



BE TWEEN
THE
LINES

An Analytical
Appreciation of the
Buddha's Life

Vol. 2



Sylvia Bay

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*I dedicate this book to the memory of my father,
Mr Bay Kwang Boo, who had loved the Triple Gems
and was devoted to supporting the Sangha to the last
days of his life. May he be well and happy wherever he is
reborn and may he realise nibbana one day.*

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Abbreviations for Pali Canon texts

Vinaya Pitaka	Discipline ‘Basket’
Para.	Parajika
Mv.	Mahavagga
Cv.	Cullavagga

Sutta Pitaka	Discourse ‘Basket’
D.	Digha-nikaya (long collection)
M.	Majjhima-nikaya (middle-length collection)
S.	Samyutta-nikaya (connected collection)
A.	Anguttara-nikaya (numerical collection)

Khuddaka-nikaya	Minor Collection
Ud.	Udana (inspired utterances)
Sn.	Sutta-nipata (sutta collection)
Dh.	Dhammapada (path of Dhamma)
Thag.	Theragatha (verses of the elder monks)
Thig.	Therigatha (verses of the elder nuns)

An Author's Request

(reproduced from volume one)

I ask that you spare a moment to read this 'short' note before you plunge into the juicier substance in the main body. I would like to take this opportunity to explain three things: why I wrote this book, what is my approach, and what I hope the reader would take away from the reading experience.

Purpose of writing this book

a) To strike a balance between logic and faith

Much have been told and written about Buddha's life through the ages. Many of those stories would recount with delight the many wondrous tales of great magic and divine splendour that purportedly surrounded Buddha all his life. While entertaining and fascinating, those colourful tales may be a little difficult for the modern, more discerning readers schooled to expect scientific explanations to appreciate, much less swallow. Indeed, the more sceptical analytical mind might even be put off from Buddhism by the very same incredible stories that had enthralled and entertained his ancient, more impressionable brethren. The challenge

for me is to try and find that middle path of explaining the key milestone events in Buddha's life that would satisfy the critical, rational, modern reader without putting off the more devotional followers.

b) To unveil the historical Buddha

A key goal in this book is to tease out the historical Buddha from between the lines of the ancient Buddhist texts (hence the title). Buddha may well be divine as those texts maintain. But I believe that there is so much more to appreciate about Buddha if we see him as just a man. A mere mortal, pushing the limits of his own endurance, then realising *nibbana* on his own and finally successfully devising a method of guiding others to the same sublime realisation: I find that far more inspiring, more uplifting than if I were to see him as a divine being! (It is sometime hard to identify with divinity.)

Having said that however, I must also add that the ancient storytellers had no ill intent when they embellished Buddha's life stories. They were addressing an audience that was mostly uninformed, highly impressionable and probably completely devotional in their approach towards Buddha. The way to touch their hearts, lift their spirit

and cement their faith was to give them wondrous tales of divine powers, awesome greatness, and incomparable kindness and compassion.

c) To reconstruct Buddha's life story accurately yet convey it simply

There are many well-written, carefully researched and thought-provoking biographies on Buddha's life by renowned scholars. Unfortunately, those books are often deemed too difficult for the general readers to appreciate. Conversely, there are also many books on Buddha written for the mass market. But those tend to be a little simplistic in substance, often inaccurate and are typically caught up with the myths and the magic. This book seeks to bridge the two divides. It aims to reconstruct Buddha's life story in a way that would meet the exacting research standards of scholars in terms of accuracy and reliability. At the same time, it remains readable and easy to digest so that the general reader could finally learn about the historical Buddha (that scholars of Buddhist studies have known for a long time), and understand him better and be inspired.

Approach

The main source of reference for this book is the Pali Canon (also referred to as canonical texts). It is essentially a huge compilation of Buddha's teachings on a wide range of issues. The Theravada school believes that these texts were compiled just 3 months after Buddha's passing. Many modern scholars are generally inclined to go along with this because there are no compelling evidences to indicate otherwise.

I consider the Pali Canon a more dependable source of information about Buddha's life relative to later Buddhist literary works for two reasons. First, because I accept that the Canon was largely collated and compiled by contemporaries of Buddha, namely his disciples. They would know him better than anyone since because they had personally interacted and lived with him. Second, I also accept that the Pali Canon was compiled and completed possibly within a year of his death. In contrast, most Buddhist literary works were produced a few hundred years later. It is reasonable to assume that the further the source of information from Buddha's time, the higher the chance of that material being corrupted. So the authenticity of the commentaries written hundreds of years later is therefore suspect. But we cannot

completely disregard the commentaries otherwise we would be left with so little data on Buddha that it is barely enough for even a very basic impression. However, because the authenticity of later sources is suspect, we have to be very careful when we use those materials.

Learning points from reading experience

Beyond just enhancing knowledge of Buddha, I also hope that this book would encourage the reader to be more probing and thinking when examining Buddhist texts and stories. It is perfectly consistent with Buddha's philosophy of learning to not just accept "teachings" at face value, but to ask questions, challenge assumptions and reflect critically. In Buddhism, we believe that true and lasting faith in *Dhamma* has to be anchored on clear and thorough understanding of the concepts and the practice. And that has to be forged through critical examination and reflection and not just blind acceptance.

Finally, I must add the caveat that the conclusion in this book is but one version of Buddha's story, from the perspective of a scholar. There could be other interpretations of the same materials used, in which case, a slightly different picture of history may emerge. But that

is alright: varied conclusions make for interesting debates and reflections.

Foreword

The Indian aristocrat who preferred devoting his life to discover *Dhamma* ('philosophy' and 'religion' defined the oriental way) rather than enjoying the luxurious life he was offered by his rich father has been 'lifted up' by his followers from history to myth, to legend and even to superstition. That was the reason why Samuel Beal called the biography of the Buddha he compiled "The Romantic Life of Gotama the Buddha". Even the life stories written by traditional Theravadins are full of events and descriptions one might consider more mythological than historical. Is his identity, then, deemed lost permanently for genuine seekers of 21st century? Or is it deeply hidden under the thick layer of glossy 'religious' literature?

In the Buddha's own terms, Enlightenment itself was like discovering a lost city; finding an ancient and forgotten path. It is natural, in this impermanent world, that cities get lost, ruined and forgotten; roads get old and abandoned. So are the philosophies and religions. In spite of the claims of clergy and pious devotees, creative literary men improvise, modify, change and even distort not only the teachings and texts but also the biographies of the founders of those

traditions. However, the reality in relation to some religions may be comparatively less dark. Nevertheless, right thinking people cannot afford to take this as an excuse for refraining from ‘exploration’ in order to find the original shape of ideas and identify the real personalities of the great masters.

The bold title given to Sylvia Bay’s book “Between the Lines” accompanied by the subtitle “An Analytical Appreciation of Buddha’s Life” is self-explanatory. Even though almost twenty six centuries of reproducing the biography has not completely distorted the original historicity and humanity of the Gotama Buddha, a critical analysis - or rather, reading between the lines - can bring out much of the ‘hidden’ humanity of the great Master. Archaeologists have done their lot to establish historicity of the Buddha dismissing the so-called sun-myth interpretation made by some early Western writers. Literary critics, historians and philosophers still have to read between the lines to appreciate the compassionate, intellectual, cultured and rational characteristics of the great human being who revolutionised Indian thought.

The writer is not assuming either the role of a Buddhist apologetic or an intellectual bull fighter. She is a sober

intellectual, well-disciplined in systematic research techniques and motivated by genuine interest of portraying the Buddha who really lived. Every right thinking Buddhist should congratulate her effort to appreciate the ‘real’ Buddha through systematic vipassana.

Chandima Wijebandara

Buddhist Library Graduate School, Singapore

Chapter One: Spread of Dhamma to Kosala

THE PALI CANON mentioned sixteen political entities in Buddha's time. The most powerful amongst them were two kingdoms: Magadha and Kosala. Magadha has held a special place in Buddhist history because it was the first territory to accept Buddha's teaching, within the first year of his Enlightenment. Kosala was the next to embrace Buddhism. That took place in the third year after Buddha's Enlightenment. This chapter will recount Buddha's maiden trip to Kosala's capital, Savatthi, and the

early efforts to establish *Sangha* there. Buddha had critical help from a wealthy Kosalan merchant, known in Buddhist history by the name Anathapindika, who threw his considerable financial resources and connections behind Buddha.

Early monastic developments in Rajagaha

For the first three years after his Enlightenment, Buddha had seemed content just to work the ground in Magadha's capital, Rajagaha: teaching *Dhamma*, debating with sceptics and critics, and guiding practitioners. Buddha must have been kept quite busy. Although his school was very new, it was gaining in popularity and prominence. Considering that Rajagaha and its surrounding villages had an abundance of spiritual practitioners, there was probably no lack of students making a beeline to his door.

Even lay people were flocking to check out the young, dynamic and charismatic Buddha. Some of these observers were quite careful. One wealthy Magadhan merchant apparently spent some time closely watching the monks' behaviour before he was convinced of their sincerity and became a generous patron. He offered to build living quarters for the monks. (He must have felt bad that they were sleeping 'in the open, under trees, in caves, in ravines,

under overhanging rocks”, and so on.¹) Buddha accepted the offer. It was said that ‘within the day’, sixty shelters had been constructed for the monks.² They were probably just simple wood constructs but they helped to shelter the monks from the elements nonetheless. That gift of lodging was a very important development in *Sangha* history because it marked the beginning of some form of a more ‘settled’ monastic life for the monks. Before that, monks were essentially sleeping in the open, and there was no reason for them to stay put in one place.

Invitation to visit neighbouring Kosala

A very important advantage that Rajagaha offered Buddha was the opportunity to meet visitors from afar. It was through the Rajagahan merchant of the sixty shelters fame above that Buddha met Anathapindika, who was to become one of his most prominent and devout patrons. Anathapindika was the brother-in-law of the Rajagahan merchant and one of the wealthiest merchants in neigh-

¹Ñāṇamoli, Bhikkhu, The Life of the Buddha: According to the Pali Canon, BPS Pariyatti Editions, Seattle, 2001, p. 87.

² Ibid., p. 87.

bouring Kosala. He happened to be visiting the day before the merchant was to host *dana* for Buddha. The merchant's household was all excited and frantically cooking away. Anathapindika was intrigued by all the excitement over a spiritual practitioner's visit. That night he slept badly because he was too caught up in the excitement of meeting Buddha the next morning. In the end he gave up trying to sleep and decided to visit Buddha. When he left the house for his pre-dawn expedition, it was so early that the land was shrouded in darkness. At one point during his forest trek, his courage almost failed him. He wanted to give up but something in his heart told him to keep going.³

Then, suddenly, he caught a glimpse of Buddha seated at a distance in a forest clearing. Buddha called out to him by his name 'Sudatta'. Anathapindika was delighted that Buddha actually knew who he was even without a formal introduction.⁴ Then Buddha gave him a short *Dhamma* discourse, which he understood intuitively and he entered the stream. His heart sang with *Dhamma* joy and his faith

³ Bodhi, Bhikkhu, "Sudatta" (10:8), The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the *Samyutta Nikaya*, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 2000, pp. 311-313.

⁴ Ibid, pp. 311-313.

in the Triple Gems became unshakeable. Anathapindika was now adamant about bringing his new faith home. He invited Buddha to visit Savatthi and stay for the upcoming rain season. Buddha agreed and the elated Anathapindika proceeded to make elaborate preparations to host Buddha. He even arranged for food and lodgings to be made available for the travelling monks on their way to Savatthi.⁵

Establishing monastic sanctuary in Jetavana (Jeta grove)

Back in Savatthi, Anathapindika's first order of business in preparation for Buddha's visit was to find a space big enough to host several scores of monks. He decided on a piece of forest land within walking distance of Savatthi. But the land belonged to Prince Jeta, a member of the Kosalan royal family. Anathapindika apparently had to spend much of his huge personal fortune to secure the piece of land. The Canon said that the price tag was the number of gold coins necessary to cover the entire land area of the site of the eventual monastery. We cannot be sure if that was

⁵ Nāṇamoli, op. cit., p. 90.

literal but we can surmise that the price must have been very steep since Prince Jeta was a most reluctant seller.

The sale negotiation might even have been acrimonious because the two men went before an ‘arbitration’ court to argue their case. In the end, Anathapindika prevailed and Prince Jeta was forced to honour the transaction. That Anathapindika had won despite facing off a prince clearly illustrated how rich and influential he must have been, considering that this was a time when the royal family could literally have gotten away with murder. In the end, both men conceded graciously. Prince Jeta agreed to honour the transaction (albeit at some ridiculous price) and Anathapindika let the Prince erect a gatehouse at the entrance of the monastery. That was significant because it marked the Prince’s stamp at the entrance of a piece of land that was now owned by Anathapindika.⁶

Once he had secured ownership of Jetavana, Anathapindika spared no expense in providing for the needs and comfort of its monastic occupants. There were “open terraces laid out, gates made, waiting halls put up, fire rooms, store houses and closets built, walks levelled, well rooms

⁶ Ibid., pp. 90-91.

prepared, baths constructed, bathrooms arranged, ponds excavated and pavilions raised.”⁷ Within a relatively short time from the point of purchase (possibly just months), Jetavana was made liveable. Jetavana was another significant milestone in the history of *Dhamma* proselytising work. For the first time in the *Sangha*’s short history, the monks had properly constructed lodgings within a safe and secure environment for their spiritual practice.

Given Anathapindika’s ambitious plans for Jetavana, clearly he was not thinking of hosting just a short visit by Buddha. He probably intended to help Buddha establish *Dhamma* in Savatthi in a big way. He must have envisioned Savatthi becoming some sort of a *Dhamma* centre where large numbers of *Dhamma* practitioners could congregate to learn and practise together. For his lifelong effort in supporting proselytising work and sponsoring *Sangha*, Buddhist forefathers devoted considerable space in the Canon recounting his contributions. They must have felt so grateful to him that they wanted to make sure that he was remembered for posterity.

Did Buddha share Anathapindika’s vision? He probably

⁷ Ibid., p. 91.

did. On that first visit, Buddha was apparently accompanied by a large number of monks. Why would Buddha travel with that kind of number if proselytising work was not part of the mission? He even took Sariputta along to Savatthi. Why bring your best *Dhamma* lecturer if you have no plans for him to conduct *Dhamma* classes? Many of the monks of the earliest years were *arabants*: they would not engage in social vacations. Whatever they did, it was probably with a plan to support *Dhamma* propagation. So we can be reasonably sure that when Buddha accepted Anathapindika's invitation to visit Savatthi, he was probably ready to start another *Dhamma* centre.

However, Buddha was probably not ready to relocate to Savatthi just yet. During that first visit, Buddha stayed for only a short while, and then he returned to Rajagaha. Buddha might have felt that he needed more time to consolidate *Dhamma* in Rajagaha. Savatthi would have to wait for Buddha's subsequent visits for more intensive and sustained proselytising work. Nonetheless, some important conditions had been put in place during that maiden visit that would help promote *Dhamma*. There was a command HQ in the form of Jetavana, a devout and dependable patron in Anathapindika, a generally tolerant if not sup-

portive ruling elite, and scores of well-trained spiritually realised monks who came over from Rajagaha.

Eventually, it would appear that Buddha preferred Savatthi over Rajagaha. In his later years, when health issues forced Buddha to cut back on his travelling, he sort of settled down in Savatthi. It was in Savatthi that Buddha stayed for over twenty-five years of his life and where he delivered the most number of discourses.

Encounters with Kosalan royal family

Just as Buddha had a very close relationship with the Magadhan royal family, he also had a strong and warm relationship with key members of the Kosalan royal family. However, it is not entirely clear how that had come to be. Below is a short note of Buddha's relations with select Kosalan royal family members.

a) Prince Jeta

Prince Jeta was probably the first of the Kosalan royal family to know of Buddha although it is unclear if the two men actually met. The Pali Canon claimed that Prince Jeta was astounded that Anathapindika was prepared to spend

so much of his personal fortune to buy a piece of land to give to the young teacher.⁸ It would have left an indelible impression. Prince Jeta was moved enough to want to donate a gatehouse to the *Sangha* even without having met Buddha. There was no mention that Prince Jeta ever became a disciple. Perhaps he did but was not prominent enough to warrant special mention. But it is more likely that he never converted. Had he been a disciple, the Buddhist forefathers would probably have wanted to highlight this.

b) Queen Mallika

Next to meet Buddha was probably Queen Mallika, the wife of the Kosalan king, and she became one of Buddha's most devout lay supporters in Kosala. The Pali Canon did not mention when and how she came to know of Buddha.⁹ However, Buddha was able to make such a deep impression that she became quite devoted. Her faith was so absolute

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁹ The less reliable *Jataka* claimed that Mallika met Buddha when she was still a commoner. He was on his alms round and she was running a personal errand, and she offered Buddha *dana*. That same day, she met King Pasenadi who fell deeply in love and decided to make her his queen. Malalasekera, G.P., Dictionary of Pāli Names, Munshiram Manoharlal, Publishers, New Delhi, India, reprinted 2008, vol. 2, pp. 455-457.

that her husband, King Pasenadi, once exclaimed in exasperation that she would always say, “If Buddha said so, it must be right”, regardless of the issue or the merit of his comments.¹⁰ It is highly possible that it was through her influence that Pasenadi was persuaded to check Buddha out for himself.

Interestingly, unlike many of Buddha’s most ardent followers, Mallika never realised *Dhamma*, and remained a worldlyling till her death. Hers was a faith forged through affection and respect for Buddha the teacher rather than because of a penetrative understanding of *Dhamma*. She had moments of wise reflection, and she was known to be a keen and dutiful listener of *Dhamma*. She was also a devout supporter of *Sangha* and took delight in showering monks with rich gifts and offerings. But she was also a contradictory character with a dark side. She had a ferocious temper and was known to have terrible fights with her husband. They would sulk and ignore each other for extended periods and things would get so bad that Buddha had to

¹⁰ Nāṇamoli, Bhikkhu and Bodhi, Bhikkhu, “*Piyajātika*” (Born From Those Who are Dear), The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka, 1995, pp. 719-720.

play peacemaker to reconcile the feuding royal couple.¹¹

What was perhaps most disturbing for some followers was that, notwithstanding her lifetime of pious support for the Triple Gems, Mallika still ended up in hell when she died. The Canon did not explain why it happened except to reassure that she was there for only seven days. It was the more colourful but questionable commentarial literature that claimed that she had the brief hell detour because her last thought moments before death was feeling guilty about having lied to her husband years earlier.¹² How the commentary compilers had known about her remorseful last thought is a puzzle: it is not as if she would publicise the secret, if there were one. But the more important moral lesson from her story is that Mallika was able to get out and has been in the heavens since because of her unstinting devotion to the Triple Gems.

¹¹ Malalasekera, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 456.

¹² The commentary claimed that once she had misbehaved with her dog in the bath-house and was seen by Pasenadi. But she was able to convince him that it was an optical illusion because of lighting problems. *Ibid.*, p. 456.

c) *King Pasenadi*

Despite his brief stay in Savatthi, Buddha must have made quite an impression. At some point, even Pasenadi himself paid him a visit at Jetavana. While Pasenadi did not have any ill intent, he was also a sceptic. It would seem that he had wanted to judge for himself whether Buddha was the real deal and an enlightened being as he had claimed to be, or just a very smart fraud. While Pasenadi portrayed himself as being prepared to be open-minded, his opening questions (as captured in the Pali Canon) suggested that he was actually quite sceptical. His opening salvo at their first meeting was, ‘Did you claim you are enlightened? There were so many other popular and influential teachers and none of them had claimed that they are enlightened. Moreover, you are so young and new to the homeless life.’¹³ Left unsaid was, ‘Why should I believe you, young man?’

Buddha calmly replied, “Great King, there are four things that should not be looked down upon and despised because they are young. What four? They are a warrior

¹³ Bodhi, “Young” (3:1), The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the *Samyutta Nikaya*, op. cit., pp. 164-166.

noble, a serpent, a fire and a monk.” Buddha added, and I paraphrase, the warrior noble might one day gain power and if he were vindictive, would seek revenge. A young snake could still attack and bite. A small fire could spread and destroy if it found fuel. But Buddha saved the best warning for last. He said, “He whom virtuous monk’s fire shall burn, will lack offspring, and no heirs will have his wealth.”¹⁴

For any monarch, not to have any heirs must surely count as one of the most frightening thoughts. Hence, even though Buddha did not actually speak any *Dhamma* and try to convince Pasenadi of his enlightened state, the king quickly professed his support for Buddha. He exclaimed, “Magnificent, Lord!” and asked to be a lifelong lay follower.¹⁵ For someone who had approached Buddha with some initial scepticism, his turnabout was really swift. I suspect Pasenadi decided not to chance the possibility of offending a “virtuous monk” and risk his progenies.

But at that early stage of their relationship, Pasenadi was probably just paying lip-service and he was not yet a true

¹⁴ Nāṇamoli, op. cit., pp. 98-99.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 99.

convert; he hadn't even heard *Dhamma*! He did eventually become good friends with Buddha. However, his faith in the Triple Gems was probably contingent on his affections and feelings for Buddha and not so much because he understood *Dhamma*. Like his wife, Pasenadi never entered the stream and never tasted *Dhamma*. Nevertheless, he and Buddha had a friendship that spanned over thirty years and he spent many happy hours sitting with Buddha, enjoying his company, listening to *Dhamma* discourses and seeking his advice on both mundane and spiritual questions.¹⁶ Because of Pasenadi's friendship and support, Buddha had absolute freedom to spread *Dhamma* in Kosala kingdom.

Concluding observations

A point worth highlighting is the critical role played by the lay supporters in the spread of *Dhamma* to Savatthi. Unlike in Rajagaha, where it was Buddha who had initiated the proselytising and conversion efforts, for Savatthi, it

¹⁶ The *Samyutta Nikaya* has an entire section dedicated to discourses given by Buddha to Pasenadi. See Bodhi, "Kosalasamyutta", Connected Discourses with the Kosalan (Chapter 3), The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the *Samyutta Nikaya*, op. cit., pp. 164-195.

was Anathapindika who had first conceived of bringing *Dhamma* there. He invited Buddha, supported his proselytising efforts, and built and donated Jetavana so that the faithful had a place to congregate and learn. Clearly, an inspired lay supporter was not just a passive recipient of *Dhamma*, but could be a powerful force for *Dhamma* work. The laity has resources, connections and power to make things happen.

The challenge is thus to get the lay person so inspired that he would set aside his own mundane interests and support *Dhamma* work. Buddha and his *ariya* monks were powerful inspirations for the laity by their immaculate conduct, gentle manner, compassion and deep wisdom. They were the living embodiments of *Dhamma*, and proof that the ultimate unconditioned peace called *nibbana* was real and attainable in one's lifetime. Seeing them, the laity's faith was established and cemented. Observing their conduct, the laity drew inspiration on how they themselves should lead their own lives and continue their own spiritual practice. Buddha knew that the symbiotic relationship between *Sangha* and the laity was fundamental to keeping *Dhamma* alive and thriving. In his lifetime he tried to show how the laity must be handled and how their support must

not be taken for granted. He did it so well that he inspired the best and the brightest of his time. And they threw their considerable resources to helping him consolidate *Dhamma* and spread it far and wide.

Chapter Two: Establishing the Nun Order

THIS CHAPTER will examine one of the most controversial subjects in Buddha's lifework: the establishment of the *bhikkhuni* or nun order. In his time, that decision would probably have counted as one of his most shocking and unfathomable initiatives. Society's mainstream thinking then was women's place in the societal totem pole was at the bottom. The conventional religious belief was women were incapable of spiritual growth and should not be given any religious role lest it offend the

gods. Given this, imagine the uproar Buddha must have triggered by his decision to admit women into the *Sangha*, which would have been a tacit recognition that they were the spiritual equals of men. Even within the *Sangha* where Buddha's word was final, there was fierce unhappiness with and strong resistance to the ordaining of women. In fact, there is evidence that scores of years after women first entered the *Sangha*, the more conservative monks were still trying to find a scapegoat to blame for that decision.

For the modern reader, there is a different controversy, this time over the manner in which Buddha had set up the *bhikkhuni* order. Buddha had not only initially resisted ordaining women, after he relented, he apparently laid down eight additional disciplinary rules for the nuns to pre-empt the decline of "pure *Dhamma*", which he also supposedly said was inevitable once women joined the *Sangha*. (More would be said about the rules later in this chapter.) This would seem to imply that Buddha had considered the female gender to be such a negative force that by their sheer presence in the *Sangha*, the male practitioners could stumble and *Dhamma* was doomed. Time and again the question has been asked: why did Buddha impose those additional rules on the nuns? Did he really think so lowly

of women? What was his attitude towards women?

This chapter will first recount the story of the establishment of the *bhikkhuni* order as recorded in the Pali Canon. I shall also offer an explanation for the additional rules, and conclude with some observations about Buddha's likely views about women.

Setting up the nun order

According to the Pali Canon, in the fifth year of Buddha's Enlightenment, he visited his father, Suddhodana, who was at death's door. Buddha took the opportunity to help Suddhodana complete his spiritual understanding and Suddhodana died an *arahant*. Soon after the funeral, Suddhodana's widow, Mahapajapati Gotami, who was also Buddha's maternal aunt and stepmother, approached Buddha and asked to be ordained.¹ Buddha refused. She pressed him but he was adamant. Eventually, she backed off. But that did not mean that she had given up her monas-

¹ The reference materials for this entire paragraph are found in "Gotami" (8:51), Bodhi, Bhikkhu, The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: a Translation of the *Anguttara Nikaya*, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 2012, p. 1188.

tic aspiration. Instead, after Buddha left Kapilavatthu, she took it upon herself to shave her head bald, don a yellow robe and go after him to his next destination, Vesali, about 150 miles (241km) away. A great number of Sakyan women apparently joined her on the gruelling trek.²

The bedraggled bald women must have been quite a sight to behold when they arrived at the monastic sanctuary in Vesali where Buddha was staying. They had ‘swollen feet’, were dust-coated and weeping miserably.³ Their physical state, emotional distress, indeed their very presence, must have caused a ruckus amongst the astounded monks.

Ananda was one of the monks who witnessed their arrival. Moved by their plight and tears, he approached them to ask what they were doing there. Mahapajapati Gotami told him of their despair at Buddha’s refusal to admit them into the *Sangha*.⁴ Ever the compassionate and caring gentleman, Ananda decided to plead their case with Buddha.

² The commentaries said Yasodhara, Buddha’s former wife was in the entourage.

³ Bodhi, Bhikkhu, The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: a Translation of the *Anguttara Nikaya*, op. cit., p. 1188.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 1188-1189.

However, he too failed to move Buddha. The Canon said that ‘three times’ Ananda asked Buddha to grant them ordination only to be flatly rejected each time. Then Ananda changed track. He asked Buddha if a woman could understand *Dhamma* and realise spiritual enlightenment in the same way and to the same degree that a male practitioner could. Buddha replied yes. Ananda said that if that were so, and considering that Mahapajapati Gotami had stepped into the shoes of his late mother and looked after him when he was young, could he please reconsider opening the door of the *Sangha* to her.⁵

At that, Buddha finally relented. According to the Canon, Buddha said if Mahapajapati Gotami would agree to accept eight “weighty” rules (*garudhamma*), her acceptance would count as her ordination.⁶ Those eight rules were as follows (and I paraphrase):

1. A *bhikkhuni*, even if she had been ordained a hundred years earlier, must pay homage to, get up for, reverentially salute, and respectfully greet a *bhikkhu* who had

⁵ Ibid., pp. 1189-1190.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 1190-1191.

been ordained just that day.

2. A *bhikkhuni* must not spend the rain retreat in a place where there are no *bhikkhus*.
3. Every half a month, a *bhikkhuni* should ask the *Sangha* of *bhikkhus* for the *Uposatha* (observance) day, and for exhortation.
4. At the end of the rain retreat, a *bhikkhuni* must invite both the *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhuni Sanghas* to comment on her conduct, and on whether they had observed improper behaviour.
5. When a *bhikkhuni* has committed a grave offence, she must observe a half-month penalty before both *Sanghas*.
6. A (female) probationer who seeks admission must apply to both *Sanghas* for permission and after training “in six things for two years”.
7. A *bhikkhuni* must not insult or revile a *bhikkhu* in any ways, and
8. The *bhikkhunis* are prohibited from admonishing the *bhikkhus*, but *bhikkhus* are not prohibited from admonishing the *bhikkhunis*.

Ananda dutifully conveyed Buddha’s condition to Mahapajapati Gotami. If she accepted those eight rules, she could be a nun with immediate effect. Mahapajapati

Gotami happily accepted the conditions. When Ananda reported her enthusiastic acceptance of the terms to Buddha, he apparently replied that if women had not been allowed to join the order, the “holy life” would have lasted a thousand years. But now that they were in the order, the “holy life” would last only five hundred years. Buddha added that, “Just as prowling burglars easily assail those families that have many women and few men, so in whatever *Dhamma* and discipline women obtain the going forth from the household life into homelessness, that spiritual life does not last long... Just as a man might build a dyke around a large reservoir as a precaution so that the water would not overflow, so too, as a precaution I have prescribed for *bhikkhunis* the eight principles.”⁷

A critical review

The story about the setting up of the nun order could have ended here if not for a few disturbing observations that prompted me to wonder whether the eight rules were indeed laid down by Buddha. Below are three examples of

⁷ Ibid., pp. 1191-1192.

the rules that do not seem to make sense in the way that Buddha's teachings typically do. Let me explain.

1. Rule number six seems unreasonable or at least illogical

Rule number six requires a female probationer to apply to both the *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhuni Sanghas* for permission to be ordained after a two-year period of training. When Buddha supposedly first set this condition, there was no *bhikkhuni* order to begin with. If that was his condition, how could women ever be ordained? Some might argue that Buddha had meant for the rule to apply to future female applicants after Mahapajapati Gotami. Then why would Buddha expect Mahapajapati Gotami to accept a rule that could not have applied to her?

The two-year probation requirement is even more puzzling. Obviously it did not apply to Mahapajapati Gotami and the Sakyan ladies because they all became nuns that same day. Since Buddha was prepared to ordain them, then why would he lay down that rule to Mahapajapati Gotami: in anticipation of future applicants? Why was she supposed to accept a rule on behalf of future applicants? Could it be that this rule was actually introduced much later, after a *Bhikkhuni* order already existed?

2. *Inconsistent with known practice by Buddha*

It is actually out of character for Buddha to introduce disciplinary rules pre-emptively, before any actual act of transgression. Once Sariputta asked Buddha what factors had accounted for how long *Dhamma* had survived after the *parinibbana* of the various past Buddhas. Buddha replied that true *Dhamma* lasted longer when there were more *Vinaya* rules. Sariputta immediately asked Buddha to introduce more *Vinaya* rules. Buddha said ‘no’, he would introduce the rules only when the conditions warranted them but not to pre-empt transgressions. So why would Buddha act differently in this case? One may say it was to prevent the decline of *Dhamma*. But that was precisely the same reason why Sariputta had asked Buddha to introduce more *Vinaya* rules, and he refused.⁸

3. *Circular argument*

Some may argue that Buddha had pre-emptively introduced the eight rules because he was trying to prevent *Dhamma* from being lost five hundred years prematurely.

⁸ Nāṇamoli, op. cit., p. 128.

Yet Buddha supposedly said to Ananda that it would happen anyway once women had been allowed into the Order. Then why did Buddha even introduce the eight rules? To prevent something which was ‘inevitable’? Does this sound like the Buddha we know? Or is there a flaw in the story somewhere? I am not sure what is the answer but in my mind, there is reasonable doubt and I think that the jury is still out on whether Buddha did set the eight additional rules.⁹

Buddha’s treatment of the bhikkhuni Sangha

There are also circumstantial evidences to suggest that Buddha might not have been as vehemently opposed to *Bhikkhuni* ordination as portrayed in the Canon. In fact, occasionally, Buddha seemed to have taken a rather proactive approach to ordaining promising woman practitioners, in the same way that he did with the men.

⁹ See Venerable Dr Pategama Gñanarama’s book “The Mission Accomplished”, where he offered several persuasive arguments why the eight rules probably did not originate from Buddha. Gñanarama, Pategama, The Mission Accomplished: A Historical Analysis of the Mahaparinibbana Sutta of the Digha Nikaya of the Pali Canon, Ti-Sarana Buddhist Association, Singapore, 1997, pp. 78-82.

The *Therigatha*¹⁰ is filled with the joyous poems of female *arabants*, many of whom credited Buddha for helping them realise *nibbana*. When Patacara¹¹ went insane after losing her entire family in one night of natural catastrophes, Buddha was able to penetrate her consciousness, gently coax her back to sanity, and guide her into the stream with a short *Dhamma* discourse. Then he invited her to join the *Sangha* where he promised she could find lasting peace of mind. She accepted and in due course became an *arabant*.

Ubbiri¹² was grieving inconsolably after her only child died, when Buddha went before her to say that she had already grieved for tens of thousands of children over so many lives. Put in that perspective, Ubbiri gained spiritual insight and eventually became an *arabant*. Then there was Vasitthi,¹³ another mother who lost her mind to grief when

¹⁰ “*Therigatha: Verses of the Elder Nuns*”, edited by Access to Insight, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 30 November 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/thig/index.html>.

¹¹ Malalasekera, op. cit., vol. 2, pp. 112-114.

¹² “*Ubbiri: Groups of Three Verses*” (Thig 3), translated from Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 4 August 2010, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/thig/thig.03.05.than.html>.

¹³ “*Vasitthi the Madwoman*” (Thig 6.2), translated from Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 30 November 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/thig/thig.06.02.than.html>.

her child died. She too regained her sanity and realised spiritual peace with Buddha's help.

Gutta¹⁴ had problems meditating and was personally guided by Buddha on her practice to spiritual realisation. Khema,¹⁵ King Bimbisara's wife, was obsessed with her own beauty. At their first meeting, Buddha conjured the image of a gorgeous female attendant fanning him and aged her before Khema's eyes until the illusion grew old, collapsed and literally disintegrated into a pile of bones. At that, Khema understood impermanence, caught a glimpse of *Dhamma* and entered the stream.

Buddha even allowed an ex-prostitute, Addhakasi, to be ordained via a messenger when she could not get to him. She subsequently realised *nibbana*.¹⁶ If Buddha had that strong a reservation about ordaining women, why did his subsequent actions demonstrate otherwise? He was

¹⁴ "*Gutta*" (Thig 6.7), translated from Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 4 August 2010, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/thig/thig.06.07.than.html>.

¹⁵ "*Khema*" (LII), Davids, Rhys(Mrs), "Psalms of the Early Buddhists - Psalms of the Sisters", 1909, <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/davids/psalms/psalms.html>.

¹⁶ "*Addhakasi*" (XXII), *ibid.*, <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/davids/psalms/psalms.html>.

proactively seeking out promising female practitioners and helping them realise *Dhamma*.

Also, consistent with his view about equality of the gender on the spiritual path, Buddha treated the nuns no differently from how he treated the monks. He established parallel authority for the *bhikkhuni* order as he did for the *bhikkhu Sangha*. He appointed first and second female chief disciples, namely, Khema and Uppalavanna respectively. He publicly acknowledged the nuns who had outstanding or unique skills in teaching *Dhamma*, psychic powers, or *Vinaya* practices. Those pronouncements were not meant to flatter egos but to help budding seekers decide who to approach for guidance.

For a while, it would appear that the nuns might have stayed separately from the monks until it became obvious that it was unsafe. Uppalavanna was raped while living alone in the forest. Perhaps that dreadful episode was the trigger for the introduction of the rule that said that during the rain retreat, a nun cannot stay where there are no monks. Presumably it was for their protection. I am not sure why this residential rule applies only during the rain retreat. Perhaps it was to strike a balance between keeping the nuns safe without excessively imposing on the monks. Imagine

if this rule had applied throughout the year? Wouldn't that have meant that a nun had to hang around some monks all the time? One can just imagine the monks feeling so burdened.

Factor of Mahapajapati Gotami

There is an odd story about Mahapajapati Gotami contained in the *Gotami-apadana* about how Buddha had asked her to demonstrate her formidable psychic powers just before she passed away.¹⁷ For Buddha, who was strongly against frivolous public displays of psychic powers, that instruction to Mahapajapati Gotami was interesting to say the least. It would appear that Buddha wanted it to be known that she was already an *arahant*. Was it because she had detractors in the *Sangha* and Buddha wanted them to realise how potentially grievous a wrong they were committing by remaining critical of her?

If so, the intriguing question is why would she provoke such negative sentiments from the monks? She was the wife

¹⁷ *Apadana* is a collection of biographical stories of prominent *Sangha* members. Many scholars believe that it was composed in the 1st or 2nd century BC, which means many of the stories were hearsay.

of a wealthy chieftain and possibly quite used to getting her way. We know that she was very headstrong: she refused to take no for an answer, even from Buddha. She was courageous and resourceful: she led scores of women through deserted forests and survived a 240-km trek intact. She was ahead of her time in terms of values and outlook: instead of quietly mourning the death of her husband like a good widow, she took off to be a nun the minute his funeral was over, presumably shocking polite society. She led what was the equivalent of a women's liberation movement for equal rights to spiritual pursuit of the ancient Indian world. It is probably reasonable to assume that she would not have simply capitulated to a monk just because he was male. Perhaps Mahapajapati Gotami was the reason why rule number one emerged: that even a nun of a hundred years is junior to a day-old monk.

Buddha's attitude towards women

Buddha lived in a world that considered women to be flawed psychologically, morally and spiritually, and literally the weaker and lesser gender. Many of Buddha's religious and spiritual contemporaries even went as far as to teach that women were evil and doomed. But Buddha did not

hold such prejudices: he saw man and woman as essentially similar in terms of psychological flaws and strengths, and with the same capacity for moral good or bad depending on the individual's instincts and motivations.

Buddha also saw the two genders as spiritual equals. He recognised that the female practitioner would be as successful as her male counterpart in spiritual realisation if she were possessed of the same level of wisdom, had made similar efforts, had the same measure of discipline, and had the same degree of mindfulness and concentration skills. In time, when her mind was ready, she too would understand *Dhamma* and realise *nibbana*, the ultimate of spiritual attainment, just as a male practitioner would. Buddha's view on gender spiritual parity was not just unique but radical and even seen as preposterous by the majority of his world.

However, Buddha did acknowledge that women could be a source of temptation for the male practitioners. But it was not the women's fault. In fact, he noted that it was a weakness of the male to be so intrigued and tempted by the female physical form and allure. His solution for them was to exercise restraint, watch their own minds and cravings and learn to be detached. He told them to steer clear of

the women because they, the men, lacked discipline and restraint.

Concluding thought

There was no doubt that the setting up of the *bhikkhuni* order was very controversial and unpopular amongst the *bhikkhus*. It was fortunate that the *bhikkhuni* order was set up so early in Buddha's dispensation and he had about forty years to help it take root, consolidate and grow. Given the strength of the resistance, the nun order might well have perished had Buddha not had that length of time to support it.

Why were the monks so staunchly opposed to women joining their ranks? Was it just social prejudice? For the non-*ariya Sangha*, that might well be the main reason. But even some *ariya* monks were against women ordaining. I can think of one perfectly understandable explanation for their opposition. Those practitioners had left home for the homeless life so that they could focus on their practice without any familial distraction. Now they had female strangers in their community: were they supposed to look out for them? There must be some resentment about this unexpected burden. Given that there were tons of emotion-

al baggage left unsaid in the Canon on this gender divide issue, it might not be surprising that attempts were made post-Buddha to impose some socially acceptable mores into *Sangha* and force the women into a junior partnership role.

Finally, I note that this was one rare occasion where Buddha reversed an earlier decision. Buddha did so only because he saw that women could realise *Dhamma* also. So in the same way that he gave the men a chance to practice for spiritual salvation; he gave entire generations of women that equal opportunity. By that act, Buddha had demonstrated once again the importance of having the courage to do what is right by *Dhamma*.

Chapter Three: Sangha Quarrels at Kosambi

IN THE NINTH YEAR of Buddha's Enlightenment, the Pali Canon recorded a disturbing incident of a conflict in a *Sangha* sanctuary in Kosambi that got so bad that for a while, it looked like the local *Sangha* community might fracture. More shockingly, even Buddha could not stop the conflict and he eventually walked away. This chapter seeks to trace the circumstances leading to the infamous Kosambi conflict and its subsequent resolution following the intervention of the indignant local lay community.

Spread of Sangha

In the first decade following his Enlightenment, Buddha was very successful in spreading *Dhamma*. *Sangha* communities quickly expanded beyond the early centres of Rajagaha and Savatthi. One of the new centres was Kosambi, the capital of Vatsa kingdom. Kosambi embraced *Dhamma* so enthusiastically that by year nine post-Enlightenment, it was host to four *Sangha* sanctuaries. That meant the young school had not only enjoyed good lay support, it had also inspired followers to take the ultimate plunge and become monks.

Unfortunately, the rapid expansion of the *Sangha* also presented some problems. One of which was not having enough *ariya* monks to guide the growing number of non-*ariya* practitioners. It was still early days of the school so there were probably not that many *ariya* teachers to begin with. Compounding the problem was many of the newly-ordained monks were not of the same spiritual calibre as the early ones who had been handpicked by Buddha: the latter day monks would require far more handholding from experienced elders for their spiritual growth. When large numbers of fairly average, possibly still quite worldly

monks lived in close proximity, it was inevitable that differences and even conflict would result.

Background of the Kosambi conflict¹

The Canon actually did not say what the Kosambi monks were fighting over. It merely reported rather blandly that a serious quarrel flared up in Ghositarama (name of the monastery at the centre of the storm) over “whether an action by one monk counted as a disciplinary offence”.² That means the monks had fought over differences in the interpretation of the *Vinaya* (training rules).³

Initially, both sides seemed amicable to a settlement.

¹ Nāṇamoli, op. cit., chapter 8.

² Ibid., p. 110.

³ The more colourful commentarial literature helpfully provided details. It said that the incident concerned two senior teacher-monks: one well-versed in *Dhamma* and the other in *Vinaya*. *Dhamma* monk, after using the latrine, had forgotten to empty a container of water that he had brought with him. When *Vinaya* monk told him that this was a disciplinary transgression, *Dhamma* monk immediately apologized. *Vinaya* monk graciously replied that since it was an honest mistake, it was alright. However, he subsequently recounted that exchange to his students who went to *Dhamma* monk’s students to crow about their teacher’s mistake and ignorance. *Dhamma* monk’s students reported back to him and he got upset and called his *Vinaya* colleague a ‘flip-flopping liar’. The furious *Vinaya* monk then convened a hearing, got *Dhamma* monk suspended and the rest is history.

Then inexplicably the protagonists hardened their positions. The monk accused of having committed a transgression was unilaterally found guilty by the opposing camp and suspended. Furious, he went around lobbying for support to help him fight the suspension. His detractors also fiercely defended their decision. Both sides were so successful in their petty campaigns that before long, their quarrel began infecting the other Kosambi monastic sanctuaries. All over Kosambi, monks were apparently picking sides.⁴

Buddha's handling

By the time Buddha learnt about the quarrel, it was already quite late into the fight (*Sangha* judgement had already been passed) and both camps were in no mood to compromise. Buddha approached them separately to try and talk some sense into them. He told the prosecuting monks that they should not be too quick to judge and impose punishment. The defendant must be made to understand his mistake and agree to the judgement, otherwise *Sangha* would fracture. Separately, Buddha said to the defendant monk and his

⁴ Nāṇamoli, op. cit., p. 110.

supporters that they should not reject a *Sangha* judgement simply because they disagreed with it. They should show some respect for their fellow monks and trust that they had acted in good faith. Buddha reiterated that they should not split the order, and to respect each other as serious and sincere practitioners, “learned and desirous of training”.⁵

However, not only did the feuding monks ignore his appeal, the conflict intensified. They quarrelled, had “brawls” and “stabbed each other with verbal daggers”.⁶ When Buddha intervened again to tell them to stop it, one of them told him ‘to take a hike’: “Let the Blessed One live devoted to a pleasant abiding here and now and not concern himself with this.”⁷ After trying a few more times to get them to stop the quarrel, he gave up. Buddha thought, “These misguided men seem obsessed. It is impossible to make them see.”⁸

Just before the rain retreat in the tenth year post-Enlightenment (meaning the conflict had raged on for

⁵ Reference material for entire paragraph is taken from *ibid.*, pp. 110-111.

⁶ Ñāṇamoli, Bhikkhu and Bodhi, Bhikkhu, “*Upakkilesa Sutta: Imperfections*”, *op.cit.*, p. 1008.

⁷ Ñāṇamoli, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

months), Buddha finally decided that he had enough of the squabbling monks. He clearly did not want to spend the next three months of the rain retreat stuck with them. So one fine morning, he took his robes, alms bowl and walked out of Ghositarama⁹. (The learning point here is that after one has tried unsuccessfully to solve a perplexing problem, at some point, one has to let it be and move on. There is wisdom in knowing when to let go.)

Buddha's first stop after he left Ghositarama was a place called Balakalonakaragama (probably a small village nearby) where his cousin Venerable Bhagu was staying alone. Buddha wanted to be sure that Bhagu was alright and had no trouble getting food. Next Buddha visited Eastern Bamboo Park where another three Sakyan cousins, Anuruddha, Nandiya and Kimbila, were residing together. Perhaps he wanted some assurance that good monks could practise together in harmony. Buddha asked them if they "...all live in concord... (and) viewing each other with kindly eyes?" They assured him that they were fine together and were able to support each other in the practice.

Reassured, Buddha then headed for the Parileyyaka

⁹ Ibid., p. 115.

forest where he stayed alone for that rain retreat. The *Sangha* knew where he went and occasionally, some monks would visit him for a *Dhamma* talk.¹⁰ Otherwise, they respected his wish to be alone. So, except for the company of animals especially elephants, he was pretty much on his own, and he clearly enjoyed his solitude.¹¹ At the end of that retreat, Buddha returned to Savatthi.

The lay community intervened

Meanwhile, the lay community of Kosambi was furious with the recalcitrant monks for Buddha's unexpected and premature departure. They organised a full boycott of the Kosambi *Sangha* and stopped giving alms.¹² That must have hit the monks hard because the feuding apparently came to an abrupt stop: their hungry stomachs had forced the self-righteous quarrelsome monks to back down. The

¹⁰ Bodhi, "Parileyya" (22:81), The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the *Samyutta Nikaya*, op. cit., pp. 921-923.

¹¹ Nāṇamoli, op. cit., pp. 115-116.

¹² Ibid., p. 117. The Kosambi lay boycott probably happened. It is highly unlikely that the Pali Canon would concoct a story that puts the *Sangha* in a bad light. If anything, the 'official' record would have been a sanitized version. The real event might have been more unpleasant.

chastened Kosambi monks all ‘came to their senses’. The monk whose suspension had set off the upheaval ‘suddenly realised’ that he had been justly ‘convicted’.¹³ He went with his supporters to Buddha to apologise and to ask for advice on how to proceed. Buddha said that both camps should formally reconcile. This time, both parties dutifully complied.¹⁴ After all the hullabaloo which seemed to have dragged on for more than a year, the most serious crisis to plague the young *Sangha* ended abruptly. The laity had succeeded in ending a feud which even Buddha could not.

That was the first record of lay activism punishing errant monks, and it was significant. Had the lay community not intervened so decisively, the first major *Sangha* split might have happened as early as in the ninth year of Buddha’s dispensation, which would have been disastrous for future *Dhamma* proselytising work. It was also an important lesson for both *Sangha* and the laity. The *Sangha* was reminded that lay support could not be taken for granted and monks had to be worthy of respect and support. The laity of the day saw that they had leverage over the monks, and decided

¹³ Ibid., p.118.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.119.

that they must be prepared to use that to force accountability from the monks and rein in bad conduct.

Observation

The Kosambi conflict was shocking to say the least. The *Sangha* was only nine years old and already some of its members were embroiled in a ferocious conflict that was so intense that even Buddha could not stop it. That many of the monks involved were well-versed practitioners (not novices) was even more disturbing. It does suggest that it is perhaps impossible to indefinitely prevent the *Sangha* from fragmenting. The Kosambi fight was over the interpretation of *Vinaya*: it would have been a matter of time before monks fought over their understanding of *Dhamma*.

Buddha's management of the conflict was enlightening. A typical reaction in a conflict is to ascertain why it happened, who is to blame, and how to solve it. Buddha's approach was to just get both parties to set aside their differences and to reconcile. He was prepared to disregard the whys and who's at fault to preserve what was truly critical: *Sangha* unity. Hence, despite having brought the *Sangha* into such disrepute by their trivial quarrels, all the protagonists were forgiven: there was no mention of punishment for

anyone.¹⁵ Buddha even told the monks not involved and the laity to not take sides, and not to ostracise the Kosambi monks.¹⁶ He added that if the Kosambi monks still had correct *Dhamma* understanding and could share *Dhamma* correctly, they were still worthy of respect and support.¹⁷ Perhaps the *Dhamma* lesson to note here is that one should focus on the true essential, which is *Dhamma* realisation and peace of mind: soothing the petty demands of the human ego is ultimately unnecessary and meaningless.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 119.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 118.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 117-118.

Chapter Four: Middle Age – Successes in Dhamma Work

BETWEEN THE PALI CANON and the commentaries, it is possible to stitch together a fairly plausible chronology of the key events in Buddha's life up to about 10-15 years post-Enlightenment. Thereafter, it is almost impossible to establish the biographical timeline.¹ The early Canon compilers, while meticulous in their

¹ The next time we can pick up on the chronology again is when Buddha was 72; that would be told in chapter 6.

record of his teachings, were short on the details of his life. So, in this chapter and the next, which touch on the period of Buddha's life between the ages of 40 and 70, the story will not be told in chronology. Instead I shall try and give a flavour of his life by highlighting some interesting events and discussing them in broad themes. Chapter 4 will largely be about the positive developments which essentially meant Buddha's successes in proselytising work and guiding practitioners to spiritual enlightenment. Chapter 5 will recount the negative incidents that made life unpleasant for Buddha and/or obstructed *Dhamma* work.

Success in spreading Dhamma²

We know that for the better part of his 45-year ministry, Buddha had travelled extensively across Northeast India to teach *Dhamma*. He slowed down only in his later years, probably because of declining health.³ Largely because

² For a fascinating read, see Dutt, Nalinaksha, Early History of the Spread of Buddhism and the Buddhist Schools, Rajesh Publications, New Delhi Allahabad, India, 1980.

³ We cannot be sure when Buddha cut back on his travels. My best guess is probably in his 60s, because the Canon seemed to suggest that he began to spend most of his time in Savatthi towards the last 25 years of his life.

of his efforts, *Dhamma* spread rapidly. Of the four ancient kingdoms mentioned in the Canon, we have already seen that three of them, namely, Magadha, Kosala and Vatsa, had played host to prominent monastic sanctuaries, which suggested that they had strong lay support and many serious practitioners. Buddha never visited the fourth kingdom of Avanti, which was in the west of the Indian subcontinent. But Avanti eventually became a major Buddhist centre due to the efforts of its native *arabants*, Maha Kaccayana and Sona Kutikanna.⁴ The Canon also mentioned a few tribal ‘republics’⁵ that became earnest supporters of Buddha, including the ruling families of the Mallians, Licchavians, Koliyans and of course Sakyans, and probably the Moriyans and Buliyans (they all demanded a share of Buddha’s relics after his *parinibbana*).

More significantly, *Dhamma* spread to the land of the Kurus in the north, which was a major breakthrough because that was said to be “the ancient home of high

⁴ Dutt, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

⁵ The term ‘republic’ is used loosely. It means they had a ruling council of elders, probably heads of prominent families, and they made decisions through collegial discussions and voting, unlike the dynastic kingdoms which were ruled by one man.

Brahmanic culture”.⁶ Interestingly, despite their Brahmanic pedigree, the Kurus were open-minded and receptive to alternative spiritual doctrines including Buddha’s *Dhamma*. Buddha personally brought *Dhamma* to the Kurus. He taught Māgandiya, a Kuru ‘wanderer’ (i.e., practitioner of another sect), how to understand the workings of the mind and the path to realising *nibbana*.⁷ Buddha also taught some rather complex discourses to his monks when he was residing in the Kuru market town of *Kammasadhamma*, e.g., the *Mahanidana sutta*⁸ where Buddha expounded on dependent origination. This would suggest that the Kurus were probably highly intelligent and possibly deeply contemplative people.

Buddha was able to touch the minds of the political, economic and spiritual elite wherever he went. His patrons read like the who’s who of ancient Northeast India, from kings, ministers, generals and millionaire traders to prom-

⁶ Dutt, op. cit., p. 104.

⁷ Nāṇamoli and Bodhi, “*Māgandiya Sutta*” (To Māgandiya), op. cit., pp. 607-617.

⁸ Walshe, Maurice translated, “*Mahānidāna Sutta*” (The Great Discourse on Origination), Thus Have I Heard: the Long Discourses of the Buddha, Wisdom Publications, London, 1987, pp. 223-230.

inent teachers of both the Brahmanic and non-Brahmanic traditions.⁹ Winning over the elite was an extremely important achievement because their support was critical to the rapid spread and consolidation of *Dhamma*. The elite poured in resources to build and maintain monastic sanctuaries. For instance, in Savatthi where Buddha spent at least twenty-five rain retreats, there were several monasteries and hermitages apart from the famous Jetavana. They included Pubbagamarama (donated by Visakha, wife and daughter of millionaires), Andhavana, Kalakarama, Kantakivana, and so on.¹⁰ In Rajagaha, there were at least three prominent hermitages, Veluvana, Jivaka-ambavana and Maddakucchimigadaya.¹¹ In Kosambi, the more well-known hermitages were built by three wealthy merchants, Pavariya, Kukkuta and Ghosita.

A measure of how successful Buddha was in propagating *Dhamma* could be gleaned from the size of the *Sangha*. We have only an anecdotal impression of that size. When

⁹ Dutt, op. cit., chapters 4-7, where Dutt compiled names of prominent personalities who were known to be patrons of Buddha.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 82-83.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 52-55.

King Ajatasattu, Bimbisara's successor, visited 80-year-old Buddha at one of the monasteries in Rajagaha, he thought there were '1250'¹² monks there listening to Buddha's *Dhamma* talk. So in the capital of Magadha alone, forty-five years after Buddha started his school, there were possibly thousands of monks. The Canon also mentioned that 'five hundred' monks were with Buddha at his deathbed (see chapter 8). That figure usually just meant a sizeable group and not literally 'five hundred'. But they were probably his closest disciples as he had called them '*ariyas*'. If the number of '*ariya*' monks was sizeable, possibly in the hundreds, surely the figure for the rank-and-file monks would be much higher? Therefore, I think it is reasonable to assume that the number of monks by the time of Buddha's death might well have been in the high thousands.

Buddha as the key driving force

There were complex and multiple reasons why the *Dhamma* spread far and wide within a short time. Part of it

¹² Walshe, "*Sāmaññaphala Sutta*" (The Fruits of the Homeless Life), op. cit., p. 92.

was the political-socio conditions of the time. The fact that the secular world then was relatively peaceful apart from an occasional border skirmish, meant that people had time for spirituality because they were not constantly preoccupied with surviving another day or feeding themselves. That Buddha was operating outside the region which was the most conservative in brahmanical belief, meant that the local population was more open to his teaching. But the most important reason why *Dhamma* spread rapidly was probably the appeal of Buddha himself. Below is an examination of some factors that may account for why Buddha was such a draw.

a) Reputation

Today, seen through the lens of biased Buddhist storytellers, one may assume that Buddha had an easy ride establishing himself as a celebrity spiritual guru. But the reality was very different. When he started out at 35, he was considered very young ('black haired'); almost all his contemporary spiritual teachers were much older. He had many sceptics. But Buddha managed to gain a fairly impressive reputation, possibly at a fairly early point of his

proselytising work.¹³ He was known to be a virtuous, noble and upright man, a sincere and disciplined practitioner, a wise sage, a brilliant, skilful and dedicated teacher and an enlightened being.¹⁴ That Buddha was the scion of the wealthy noble Sakyans (“wanderer of high birth”, “from a wealthy family”,¹⁵ “from one of the original noble family”¹⁶) added to his allure. Many rich, powerful and prominent luminaries including well-versed and much respected *Brahmana* teachers had been known to visit him purely because they were intrigued by his reputation.¹⁷ They were all curious about him and his doctrine.

b) Physical appearance

Buddha’s physical appearance was probably very

¹³ The *Majjhima Nikaya* has a few suttas where prominent *Brahmanas* living in Magadha explained that they had been most intrigued by Buddha’s reputation and were curious about him. It is traditionally accepted that Buddha spent his earlier rain retreats in Magadha. So circumstantially, a mention of activities in Magadha would suggest a younger Buddha.

¹⁴ Today the nine qualities we chant in homage of Buddha were in effect his reputed qualities in his lifetime.

¹⁵ Walshe, “*Sonadanda Sutta*” (To Sonadanda), op. cit., p. 127.

¹⁶ Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, “*Cankī Sutta*” (With Cankī), op. cit., p. 777.

¹⁷ Walshe, op. cit., pp. 125-126.

impressive. That would help because looks mattered to the ancient audience (just as they still do today). He was probably handsome: there were fans who would sigh happily just looking at his face. We know of at least one Vakkali who was so mesmerised by Buddha's form that he became a monk just to be near Buddha. Vakkali became depressed and almost killed himself when Buddha told him to go away because his attachment was obstructing his practice.¹⁸ A *Brahmana* elder, Canki, described Buddha as "handsome, comely, and graceful, possessing supreme beauty of complexion with sublime beauty and sublime presence, remarkable to behold."¹⁹ (Canki was not even a disciple when he gushed about the above.)

Buddha probably had features that his ancient contemporaries would consider auspicious and proof of greatness. There were persistent stories about people, especially superstitious *Brahmanas*, who were big on physiognomy, looking out for those special physical markings on his

¹⁸ "*Vakkalithera Vatthu*", *Dhammapada* 351, <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=351>.

¹⁹ Nāṇamoli and Bodhi, op. cit., p. 777.

body.²⁰ Over time, those markings became known as the ‘thirty-two marks’ of a Great Man. Some of those ‘thirty-two marks’ might have actually been an accurate description of Buddha. He might have been tall (legs like an antelope’s, with “long fingers and toes”), possessing an erect posture, and possibly powerfully built (“front part of body like a lion’s”). He might have had soft, smooth skin and a gold-coloured complexion. He might possibly have had deep blue eyes with thick eye-lashes (“like a cow’s”). He could also have had good dental hygiene (“teeth white, even and close”). And he had a deep and powerful voice.²¹

But there were also preposterous exaggerations: such as that “standing and without bending, he can touch and rub his knees with either hand”; that he was “proportioned like a banyan-tree: the height of his body is the same as the span

²⁰ In the “*Ambattha Sutta*” (Walshe, op. cit., pp. 111-112), *Brahmana* grandmaster Pokkharasati sent star pupil Ambattha to visit Buddha and check out if he had ‘32 marks’. In the “*Sonadanda Sutta*” (Walshe, op. cit., p. 127), *Brahmana* Sonadanda told his friends that he was going to visit Buddha who was “handsome, virtuous, well-spoken and had 32 marks”.

²¹ All the physical descriptions were taken from Walshe, “*Lakkhana Sutta*” (The Marks of a Great Man), *ibid.*, pp. 441-442.

of his outstretched arms”;²² and that his tongue was so long that it could “touch both ear holes and both nostrils and cover the whole of his forehead”.²³ He also had 40 teeth! Surely if these were for real, Buddha would have looked like a beast! (How was his mouth supposed to accommodate 40 teeth and a ginormous tongue?) But absurdity did not stop storytellers from repeating the exaggerations.

c) *Personality*

Buddha’s personality possibly made an even more powerful impact. He was charismatic, full of warm friendliness and humour, and deeply compassionate. He was at peace, content, relaxed, and easy-going. Nothing fazed him: trouble could be brewing and the world falling apart, and he would still be calm, unruffled and equanimous. He had simple needs and no expectations, and thus no disputes with the world (as he himself had put it).²⁴ People had been drawn towards him just by his positive aura. Sonadanda

²² Ibid., “*Mahapadana Sutta*”, pp. 205-206 and “*Lakkhana Sutta*”, pp. 441-442.

²³ Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, “*Brahmāyu Sutta*” (Brahmāyu), op. cit., p. 751.

²⁴ Bodhi, “Flowers” (22:94:2), *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya*, op. cit. p. 949.

said Buddha was “welcoming, kindly of speech, courteous, genial.”²⁵ A slave-girl, Punna, was so affected by Buddha that she offered him her food, which was just a meagre piece of pancake made from discarded broken rice. Ever compassionate, Buddha ate the pancake in front of her, giving her so much joy, thus calming her mind and making it ready for *Dhamma*. Punna became a *sotapanna* after a discourse by Buddha.²⁶

Buddha had no airs about him. Even after he had become a famous teacher enjoying royal patronage, Buddha remained easily accessible to just about anybody. His monks would just hang around outside his lodging if he was meditating, and when he came out, would join him on his walks and be treated to *Dhamma* chats. Lay visitors could just drop by to see him without appointment. They could literally walk up to his lodging, knock on the door and be greeted by Buddha himself.

Buddha was a man of few words but he had been known to initiate conversations with complete strangers

²⁵ Walshe, op. cit., p. 127.

²⁶ “*Punnadasi Vatthu*”, *Dhammapada* 226, <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=226>.

when it was an appropriate occasion to teach *Dhamma*. He interrupted a lay man, Sigala, whom he observed bowing solemnly in six directions.²⁷ Buddha advised him on how to make that ritual more meaningful instead of just mindlessly bowing. Buddha said that it was important to observe moral precepts and refrain from unwholesome activities that would drain his financial resources and cause him pain. Buddha also advised Sigala on how to better manage relationships such that he could have a peaceful, harmonious and rewarding life. Buddha had also initiated philosophical conversations with ascetics of other sects when he assessed that they might be open to *Dhamma*.²⁸ Quite a few ascetics converted as a result of those exchanges. (Incidentally, Buddha must have been good company because some of those ascetics did seem to look forward to his occasional visits.²⁹)

²⁷ Walshe, “*Sigālaka Sutta*” (To Sigālaka: Advice to Lay People), op. cit., pp. 461-469.

²⁸ The Canon has a few suttas capturing those exchanges, such as the “*Udumbarika-Sīhanāda*” (The Great Lion’s Roar to the Udumbarikans) in Walshe, *ibid.*, pp. 385-394 and the “*Tevijjavacchagotta Sutta*” (To Vacchagotta on the Threefold True Knowledge) in Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, op. cit., pp. 587-589.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

For most of us who are social creatures, such interactions would be enjoyable and welcomed. For Buddha whose mind was quiet and still, those social activities would actually have been an imposition and a sacrifice. But he did it because it was necessary to teach *Dhamma*. For the same consideration, he had stayed in populous places for the better part of his life to be accessible to people, even though he would have preferred solitude and a quiet life in the forest. Such was his compassion for the world.

d) Wisdom

That he was brilliant was another big draw. People were apparently coming from distant lands (“remote kingdoms and districts”³⁰) to consult him on all kinds of issues. The type of questions posed to him ranged from the spiritual - namely, what was *Dhamma*, how to walk the spiritual path, how to observe morality, to the mundane – how to lead a successful lay life, how to have good relations, even how to have a successful ‘sacrifice’ (a perennial *Brahmana* obsession). (King Ajatasatthu even sent someone to ask Buddha

³⁰ Nāṇamoli and Bodhi, “*Cankī Sutta*” (With Cankī), op. cit., p. 777.

whether he could win a war against the Vajjians; this story will be told in chapter 8.)

But probably one of the most memorable discourses that Buddha gave which demonstrated just how brilliant he was, was the '*Kalama Sutta*'.³¹ He delivered it to a group of highly intelligent and well-informed people known as the Kalamas, who were exasperated and confused by the many rival sects and wanted to know which one was correct and taught true *Dhamma*. Buddha gave a brilliant discourse on how to ascertain truth. He told them that the usual manner by which one learned about the nature of the world actually would not deliver truth.³² Instead learn to observe the mind and know when a choice or an action harmed it (i.e., led to more suffering), or strengthened it (i.e., led to happiness). What strengthened the mind must be the truth. His advice probably cemented his reputation for being wise and ahead of his time.

³¹ Bodhi, "Kesaputtiya" (3:65), The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: a Translation of the *Anguttara Nikaya*, op. cit., pp. 279-283.

³² Ibid., p. 280. They are: oral tradition, lineage of teaching, hearsay, collection of scripture, logical reasoning, inferential reasoning, reasoned cogitation, acceptance of a view after pondering it, the seeming competence (of a speaker) or because you think the ascetic is a teacher.

e) Par excellence teaching skills

Ultimately, however, what distinguished Buddha from the average, run-of-the-mill teacher was his phenomenal skill at guiding interested practitioners to spiritual enlightenment. Below is a brief account of what he had taught, who his target audience was and how he so successfully imparted a teaching so sublime that until one realised, one was often clueless as to what it meant.

What did he teach

The foremost objective of his doctrine was to explain the nature of *dukkha* and how one could be free from it and experience the bliss of *nibbana*. To the practitioners who wanted the full knowledge of *Dhamma* realisation, Buddha would guide them towards recognising the reality of the mind: which was that every mental and physical experience was impermanent and ever-changing (*anicca*), was fundamentally dissatisfying and unpleasant (*dukkha*) and had no essence or soul (*anatta*). He would also guide them to develop and set in place the mental faculties necessary for them to be able to see and realise the above characteristics and also to understand how their minds worked. With that

newly-gleaned knowledge, hopefully, they would gain the spiritual maturity to be able to let go of sense desires and the illusion of the 'I-ego'. The practice requires restraint over our innate negative instincts (i.e., greed, ill-will and foolish delusion) and effort to sharpen the ability of the mind to concentrate and be able to observe objectively.

Who were his listeners

a) Non-practitioners

Not all who stopped to listen to Buddha became serious practitioners. Some were not ready to go on the *Dhamma* path. To these people, Buddha would emphasise ethics and explain implications of skilful and unskilful choices (i.e., *kamma*). The intent was to give them strong incentives to be morally upright and to restrain their more negative instincts. Buddha also advised them to observe some spirituality, namely, to develop faith in the practice, be generous, be caring, be grateful, tame the ego and service the community, amongst others. Observing ethics and practising some spirituality would give them a chance to be happy in this life and in the next. Discourses touching

on these themes would include the *Mangala Sutta*³³ where Buddha explained the conditions for advancement in life and the *Parabhava Sutta*³⁴ where Buddha explained how some choices could lead to downfall. In the *Vyagappajja Sutta*,³⁵ Buddha explained the qualities a lay person must develop to have both a successful secular life and still be prepared for a good afterlife. In the *Ratana Sutta*,³⁶ Buddha systematically explained how faith in the Triple Gems would give the believer peace of mind and help to resolve his mundane *dukkha*.

33 “*Mangala Sutta: Blessings*” (Khp 5), translated from Pali by Narada Thera. Access to Insight (Legacy Edition), 30 November 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/khp/khp.5.nara.html>.

34 “*Parabhava Sutta: Downfall*” (Sn 1.6), translated from Pali by Narada Thera. Access to Insight (Legacy Edition), 30 November 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.1.06.nara.html>.

35 “*Dighajanu (Vyagghapajja) Sutta: Conditions of Welfare*” (AN 8.54), translated from Pali by Narada Thera. Access to Insight (Legacy Edition), 30 November 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an08.542.nara.html>.

36 “*Ratana Sutta: The Jewel Discourse*” (Sn 2.1), translated from Pali by Narada Thera. Access to Insight (Legacy Edition), 30 November 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.2.01.piya.html>.

b) Serious practitioners

Criterion for selection

Buddha was very practical. Much as he was compassionate, he was also keenly aware that beings were of different spiritual calibre. Probably more aware of mortality than the average man, Buddha was careful to focus his limited time and resources on those he knew were spiritually ready and keen, and not to waste time with the recalcitrants. Admitting this explicitly, Buddha told a horse trainer that he would focus effort and attention on the disciples who were prepared to practise diligently for enlightenment and “kill” those who would not “submit to discipline”.³⁷ After shocking the horse trainer who asked wasn’t Buddha supposed to abstain from killing, Buddha explained that he had meant he would not “speak to or instruct” them.

Buddha never discriminated against anyone on account of their age, gender, caste, economic status or intelligence, which were the usual bases for discrimination throughout human history. The only criterion he had used to pick

³⁷ Bodhi, “*Kesi*” (4:111:1), The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: a Translation of the *Anguttara Nikaya*, op. cit., pp. 492-494.

his practitioners was spiritual maturity and readiness for *Dhamma*. On that basis, Buddha had approached some rather unexpected people. We already know of one mad candidate: Patacara (whose story was told in chapter 2).³⁸ Then there were at least five young boys, said to be only seven years old when they became novices: Sopaka, Revata, Pandita, Samkicca³⁹ and Buddha's own son Rahula. The first four boys became *arahant* within just weeks of joining the order. In Sopaka's case, he became a *sotapanna* after only one conversation with Buddha, when he was rescued by Buddha from a cemetery where he had been abandoned.⁴⁰

To the society of the day, perhaps the most shocking of Buddha's new converts was serial killer Angulimala,⁴¹ in the 20th year of post-Enlightenment. Angulimala was at the

³⁸ Malalasekera, op. cit., vol. 2, pp. 112-114.

³⁹ "*Samaneranam Vatthu*", *Dhammapada* 406, <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=406>.

⁴⁰ Malalasekera, op.cit., vol. 2, p. 1303. Sopaka was grudgingly raised by a paternal uncle, after his father's death. When he was seven years old, his uncle dumped him in the cemetery on the pretext that he had quarreled with his cousin.

⁴¹ If our ancient Buddhist forefathers are to be believed, Angulimala would be history's most prolific serial-killers: he apparently had 999 victims, and collected enough fingers to wear as a garland around his neck (like some macabre souvenirs).

very least a psychopath. When he first saw Buddha walking alone in the forest, Angulimala had gleefully exclaimed that it was “wonderful” and “fated” that Buddha must die by his hands.⁴² But Buddha knew that Angulimala’s mind could be awakened to *Dhamma*. As Angulimala chased him through the forest, Buddha made sure that he never caught up. Angulimala finally gave up and demanded that Buddha ‘stop walking’. Buddha said that he had stopped but Angulimala had not. Buddha further explained that he meant he had stopped wielding violence but Angulimala was still killing.⁴³ That jammed Angulimala’s psychotic madness. Deeply remorseful, he dropped his weapons and asked to be a monk. Angulimala eventually realised *nibbana* after a considerable and painful struggle.

Buddha would cast his net very wide to ensure that the wise would be given a chance to taste *Dhamma*. If they could not come to him, he would go to them. He also went out of his way to help the average folk, the poor and the desperate. One such story was the conversion of a weaver’s

⁴² Nāṇamoli and Bodhi, “*Angulimala Sutta*” (On Angulimala), op. cit., pp. 710-711.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 711-712.

daughter.⁴⁴ She had been inspired by Buddha at a *Dhamma* talk three years earlier and had spent the intervening years meditating on death. One day, by chance, Buddha felt that her mind was ready for spiritual awakening. He returned to her village just to help her. When they met, Buddha asked her, “From where do you come?” She replied, “I do not know.” Buddha asked again, “Where are you going?” She shook her head, “I do not know, sir.” “Do you not know?” he pressed. She nodded, “I know.” “Do you know?” he asked. She replied, “I do not know, sir.”

The crowd listening thought she was trying to be funny and got annoyed. Buddha asked that she explain herself. She responded that, Buddha’s first question was whether she knew what her previous life was. The second was if she knew her rebirth destination. Then it was if she knew that death was imminent, and finally if she knew when it would happen. After that series of cryptic questions and answers,⁴⁵

⁴⁴ “*Pesakaradhita Vatthu*”, *Dhammapada* 174, “Buddhist Stories from the Dhammapada Commentary: Part II”, translated from Pali by E.W. Burlingame, selected and revised by Bhikkhu Khantipalo, Access to Insight, 30 November 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/burlingame/wheel324.html>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

she became a *sotapanna*. That was fortunate because by the end of that day, she was dead – killed in a freak accident, and was reborn in heaven.

Amongst Buddha's more unusual disciples included an acrobat who realised *nibbana* while still in the midst of a circus act,⁴⁶ an ostracised leper who chanced upon Buddha's talk while scavenging for food and entered the stream,⁴⁷ a serial womaniser-philanderer,⁴⁸ an entire family of hunters (i.e., killers)⁴⁹ and a thief⁵⁰ who all became *sotapannas* after one *Dhamma* talk, and the list goes on.

Successful practitioners who realised *Dhamma* were very important to the proselytising cause as they were living proof that the doctrine worked and delivered the mental relief and bliss as promised. They were a critical source of

⁴⁶ “*Uggasena Vatthu*”, *Dhammapada* 348, <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=348>.

⁴⁷ Ñāṇamoli, op.cit., pp. 171-173. The leper was killed in an accident shortly after.

⁴⁸ “*Khemakassetthiputta Vatthu*”, *Dhammapada* 309, <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=309>.

⁴⁹ “*Kukkutamittanesada Vatthu*”, *Dhammapada* 124, <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=124>.

⁵⁰ “*Ganthibhedakacora Vatthu*”, *Dhammapada* 63, <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=63>.

inspiration for others. At the same time, they would usually become tireless and passionate propagators of *Dhamma*. At least one *ariya* monk even chose to bring *Dhamma* to a land known to be xenophobic towards outsiders. *Bhikkhu* Punna told Buddha that he was prepared to risk life and limb if that was what it would take to bring *Dhamma* to Sunaparanta.⁵¹

Many of the early *ariya* monks were from rich families and probably had the best education of the day to prepare them to manage their family's wealth. Those included chieftains, former military generals, ex-ministers, landlords, and so on. That meant that Buddha had excellent help from some of the best trained individuals in leadership responsibilities to manage and organise the *Sangha*. They also assumed teaching responsibilities which would have alleviated Buddha's heavy lecturing schedule. Some of these monks were very effective and competent *Dhamma* speakers. Buddha named Maha Kaccayana as a great expositor of *Dhamma*, Punna Mantaniputta as an appealing preacher, Pindola Bharadvaja

⁵¹ Nāṇamoli and Bodhi, "*Puṇṇovāda Sutta*" (Advice to Puṇṇa), op. cit., pp. 1118-1119.

as “chief of the lion roarers”⁵² (presumably that meant an inspirational speaker) and Sariputta as foremost of those who possessed wisdom.

How did he teach

i) Underlying pedagogic philosophy

Be compassionate – Buddha seemed to subscribe to a few basic principles in his approach to teaching *Dhamma*. He had compassion for his listeners and would teach with their interest in mind. When he told the world’s first sixty *arabants* to go spread *Dhamma*, he stressed that it was to be done out of compassion and for the benefit, welfare and happiness of the recipients.⁵³ On another occasion, Buddha said a spiritual teacher must be compassionate towards the laity, and teach him what he had not heard and point him the way to heaven.⁵⁴ A spiritual teacher should not have ulterior motives in teaching *Dhamma*: it was not for gain or fame. It was also not an ego trip. Buddha never accepted gifts for himself. He would make it clear that he

⁵² Dutt, op. cit., p. 24.

⁵³ Ñāṇamoli, op. cit., p. 52.

⁵⁴ Walshe, op. cit., p. 468.

was accepting offerings on behalf of the *Sangha*.

Be sensitive – Despite his exalted status, Buddha remained alert to the emotions and reactions of his listeners. He would carefully gauge reactions to his words and make appropriate adjustments to suit the mood and occasion. For instance, once he was trying to teach humility to a defiant *Brahmana* youth, Ambattha, and when nothing seemed to work because the latter was so caught up with his caste, Buddha told Ambattha that he was the descendent of a slave. Then when Buddha sensed that Ambattha was swinging towards despondency and humiliation because his friends were jeering at him, Buddha pulled back and revealed that his slave ancestor eventually became a great saint of the *Vedic* faith.⁵⁵ Buddha had been known to refuse to answer questions when he knew that the truth was painful. A ‘dog’ ascetic and an ‘ox’ ascetic asked him point-blank three times whether their practice of emulating their respective animals would lead them to heaven. He finally replied, with obvious reluctance, that it would not, and in fact they would

⁵⁵ Walshe, “*Ambatṭha Sutta*” (About Ambatṭha: Pride Humbled), op. cit., pp. 115-117.

end up in woeful states.⁵⁶ Sensing their despair and fear, Buddha taught them *Dhamma* which helped to repair the damage to their minds from their years of wrong practices.

Be objective – Buddha also taught his disciples how to criticise wrong practices without being offensive. He said they should focus on explaining how a practice was wrong without criticising the practitioner. On their part, he said they must not get upset or defensive when people criticised their doctrine. They should merely clarify any misunderstanding in the critics' arguments, and explain factually what was their teaching and practice. He told his disciples that they should be equanimous about public comments about him (Buddha) and not react with anger to criticisms or delight to praises.⁵⁷

Be practical – Buddha was practical. For him, *Dhamma* was about solving problems of the mind (i.e., *dukkha*) and not a philosophical pursuit for its own sake. He had a modern man of science approach to problems. That meant: asking the correct questions; objectively studying the problem and

⁵⁶ Nāṇamoli and Bodhi, “*Kukkuravatika Sutta*” (The Dog-duty Ascetic), op. cit., pp. 493-497.

⁵⁷ Walshe, “*Brahmajāla Sutta*” (The Supreme Net: What the Teaching is Not), op. cit., p. 68.

issues; not making assumptions about the solution; and fixing the problem rationally and systematically. He taught his disciples not to be distracted by irrelevant and unnecessary questions that might be philosophically fascinating but of no value to solving the problem of *dukkha*. So he refused to be drawn into the hot debates of the day, such as the temporal and spatial nature of the universe, and whether Buddha existed as an entity after death. Buddha likened such a theorist to one who foolishly refused to be treated after having been pierced by a poison arrow until he had been given some ridiculous, non-essential information like the name, clan and physical appearance of the assailant or the shape and make of the arrow or the bow.⁵⁸

ii) Preliminary work

Before he commenced his talk, Buddha would usually check on the state of mind of the listeners. If the listener was distracted, disturbed, tired, or for whatever reasons uncomfortable and unable to concentrate, Buddha would do the necessary to restore mental balance. Sometimes it

⁵⁸ Nāṇamoli and Bodhi, “*Cuḷamālunkya Sutta*” (The Shorter Discourse to Mālunkya-putta), op. cit., pp. 534-535.

took nothing more than just ensuring that the person was fed. There was a poor farmer who came to pay respects to Buddha after a whole day of looking for a lost ox. Because the farmer was starving, Buddha waited until he had some food before delivering a *Dhamma* discourse. The sated man understood and entered the stream.⁵⁹ To those in some emotional distress, he would calm them down with well-placed words and invite them to sit with him. Sometimes, just being in his soothing presence was enough to calm them down.

To a listener with no background in spiritual practice, Buddha would usually start with something easy to understand so that the listener could take delight and be inspired. His usual starting point was expounding on the merits of being generous (*dāna*). Then Buddha would talk about the importance of upholding morality (*sīla*), how to be reborn in the heavens, the dangers of overindulging and finally, the importance of moderating one's desires. By that time the listener would likely be enjoying himself, listening attentively with an open and receptive mind. Only then

⁵⁹ “*Eka Upasaka Vatthu*”, *Dhammapada* 203, <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=203>

would Buddha share the deeper *Dhamma*.

Sometimes, even when the candidate was keen for *Dhamma*, the conditions might still not be right for his enlightenment. Buddha had been known to hold back from teaching when he sensed that the conditions were not ready. For instance, time and again Buddha did not accept Nanda the herd-man's invitation to lunch. Then one day, Buddha on his own initiative visited Nanda for alms. This went on every day until the seventh day when Buddha gave Nanda a *Dhamma* discourse and the herd-man entered the stream.⁶⁰ Sometimes, when the timing was right for the subject to understand *Dhamma* but the occasion might not be appropriate, Buddha would also teach *Dhamma*. That happened at a wedding ceremony.⁶¹ Buddha reminded the bridal couple to beware of passion (talk about appropriateness) and anger and hatred, and to note the burden of the aggregates⁶² and

⁶⁰ That same day, Nanda was killed by an old enemy. "*Nandagopalaka Vatthu*", *Dhammapada* 42, <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=42>.

⁶¹ "*Annatarakuladarika Vatthu*", *Dhammapada* 202, <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=202>.

⁶² The five aggregates (*khandhas*) are physical form (*rūpa*), consciousness (*viññāna*), feelings (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*) and volitional thought formations (*saṅkhāra*).

the bliss of *nibbana*. Both the bride and groom entered the stream in the midst of wedding festivities.

iii) Arsenal of teaching tools

Buddha was a skilful teacher with quite a few tricks up his proverbial sleeves. He would tailor the method of instruction to the individual. Some of his listeners were sceptical or even downright hostile. For those, he would try to tame them by overcoming their pride and closed-mindedness. Usually he would either ‘shock-and-awe’ them into abandoning their ego or out-talk them into submission with his far superior intellect. Some were already receptive and came to him sincerely wanting to learn. For those he would gently guide with straightforward and precise explanations and careful details. Below is an elaboration of his teaching tools.

Psychic powers – The Canon has captured many instances of Buddha being able to do things that others would consider unexplainable. He was able to engage beings that could not be seen by the average eyes.⁶³ He was able to ma-

⁶³ Those beings were probably vibrating at a different light and sound frequency.

nipulate elemental molecules, such as fire, earth, water and air. He was able to see his and other people's previous lives. One psychic skill that came in very handy in *Dhamma* work was the ability to literally see into the minds of individuals and know just what it would take to enable each person to realise *Dhamma*. There is a complex balance of mental faculties that must be present for *Dhamma* realisation.⁶⁴ Buddha was able to help bring up a missing mental faculty for the practitioner and tip him over into *ariya* realisation.

Buddha had helped many with this skill. There was *bhikkhu* Culapanthaka, who was so slow-witted that even his well-meaning elder brother Mahapanthaka gave up trying to teach him *Dhamma* and told him to go back to lay life. Buddha intervened to stop Culapanthaka from disrobing, gave him a piece of white cloth and told him to keep rubbing it on his brow. Culapanthaka did as told and after a while noticed that the cloth was becoming dirtier. As he reflected on that, his mind quietened down, became concentrated, and suddenly penetrated the concept of

⁶⁴ The faculties would include having faith (*saddhā*) about Buddha and the practice, being morally upright (*sīla*), being able to concentrate (*samādhi*) and observe objectively (*sati*), and having intuitive wisdom (*paññā*).

impermanence,⁶⁵ and realised *nibbana*. Culapanthaka probably lacked the ability to focus and concentrate properly. The repeated action of rubbing and looking at a staining cloth was enough to focus his mind, reduce its agitation thus allowing time for his intuitive wisdom to blossom.

Then there was *bhikkhu* Suvannakara training under Sariputta, who was given the meditation subject of decaying form. He became so demoralised because he could not concentrate that he wanted to disrobe.⁶⁶ Buddha gave him a lotus and told him to focus on it. Then Buddha used his psychic powers to age the lotus rapidly and the petals started falling off. Suvannakara saw impermanence, penetrated the concept of decay and *anatta*, and realised *nibbana*. Buddha had known that Suvannakara was drawn towards things of beauty. The lotus would please him and calm his mind so that he could concentrate on the *Dhamma* characteristics. The decaying corpse in contrast was repulsive to Suvannakara and his agitated mind could not reach mental balance.

⁶⁵ Malalasekera, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 897-900.

⁶⁶ “*Suvannakarathera Vatthu*”, *Dhammapada* 285, <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=285>.

Then there was Kisa Gotami who became hysterical after losing her infant son.⁶⁷ Buddha told her that he could resurrect the baby if she could find mustard seeds from a household where no member had died. After hours of fruitless search, she realised that death was the natural order of life. Her tears stopped. She let go of her son, asked to join the *bhikkhuni* order, and eventually became an *arabant*. Kisa Gotami just needed time to come to terms with her loss. Having her go on a fruitless quest was probably just to exhaust her agitated mental energy while giving her half-crazed mind an object of focus. In the end, when the agitated energy was spent, the single-minded focus of the hunt was enough to lead to a momentary realisation about mortality. That was Kisa Gotami's *Dhamma* moment that Buddha triggered.

Power of visual aid – Buddha frequently used visual aids to drive home *Dhamma* points. When celebrity courtesan Sirima died, Buddha arranged for a public auction of her rapidly decomposing body. There was naturally no taker. In life, she had commanded a thousand coins for a night

⁶⁷ “*Kisagotami Vatthu*”, *Dhammapada* 114, <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=114>.

of her company but in death no one wanted her body even for free. His monks were amongst the witnesses and those who were her secret admirers were stunned by the sight of the corpse into realising mortality and impermanence.⁶⁸

A Sakyan cousin, Janapadakalyani Rupananda,⁶⁹ was seized by her own beauty but joined the *bhikkhuni* order to be with her closest kin because she felt lonely. Buddha conjured up the image of a beautiful nymph and aged it before her very eyes until it collapsed, died and started decomposing. Horrified, she overcame her attachment to physical form and realised impermanence.

Sometimes, Buddha merely took advantage of an incidental visual aid to make his point. Once, a monk saw a forest fire and reflected that enlightenment insight would similarly burn up all fetters.⁷⁰ Buddha interjected to reinforce his understanding and help him realise *nibbana*. Then there was a whole bunch of monks who had a good medi-

⁶⁸ “*Sirima Vatthu*”, *Dhammapada* 147, <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=147>.

⁶⁹ “*Janapadakalyani Rupanandatheri Vatthu*”, *Dhammapada* 150, <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=150>.

⁷⁰ “*Annatarabhikkhu Vatthu*”, *Dhammapada* 31, <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=31>.

tation session and thought they were *arabants*. They wanted to see Buddha to convey the good news. Buddha told Ananda to tell them to visit the cemetery before going to see him. It was at the cemetery while looking at the freshly dead bodies that they realised they still had attachments. Buddha interjected to remind them of the real nature of the body and to let go of desires. They all realised *nibbana* soon after.⁷¹

Intellectual approach – For those who were well-educated and proud of their vast learning, Buddha usually engaged them on dialectic discussions. Buddha had devised four approaches to handle such occasions.⁷² To a valid question, Buddha might judge it appropriate to give either a categorical answer (i.e., yes or no) or a lengthy reply with detailed explanations. Buddha would not talk unnecessarily: if he could, he would get to the bottom-line quickly. However, if a categorical or succinct answer was not enough to explain the *Dhamma* point clearly, Buddha would elaborate. Many of the exchanges captured in the

⁷¹ “*Sambahula Adhimanikabhikkhu Vatthu*”, *Dhammapada* 149, <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=149>.

⁷² Bodhi, “Questions” (4:42:2), *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: a Translation of the Anguttara Nikaya*, op. cit., pp. 432-433.

Anguttara Nikaya were of the former category while those in the *Majjhima* and *Digha Nikayas* were of the latter. The brilliance was in knowing which approach would be the most effective for the occasion. Sometimes, Buddha might not even answer the question but would instead pose a question in return. This usually happened when he wanted to clarify the inquirer's understanding of the issue. There were other times he might well have planned to debunk the assumptions behind the query. But Buddha would also decline to reply and just keep quiet when he deemed the question to be a trivial philosophical pursuit that had nothing to do with *Dhamma* or even improvements to the secular life.⁷³

Use of simile, metaphor and analogy – Often Buddha would use one of these to make an obscure point clearer to his listeners. Buddha was extremely well-informed on a wide range of things and he was also very observant. So he had stored in his mind all kinds of little fascinat-

⁷³ In the Pali Canon, they are known as the ten unanswerables. They are: is the world eternal? Or not? Is the world infinite? Or not? Is the soul identical with the body? Or not? Does the Buddha exist after death? Or not? Does he both exist and does not exist? Or neither exist nor not exist? See *Cūḷamāhunkya Sutta*, in Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, op. cit., p. 533.

ing details about life's activities: farming, cattle herding, taming animals, shaping gold pieces, sculpturing, even hunting and arrow making. Often he would use something directly associated with his listeners' lives for his analogy or metaphor so that they could more easily and intuitively grasp the *Dhamma* point.

Many of his monks were probably village folk whose backgrounds were in farming and cattle tending. In the *Mahagopalaka Sutta*,⁷⁴ Buddha used the analogy of the qualities of a successful cowherd to explain how monks should practise to achieve spiritual success. For instance, he said one of eleven things that a bad cowherd would not know how to do was to “pick out flies’ eggs”.⁷⁵ Similarly, a poorly-practising monk who did not know to ‘pick out flies’ eggs’ would tolerate thoughts of sensual desire, ill-will and cruelty.⁷⁶ In the *Culagopalaka Sutta*,⁷⁷ he said a “foolish cowherd” had caused his entire stock of cattle to drown

⁷⁴ Ibid., “*Mahagopalaka Sutta*” (Greater Discourse on the Cowherd), pp. 313-318.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 313.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 314.

⁷⁷ Ibid., “*Culagopalaka Sutta*” (The Shorter Discourse on the Cowherd), pp. 319-321.

because he had not examined a flooded terrain properly. In the same way, unskilled monks would find themselves trapped and would suffer if they had not studied the mental terrain thoroughly and understood the way out.⁷⁸

In the *Kayagatasati Sutta*,⁷⁹ Buddha gave an excellent and vivid impression of what to expect at the different levels of *jhana* through a very effective use of analogies. For instance, he compared the effort to get into the first *jhana* to kneading bath powder into a ball. “Just as a skilled man...heaps bath powder in a metal basin and, sprinkling it gradually with water, kneads it till the moisture wets his ball of bath powder, soaks it...; so too, a *bhikkhu* makes the rapture and pleasure... drench, steep, fill, and pervade this body, so that... no part is unpervaded by the rapture and pleasure...”⁸⁰

Sometimes, he used this method to drive home a point powerfully. On why one must avoid doing evil, Buddha said that if one were to fall into the lower realms, the odds of being born a human again were lower than a blind turtle

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 319.

⁷⁹ Ibid., “*Kayagatasati Sutta*” (Mindfulness of the Body), pp. 952-954.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 953.

being able to stick its head through a yoke that was floating freely in an ocean of water, assuming that the turtle surfaces only once every century.⁸¹

Storytelling – Buddha had quite a repertoire of stories, which ranged from folklore to the supernatural, from tales of time long past to that of the distant future. Often Buddha told stories to set the context so that people could better understand his lesson. In the *Aggañña Sutta*, he told a story of how life began on earth, gradually evolved through millenniums until the first humans appeared and eventually the establishment of society and the caste system.⁸² The whole process was driven by greed and craving. Buddha wanted to show that the caste system was a human invention and not a divine creation. He also told numerous stories about the *kammic* consequences of making right or wrong choices to impress on the need to exercise moral restraint.⁸³

⁸¹ Ibid., “*Balapandita Sutta*” (Fools and Wise Men), op. cit., pp. 1020-1021.

⁸² Walshe, “*Aggañña Sutta*” (On Knowledge of Beginnings), op. cit., pp. 407-415.

⁸³ See *Dhammapada* for an excellent collection of such stories.

iv) Innate skills

Buddha was a powerful speaker: eloquent, engaging and possibly even mesmerising. His audience had been known to listen in rapt silence during his discourses. Buddha's style of lecturing was lively and dynamic. Buddha was not above making a dramatic point. He once picked up some leaves to make the point that the knowledge he had was as vast as all the leaves in the forest but what he had taught was just a small fraction of this, just like the few leaves in his palm.⁸⁴ This amount of knowledge was enough for *Dhamma* realisation.

v) Nurturing

Buddha was a very dedicated teacher who took the spiritual development of his monks very seriously and often personally guided them. There were several stories in the Canon of how, at the pivotal moment when the monk's mind might just be ready for spiritual awakening, Buddha would be there to guide him so that he could make it through and not lose the chance. Buddha once stood guard at a door

⁸⁴ Bodhi, "The Simsapa Grove" 56:31(1), The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the *Samyutta Nikaya*, op. cit., pp. 1857-1858.

to stop Sariputta from entering a room and interrupting the meditation of a novice monk there. Buddha knew that young Pandita could realise *Dhamma* soon if he was not disturbed.⁸⁵ Sometimes, Buddha would even handhold a new disciple. He had newly-ordained Sona Kutikanna spend the night in his dwelling so that he was easily accessible to Sona at a time when the latter was reaching spiritual maturity.⁸⁶

Beyond spiritual practice, Buddha also cared for the well-being of his monks. His opening greeting to those whom he had not seen for a while was often, ‘Are you well? Are you happy? Do you have trouble finding almsfood?’⁸⁷ Once Buddha came across a dying monk, Tissa, lying in a pool of his own urine. Together with Ananda, Buddha cleaned Tissa up, changed his robe, spoke *Dhamma* to him which comforted him and he passed away with joy in his heart.⁸⁸ (Buddha subsequently made it an offence of wrongdoing if fellow monks were not looked after.)

⁸⁵ “*Panditasamanera Vatthu*” *Dhammapada* 80, <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=80>.

⁸⁶ Ñāṇamoli, op. cit., pp. 165-167.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 166.

⁸⁸ “*Putigattatissatthera Vatthu*”, *Dhammapada* 41, <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=41>.

Enlightenment of Rabula

In this final segment, we will continue with the story of Rahula, Buddha's son, from where we had left off in chapter 9 of volume 1. In the Pali Canon, we catch glimpses of Rahula growing up and being guided by his father. He was a lively, playful boy who quite possibly played pranks on his elder monks. Buddha once told little Rahula that he must never tell lies "even for a joke" because a single lie could easily and completely erase all his spiritual achievements.⁸⁹ Buddha also stressed the importance of constantly reflecting on whether a physical, mental and verbal action was wholesome or not, 'before, during and after' it was performed. (This was the picture of a father teaching his little boy how to be morally upright and behave properly.)

But Rahula was essentially a good kid. For an only child who must have been thoroughly pampered when he was with his grandfather, Rahula was amazingly well-behaved. He once slept in the lavatory adjacent to Buddha's room because there was a new *Vinaya* rule stating that a novice

⁸⁹ Nāṇamoli and Bodhi, "*Ambalatthikarahulovada Sutta*" (Advice to Rahula at Ambalatthika), op. cit., pp. 523-524.

could not sleep under the same roof as a fully ordained monk.⁹⁰ He also did his share of cleaning chores.⁹¹ He was well known for his eagerness to learn *Dhamma*; Buddha pronounced him as foremost among those keen on training (*sikkhakamanam*).⁹²

Rahula clearly held Buddha in awe and was quite sensitive about how Buddha viewed him. Once as a young man following his father on alms rounds, Buddha suddenly ‘looked back’ and told him to regard all material forms as ‘not mine, not I and not my-Self’.⁹³ It was not said in the Canon what had prompted Buddha’s words. But the commentaries added that Rahula was caught day-dreaming and admiring his father’s handsome profile and noting how much they resembled each other. Anyhow, Rahula must have felt embarrassed for he thought, “Who would go into the town for alms today when personally admonished by

⁹⁰ Malalasekera, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 738.

⁹¹ Crosby, Kate, “The Inheritance of Rahula: Abandoned Child, Boy Monk, Ideal Son and Trainee”, edited by Sasson, Vanessa R., Little Buddhas: Children and Childhoods in Buddhist Texts and Traditions, Oxford University Press, New York, 2013, p. 111.

⁹² Malalasekera, op. cit., vol. 2, p.738.

⁹³ Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, “*Maharahulovada Sutta*” (The Greater Discourse of Advice to Rahula), op. cit., p. 527.

the Blessed One?” He then sat by the side of the road to meditate.⁹⁴ Subsequently, he approached Buddha to guide him on mindfulness meditation. Buddha took the opportunity to explain how to view the body and its functions with “disenchantment and dispassion”.⁹⁵

On his part, Buddha seemed more like a teacher than a father. He took a personal interest in Rahula’s monastic training and closely guided him on spiritual matters. On the day Buddha knew that the mental conditions were ripe for Rahula’s enlightenment, Buddha decided he would spend time with Rahula to guide him through.⁹⁶ They went for alms together and then Buddha took Rahula to a secluded spot in the forest, where he sat him down and systematically walked him through the nature of the mind. At the end of the exchange, Rahula realised *nibbana*. He was about 18 years old.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 527.

⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 527-530.

⁹⁶ Ibid., “*Cularahulovada Sutta*” (The Shorter Discourse of Advice to Rahula), pp. 1126-1128.

⁹⁷ Malalasekera, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 738.

A final word

Up until about 55, Buddha was a tireless wanderer who travelled extensively throughout northeast India to teach *Dhamma* and he would spend the rain retreats in a different place almost every year. People from all walks of life would go to him to be guided on the spiritual path. He was so skilful that he made it seem like it was a foregone conclusion that the candidate would see *Dhamma*. But there were actually many instances when success was not a given, and it took a combination of Buddha's extraordinary teaching skills and his knowledge of the seeker's state of mental and spiritual readiness to pitch the lesson in just the right way so that these seekers could have their spiritual breakthrough. Buddha's dedication and hard work paid off. He singlehandedly guided thousands of people to see *Dhamma*. This was a mind-boggling achievement, considering how incredibly sublime and difficult it is even to catch a glimpse of *Dhamma* for oneself, let alone to help another see it.

Chapter Five: Middle Age – Trouble and Unpleasantness

BUDDHIST STORYTELLERS over the centuries tend to play up the happy, glorious episodes in Buddha's life story. It is thus not as commonly known that there were some pretty dark episodes in Buddha's life when he had to deal with really serious problems. He was accused of having illicit affairs, framed for murder, targeted for assassinations, betrayed by his disciples, heckled by angry crowds, endured starvation, and so on. There were problems even within the *Sangha*: routinely he had to deal

with terrible practitioners who blatantly disregarded the training rules, disgraced the practice and upset the laity. This chapter seeks to give a flavour of the range of problems that confronted Buddha and how he managed them.

Problems of being in society

a) Social prejudices

One unpleasantness that Buddha continued to encounter throughout his life was social prejudice and the hostility of non-believers. When he was younger, his youth was often cited as a reason why people were sceptical about his spiritual attainment. But as Buddha grew older and his age became less of an issue, sceptics, particularly the *Brahmanas*, would challenge his lack of the right religious pedigree: Buddha was of the warrior *Khattiya* caste, and not the priestly *Brahmana* caste. Often, he had to contend with conservative *Brahmanas* disparaging him for rejecting the *Vedas* (their religious texts), demanding to know why he did not show proper respect for *Brahmanas* as was their due,¹

¹ Dutt, op. cit., p. 47.

and even calling him a social parasite.²

Some *Brahmanas* even believed that just seeing a monk was enough to bring bad luck. Magandiya said that according to his scripture, “it is an ill sight” to see “the lord of that destroyer of growth” (i.e., Buddha).³ Aggika Bharadvaja agitatedly warned Buddha to stay away from him because he was afraid that Buddha’s presence would ruin the sacrificial ceremony he was about to perform.⁴ One *Brahmana* colourfully cursed a lady just for uttering a salutation to Buddha.⁵ There was even one occasion when prejudices were so bad that Buddha could not get a single alm in a *Brahmana*-majority village, Pancasala.⁶

Sometimes Buddha managed to overcome their initial hostility and convert them. One such celebrated instance

² “*Kasi Bharadvaja Sutta: To the Plowing Bharadvaja*” (Sn1.4), translated from Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 30 November 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.1.04.than.html>.

³ Ñānamoli and Bodhi, “*Māgandiya Sutta*” (To Māgandiya), op. cit., p. 607.

⁴ Translated by Norman, K. R., “The Outcaste” (1.7), *The Rhinoceros Horn and other early Buddhist Poems*, from The Group of Discourses (*Sutta-Nipata*) vol. 1, Pali Text Society, London, 1985, p. 20.

⁵ Dutt, op. cit., pp. 73-74.

⁶ “*Mara Vatthu*”, *Dhammapada* 200, <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=200>.

was the conversion of *Brahmana* farm owner, Kasi Bharadvaja in the 11th year of post-Enlightenment (date according to commentaries) in Ekanala village. While on his alms round, Buddha came upon Kasi Bharadvaja distributing food to his workers. When Kasi saw Buddha, something snapped in him and he apparently called out quite rudely to the effect, ‘I work, I get to eat. You want to eat, you should work.’⁷

Buddha could have ignored Kasi and moved on, and that would have been quite consistent with his usual mode of handling hostile sceptics. Instead Buddha stopped to correct Kasi’s prejudice. Using a farming analogy that would resonate with the farmer in Kasi, Buddha explained that the spiritual practice of a monk was also very hard work, and no less demanding than Kasi’s own physical exertions.⁸ Buddha concluded with, “Such is the ploughing that I do. It has Deathless for its fruit. Who does this ploughing will be freed, from every kind of suffering.”⁹

⁷ “*Kasi Bharadvaja Sutta: To the Plowing Bharadvaja*”, Thanissaro, op. cit., <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.1.04.than.html>.

⁸ Buddha’s discourse to Kasi was in verse. The version used here was translated from Pali by Ñāṇamoli, op. cit., pp. 120-121.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

To Kasi's credit, he paid attention instead of just ignoring Buddha, and was able to understand Buddha's words. He became a lay disciple on the spot. Eventually, he became a monk and even realised *nibbana* for himself.

b) Constant doctrinal debates

Buddha had to regularly debate practitioners from other schools on his doctrine. Some of those sessions were argued in private, just between Buddha and his challenger. But others were primetime events held before large crowds and the stakes could be very high: the loser (and his disciples) might be obliged to renounce his doctrine and embrace that of the victor's. Because of Buddha's formidable reputation as a very skilled orator, he was an irresistible lure for disputants eager for fame and glory.

One particularly memorable debate was that with Saccaka, a star disciple of prominent teacher Nigantha Nagaputta from the *Jaina* school. Saccaka was an outstanding debater who was touted as unbeatable. In fact Saccaka was so sure of victory that he invited his legion of fans to come watch him 'humiliate' Buddha, even promising to make

Buddha ‘sweat’.¹⁰ However, the reverse happened: Saccaka lost so badly that he was left stunned and speechless. After Buddha won, he apparently flipped open his robe and showed his bare chest to the crowd and said, Saccaka had wanted to make him sweat but ended up sweating profusely instead.¹¹ This was one rare glimpse of Buddha as a man who was not above some dramatic timing to drum home the message to the audience, which seemed to be ‘behold true *Dhamma* triumphs!’ It is interesting that the Canon compilers devoted considerable space to reporting on the debate. Saccaka was not the only debater who took Buddha on but he was possibly one of the most formidable, with a ruthless agenda to defeat and discredit Buddha and destroy the young school. Buddha’s triumph must have been all the more sweet to the Canon compilers.

Then there were the *Brahmanas* who would frequently visit Buddha to argue that birth alone determined spiritual purity and excellence, as explained in their scripture. One of the *Brahmana*’s best and brightest, Assalayana, was egged

¹⁰ Nāṇamoli and Bodhi, “*Cuḷasaccaka Sutta*” (The Shorter Discourse to Saccaka), op. cit., p. 322.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 328.

on by his fellowmen to pick a fight with Buddha over that theme.¹² Assalayana was initially most reluctant because he was not sure of winning. But his fellow *Brahmanas* were relentless and he finally caved in. He decided on a strategy of passive resistance, which essentially translated into ‘you can say whatever you want but I still maintain that my doctrine is right’. In other words, there was no real debate: Assalayana was just going to ignore Buddha’s argument.¹³ One can imagine how exasperating such exchanges would be. Yet Buddha patiently walked Assalayana through his arguments until even the stubborn youth finally conceded defeat. Assalayana became a lay disciple at the end of the session.

c) *Vicious rival schools*

One of the most dangerous threats that Buddha had to grapple with was rival sects plotting to destroy him and his school. His enemies were completely ruthless and the Pali Canon reported at least three nefarious plots. The first took place in Savatthi, where Buddha was accused by

¹² Ibid., “*Assalāya Sutta*” (To Assalāya), p. 763.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 764-770.

Cinca Manavika of impregnating her. (The ancient Indians apparently equated celibacy with holiness, so accusing him of being sexually active was to cast doubts about his spiritual attainment.) It was an elaborate plot which took several months to ferment. Cinca Manavika would visit Jetavana monastery just before ‘closing hours’ for months and then made it seem like she had spent the night there. So naturally, people started talking and her claims actually succeeded in sowing doubts in the minds of the laity. The ruse was exposed somewhat fortuitously when the strings holding up her fake ‘belly’ to simulate pregnancy gave way.¹⁴

In the second plot, which apparently happened around the same period as the Cinca Manavika scandal, Buddha was framed for the murder of Sundari, a female disciple of another sect. At her teachers’ instruction, Sundari had actually been snooping around Jetavana for a while, supposedly to find evidence that could discredit Buddha. Her teachers subsequently had her killed and her body buried in a shallow grave near Jetavana. In the ensuing search by the authorities for the missing girl, her body was ‘uncov-

¹⁴ “*Cincamanavika Vatthu*”, *Dhammapada* 176, <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=176>.

ered' near Jetavana and the fickle public apparently turned ferociously against Buddha. Things must have gotten really tense and the monks were heckled when they went for their alms. Buddha had to comfort them saying, 'Be patient, the truth would be out eventually'. The storm did finally blow over: lay opinion was said to have shifted when they saw how unruffled and well-behaved the monks were. While that might be so, it probably helped that official investigations were able to expose the conspiracy, implicate the real culprits and exonerate Buddha.¹⁵

Interestingly, both incidents took place in Savatthi. Why was Savatthi such a vicious hotbed of anti-Buddha activities? We know that Savatthi was host to a large number of ascetic communities, including Buddha's *Sangha* because of its wealth and religious tolerance. Perhaps the presence of a large number of sects exacerbated the rivalry for finite lay resources and support. Buddha's popularity would be a threat to not only their support base but possibly also their longer-term survival. Both Cinca Manavika and Sundari were told by their teachers that their ranks were dwindling,

¹⁵ "*Sundariparibbajika Vatthu*", *Dhammapada* 306, <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=306>.

and they must do something before the tide became irreversible.

Clearly, proselytising work was dangerous and the more successful Buddha was, the more he and his monks became fair game. Their enemies were completely ruthless especially given the money and power at stake. The above two incidents ended on a happy note for Buddha; eventually however, those tenacious enemies did manage to score a big win when they successfully murdered Maha Moggallana. Maha Moggallana was one of the pillars of the *Sangha* and his untimely death just before Buddha's own demise would severely demoralise the *Sangha*. (That tragic story would be told in chapter 8.)

d) Vindictive royal enemies

The political elite of Northeast India were generally ambivalent if not supportive of Buddha. However, there was one exception: in Vatsa kingdom, royal consort Magandiya hated Buddha with a vengeance and was determined to drive him out of Vatsa. Their paths had crossed much earlier when Magandiya's father had offered her hand in marriage to Buddha after seeing that Buddha had the physiognomy for greatness. Buddha declined saying he would

not marry a “vessel of filth”.¹⁶ Magandiya never forgave that perceived insult. After she married Vatsa king, Udena, she hired provocateurs to heckle and harass Buddha and the monks on alms rounds. However, the anti-*Sangha* campaign apparently lasted for only a short while (seven days according to the Canon).

The key reason why the momentum fizzled out was probably because Udena himself was neutral towards Buddha. We do not know if Magandiya had tried to poison his mind against Buddha. We can assume that she would have tried but Udena was probably not convinced. Perhaps the fact that another of his consorts, Samavati, was a devout Buddhist had helped to mitigate Magandiya’s influence. Anyhow, *Dhamma* and *Sangha* continued to thrive in Vatsa notwithstanding Magandiya’s machination against Buddha. However, at some point Magandiya did manage to engineer the death of Samavati; she was subsequently

¹⁶ According to commentaries, Buddha had used strong words to deliberately shock the old *Brahmana* into realising the gross reality of the human body so that he could overcome his attachment and realise his spiritual potential. It worked and the *Brahmana* realised *nibbana*. See Malalasekera, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 596.

exposed for that murder and executed.¹⁷

e) Negligent lay community

Lay support has been pivotal for the survival of the *Sangha* through the centuries. By and large, the laity has been dependable. But there was at least one occasion during Buddha's time when a lay supporter failed in his duty, which led to terrible suffering for the monks. This happened in the 12th year of post-Enlightenment. A *Brahmana*, who recently converted, invited Buddha and the *Sangha* to stay in his home village of Veranja for the rain retreat and then neglected to follow up on providing their basic needs, especially food. Under normal circumstances, the monks would have just shrugged it off and gone on alms rounds. But during that visit, Veranja was experiencing serious famine and food was rationed, so the monks had great difficulty getting alms.¹⁸ They were reduced to eating fare meant for animals. Some horse dealers passing through Veranja took pity on them and gave them horse bran.¹⁹ Maha Moggalla-

¹⁷ Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 596-597.

¹⁸ Ñāṇamoli, op. cit., p. 126.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 126.

na wanted to use his psychic powers to overturn the earth so that the starving monks could scour for food that grew underground.²⁰ But Buddha refused saying that it would harm the creatures that lived within the soil. Moggallana then suggested leaving Veranja but Buddha declined and said to bear with it.²¹

The situation must have been really bad to prompt a conversation between Sariputta and Buddha about the conditions for the longevity of true *Dhamma*. Sariputta asked Buddha why some *Sanghas* from previous dispensation lasted long and others only a short while.²² Buddha replied that if *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* had been taught in detail, the *Sangha* would survive longer. Sariputta promptly asked Buddha to set more disciplinary rules. Buddha declined saying that he would not introduce rules to pre-empt problems but would do so only when the conditions required it.²³

Eventually, the rain retreat was over and the monks could move elsewhere. Buddha went to the absentee

²⁰ Ibid., p. 126.

²¹ Ibid., p. 126.

²² Ibid., p. 128.

²³ Ibid., p. 129.

Brahmana ‘host’ to take his leave. The *Brahmana* became defensive when he saw Buddha and claimed that he had been ‘very busy and had no time’ to look after the monks.²⁴ While it would be so easy to blame the *Brahmana* for being irresponsible, the fact is he did make a valid point. Often laity is caught up with mundane life’s demands and responsibilities and supporting spiritual practitioners is bumped down on the priority list. This dependence on laity is a vulnerability that will always plague the *Sangha*.

Problems from within the Sangha

Some problems that confronted Buddha were the results of the shenanigans of rogue monks. In the early years after Enlightenment, the monks were of the highest spiritual calibre. They were handpicked and ordained by Buddha and all had the mental qualities to realise *nibbana*. At some point, Buddha decentralised the ordination process, mainly to make *Sangha* ordination more easily accessible to spiritual seekers. The positive effect of decentralising ordination was a faster pace of growth in the number of *Sangha* members.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 129.

The big minus however was doubtful characters with wrong motivations were also being admitted because there was no fool-proof quality control. The average monk who was doing the *Sangha* admission did not have Buddha's psychic abilities to discern the minds and intentions of candidates. Over time, Buddha had to deal with monks who practised poorly and behaved inappropriately, not least because they were disturbing the sincere practitioners, but also because they were upsetting the laity and putting off non-believers who might otherwise have been receptive to *Dhamma*.

a) Misconducts and transgressions

So Buddha started introducing disciplinary rules to try and rein in the rogue monks. But those monks were quite ingenious in bending the rules, mainly so that they could continue to gratify their sense bases and do as they pleased. Probably the most instances of rule circumvention were about sex. Buddha made it a *pārājika* (literally 'defeated') offence if a monk were to have sexual intercourse, which meant immediate and permanent disrobement. The rule was introduced after *bhikkhu* Sudinna acceded to his family's

plea to bed his ex-wife so as to produce a son and heir.²⁵ Then the ‘no sexual intercourse’ rule had to be tweaked because someone had sex with a female animal (believed to be a she-monkey), and further refined to disallow sex with a corpse, another male, a female supernatural being, and so on.²⁶ Then there were indecency rules prohibiting molesting of lay female disciples, telling lewd jokes, propositioning, and the list goes on.²⁷

It boggles the mind the kind of misconduct and mischiefs the scoundrel monks got themselves into. Amongst the most outrageous were downright criminal acts such as stealing and even killing. The *pārājika* on stealing was introduced when *bhikkhu* Dhaniya took timbers from King Bimbisara’s own store without permission. (He wanted to build his own hut.) Dhaniya escaped judicial punishment only because Bimbisara was a devout Buddhist.²⁸ But this was more than just a simple theft: the stunned lay

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 157-159.

²⁶ Brahmavamso, Ajahn, *Vinaya Notes*, vol. 1, *Pārājika 1 to Nissaggiya Pācittiya* 30, pp. 4-7. http://www.dhammadatalks.net/Books7/Ajahn_Brahmavamso_Vinaya_Notes.pdf.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 5-7.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 7-8.

community apparently wondered, if Dhaniya had the audacity to steal from the king, what more might he do to the ordinary man? There might even be some who would wonder about the purity of the rest of the *Sangha*.

Then there was the *pārājika* on killing which was introduced when an over-zealous novice monk, Migalandika, took it upon himself to behead fellow monks apparently in the belief that he was helping them to ‘cross over to the other shore’ (presumably that meant ‘enlightenment’). Migalandika was such a motivated killer, the Canon claimed that he was responsible for almost five hundred deaths. It is most likely that the figure was outrageously inflated, but even then it still meant a lot of killings.²⁹ Was Migalandika mad? Apparently not, otherwise Buddha would not have said that he was guilty of killing. Then there was a monk who encouraged a lay supporter to commit suicide because he coveted the latter’s wife. And another monk who offered advice to a suicidal man on the most effective methods of killing himself, and yet another who prepared poison for a woman to abort her foetus, and many more where the monks were either instigators or facilitators of someone’s

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 22-23.

death.³⁰

To Buddha, just as disturbing as criminal acts were monks falsely claiming spiritual enlightenment for material gains. A group of Vajjian monks devised a cunning scheme to get alms during a terrible famine by claiming to be *ariyas*. (Buddha had taught that the *kammic* returns from a gift to an *ariya* would be multiple times its tangible value.) The duped laity offered them food at the expense of their own stomachs and health. When Buddha found out, he scolded them saying that they had booked their ride to hell for that deception. Buddha ranked this deceptive wrongdoing to be the fourth and final *pārājika*. It was no wonder that Buddha took a tough line on this for it not only hurt the laity who were misled, but also damaged *Sangha's* reputation and created confusion on what was true *Dhamma*.

The above were just some examples of the most serious transgressions that would result in immediate expulsion from the *Sangha*. There were actually far more incidents of misconduct by wayward monks. Some of them were just plain disobedient. Bhaddali told Buddha that he was going to ignore the rule on eating just one meal a day because he

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 24-27.

might “worry and be anxious”.³¹ Two others, Punabbasuka and Assaji, were even more defiant. When Buddha said he ate ‘once a day and lived healthily’,³² they retorted that they ate three times a day and also lived healthily. They remained argumentative when Buddha told them they were practising badly, prompting Buddha to say “such haggling” with even the mundane teacher “would not be proper”, let alone haggling with him.³³

Then there were troublemakers such as the Chabbhagi (literally ‘six monks’) who were little more than rowdy thugs who enjoyed quarrelling, picking fights and bullying other monks.³⁴ Even Buddha’s former charioteer from home, Channa, gave trouble.³⁵ He was arrogant, abusive, disregarded training rules, and was disrespectful towards senior monks, even Sariputta and Moggallana. He was such a troublemaker that Buddha at his deathbed told the *Sangha*

³¹ Nāṇamoli and Bodhi, “*Bhaddāli Sutta*” (To Bhaddāli), op. cit., p. 542.

³² Ibid., “*Kīṭāgiri Sutta*” (At Kīṭāgiri), p. 577.

³³ Ibid., p. 583.

³⁴ “*Chabbaggiya Vatthu*”, *Dhammapada* 129, <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=129>.

³⁵ “*Channatthera Vatthu*”, *Dhammapada* 78, <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=78>.

to impose *Brahmadanda* on him.³⁶ That meant he was to be fully ostracised by the other monks. (This tough punishment shocked Channa into practising and he eventually realised *nibbana*.)

It was because of all kinds of misconduct that there were reams of rules to try and restrain behaviour.³⁷ But evidences from the Canon suggest that Buddha was ultimately unsuccessful in eradicating the bad apples from the *Sangha*. Several years after many *Vinaya* rules had been introduced, a concerned Maha Kassapa asked Buddha why it was that there were more and more training rules and yet the number of monks becoming enlightened was declining. Buddha replied that this would happen when “people are degenerating and good *Dhamma* is disappearing”.³⁸ Good *Dhamma* would begin to be forgotten when people started “disrespecting and becoming contemptuous” of the Triple

³⁶ Walshe, “*Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*” (The Buddha’s Last Days), op. cit., p. 270.

³⁷ “Introduction to the *Patimokkha Rules*”, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 17 Dec 2013, <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/vin/sv/bhikkhu-pati-intro.html>.

³⁸ Ñāṇamoli, op. cit., p. 163.

Gems, the training and meditation.³⁹

An event suggesting the declining moral standards in the *Sangha* could not be reversed was Buddha's announcement one day that he would no longer observe *Patimokkha* with his monks. He added that it was "impossible" for him to "participate in the *Uposatha* and recite the *Patimokkha* in an unpurified assembly."⁴⁰ Why did Buddha decide to withdraw from the twice monthly event where monks came together to profess their purity and to affirm their commitment to the path? This is especially since Buddha had actually considered *Uposatha* an extremely important occasion. He once told Maha Kappina that as an *arabant*, he must "revere, respect, esteem and honour" *Uposatha* to set an example to the rest of the *Sangha*.⁴¹ Perhaps Buddha had foreseen that the moral degeneration of the *Sangha* was irreversible? Just before his fateful announcement, he had an 'impure' monk forcefully ejected from the *Uposatha*

³⁹ Ibid., p. 163.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 161.

⁴¹ See "The Buddhist Monastic Code II", translated and explained by Thanissaro, Bhikkhu from "The Khandhaka Rules", 2001, Chapter 15. <http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/bmc2.pdf>.

ceremony.⁴² It was probably not the first time that something like that had happened. Perhaps Buddha decided to skip the event to avoid future recurring unpleasantness?

The question is why did those foolish individuals ordain? Given the extent of their misbehaviour and abuses, clearly they were not committed to the path and the goals of the practice. The reason is probably the allure of an easy and comfortable life: *Sangha* in the later years was very well supported by the rich and powerful.

b) Misrepresentation

There were also monks who got Buddha's teaching wrong and then happily went around repeating their own misunderstanding. Arittha, a vulture hunter in his lay life, claimed that Buddha had said that it was acceptable to continue pursuing sense delights.⁴³ Buddha summoned him immediately and rebuked him strongly. Then there was the monk, Sati, who stubbornly insisted that Buddha had taught that it was the same consciousness that wandered through

⁴² Nāṇamoli, op. cit., pp. 160-161.

⁴³ Nāṇamoli and Bodhi, "*Alagaddupama Sutta*" (The Simile of the Snake), op. cit., p. 224.

rounds of rebirths. When his brother monks dragged him before Buddha to explain himself, Sati insisted that was what he heard. An exasperated Buddha reprimanded him soundly and delivered a long lecture on the conditionality of consciousness, and the dependent arising of thought processes.⁴⁴ Buddha was always vigilant to set the *Dhamma* record straight and prevent wrong understanding from taking root. But even then, it was always a challenge because the *Dhamma* was so sublime and sometimes, practitioners (even sincere ones) missed the point and had a wrong understanding of the path.

c) Betrayal

Then there were former disciples who had quit his Order under unhappy circumstances and then went around bad-mouthing Buddha. Sunakkhatta, a Vajjian native, told a gathering of the Vajjians' most powerful that Buddha was a fraud, was not enlightened, had no psychic powers, and

⁴⁴ Ibid., “*Mahatanhasankhaya Sutta*” (The Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving), pp. 349-361.

his teaching was baseless.⁴⁵ That must have caused a stir in Vajjian society since Sunakkhatta was a former attendant of Buddha. However, ultimately the slur probably did not stick because Buddha continued to enjoy strong support in Vesali until the end of his life. Buddha apparently did nothing to defend himself against Sunakkhatta's allegations. When Sariputta, who had witnessed Sunakkhatta's tirade, reported the incident to Buddha, Buddha replied calmly that Sunakkhatta was angry and those were angry words.⁴⁶

d) Insidious intent

The *Sangha* was a microcosm of ancient India. It was thus almost inevitable that all kinds of social and cultural prejudices would worm their way into the order. One of the biggest social issues of the day was caste discrimination. Buddha tried to eradicate caste identity and differentiation

⁴⁵ Nānamoli and Bodhi, “*Mahāsīhanāda Sutta*” (The Greater Discourse on the Lion's Roar), op. cit., p. 164.

⁴⁶ Probably the most damaging betrayal was that by his own cousin, Devadatta, who tried to wrestle control of the *Sangha* and in the process, tore the Buddhist community apart. That story would be elaborated in chapter 6.

in the *Sangha* by calling his monks *Sakyaṇṇaputtiya* (i.e., sons of Sakya) which meant that all monks were of one caste. But still the *Brahmanas* brought their snotty prejudices into the *Sangha*. Two *Brahmana* brothers, Yamelu and Tekula, told Buddha that the *Dhamma* was being ‘spoilt’ because all kinds of people were teaching it in their own language. They recommended that *Dhamma* be rendered into “classical metre” (i.e., the *Vedic* language). In practical terms, what they were suggesting would have effectively kept *Dhamma* out of the reach of the ‘other’ (read: ‘lower’) castes that did not learn the *Vedic* language.⁴⁷ Buddha rebuked them and said that their suggestion would reduce *Dhamma*’s appeal. He stressed that *Dhamma* must be taught in the local tongue and anyone who suggested otherwise had committed an offense.⁴⁸

e) *Lethal folly*

Even monks totally dedicated to the practice but who were not very wise gave Buddha a headache. There was once scores of good monks described as “devoted” to the

⁴⁷ Ñāṇamoli, op. cit., p. 173.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 173.

contemplation of the loathsomeness of the body during a rain retreat in Vesali. Unfortunately, they were so affected by their disgust of the body that many started killing themselves. The Canon reported that “in one day, ten *bhikkhus*... or... twenty or thirty... used the knife!”⁴⁹ So many died that when Buddha returned from his own retreat just two weeks later, he immediately noticed something was amiss. He asked Ananda, “Why does the *bhikkhu Sangha* look so diminished?”⁵⁰ and was told the shocking reason. Buddha had to give the remaining monks another meditation objection (the breath) to take their minds off suicide. Incidentally, it was not uncommon for monks to kill themselves in the quest for *nibbana*. Buddha had made it clear that suicide was breaking the first precept but to those who had no wisdom, it cut no ice.

f) Ordinary and uninspiring

Sometimes there was nothing really wrong with the monks other than they behaved like the average mundane

⁴⁹ Bodhi, “At Vesali” (54:9), The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the *Samyutta Nikaya*, op. cit., pp. 1773-1774.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1774.

lay people instead of mindful practitioners. Buddha was once so exasperated with a group of noisy monks who had just arrived at the monastic sanctuary that he basically told them to go away because they were “loud and noisy” and behaving like “fishermen hawking fish”.⁵¹ Then there were monks who replicated their lay life in the *Sangha*. One family (father, mother and son) ordained one after the other and then proceeded to live together in the monastery.⁵² Buddha had to tell them to stop it and watch their mutual attachments. One wealthy man, Bahubhandika, joined the order with his servants. He also constructed a monastery for himself and stocked it up with his own furniture, utensils and all kinds of food provisions.⁵³

The *Vinaya* rules were designed to guide monks to behave skilfully and mindfully, both to help in their realisation as well as to inspire respect and confidence from the laity. There were etiquette rules for eating, walking, sitting, standing, talking and even laughing. However, Buddha was

⁵¹ Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, “*Cātumā Sutta*” (At Cātumā), op. cit., pp. 560-561.

⁵² “*Tayojanapabbajita Vatthu*”, *Dhammapada* 209, <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=209>.

⁵³ “*Bahubhandika Bhikkhu Vatthu*”, *Dhammapada* 141, <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=141>.

actually not fixated on the rules for their own sake. Once, a monk went to Buddha asking to disrobe because he was overwhelmed by the ‘hundred and fifty rules’ that he had to observe. Buddha asked him if he could handle just “three trainings: the training in the higher virtuous behaviour, training in the higher mind and the training in the higher wisdom... (to) abandon lust, hatred, and delusion.”⁵⁴ The monk said yes and happily remained in robes.

Concluding reflections

Buddha was a noble and wise man with deep compassion, warm kindness, and total dedication to teaching *Dhamma* and helping the world resolve its mental ailment. He had done nothing to hurt another and yet, he had more than his fair share of trouble. To a large extent, life is indeed like that: there will be ups and downs, and good and bad moments. We cannot dictate the external environment for it spins on its own conditional axis. But we can learn to control our mind so that we don’t feel battered and hapless

⁵⁴ Bodhi, “The Young Vajji” (3:84), The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: a Translation of the *Anguttara Nikaya*, op. cit., p. 316.

in dealing with the vagaries of life. If we learn to understand how the mind works, how not to cave in to negativities, we will make it strong, steady and unruffled. Like Buddha, we must learn to mindfully deal with problems as they crop up, practise endurance if need be, forgive our detractors if any, then let go and move on. Life is too short to harp on past hurts or to worry about hypothetical futures.

Chapter Six: Troubling Times

ONE OF THE most serious troubles to hit the *Sangha* took place when Buddha was in his early 70s. His first cousin and brother-in-law, Devadatta, tried to wrestle control of the *Sangha* leadership. When Buddha resisted, Devadatta fought back so fiercely that it tore the *Sangha* apart and split the lay community. Devadatta's ruthless ambitions even led to the death of one of Buddha's staunchest lay supporters, King Bimbisara, and the loss of Rajagaha as a sanctuary for Buddha. This chapter will

trace the events of that tumultuous episode and examine the implications for *Dhamma* proselytising work.

Bid for Sangha leadership

According to the Pali Canon, Devadatta made a bid for *Sangha* leadership when Buddha was 72. Devadatta fired the first shot when he told Buddha before a large congregation that included King Bimbisara, that Buddha was already so old and should just enjoy the bliss and hand over the *Sangha* leadership to him (Devadatta).¹ Buddha refused and told him not to “...aspire to govern the *Sangha* of *bhikkhus*.” Undaunted, Devadatta asked again and was rebuffed. When he asked a third time, Buddha had enough and gave an unexpectedly tough reply. Buddha said he would not hand over the *Sangha* even to Sariputta and Moggallana. How could he pass it to “such a wastrel, a clot of spittle, as you?”² That completely stunned Devadatta and he walked out of the congregation without another word. Unfortunately, that was not the end of the story. Devadatta was not about

¹ Ñāṇamoli, op. cit., p. 258.

² Ibid., p. 258.

to give up. But now, in addition to his ambitions, he also nursed a personal grudge against Buddha and he planned to strike back hard.

Battlelines drawn

The *Sangha* was hurling towards a seismic battle between the cousins and Buddha knew it. After Devadatta had left the hall, Buddha told Sariputta to go around Rajagaha and publicly denounce Devadatta.³ Why would Buddha deliberately take a *Sangha* internal conflict into the open? Even Sariputta was taken aback and tried to demur. He said, “But I had spoken in Devadatta’s favour in the past. How could I now denounce him?”⁴

Perhaps it was because Buddha knew the extent of malice in Devadatta’s power hungry mind, and anticipated that he would go overboard in his quest for power. So Buddha had to publicly ‘disown’ Devadatta to try and shield *Sangha* from being blamed for the latter’s subesequent ruthless actions. In any case, even if Buddha had not involved

³ Ibid., p.259.

⁴ Ibid., p.259.

the lay community, they would have been drawn in at some point because Devadatta had every intention of involving his own lay supporters in the fight for *Sangha* leadership. Devadatta did not have Buddha's standing in the *Sangha* so the only way he could even remotely hope to win was to secure enough lay backing to influence *Sangha* behaviour. The non-*ariya Sangha* would not be immune to the views of their lay patrons. And indeed, the Canon reported that the lay community was split and there were many who felt that Devadatta was unjustly treated by Buddha. Some even thought that Buddha had disowned Devadatta out of jealousy of the latter's fame and influence.⁵

Palace coup

Devadatta was predictably furious at Buddha's abrupt dismissal of his call for leadership change, and the subsequent public denouncement. But he was quite a cunning tactician and did not immediately take Buddha on. Instead, he decided he would first neutralise Buddha's most powerful protector in Magadha, King Bimbisara, presumably so

⁵ Ibid., p. 259.

that he would be immune from any state retaliation should he start his attacks on Buddha. Devadatta instigated Crown Prince Ajatasatthu to kill his father and seize the throne. Ajatasatthu probably needed little persuasion.⁶ He tried to infiltrate the palace with a hidden dagger to assassinate the king. But he was caught by the vigilant palace guards and delivered to Bimbisara for appropriate judgement.

The royal court was stunned and was split between the courtiers who wanted blood (anybody's: Ajatasatthu's, Devadatta's and even the monks'), and those who wanted to spare everyone. Bimbisara himself was aghast that anyone would suggest killing the innocent monks and asked "What have Buddha, *Dhamma* and the *Sangha* to do with it (the assassination plot)? Has not Devadatta been denounced

⁶ It is interesting how the Canon tried to portray Ajatasatthu as a somewhat witless follower of Devadatta's conspiracy instead of an active co-conspirator. It said Devadatta guided Ajatasatthu closely on how to oust his father. Why portray Ajatasatthu so? Perhaps it was because of Ajatasatthu's role much later as a sponsor of the first Buddhist council and a patron of Buddhism. After Buddha's death, Ajatasatthu took care of five hundred *arahants* for seven months as they deliberated and compiled Buddha's teaching. This complex character who murdered his own father for the throne was thus by Buddhist definition a 'good' man because of his patronage of *Dhamma*. How then should he be remembered? A patricide that was misled and subsequently genuinely repented seemed like an appropriate balance.

by Buddha?”⁷ (Evidently, Buddha’s earlier pre-emptive denouncement of Devadatta had given Bimbisara the justification to protect *Sangha*.)

However, in a completely unexpected twist, instead of punishing his homicidal son, Bimbisara not only pardoned him but also abdicated the throne in his favour. The Canon then went silent about Bimbisara’s fate. There was only an incidental mention that Bimbisara was killed by his son in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* when Buddha told his monks that, had Ajatasatthu not committed patricide, Ajatasatthu would have become a *sotapanna* after listening to his *Dhamma* discourse.⁸ However, the ever dependable commentaries did provide much detail on Bimbisara’s tragic death. Ajatasatthu apparently moved quickly to consolidate power. He saw his father as a threat to his grip on power that must be exterminated. But because Bimbisara remained popular with the court and his people, Ajatasatthu could not simply just have him killed. He had Bimbisara imprisoned and starved, probably hoping that he would die of ‘natural causes’. When

⁷ Nāṇamoli, op. cit., p. 260.

⁸ Walshe, “*Sāmaññaphala Sutta*” (The Fruits of the Homeless Life), op. cit., p. 109.

that failed (because sympathisers kept smuggling food to the old king), Ajatasatthu had Bimbisara's soles shaved off and then forced him to walk on burning coals. That gruesome torture finally killed him. But the commentaries were quick to assure that because Bimbisara was a *sotapanna*, he was reborn as a *deva*. Was Ajatasatthu being deliberately sadistic? It may seem so but his real motivation could be to cover up a murder: there would be no obvious evidence of foul play on the king's body, unless one examines the soles.

Trying to kill Buddha

Under Ajatasatthu, Rajagaha was no longer a sanctuary for Buddha. Ajatasatthu basically gave his spiritual mentor Devadatta carte blanche on how he planned to get rid of Buddha. The Canon mentioned that Devadatta engineered at least three attempts on Buddha's life.⁹ In two of those attempts, he used the king's resources.

1) Mercenary killers

The first plot was the most elaborate in terms of trying

⁹ Nāṇamoli, op. cit., pp. 260-264.

to mask that it was an assassination. Devadatta instructed one of Ajatasatthu's men to go to Buddha's lodging and kill him. To cover his tracks, he recruited two men to kill the first assassin, and four other men to kill those two, then another eight to kill the four and so on. The whole scheme fell apart when the first assassin found that he could not pull the trigger (or rather the bolt of the arrow). Instead, awed and contrite once he caught sight of Buddha, he went before Buddha to confess about the assassination plot and beg for forgiveness. Buddha pardoned him and told him to leave by a back route, away from the waiting killers in the front.

After a long while, the two killers got tired of waiting and went to check what was holding the first man up. They went towards Buddha's lodging and found him still very much alive. He saw them and invited them to sit and listen to a *Dhamma* talk, after which they became his disciples. They too abandoned their murderous mission and ran off. The other killers waiting down the line also took turns to run into Buddha and were duly converted. Only one of them returned to Devadatta to report that "Buddha is mighty and powerful", and that all the hired killers had

become his disciples.¹⁰

2) *Rockslide*

Of course Devadatta was not amused. He decided that he would kill Buddha himself since the average assassin was no match for Buddha's charisma. Plot number two was elegant in its simplicity. Devadatta tried to trigger a rockslide onto Buddha, who was then staying in Vulture Peak Rock. He climbed the hill overshadowing Buddha and hurled a huge stone down at Buddha. He missed. But some splinter of the ensuing rockslide badly injured Buddha's foot, and caused him severe pain.¹¹

With the second attempt, Devadatta's murderous hand was exposed. Suddenly the monks realised that there were conspiracies to kill Buddha. Shocked, they took it upon themselves to organise security details for Buddha. Apparently they caused so much commotion that it disturbed Buddha's rest. He had to tell them to stop it and that it was not necessary because no one could kill a Buddha.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 260-261.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 262.

¹² Ibid., pp. 262-263.

3) *Runaway elephant*

Devadatta's third assassination attempt bordered on the ludicrous. He went to the royal elephant stable and bribed the mahouts to feed one of their wildest elephants some alcohol and then unleash it on a crowded Rajagaha street into the path of Buddha on his alms round. Seeing the rampaging intoxicated elephant, the monks panicked and tried to bundle Buddha out of the way. Buddha insisted that he could not be killed and refused to be budged. Crowds were hanging out of their houses and waiting with baited breath wondering if they were going to witness a bloody slaughter.

The Canon said that Buddha “encompassed Nalagiri (Buddhist compilers were clearly partial to elephants and gave them all names) with thoughts of *metta*” (loving kindness) and literally stopped it in its tracks.¹³ Nalagiri slowly approached Buddha, lowered its trunk and stood before him. Buddha gently stroked the elephant's huge forehead and told him “there is no happy destiny beyond for one who kills a tusker”¹⁴ (meaning, one who tames the wild

¹³ Ibid., p. 264.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 264.

mind, i.e., Buddha). Nalagiri paid respect to Buddha in its own elephant way and calmly lumbered back to its stable.

This third attempt suggested that Devadatta was getting desperate. He had initially been careful to cover his tracks and had made elaborate plans to silence the hired killers. Even when he decided to kill Buddha himself, he wanted it to look like an accident. But this time round, he did not seem to care anymore. He blatantly risked innocent bystanders' lives with a runaway intoxicated elephant. This was probably what turned public sentiments against him. I think it also helped that Buddha had demonstrated extraordinary courage and formidable psychic powers to tame the elephant. Anyone half tempted to align with Devadatta would think twice about taking on this powerful psychic.

Split the Sangha

When it became clear to Devadatta that Buddha could not be killed by foul means, he changed his game-plan from trying to assassinate Buddha to just splitting the *Sangha*. He had probably decided that if he could not wrest control of the whole order, he would make do with controlling just the monks he could win over. So he devised an ingenious plot that would make him look the better spiritual practitioner

than Buddha, thus attracting support. He proposed to Buddha that the *Sangha* should adopt five new rules prescribing more severe austerity, anticipating that Buddha would say no. The five new rules were that monks would:

1. Be forest dwellers and no longer live in villages;
2. Eat only alms food and not accept invitation to *dana*;
3. Wear only refuse-rags and not robes offered by householders;
4. Live at the foot of trees and not dwell in buildings; and
5. No longer eat fish or meat.¹⁵

True enough, Buddha rejected all five rules. He said that each monk could go ahead and adopt them for himself if he so wished. But he (Buddha) would not make the rules compulsory across the order because they were unnecessarily extreme and would not aid in spiritual enlightenment.¹⁶

The entire Buddhist community exploded in an uproar. Some lay supporters thought that Devadatta was indeed the real enlightened one while Buddha was ‘into luxury’. But more shockingly, there were *Sangha* members who agreed

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 265.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 266.

with Devadatta. The Canon reported that ‘five hundred newly-ordained’ Vajjian monks from Vesali decided to quit the *Sangha* and join Devadatta’s new school, which he set up at Gayasisa.¹⁷ We cannot be sure exactly how many monks broke away to join Devadatta. The number ‘five hundred’ is probably symbolic and is meant to imply a sizeable group.

Clearly, Devadatta’s five austere rules had quite a lot of appeal. The question is why was this so? It is possible that Devadatta had not actually dreamt up the five rules. They might well be the logical outcome of certain types of thinking. For instance, since Buddha had stressed that monks should avoid associating too closely with laity to avoid attachment and spiritual backsliding, it would seem logical that the ‘best’ practitioners should live alone in the forests, completely cut off from laity and society. Or since Buddha had constantly reminded that practitioners should exercise moderation in eating, wouldn’t it make sense that the *Sangha* should avoid invitation to *dana*, because that was where laity would offer the choicest food. And the perennial favourite of some is if one is truly compassionate, surely that must mean becoming vegetarian so that one does not

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 266-267.

generate demand that supports the market for the meat of living beings?

Anyhow, many monks were devastated and demoralised by the escalating *Sangha* infighting and the mass exodus of the Vajjian monks. When Sariputta and Moggallana, at Buddha's behest, went to Gayasisa to try and bring the Vajjian monks back, one monk loyal to Buddha actually cried because he thought the august pair was also defecting.¹⁸ Perhaps for the monks who had stayed with Buddha, it might have felt like a sinking ship. Buddha was old, physically declining and no longer enjoyed royal patronage, whereas Devadatta despite his age was in good health and was the new king's spiritual master. Devadatta's 'school' might have seemed like the up-and-coming powerhouse, while Buddha's order might have felt like yesterday's has-been.

Turning point finally

Devadatta was delighted when he saw Sariputta and Moggallana approaching his hermitage and warmly welcomed them to his 'order'. His co-conspirators were

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 268.

more suspicious. One of them (Kokalika) warned him not to trust the two elders,¹⁹ and rightly suspected that the pair was going to try and draw the Vajjian monks back to Buddha. Devadatta brushed off Kokalika's concern and even invited Sariputta and Moggallana to join him in the honoured front row seats.

Now, Devadatta was not a fool. He was shrewd, cunning, wily and manipulative. How could he have been so wrong about the two chief disciples? Could self-conceit have blinded him so completely? Or might it be that the momentum to join his 'order' was so strong that he had become complacent and believed that even Sariputta and Moggallana would betray Buddha? Whatever the reasons, he actually let his guard down. That very night, he preached '*Dhamma*' until it was very late. At some point, he said that he was going to rest and asked Sariputta and Moggallana to take over the sermon. Then in a surreal display of emulating Buddha, he "folded his cloak of patches in four" and "lay down on his right side in the lion's sleeping pose, one foot overlapping the other",²⁰ just as Buddha would. But unlike

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 268.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 269.

Buddha who would rest mindfully and alert, Devadatta fell deeply asleep. This was the moment the chief disciples were waiting for. They used their psychic power to gauge the minds of the Vajjian monks and then pitched *Dhamma* to their level of understanding. Slowly the monks began to penetrate *Dhamma*. Then Sariputta invited them to return to Buddha with him, which they did.²¹

Witnessing this, Kokalika was frantic and tried to rouse the snoozing Devadatta in the hope that he could stop the young monks from leaving. But it was too late. When Devadatta finally woke up, they were all gone. Devadatta was devastated. The unexpected decimation of his fledgling ‘order’ caused “hot blood to gush from his mouth.”²² The Canon did not relate the actual circumstances of Devadatta’s death. It merely reported that Devadatta had performed the most unwholesome of acts, created such terrible ‘*kammic*’ consequences that he would die horribly, be reborn in the deepest bowels of hell and remain there for a very long time. The commentaries however were exuberant with the gory details. Devadatta was said to have repented

²¹ Ibid., p. 269.

²² Ibid., p. 269.

at his death bed and asked to be carried to Buddha so that he could beg for forgiveness. However, along the way, the earth dramatically opened up and swallowed him whole! He literally plunged into hell where he, the commentaries proclaimed, would remain until the ‘next cycle of world contraction’²³ (i.e., an inconceivably long time).

Was Devadatta ‘destined’ to be evil?

Devadatta was so unanimously reviled by the ancient Buddhist storytellers that in their hands he has become a two-dimensional character who is evil personified. This characterisation of him as irredeemably immoral might be a little too simplistic. There is evidence that Devadatta might once have been quite an idealist, i.e., he was prepared to make personal sacrifices for his dreams. He had defied his family to become a homeless ascetic under Buddha presumably because he wanted to see *Dhamma*. Surely he was not motivated by fame, wealth or power then because at the time when he ordained, the *Sangha* was still poorly supported and monks led very hard and destitute lives. (See

²³ Ibid., p. 271.

chapter 9 in volume 1 for the story of his joining the order.) While being an idealist is not synonymous with being a good person, idealists are typically not Machiavellian realists who seek more mundane goals like power, fame and money. Moreover, for years, Devadatta was apparently a decent enough practitioner. At the very least, he was able to keep his negative instincts in check such that he could gain deep meditation concentration and develop psychic powers.

Until Devadatta made that fateful bid for *Sangha* leadership, there was actually no record in the Canon of him being a trouble-maker. For over 34 years of his life, Devadatta was largely an average, relatively rule-abiding practitioner, who presumably did his monastic duties. Then suddenly in his mid-70s (he was older than 72-year-old Buddha), he decided to make a bid for *Sangha* leadership, and was prepared to kill his cousin for it. What got into him? Was it simply name, fame and power? Did Devadatta feel entitled to succeed Buddha as leader because he was Buddha's blood relative and quite possibly the most senior of the Sakyan-Koliyan members in the *Sangha*? Might he have thought that his seniority in the largest faction in *Sangha* would make him a natural choice to be *Sangha* leader? The

above musing is not meant to excuse Devadatta, for what he did was reprehensible and inexcusable. But it is intended to set in context the Devadatta challenge so that one goes beyond traditional simplistic assumptions and hopefully draws out meaningful conclusions for reflection.

I think one critical lesson from the Devadatta story is the importance for a practitioner to remain focused on spiritual enlightenment and not be side-tracked and seduced by the allure of psychic powers. Having psychic powers does not mean one is spiritually realised. Conversely, as one develops spiritual wisdom, it does not mean one will necessarily have psychic powers. Devadatta's biggest tragedy was he had gained formidable psychic abilities without also developing enlightenment wisdom. Those psychic powers ironically became his Achilles' heel because they fed his ego and aggravated all kinds of negative instincts (greed, ill-will and ignorance). Devadatta was not the first and would not be the last practitioner who started out with the best intentions and was felled by a fatal attraction to psychic powers.

Concluding reflections

The Devadatta-instigated schism was probably the

most serious crisis to hit the *Sangha* up to that point. To the non-*ariya* Buddhists of the day, the future of *Dhamma* must have looked terribly bleak. Buddha was old, and in declining health, a large chunk of the *Sangha* had actually broken away and what remained was demoralised, and the lay supporters were split and confused by the *Sangha* infighting. Their once close-knit community was in tatters. The situation was eventually salvaged by Sariputta and Maha Moggallana, but it was only sobering cheer. The fact remains that they were also old and there was no obvious young talent to inherit their mantle.

What was even more disturbing about the schism was that it actually happened when it did. Buddha was still alive and had been the undisputed teacher and final doctrinal arbiter for over 37 years. If anyone could have prevented a *Sangha* schism, surely Buddha could. And yet, one man's ruthless ambition was able to split the entire Buddhist community. Does that mean that there was really no way of indefinitely preventing the *Sangha* from ripping apart? And that it is only a matter of time before that would happen again? Indeed, history would show that over the next hundreds of years, *Sangha* did split time and again. Devadatta had used *Vinaya* practices to instigate a schism.

At some point, differing interpretations of *Dhamma* were used to tear the *Sangha* apart.

Chapter Seven: Troubled Old Age

THIS CHAPTER will examine the key events in the last eight years of Buddha's life. As Buddha aged and grew more frail, the sense of an impending leadership vacuum got more pronounced within the Buddhist community. Among the unenlightened *Sangha* and the lay supporters, there was deepening uncertainty and fear about a future without their beloved Teacher. Even the *ariya Sangha* were concerned about the challenges of safeguarding *Dhamma* and keeping it true and unadulterated

for future generations.

Compounding the sense of crisis amongst Buddha's disciples was the observation that the secular world was becoming more uncertain and less benign. They had already lost Magadha as a dependable sanctuary. Under patricide Ajatasatthu, it was at best ambivalent, possibly even hostile. In the last year of Buddha's life, they also lost Kosala as a haven when a successful palace coup led to the death of Buddha's good friend and patron, King Pasenadi. To the *Sangha* of the day, the world must have looked very bleak indeed.

Painful realities of mortality

In his 70s, the historical Buddha had looked his age. Apart from his closely shaven head of white hair, Buddha was also bent over, his skin was "flaccid and wrinkled" and the colour was dull. Buddha might even have suffered from some hearing or visual deficiency ("sense faculties" were no longer as before), probably associated with aging.¹ At the same time, he was frequently in physical discomfort

¹ Nāṇamoli, op. cit., p. 274.

and even debilitating pain. He told Ananda that his body was like an “old cart”, “made to carry on with makeshifts” and he could find physical pain relief only when he was in deep meditation.² However, true to his practice, Buddha bore all his physical suffering mindfully, calmly, patiently and without complaint.³

Throughout this difficult time, his main caregiver was Ananda who was also in his 70s but fortunately in far better health.⁴ The dedicated Ananda apparently fussed over his cousin-teacher, ministered to his physical needs, massaged his limbs to give some pain relief, watched over him when he rested, vetted his daily appointments probably to ensure that his declining energy was not overly taxed, and kept him company.

Challenge of preserving Dhamma

Given obvious signs of Buddha’s mortality, the *Sangha* was deeply concerned about what would become of the

² Ibid., p. 300.

³ Ibid., p. 300.

⁴ The commentaries claimed that Ananda was born on the same day as Buddha but we don’t know it for a fact.

practice and of *Dhamma* after he was gone. The *Sangha* must have been affected by the infighting that tore apart the rival *Jaina* school after its teacher Nigantha Nataputta died.⁵ Reflecting on the fate of the *Jains*, Ananda told Buddha, “Let no disputes arise in the *Sangha* when the Blessed One has gone.”⁶ Ananda added that he was afraid that the *Sangha* might fight over ‘livelihood and code of monastic rules’.⁷

Buddha replied that dispute over the *Vinaya* was a small matter. “But should a dispute arise... about the path or the way... (that would) be for the harm and unhappiness of many.”⁸ Thus, one of Buddha’s foremost concerns would have been to ensure the preservation of true *Dhamma* ‘path and practice’ for future generations. However, contrary to conventional logic and practice, Buddha refused to anoint a successor, despite strong pressures from *Sangha* members. Instead he chose a completely unconventional and untested approach: he told his disciples to look to *Dhamma* and

⁵ Nāṇamoli and Bodhi, “*Sāmagāma Sutta*” (At *Sāmagāma*), op. cit., pp. 853-854.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 854.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 854.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 854.

Vinaya for guidance.⁹

Why did Buddha, refuse to designate someone to succeed him as leader of the *Sangha*? We probably will never know for certain Buddha's reason since he never explained himself. Whatever his motivations, the decision has probably contributed to preserving true *Dhamma*. It is impossible to guard against human failings indefinitely, even in the *Sangha* and there is no guarantee that the leadership of the *Sangha* would always go to an *ariya* monk. In fact, it was almost inevitable that at some point, a non-*ariya* monk would secure *Sangha* leadership, if only because he would play politics and lobby for support while his *ariya* counterpart would not. When a worldling, or worse, an immoral monk captured the leadership, what would become of true *Dhamma*? Regardless of his lack of spiritual attainment, as a *Sangha* leader he would have the authority to dictate scriptural interpretation, however distorted. Texts collectively preserved would probably have a better chance of staying true to the original teaching. The unsaid point seems to be that each practitioner should have the liberty to try and see and understand *Dhamma* for himself. He should not feel

⁹ Nāṇamoli, op. cit., pp. 308-309.

compelled to learn from a teacher and have his spiritual understanding endorsed by another.

Political crisis in Kosala

For over forty years, Kosala was a most hospitable sanctuary for Buddha and *Dhamma* work mainly because of Buddha's special relationship with the royal couple, Pasenadi and Mallika. Mallika was a devout patron from the start. Pasenadi did not hit it off with Buddha when they first met, but he eventually grew very fond of Buddha. In fact he became so attached that he would visit Buddha almost daily, and sometimes even twice a day. He regarded Buddha not just as a teacher but also a good friend, and would go to Buddha for comfort when he was down. During their last meeting, the aged Pasenadi apparently prostrated and "covered Buddha's feet with kisses and caressed them with his hands" as he happily noted that they were "both of warrior caste, Kosalans and 80 years old."¹⁰

It is possibly because of his desire for a kindred relation-

¹⁰ Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, "*Dhammacetiya Sutta*" (Monuments to the *Dhamma*), op. cit., pp. 729-733.

ship with Buddha that, when he decided to take another wife, Pasenadi went to the Sakyans for a bride. This was where trouble began. The Sakyans, who would only intermarry amongst themselves to keep their bloodline pure, were horrified at the thought of having to marry one of their precious blue-blood Sakyan daughters to an outsider, not even if he was their king. But they were wary of offending him. Mahanama (Buddha's cousin and leading Sakyan elder of the day) hit upon the idea of passing off an illegitimate daughter of his with a slave girl as the real deal and offering her to Pasenadi. The deception worked. Pasenadi even got his dearest wish when that union delivered his only son, Vidudabha.

Everything was fine until sixteen years later when Vidudabha decided that he wanted to visit his maternal relatives. His mother, who knew her bigoted Sakyan relatives better, tried to dissuade him. But the young prince was strong-headed. Short of telling him the truth about his 'low' birth, she had no choice but to let him go. The visit was initially a huge success. He was accompanied by a large retinue as befit his status as crown prince. The Sakyan elders who knew better than to expose the ruse were properly behaved and treated him with immaculate decorum.

Vidudabha was most satisfied. What he did not realise was that there was no Sakyan younger than him around. The younger ones had all been despatched off somewhere out of town so that they need not salute and pay respects to him.

The Sakyans probably heaved a collective sigh of relief when the day finally came for Vidudabha to leave. As soon as his retinue had left, they had a servant girl scrub the spot where he had sat with 'milk and water' to cleanse and purify it. Even a Sakyan servant girl thought she was too good for that task, and she grumbled as she scrubbed. A stray member of the prince's retinue who came back to retrieve his belonging overheard her. Asked what she was doing, she said she was washing the spot where 'the son of a slave girl' had sat. Shocked, the man raced off to tell Vidudabha, who flew into a rage and vowed to kill every last Sakyan for their deceit and the insult.

Pasenadi was the next to hear about the deception. Furious and humiliated, he stripped both mother and son of their royal status, demoted them to servitude and had them confined in the royal compound. Buddha apparently

interceded for them.¹¹ By and by the king was suitably pacified and he restored them to their former status and honours. But the damage had already been done in Vidudabha's mind. We can only speculate about what he would have learnt from such a traumatic experience. To plummet from the status of lofty crown prince to lowly slave in the blink of a raging king's eye and then be restored to his previous position in the next blink. Minimally, it would do irreparable damage to the father-son relationship. Vidudabha would probably see no reason to remain loyal to a temperamental despot. Given half a chance to grab power and dispose of his old man, he would do so, both for personal security and out of revenge.

Vidudabha's bitterness and insecurity was now a time bomb waiting to explode in the Kosalan court. What happened next was told only in the commentaries but not in the Canon. Apparently, the chance for Vidudabha to seize the throne came when his father went on one of his many private visits with Buddha. As per his usual habit, Pasenadi took off his official garb and deposited the royal regalia with his guards, presumably so that he would see Buddha

¹¹ Malalasekera. *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 171.

as a simple man. Heading the guards on that fateful day was General Digha Karayana, who had a blood grudge against Pasenadi.¹² He stole the royal regalia, rushed back to the palace to present them to Vidudabha, who quickly proclaimed himself king and ordered the city gates shut to keep his father out.

When Pasenadi found out about the palace coup, he fled to Rajagaha to seek the help of his nephew, Ajatasatthu, to regain his throne (which was ironic considering Ajatasatthu's own bloody role in his father's ouster and murder). But the city gate of Rajagaha was already closed when he arrived and he was forced to spend the night in a tavern just outside the city. After consuming some tavern fare, he had food poisoning. An octogenarian who had a traumatic and exhausting day would probably not have had much physical reserve to be able to survive a particularly vicious bout of food poisoning. Pasenadi died a pauper's death that night,

¹² Digha Karayana was the nephew of a former military commander who was Pasenadi's best friend until he was framed for plotting to usurp power. Impulsive Pasenadi had him assassinated. Then, almost immediately, he regretted his decision and tried to make amends by promoting the dead man's nephew to assume his place as commander of the military. But Digha Karayana never forgave Pasenadi and had vowed revenge.

mourned by only a personal attendant.

Massacre of the Sakyans

Once he had consolidated power, Vidudabha quickly turned his sight on destroying the Sakyans. The Pali Canon was actually silent about the attack. It was the commentaries that shed some light on the tragic event. They claimed that Vidudabha went after the Sakyans to avenge the deceit and humiliation of his ‘low birth’. Perhaps so. That he apparently gave the order to spare ‘not even a baby’ does suggest that the whole thing was personal. However, it might also have been intended to warn enemies and detractors in his court from using his ‘low birth’ to challenge his legitimacy and oust him from power. The point would be, if he could exterminate his own blood relatives so ruthlessly, what would he do to his enemies?

Buddha was 80 years old when Vidudabha launched the operation to wipe out the Sakyans. According to the commentaries, Buddha did try to stop the war. He sat by the side of the main trunk road leading into Kapilavatthu and waited for the invading Kosalan expeditionary force. Vidudabha personally led the charge. When he saw Buddha in the distant, he stopped and then retreated. The com-

mentaries helpfully added that this was out of respect for Buddha. That is highly doubtful. In fact, it is more likely that Vidudabha's seething fury towards the Sakyans might even have extended to include Buddha. What stayed his hands from attacking Buddha was probably fear of Buddha's legendary psychic powers. It was likely this same fear that prompted him to withdraw his troops; he did not want a fight that he was not sure he could win.

Vidudabha subsequently marched on Kapilavatthu a second time and then a third. Each time when he saw Buddha waiting by the road, he would back off. (Had he truly been respectful of Buddha, it is highly unlikely that he would resume his attack plans time and again.) But by the third time, it was clear to Buddha that Vidudabha could not be dissuaded. Buddha had a choice: continue to stand between Vidudabha's forces and the Sakyans, or let conditions take their natural course. To choose the former would be out of deep compassion for the potential victims but to choose the latter would be consistent with his teaching about letting conditions be. Buddha eventually went with the latter. In any case, it should be noted that the Sakyans were themselves fierce warriors so this was by no means a walk in the park for the Kosalan forces. The Sakyans were

by now prepared for war.

The ensuing battle was captured only in commentaries written several decades after the fact. We have no verifiable data to reconstruct what really happened. While Vidudabha might have slaughtered many Sakyans, there is circumstantial evidence to suggest that he did not succeed in wiping them out. We know that when Buddha himself passed away about a year or so later, there were Sakyans who went to demand for a share of his relics after his cremation, on the grounds that they were his blood relatives. Their claims were recognised as valid by the other claimants, clearly suggesting that enough Sakyans survived Vidudabha's extermination efforts such that it still existed as a tribe.

Leaving Savatthi

Buddha did not remain in Savatthi after Pasenadi's death. It is not clear if Buddha left Savatthi before or after the Sakyan bloodbath. Nevertheless, that relocation would suggest his strong reservations about remaining in Savatthi. The commentaries claimed that Vidudabha actually did not survive the invasion. He and legions of his best troops were apparently wiped out in a flash flood while they were resting after their bloody massacre. If that were true, given that

Vidudabha was Pasenadi's only son, and his own children, if any, were probably very young, the Kosalan court would have plunged into a royal succession crisis.

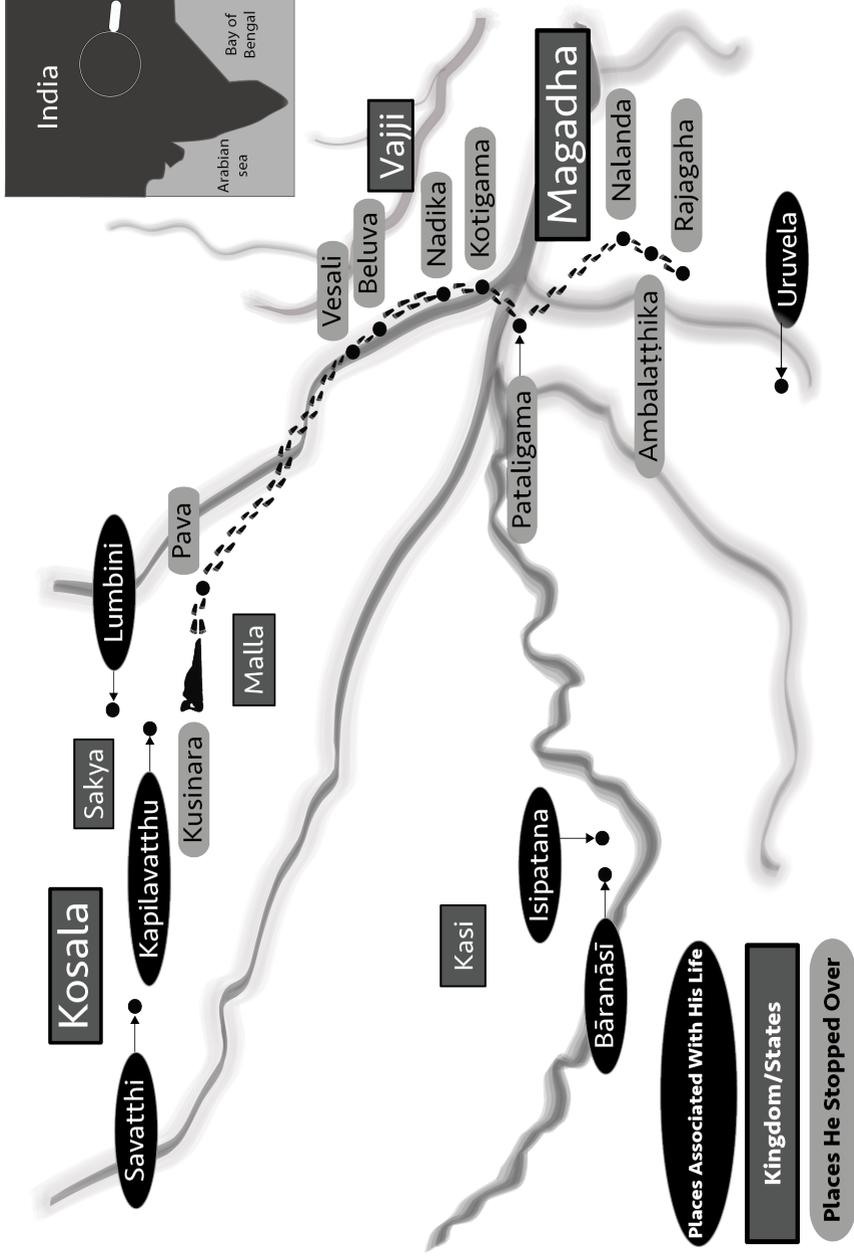
Anyhow, Buddha left Savatthi and returned to Rajagaha. There he stayed at a grove donated by Jivaka, the royal physician of the Magadhan court and a *sotapanna*. Since Jivaka was mentioned as being in attendant, given his medical background, it could mean that Buddha was quite sick. Perhaps the constant shuttling to stop the invasion of the Sakyans sapped what little was left of his strength.

Concluding thoughts

In the twilight year of his life, by any conventional measurement, Buddha's external world would be regarded as painful and tragic. He lost one of his closest lay friends, Pasenadi, had to deal with the latter's neurotic psychopathic successor, and finally witnessed the mass slaughter of his blood relatives. At the same time, he was plagued with ill health, incapacitating pain and obvious signs of impending death. But even as he knew that he was nearing the end of his life, he continued to teach *Dhamma* and to guide as many of his disciples as possible to realise *nibbana*. Buddha was also concerned about preserving *Dhamma* for future

generations. At the same time, he remained a practitioner to the end. He would show by his own example how to live life the *Dhamma* way, even as his own life ebbed away.

Buddha's Last Journey



Taken from Anandajoti, Bhikkhu, "The Realised One's Last Tour", Maps of Ancient Buddhist Asia, last updated October 2008, <http://www.ancient-buddhist-texts.net/Maps/Map-05-Last-Tour.htm>.

Chapter Eight: Last Days

A SOMEWHAT PUZZLING EVENT occurred during the last months of Buddha's life. The frail octogenarian unexpectedly decided to go on one last arduous journey that was to cover about 360km.¹ The trek would have been challenging even for someone far younger

¹ Anandajoti, Bhikkhu, "The Realised One's Last Tour", Maps of Ancient Buddhist Asia, last updated October 2008, <http://www.ancient-buddhist-texts.net/Maps/Map-05-Last-Tour.htm>.

and in better health. But for someone at his age and physical state, the journey would have been excruciating. It severely depleted what was left of his dwindling physical reserves and probably hastened his death.

So why did he go on this journey? Why did Buddha leave Rajagaha where he had easy access to medical care and basic requisites? What was his ultimate destination? All these intriguing questions were never quite explained in the Canon. The scriptures merely conscientiously listed in sequence all the places he visited, but were completely silent on Buddha's motivations for undertaking what was to be his last journey. In this chapter, I shall try to postulate some answers. For a story on Buddha's life, it seems incomplete not to have some idea of what were the last things he had wanted to do. That knowledge may help us know Buddha better and perhaps deepen our appreciation of his life's work.

Last stay in Rajagaha

The Canon has a lengthy discourse called the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* that was devoted to detailing the events in the last months of Buddha's life. It began with a private conversation between King Ajatasatthu and a trusted minister,

Vassakara. Ajatasatthu told Vassakara that he intended to attack and destroy the neighbouring tribal Vajjian republic, and told Vassakara to go and ask Buddha to foretell if he could succeed.²

When Vassakara posed the king's question, Buddha's response was intriguing. Instead of replying directly, Buddha turned to his attendant, Ananda, and asked, "Have you heard that the Vajjians hold frequent and frequent assemblies?" Buddha added that if they continued to do so, to live in harmony and cooperate with each other, to show respect for tradition and the law, for their elders, for each other's women, and for mainstream religious practices, and to support spiritual pursuits and protect sincere practitioners, the Vajjians could be "expected to prosper and not decline."³

Clearly Buddha was reluctant to answer Ajatasatthu's preposterous question. But he chose to handle the situation sensitively. Buddha must know that he could not afford to alienate or upset Ajatasatthu because of *Dhamma* work in

² Walshe, "*Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*" (The Great Passing: The Buddha's Last Days), op. cit. p. 231.

³ Ibid., pp. 231-232.

Magadha and the monks would bear the brunt of any royal fury. In any case, the ruthless and ambitious Ajatasatthu probably would not have listened if Buddha had told him not to attack the Vajjians. Buddha did the next best thing he could, which was to make the point that the Vajjians could not be defeated because they were united, as an indirect way of dissuading him. Unfortunately the wily and astute Vassakara drew a different conclusion: the Vajjians could not be defeated by brute force, “unless he buys them over and sows dissension among them.”⁴ In other words, instigate suspicions and quarrels amongst the Vajjians and wait for an implosion.

Buddha was probably disturbed. As soon as Vassakara left, he told Ananda to summon all the monks living in and around Rajagaha. He was going to teach them how to avoid backsliding.⁵ At the ensuing *Sangha* assembly, Buddha said that monks must meet regularly, make decisions collectively, and maintain consensus. They should respect and uphold the *Vinaya*, honour and respect the elder monks, refrain from giving in to craving, esteem forest

⁴ Ñāṇamoli, op. cit., p. 287.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 287-288.

dwelling, and maintain strict mindfulness. Buddha urged them to “avoid delighting... in being busy, in gossiping, in sleeping and in society”, to “have no evil wishes”, to have no evil friends... ”⁶ He stressed that they should maintain the seven enlightenment factors,⁷ and “develop perception of impermanence, non-self, loathsomeness in the body, of danger, of abandoning lust, of fading away of lust, and of cessation of lust”. Finally, the monks must maintain loving kindness towards each other, not be discriminatory in sharing alms, be upright and virtuous, and to live possessed of the right understanding of the noble truths.⁸

Buddha spent quite a bit of time repeating *Dhamma* to the monks and exhorting them to practise hard. Then one day, he suddenly said to Ananda, “Let us go to Ambalathika.”⁹ It was almost the rainy season where travelling would have been very difficult. For him to decide to leave then would suggest that he was in a hurry to get out of Rajagaha. This was to be Buddha’s last time in Rajagaha, a

⁶ Ibid., p. 288.

⁷ The seven enlightenment factors are mindfulness, investigation-of-states, energy, happiness, tranquillity, concentration and equanimity.

⁸ Ñāṇamoli, op. cit., pp. 288-289.

⁹ Walshe, op. cit., p. 234.

city with deep meaning for his work. It was the first major centre to embrace his teaching; it was where he had his first monastic sanctuary, met several important disciples and patrons, and had his first major successes in converting the lay population.

Why did Buddha leave Rajagaha?

The clue may lie in that first conversation between Ajatasatthu and Vassakara that kicked off the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*. Why did the Canon give headline status to a conversation between two laymen, especially since the content did not obviously and directly concern Buddha or *Dhamma*? Perhaps that conversation formed a critical part of the explanation to Buddha's followers why he made such an unexpected and inexplicable decision to leave Rajagaha especially when he was already so sick. It would suggest that Buddha's motivation for leaving could be because Magadha was going to war with the Vajjians. In a war situation, life for everyone would be hard but the monks would be worse off since they were dependant on alms for survival.

Where was Buddha headed?

The *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* also provided a clue as to Buddha's destination. It listed in sequence all the places that Buddha visited after he left Rajagaha, and they were all along a route that would lead to Kapilavatthu.¹⁰ Buddha was probably heading home but never made it. Kusinara, where he died, was just an estimated 167km from Kapilavatthu. The entire trek from Rajagaha to Kusinara was about 360km.¹¹ Buddha took almost a year to cover the distance. He left just before the rainy season, which meant around June or earlier, and arrived in Kusinara during the hot season the following May or thereabouts.

Why Kapilavatthu?

Assuming that the above hypothesis is correct, the next question is why was Buddha going back to Kapilavatthu? This is harder to answer because Buddha did not explain himself. At best, we can offer a postulation based on his

¹⁰ Anandajoti, op.cit., <http://www.ancient-buddhist-texts.net/Maps/Map-05-Last-Tour.htm>.

¹¹ Ibid.

activities during the journey. It seemed that Buddha was stopping at monastic settlements that dotted the route to Kapilavatthu and delivering *Dhamma* discourses to monks and occasionally lay disciples. Perhaps Buddha was trying to inspire them even as the future seemed daunting. The evidences are not conclusive, but they are rather compelling. Below were the places he visited during his trek, listed in sequence in the Canon.

Ambalattika and Nalanda

At his first stop, Ambalattika, and the second stop, Nalanda, Buddha reportedly ‘often’ spoke *Dhamma* to the monks: “Such is virtue, such is concentration, such is understanding; concentration fortified with virtue brings great benefits and great fruits... the heart fortified with understanding becomes completely liberated from... the taint of sensual desire, the taint of being, the taints of views, and the taint from ignorance.”¹² This was essentially the Eightfold-path and the realisation of *nibbana*.

¹² Nāṇamoli, op. cit., p. 289.

Pataligama

The third stop was Pataligama, a border village along an important river waterway. Buddha stayed in a “rest-house” (possibly an inn) at the invitation of lay supporters. He would be a bit more comfortable there because the place had a proper sleeping area, chairs, lighting and even water on hand (“big water trough”).¹³ That evening, the laity converged on his rest house and Buddha gave a talk on the five dangers of failing in virtue, namely, that the person would suffer a great loss of wealth, acquire a bad reputation, lack confidence wherever he goes, die confused and after death, reappear in a woeful state of existence.¹⁴ The lay supporters probably had a wonderful time listening to his talk: they stayed until very late (“the night is nearly over”) and Buddha had to tell them to go home.¹⁵

It would appear that the rains might have started already. As Buddha prepared to leave Pataligama the next day, it was said that the river was filled to the brim, the waters were rough and the current was fast moving. There was no river

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

¹⁴ Walshe, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

crossing raft operating. Just as it seemed that the monks would be stuck in Pataligama for another day, Buddha apparently used his psychic powers to send everybody across the river.¹⁶ For Buddha who did not like public displays of psychic powers to do this, shows clearly that he wanted to get on with the journey. Now that the rainy season had begun, the weather was going to worsen and the *Sangha* must quickly find a place to settle down.

Kotigama

At his next stop, Kotigama, Buddha gave a *Dhamma* discourse to the monks on the Four Noble Truths, adding that, “When these Four Noble Truths are discovered and penetrated, craving for being is cut off, craving that leads to being is abolished and there is no renewal of being.” Buddha apparently stayed for a while in Kotigama and spoke often on the practice of the Noble Eight Fold-path and the realisation of *nibbana*.¹⁷ Kotigama might have been where many monks stayed.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 238-239.

¹⁷ Ñāṇamoli, op. cit., p. 294.

Nadika

Then followed Nadika, where Buddha stayed at the ‘Brick Hall’. There Ananda asked Buddha about the rebirth destinations of several of his disciples (including lay disciples). After he had patiently satisfied Ananda’s curiosity, Buddha said (and I paraphrase), ‘If you come and ask me this each time someone dies, it is going to be very tiring.’¹⁸ So Buddha gave a checklist, ‘the Mirror of *Dhamma*’, by which a practitioner could “predict for himself” whether he would have a lower rebirth or if he had entered the stream.¹⁹

Vesali

At his sixth stop, Vesali, the capital of the Vajjian confederacy, he stayed in a mango grove belonging to a famous courtesan, Ambapali. There he gave another *Dhamma* discourse to the monks on how to practise the four foundations of mindfulness properly.²⁰ Buddha also

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 295.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 295-296.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 296-297.

had many lay supporters in Vesali and they converged on the mango grove as soon as they learnt that he was there. Ambapali was the first to visit (the grove belonged to her so she had insider information on when he would arrive). She had a *Dhamma* talk from Buddha and was so happy that she immediately invited him for *dana* the next day. He accepted and she rushed off to prepare.

The next to visit Buddha were the Licchavis, who were from the most powerful clan in the ruling Vajjian elite. They ran into Ambapali as she was leaving the mango grove and found out from her that she had the much coveted *dana* slot for the next day. Dismayed, they tried unsuccessfully to bribe her with an obscene sum of money to let them have the *dana* honour. Ambapali said no, not even for “Vesali and all its lands”.²¹ The Licchavis then tried to sneak one past her by approaching Buddha directly. To their disappointment, Buddha also said no, because he had already accepted Ambapali’s invitation.

This was an important moral and social statement. Buddha treated his supporters equally, regardless of social, political or familial background. Notwithstanding her fame

²¹ Ibid., p. 298.

and wealth, Ambapali was a courtesan and her social standing must pale in comparison with the powerful Licchavis. Yet Buddha respected her no less. After *dana* the next day, Ambapali presented the mango grove to the *Sangha*. That was the last parcel of land received by Buddha personally on the *Sangha*'s behalf.

This was also to be Buddha's last visit to Vesali. The Canon recorded this moving scene of Buddha returning with Ananda from one of his alms rounds. He was said to have 'turned to gaze at Vesali with an elephant's gaze' (calmly and quietly perhaps). Then he said, "Ananda, this will be the Perfect One's last night in Vesali."²² Even though I know that Buddha did not have attachments, there was something poignant about him turning back for another look at the town, knowing that his own end was near and this was the last view of a place that he had a long association with and possibly had some affection for.

Beluvagamaka

It was at Beluvagamaka where Buddha stopped to stay

²² Ibid., p. 307.

for his last rain retreat. It was fortunate that he stopped because soon after they had settled in, he fell very sick. His illness was described as debilitating and he was wrecked with “violent and deadly pain”.²³ At one stage it got so bad that Ananda thought Buddha would die. But by sheer indomitable will, Buddha decided that it was not time to die yet and there was something more to do: “It is not right for me to attain final *nibbana* without having addressed my attendants and taken leave of the *Sangha* of *bhikkhus*. Suppose I forcibly suppress this sickness by prolonging the will to live?”²⁴

That worked and Buddha recovered enough to be able to get up and walk outside his dwelling. He went only as far as the open space at the back of the lodging and sat down to rest. Ananda joined him and happily confided that he had been going out of his mind with worry. He added that he drew comfort from the belief that Buddha would not die without a “pronouncement about the *Sangha* of *bhikkhus*”.²⁵ Ananda probably meant that he expected Buddha to say

²³ Ibid., p. 299.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 299.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 299.

something about the future leadership of the *Sangha* or to designate a new leader.

What followed was an extremely important exchange. Buddha replied, “What does the *Sangha* expect of me? The *Dhamma* I have taught has no secret and public versions... Surely it would be someone who thought thus, ‘I shall govern the *Sangha*’ or ‘the *Sangha* depends on me’ who might make a pronouncement about the *Sangha*? A Perfect One does not think like that. How then can he make a pronouncement about the *Sangha*?’²⁶

Buddha’s words provided a glimpse into his mind. First, it was consistent with his teaching of *anatta* (non-self) that he did not consider that *Sangha* as belonging to him. As he put it and I paraphrase, ‘Surely only someone who sees himself as indispensable or sees *Sangha* as belonging to him would feel compelled to make pronouncement about its future? But my mind does not think like that.’

Second, ultimately, the priority must be about *Dhamma* and the practice of letting go, seeing non-self and realising *nibbana*. As Buddha said to Ananda, “Each of you should make himself his island, himself and no other his refuge;

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 299-300.

each of you should make the *Dhamma* his island, the *Dhamma* and no other his refuge.”²⁷ *Sangha* was a way of life, for individuals to practise and realise *Dhamma*. *Sangha* was not so much an organisation with a mission statement, structure, rules and regulations, or a possession to be transferred around. *Sangha* was a vehicle, not a goal.

Finally, Buddha knew that he was dying. He was frequently in terrible pain. As he put it, ‘My body is at ease only when I am in really deep *jhana*.’²⁸ But he hung on out of compassion for Ananda and the monks. He knew that they needed closure, a chance to say their goodbye perhaps. As he put it, “It was not right to attain final *nibbana* without speaking to attendants and taken leave of monks.” It was for them that he gritted his teeth and literally willed himself back to life.

*Deaths of the chief disciples*²⁹

Just months before Buddha’s own *parinibbana*, the *Sangha* lost both Sariputta and Moggallana in apparent quick suc-

²⁷ Ibid., p. 300.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 300.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 300.

cession. Their deaths were unexpected: although they were older than Buddha, they had been in good health. So it must have been a terrible shock and a double whammy for the Buddhist community to lose them so suddenly. The *Sangha* had been struggling to accept that they were going to lose their Master, after having witnessed how terribly sick he was. But instead, they lost the other two pillars of the *Sangha*. It must have been one of the most traumatic periods in early *Sangha* history.

Sariputta's passing

The Canon did not say where or when Sariputta passed away. It merely recorded that Sariputta had died after a spell of illness and his attendant, Cunda, delivered the news to Buddha and ‘handed over Sariputta’s robes and bowl’.³⁰ It was the commentaries that plugged the gaps. They said that before he fell ill, Sariputta knew that he would die soon and decided to go home to convert his mother before his death. She was a devout *Brahmana* and had been resentful that all her children became Buddhists because of Sariputta’s influ-

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 300-301.

ence. But he was hit by severe dysentery when he got home, and went straight to bed. His mother hovered at the door of his room and fretted. Then she noticed periodic bursts of bright light coming from his room. Unable to contain her curiosity, she went inside and asked him what was going on. He said that the lights were visiting deities. Mum was truly impressed! Her son got personal house calls from the gods she prayed to and her pent-up resentment dissipated. She converted. With his mission to convert and reconcile with his mother completed, Sariputta attained final *nibbana* soon after.

We would never know how much of this sweet story is true but it is worth recounting the key message here, which is that the ultimate gift is the gift of *Dhamma* and the ultimate filial act is to bring one's parents onto the *Dhamma* path.

Maha Moggallana's murder

In contrast, Maha Moggallana's death was tragic and violent. Again, the Canon was silent on how he died, and it was the commentaries that delivered the gory details. Unfortunately, the 'exact' details vary considerably depending on which commentarial version one consulted. The only

consistent theme is he was brutally murdered while meditating alone in his dwelling by assassins probably hired by rival sects. He died alone, his body found only much later. It might well be that his killers were never caught so no one really knew what happened.³¹ The lack of eyewitness account was possibly one reason for the many creative variations of the tragic event. In one version, he was just bludgeoned to death. In another, the vicious killers dismembered him. A third said that he was left for dead but willed himself back to life and made his way to Buddha to pay his last respects before combusting. A variation even claimed Buddha told him to deliver a *Dhamma* talk. (Like I said, the ancient storytellers got really creative!)

However, the more disturbing question that has plagued the faithful masses is why did Maha Moggallana not escape? He was foremost of the *arabants* with psychic powers. He was Buddha's weapon of choice to subdue *nagas* and neutralise demons. How could mere mortals kill him? Another question that deeply disturbed the faithful

³¹ Although the commentaries claimed that the killers were caught and painfully executed for their crime, I suspect otherwise. That the Canon was silent about the details of his death would suggest that mysteries surrounded it and ultimately, 'justice' might actually not have been served.

has been how could such an accomplished *arahant* have so terrible a death? The explanation given by the helpful commentaries was that it was because of the working of *kamma*. In one life eons ago, he had bludgeoned his aged parents to death for selfish reasons. For that heinous act, he had been reborn in ‘hell’ and suffered terribly for a very long time. In his final life, even after enlightenment, he could not escape that terrible *kamma* – whereupon sympathetic listeners would nod in understanding and resigned acceptance.

But what is the moral of the story? Depending on the mood of the storytellers, there are a few possibilities. The most obvious is the notion that some actions are so heinous that nothing could neutralise or avert the *vipaka* (i.e., fruits of *kamma*). A less obvious point is a reminder of the importance to practise and realise *Dhamma*. We would never know what great *kammic* acts we had committed, and what kind of *kammic* tsunami might come our way. The only ‘escape’ would be to realise *nibbana* and then even if we had to endure a cataclysmic *kammic* boomerang, it would be just one last time.

Buddha’s reaction

The Canon is thin on how Buddha took the news of their

deaths. However, we can distil from *suttas* that Buddha was quietly accepting. When Ananda went numb with grief, Buddha comforted him and reminded him that such was the nature of life: there was birth, there would be death.³² Nevertheless, Buddha did miss them. Once, while seated before a congregation of monks, Buddha glanced around and said, “The assembly seems to me as though it were empty. The assembly is empty for me now that Sariputta and Moggallana have attained final *nibbana*.”³³

Predicting his own death

One of the hardest events for the early Buddhist forefathers and the faithful to accept was the death of Buddha. Even though they could see him aging, becoming weaker, sick and in pain, they were in some denial about his mortality. Perhaps it was this denial and intense emotional angst that led to a rather odd feature in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*: there were several stanzas blaming Ananda for Buddha’s ‘premature’ death.³⁴ The Canon said that Buddha ‘hinted’

³² Nāṇamoli, op. cit., p. 301.

³³ Ibid., pp. 301-302.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 302-306.

to Ananda several times that his meditation and spiritual attainments were such that if he so wished, he could “live out the age or what remains of the age.”³⁵ (The commentaries helpfully explained that meant 120 years old.) The Canon added that, “Even when such a broad hint... Ananda could not understand it... (because) his mind was under Mara’s influence.”³⁶ Because Ananda did not ‘beg the Blessed One’ to ‘live out the age’, Buddha then consciously ‘relinquished the will to live’.³⁷ When Ananda finally realised that he had blundered and asked Buddha to please consider extending his life force, Buddha replied “his will to live has been renounced... ‘three months from now the Perfect One will attain final *nibbana*.’ It is impossible... to go back on those words.”³⁸

There is something very odd about the story once the details are examined closely. For instance, the *Sutta* mentioned that Buddha listed the places where he had hinted to Ananda about extending his lifespan if invited to do

³⁵ Ibid., p. 302.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 302.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 303.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 306.

so: there were sixteen names.³⁹ Seriously, would Buddha hint sixteen times to Ananda about getting him to extend his life? Then Buddha supposedly reprimanded Ananda as follows, “Ananda, the wrongdoing is yours, the fault is yours; for even when such a broad hint... was given... you did not understand... if you had done so... he (Buddha) would have consented.”⁴⁰ Would Buddha, known for his deep compassion and empathy, treat someone he knew to be deeply attached to him so harshly? It was almost like rubbing salt to the wound. Perhaps this was one spot in the *Sutta* where the ancient forefathers might have inserted their bit of ‘history’ to explain the ‘unthinkable’ – Buddha’s death.

Bhandagama, Hatthigama, Ambagama and Jambugama

The Canon mentioned four other villages that Buddha trekked through in his last days. In all of them, Buddha stayed for a while to instruct the local monks on key *Dhamma* points and to encourage them to practise hard.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 305-306

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 305.

Bhoganagara

By this stop, Buddha was nearing the end of his life's journey. He must have been very weak by then. Nevertheless, he had the presence of mind to warn his disciples about the possibility of new, unheard of teachings surfacing after his death. He said the bearers of those teachings might claim that they had learnt the discourses from Buddha himself. Alternatively, they might say that they had learnt it from some renowned monks or a prominent monastery.⁴¹ Buddha advised that one should not react in a kneejerk manner and immediately either accept or reject those new discourses. Instead, one should compare them against the full spread of known '*Vinaya* or *Sutta*' (i.e., Buddha's teaching). If they were inconsistent with the known instructions and discourses, then it 'could' be concluded that those new teachings should be rejected.⁴²

Buddha had clearly anticipated that it was inevitable that his teaching would morph over time. It is interesting that he seemed to imply that there was no ill-intent behind the

41 Bodhi, "The Great References" (5:180), [The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: a Translation of the *Anguttara Nikaya*](#), op. cit., pp. 545-547.

42 Ibid., p. 547.

unveiling of the new discourses and that the people who offered them were merely misguided and had misunderstood his teaching. But the more important task was to help practitioners discern what was right *Dhamma* or a wrong interpretation. Buddha made essentially two points. First, practitioners must be familiar with the full spectrum of his teachings so that they could catch the inconsistency and spot a wrong version. Second, a practitioner must exercise critical thinking and not blindly embrace whatever he has heard regardless of how impressive or seemingly credible the source of teaching is.

Pava

Pava was the penultimate stop in Buddha's long last trek. It was one of the two capitals of the Malla tribal 'republic': the other being Kusinara. The Mallians were adjacent to the Sakyans so over half a century earlier, they had hosted the young Gotama in his very first week as a homeless ascetic, just after he left his ancestral home. Now, once again it was his sanctuary in the last days of his life.

In Pava, Buddha stayed in a mango grove belonging to a wealthy lay supporter named Cunda (said to be a goldsmith's son). When Cunda heard that Buddha was staying on his

property, he promptly paid him a visit. Buddha gave him a *Dhamma* talk but there was no mention that he understood. Cunda was probably just a faithful follower who was happy to shower generous hospitality on Buddha. He invited Buddha for *dana* and prepared all kinds of gourmet food including *sukaramaddava*. Literally it translates into either hog's mincemeat or pig's throttle. (Some have argued that it was a kind of mushroom.) Whatever it was, that dish was apparently the cause of severe food poisoning for Buddha, who was the only one to consume it. He knew that it was contaminated, presumably after tasting it, and made sure that no one else ate it. He told Cunda to have it buried "in a hole" if there were any leftovers. Soon after *dana*, Buddha had bloody diarrhoea and "violent deadly pains."⁴³

That was the last straw that broke his body completely. Buddha was dying. It was not quick and the pain was excruciating. Captured between the lines in the Canon is an almost heart-breaking image of a frail old man with chalk-white hair struggling to trek through the ancient dirt-beaten forest track, and every few steps his strength

⁴³ Nāṇamoli, op. cit., pp. 309-310.

would give and he would ask to lie down.⁴⁴ It did not help that it was an Indian summer and the heat must have been unbearable.

Water was hard to come by. At one stage, a severely dehydrated Buddha asked Ananda ‘three times’ to “please fetch me some water. I am thirsty.”⁴⁵ Poor Ananda was at his wit’s end. He tried to comfort Buddha by saying that they were nearing River Kakuttha, where there was ‘clear, pleasant, cool water’.⁴⁶ But Buddha was really spent. Fortunately, by a stroke of luck (or divine intervention according to ancient storytellers), Ananda did manage to find a little clean water in a nearby stream and that helped to quench Buddha’s thirst for a while.

They finally made it to River Kakuttha where Buddha took a dip and had a more fulfilling drink. But that little

⁴⁴ The commentaries claimed that between Pava and Kusinara, Buddha had to rest at least 25 times. I have not been able to ascertain that distance. One source claimed that it is about six miles (see http://www.buddhistdoor.com/Old/Web/bdoor/archive/budd_story/blpg26.htm). Another said that it is about 9.3 miles (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kusinagar#Ancient_history). A site advertising tours in Kusinara claimed that Pava is 22 km to the east. (See <http://www.kushinagar.net/sites-to-visit/>)

⁴⁵ Ñāṇamoli, op. cit., p. 310.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 310.

exertion exhausted him. He told a disciple, Cundaka, to fold his outer robe into a make-shift bed, so that he could lie down because ‘he was really tired’.⁴⁷ While catching his breath, Buddha had the presence of mind to consider that Cunda might feel terrible about having fed him bad food that killed him. He told Ananda to remember to ease Cunda’s possible guilty conscience with the assurance that he had actually gained great merit to have given Buddha his last meal before *parinibbana*. This was classic Buddha: understanding, considerate and deeply compassionate. That was also a clear illustration that a truly enlightened being might be emotionally detached but he was not indifferent: he cared without being caught up.

Last conversion of a lay person

Somewhere during the torturous trek between Pava and Kusinara, the deeply-exhausted Buddha converted one last lay person, a wealthy Mallian by the name Pukkusa. At the point when they met, Buddha was literally dying of thirst and was resting under a tree while he waited for Ananda to

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 313.

return with some water. Pukkusa was struck by Buddha's calm demeanour and stopped to talk. Pukkusa was a lay supporter of the late Alara Kalama, a meditation master who was also Buddha's first meditation teacher when he was a young ascetic. (See vol 1, chapter 2.) Pukkusa was a fan of deep meditation and wanted to know how deep into *jhana* could Buddha go. When Buddha described his *jhana* experience, Pukkusa was awed. Convinced that Buddha was more skilful than Alara Kalama, he converted on the spot. He immediately offered Buddha two very expensive pieces of cloth (said to be made of gold threads). Buddha accepted one and asked that the other be given to Ananda. That might possibly be the only time that Buddha had a *dana* offering extended to Ananda. (Years back, Buddha had agreed to Ananda's request when he first became Buddha's personal attendant, that Buddha would not extend *dana* to him in case of being misconstrued by other monks.) Buddha also instructed Pukkusa further on *Dhamma* which delighted the latter: Pukkusa did not enter the stream but he was inspired.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Walshe, op. cit., pp. 258-260.

Kusinara

By the time the *Sangha* entourage made it to Kusinara, Buddha was close to collapse. They stopped to rest at the Sala-tree grove just outside Kusinara town. Buddha asked Ananda to prepare another make-shift ‘bed’, and he laid down to rest in the shade of the Sala trees, earning some respite from the fierce summer sun and heat. It sounded like an unscheduled stop: Kusinara was probably not his intended final destination. But he could go no further. Buddha himself knew that he was down to his last hours alive. He told Ananda that he would pass away that night, in the last watch (i.e., between 2am and 6am).

Ananda who had been his main caregiver too, must have known that his teacher’s end was near but he could not accept it. He was so distraught that he had to leave Buddha’s side and hide away to weep. Part of his pain was for himself: what was to become of his practice now that his teacher was no more. “I am still only a learner... My teacher is about to attain final *nibbana*.”⁴⁹

He was possibly absent for a while because at some

⁴⁹ Nāṇamoli, op. cit., p. 318.

point, Buddha asked for him. When Ananda returned to his bedside, Buddha comforted him as best he could. He gently chided Ananda for weeping, saying that hadn't he been saying that living things must die so why the tears? Reading Ananda's fear about his own practice, Buddha told him not to worry and that he would realise *nibbana* soon. "Ananda, you have long and constantly attended on the Perfect One with bodily acts of loving-kindness, helpfully, gladly, sincerely and without reserve... You have much merit... Keep on endeavouring and you will soon be free from taints."⁵⁰

Interestingly, Buddha also made it a point to praise Ananda before the assembled monks. He said that Ananda was wise, that he had been an excellent attendant, had exercised good judgement on Buddha's schedule, had excellent interpersonal skills and was very popular with both lay and *Sangha* community.⁵¹ Why did Buddha praise Ananda? Could it be to boost Ananda's standing before an *ariya Sangha*, in anticipation that Ananda would play a critical role in preserving his teaching? (Indeed Ananda

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 318.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 318-319.

was to be the lead reciter of Buddha's discourses at a *Sangha* conference held three months after the Teacher's *parinibbana*. Details are in chapter 9.) It was almost as if Buddha was reminding everybody of Ananda's special qualities and unique suitability to play the role of lead *Dhamma* recorder and reciter.

Honouring Buddha

Just as in the treatment of his birth when ancient storytellers went overboard with the magic and mystical narratives, the same happened in the recount of his dying moments. That was perhaps inevitable. To them, Buddha was not a common man so his last moments must commiserate with his greatness and semi-divine status. It was solemnly reported that all kind of flowers were blooming out of season (probably implying that nature was in mourning and showing the deepest respect in its own way), and even the deities (said to be in their thousands) were paying tribute in full force: heavenly music playing, divine choir singing and deities "tearing their hair and weeping" and "falling

down and rolling back and forth” (all very dramatic).⁵²

Then there was a section where Ananda apparently consulted Buddha on the correct rites to honour his memory. This was a rather odd section because there was some seemingly contradictory messaging. On the one hand, consistent with his *Dhamma*, Buddha told Ananda not to be attached to his remains but to focus on his (Ananda's) own practice. Buddha said, “Do not preoccupy yourselves about venerating” the remains. “Please strive for your own goal.”⁵³ Earlier, Buddha had also said the disciple who “lives according to *Dhamma*, who enters upon the proper way, who walks in the *Dhamma*...” paid him the highest veneration.⁵⁴

But on the other hand, Buddha apparently also gave tacit approval for turning sites associated with the key milestones in his life into places of faith and worship. Replying to Ananda on how the disciples could be inspired after his death, Buddha replied that they could visit four places for inspiration: where he was born (Lumbini), where he realised

⁵² Ibid., pp. 315-316.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 316.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 315.

enlightenment (Bodhigaya), where he first taught *Dhamma* (Isipatana), and where he attained *parinibbana* (Kusinara). Buddha supposedly added that “all those who travel to visit shrines with confident hearts reappear... after death, in a happy destination, even in a heavenly world.”⁵⁵

It is plausible that Buddha might have given the above advice: he had always been sensitive to the average man’s need for tangible objects and rituals to anchor faith. But then again, something about the exchange would also seem rather uncharacteristic of Buddha. In particular, the word “shrine”: would Buddha presume that shrines would be built in his memory? Indeed would he have encouraged the costly practice of building shrines?

Then there was this odd one on the treatment of his remains. Buddha purportedly said they were to be treated like those of a “universal monarch”. That his body should be wrapped in “new cloth” of “well-beaten cotton” (no less) in “five hundred twin layers”, placed in an “iron oil vessel”... put on a pyre with “all kinds of scents” and be cremated.⁵⁶ Monuments were also to be built at crossroads

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 316.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 317.

in his memory so that whoever saw them would “feel confidence”. Does this even sound like Buddha? That he would have expected full-fledged royal treatment and mass public veneration? Isn't it odd that a humble, austere teacher who had made teaching *Dhamma* his life mission and had asked for nothing in return, would at his deathbed give instruction for an elaborate and excessive funeral ritual? One wonders whether it might have been a later day insertion, possibly by followers who were seized by devotional faith.

Even Kusinara, the place where he finally attained *parinibbana*, probably came under fierce scrutiny by his devotees. Ananda supposedly pleaded with Buddha not to die in Kusinara, a “little mud-walled town, this backwoods town, this branch township.”⁵⁷ Instead Buddha should consider having his *parinibbana* in “other great cities like Campa, Rajagaha, Savatthi, Sakera, Kosambi and Benares.”⁵⁸ Buddha apparently told Ananda then not to belittle Kusinara and took the trouble to explain at length that it was once a capital of a great and prosperous ancient kingdom.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 319.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 319.

I find it hard to believe that this exchange really took place. While it is possible that devoted Ananda might have preferred Buddha to end his days in a great Buddhist city, he, of all people, would have known the depth of Buddha's physical suffering. Would he, given his deep love for his Teacher, have even dreamt of suggesting that Buddha should get up and walk another few hundred miles to the nearest Buddhist centre, so that he could pass away surrounded by mundane glory? It was more likely that some of Buddha's non-*ariya* devotees were dismayed that Buddha ended his days in such a nondescript place as backwater Kusinara. Perhaps along the way, it was felt that an explanation needed to be given to pacify the ground sentiments. Hence a story of Kusinara's ancient greatness was introduced to make it 'worthy' to host the dying moments of a great man.

Lay supporters' farewell

At some point, Buddha asked Ananda to let his lay supporters in Malla know that he was going to pass away that night in their land. Even in those critical hours and in severe pain, Buddha was considerate of the needs of his lay followers. He understood their attachment and gave them a chance to pay their last respects and say their goodbyes.

He did not want them to regret later that they never got to bid him a proper farewell. That simple act of kindness and thoughtfulness was classic Buddha. Apparently, so many Mallians came that Ananda fretted that it would take too long to clear the crowd if everyone was given a personal moment with Buddha. So he organised the visitors into groups and had their representatives deliver a communal farewell.⁵⁹ In this way, the crowd was effectively cleared by late evening.

Last conversion of a practitioner

One of the most touching scenes in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* was Buddha's last act of kindness – his agreeing to teach *Dhamma* to an ascetic by the name Subhadda. First, let's set some context. At the point when Subhadda asked to see Buddha, it was literally down to the last couple of hours of Buddha's life. He must have been completely exhausted and possibly in excruciating pain. He had just spent hours receiving grieving Mallian visitors, and he never got to rest at all from that terrible day-long trek from Pava. It

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 320.

must have broken Ananda's heart to see his dying Teacher suffering so. Hence, Ananda tried to turn Subhadda away saying, 'Don't trouble Buddha, he is tired',⁶⁰ despite the latter's heartfelt plead to let him see Buddha.

But Buddha intervened and told Ananda to let Subhadda through. "Do not keep Subhadda out; let him see (me). Whatever he may ask of me, he will ask it only for the sake of knowledge, not to cause trouble, and what I can tell him he will quickly understand."⁶¹ Buddha was prepared to expend whatever was left of his fast dwindling life-force to teach *Dhamma* so long as the practitioner was sincere and able to understand.

Subhadda's question was, which of the many philosophical and religious schools offered the 'correct' teaching? Buddha interrupted to say that he had no more time to waste on philosophical musings. Whatever their teaching, "... let that be. I shall teach you *Dhamma*... listen and attend carefully."⁶² 'In any school that emphasised wisdom, morality practice and concentration cultivation, that school would

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 321.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 321.

⁶² Ibid., p. 321.

guide the practitioner towards spiritual enlightenment.⁶³ Subhadda was sold, he asked to join the order and was the last monk personally ordained by Buddha. Not long after Buddha's *parinibbana*, Subhadda paid his late teacher the highest tribute by realising *nibbana* and joining the ranks of the *arahants*.

Sangha matters

At the very end of life, *Sangha* and *Dhamma* were the last things on Buddha's mind. Buddha returned to the issue of utmost concern to his monks: no designated successor. Many in the *Sangha* knew of other schools that had fought and split after their founder-teacher died and were worried about their community suffering a similar fate. They wanted the assurance of a leader (hopefully in the mould of Buddha) to hold everything together. Instead, Buddha told the assembled monks, "Let the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*... (be) your teacher after I am gone."⁶⁴ He was probably reminding them that their foremost quest was to realise

⁶³ Ibid., pp. 321-322.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 323.

nibbana and be freed from *dukkha*. To achieve that goal, they needed only to correctly understand *Dhamma* and to properly practice *Vinaya* (i.e., restraining their negative instincts that hinder spiritual realisation). Left unsaid was probably the point that there was no need for someone to hold *Sangha* together because it was never about a formal structure to begin with.

Next, Buddha said that, “The *Sangha* can, if it wishes, abolish the lesser and minor rules” when he was gone.⁶⁵ He had thus empowered them to amend non-critical training rules. Buddha was practical: he had introduced disciplinary ‘rules’ to help practitioners restrain their negative impulses which impeded spiritual development and realisation. He recognised that some rules had to be revised from time to time to keep them relevant to the prevailing environment. The only caveat was it must be a collective decision of dedicated practitioners to change the rules and not a unilateral decision by individuals.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

Final words

Finally Buddha said to the gathered monks (paraphrased), ‘If you have any questions or doubt about the teaching and the practice, ask now while I’m still around... do not regret later that you had missed the chance to ask me in person.’ When the monks remained silent, Buddha said, ‘If you are too tongue-tied to ask me, get your brother monk to pose your question for you.’ When still no questions were forthcoming, Buddha bade his farewell. His last words were, ‘It is in the nature of all formations to dissolve. Work hard to realise *nibbana*.’⁶⁶

The Canon reported that after Buddha had closed his eyes, his mind went into deep concentration meditation. It gradually made its way up nine levels of absorption concentration before reversing course and drifted back to level one. His cousin, Anuruddha, who was known for his psychic powers, was able to track Buddha’s last meditation. The death vigil lasted quite some time. At one point, probably because Buddha was so still for a while, Ananda asked Anuruddha if Buddha had passed away. Anuruddha

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 324.

said no, (at that point) Buddha's mind had just attained the cessation of perception and feeling (ninth *jhana*). Buddha eventually passed away with his mind just emerging from the fourth *jhana*.⁶⁷

Buddha passed away in a forest in Kusinara sometime in the early morning, when the land was still shrouded in darkness and the world was still asleep. He was 80 or 81 years old.⁶⁸ Anuruddha decided that it was too early to disturb the lay people so he and Ananda 'spent the rest of the night' discussing *Dhamma*,⁶⁹ an appropriate and worthy tribute to their late Teacher.

Concluding thoughts

What gives meaning and value to a life? This is a question that, since time immemorial, Man has asked and creative thinkers have offered all kinds of answers. There is no universally applicable answer. Ultimately, meaning and value of life is determined by the individual. For many, life

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 327.

⁶⁸ If vesak full moon day was indeed the day of his birth and death, the Buddha would have passed away on his 81st birthday.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 327.

is 'meaningful' when they have a successful career, fame, money, power, and so on. Their belief is having these things brings happiness and satisfaction. However, the supreme irony is the search for these things is draining and stressful and often after we have nailed these worldly 'goals', we are probably not as happy as we thought we would be, and what happy feeling we have upon achieving them is fleeting.

Buddha did not waste time with external worldly conditions. He had seen through their transient nature and decided to go in search of happiness directly and not derive it through conditional proxies. At 35 (quite the prime of his life), Buddha knew exactly what it was like to taste that exquisite inner peace that is not dependant on fickle, short-lived external conditions. After six years of exacting spiritual practice under very painful conditions, he succeeded in his quest to realise unconditioned happiness (*nibbana*). By any yardstick, that attainment alone would already have made his life deeply meaningful. While the rest of the world hankers after passing moments of delight, he abided in deep contentment and happiness as a matter of course. There is no comparison!

For many of us, to feel happiness is satisfying. But if we can help another to a similar exhilarating experience,

it is even more fulfilling. After his enlightenment, Buddha decided to teach others the path to realising *nibbana*. It was a stroke of unparalleled genius that he managed to develop a method of practice that truly worked in enabling another to realise that sublime experience. Twenty-five hundred years later, his method is still as relevant and as effective a guide to *nibbana* as it had been in his time. If the worth of a life is measured by how much happiness one brings to another, Buddha's life would have been priceless. He personally guided hundreds, if not thousands, to spiritual enlightenment in his lifetime. Even after his death, his method continued to help numerous beings through the ages. Those realised individuals in turn taught others and the powerful positive *Dhamma* wheel spins on.

Chapter Nine: After Parinibbana— Safeguarding Dhamma

A STORY ON BUDDHA'S LIFE technically could end with his *parinibbana*. But I did not stop there because I feel that the significance of his life was not just about him being an enlightened being and a great historical figure, but more because he left behind a teaching that helped to bring peace and joy to generations of people across many lands. So an appropriate end to his story would be how *Dhamma* survived his death. This final chapter traces two events that happened after *parinibbana*: the first,

led mainly by the lay community, was about his funeral and the treatment of his earthly remains. The second event, led primarily by the *Sangha* community, was about the effort to compile and consolidate his teaching as a means of ensuring its long term survival. The *Dhamma* story was by far the more important to tell: it has a much greater impact on humanity's psyche, well-being and happiness.

First story: lay disciples' tribute to Buddha

Funeral

The first lay supporters who knew about Buddha's demise were the Mallians in Kusinara. They woke up to Ananda's news that Buddha had passed away in the wee hours of the morning. Many broke down, some rather dramatically. Yet others immediately took charge of the funeral arrangements. His devoted followers probably wanted his funeral to be a grand affair, as befit his status as a great Teacher. So it was said in the Canon that Buddha's funeral was complete with divine and human "dances, songs, music, garlands and scents."¹

¹ Walshe, op. cit., p. 273.

Interestingly, the Canon reported that it was Ananda who had told the Mallians about Buddha's guidance on the proper treatment of his body. (See chapter 8 for details.) As discussed earlier, it would have been completely out of character for Buddha who had no attachment to a 'self' to prescribe royalty treatment for his body and that the section could have been a later day insertion perhaps to justify the elaborate funeral services that his grieving lay supporters threw for him. They probably could not bring themselves to comply with his teaching to see his body as no more than just "a useless log."²

The Mallians' attachment to him and reluctance to let him go would also explain why his body was not cremated that same day as was the custom of the time. There was a mention in the Canon that they had an initial plan to have Buddha's body cremated that same evening of his *parinibbana*.³ But on one pretext or another, the funeral organisers kept postponing the cremation ceremony. In the end, the

² "Putigattatissatthera Vatthu" (*Dhammapada* 41), <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=41>.

³ Walshe, op. cit., p. 273.

funeral wake dragged into a week.⁴ In fact, by the time the Mallians finally decided to proceed with the cremation, a large group ('five hundred') of monks had arrived from a distant region. They were Maha Kassapa and his disciples. Maha Kassapa was actually on his way to Kusinara,⁵ when he learnt by chance from an ascetic that his Teacher had passed away. He immediately rushed to the cremation site. The group made it in the nick of time, literally just before the pyre was lit.⁶ The ceremony was apparently held up for Maha Kassapa and his disciples to see Buddha's body one last time and pay their last respect.

Bone relic distribution

The cremation itself was uneventful. After the fire died down, only little bone fragments were found.⁷ The Kusinara Mallians immediately took possession of the bone relics. But Buddha's followers in the neighbouring territories came storming into town insisting on having the relics.

⁴ Ibid., p. 273.

⁵ Ibid., p. 274.

⁶ Ibid., p. 275.

⁷ Ibid., p. 275.

They included the Mallians of Pava, Buddha's relatives the Sakyans and Koliyans, King Ajatasattu (now a devout follower), long-time supporters Licchavis of Vesali, the Bulians of Allakappaka, and a *Brahmana* of Vetha Island.⁸ The eight squabbling parties came close to blows, which was supremely ironic given Buddha's pacifist teachings. War was barely averted when Dona, a prominent *Brahmana* disciple of Buddha, successfully convinced the eight antagonists to share the bone relics. Dona was subsequently given the vessel which he had used to divide up Buddha's relics for them. The Moriyans of Pippalivana arrived after the others had already left and had to be content with just the souvenir ashes from the pyre.⁹

Everyone went their separate ways to build monuments honouring Buddha's earthly remains. That was probably the beginning of some kind of deification of Buddha. While the initial intent behind those monuments might have been just to honour his memory, over time, they became places of worship and veneration. They were particularly impor-

⁸There are discrepancies in the way the names of the eight antagonists have been spelt. I am using Bhikkhu Nāṇamoli's version. See Nāṇamoli, op. cit., p. 331.

⁹ Entire paragraph taken from Walshe, op. cit., pp. 275-277.

tant for faith-based followers who needed tangible symbols to reinforce their belief in Buddha and to inspire them on the *Dhamma*.

Second story: Sangha's effort to preserve Buddha's spiritual and doctrinal legacy

Problems confronting Sangha

'No leader: how to hold *Sangha* together' – Buddha's death was an unprecedented crisis for the *Sangha*. Beyond the pain of a physical loss, the monks were also concerned about their own future: what was to become of the *Sangha*, now that the glue that had bonded them all was no more? Today it is difficult to imagine what it was like for them because in our time, *Dhamma* and *Sangha* are firmly established. At that point however, their concerns were quite justified. They had seen how other schools (some much older than their own *Sangha*) had fallen apart quite soon after their teachers passed away. Moreover, the late teachers of those schools would usually have designated successors and still there were infightings that ultimately destroyed them. Buddha did not name anyone to guide *Sangha* after him so one can only imagine how his monks must have felt:

if the others could not hold together with a leader blessed by the old teacher, what were their odds of remaining united and avoiding infighting with no leader?

‘Let *Dhamma-Vinaya* be the guide: how’ – Buddha’s instruction at his deathbed was *Dhamma-Vinaya* will be the guide for the *Sangha* on their spiritual journey, in place of a leader in the conventional sense. His disciples were probably not comfortable¹⁰ with that but such was the respect and awe for Buddha that the monks went about trying to operationalise that injunction properly instead of challenging it. But they had a real and practical problem. At the time of his death, what Buddha had taught resided in the minds of individuals; in each disciple who had his personal sessions with Buddha and was given discourses tailored for his spiritual enlightenment. There was no single source where all his teaching could be found. How was *Dhamma-Vinaya* supposed to be the guide for future practitioners when it was in disjointed bits everywhere? Where would people

¹⁰ Even today, we still find people asking why Buddha did not designate a successor. So clearly Man is instinctively more comfortable with having a thinking human run the show instead of allowing individuals to make a judgment based on his own wisdom and understanding of the teachings.

go to find the material to guide them? And how would they know if a teaching was Buddha's and whether it was correctly understood and taught? So the *Sangha* elders must have seen a need to first establish true *Dhamma-Vinaya* and the correct way of understanding it.

Holding the line against relaxing training rules – *Sangha* elders were also concerned about errant monks running riot now that Buddha was no longer there to discipline them. Even when Buddha was alive, recalcitrant monks were already bending rules and misbehaving. Surely they would be even more blasé about the rules now? Indeed, the leader of the drive to compile Buddha's teachings, Maha Kassapa, was said to have been so motivated because he had overheard by chance a junior monk telling his fellow monks not to be too upset about Buddha's death because 'now they could do as they pleased!' That junior monk even described Buddha as a 'spoilsport' teacher who was forever telling them to exercise restraint and not simply indulge.¹¹ But what was even more shocking was that that monk was part of Maha Kassapa's entourage to Kusinara, which

¹¹ Walshe, op. cit., p. 274.

meant probably his own disciple. Now Maha Kassapa was known to be the foremost *dhutanga*¹² practitioner. If even his disciple could talk about being more relaxed about training rules, what more the other monks? It would be yet another chilling concern for the Sangha elders.

The First Council

According to the Canon, it was Maha Kassapa who took the lead in organising the efforts to compile and protect *Dhamma-vinaya*. He lobbied the other elders for the need to come together and consolidate Buddha's teachings.¹³ They agreed to such a gathering. They probably recognised the urgency themselves, because that meeting took place within a short time ('three months') of Buddha's *parinibbana*.¹⁴ The Canon said that 'five hundred *arabants*' (i.e., a sizeable group of the most respected and influential monks) met in

¹² *Dhutanga* monks adopt thirteen more ascetic practices which mean they lead a more austere life. See "The 13 Ascetic Practices", Monk Devinda, translated from Burmese by Monk Dhamma Sāmi, [Dhammadana.org](http://en.dhammadana.org), updated 28 August 2007, <http://en.dhammadana.org/sangha/dhutanga.htm>.

¹³ Ñāṇamoli, *op. cit.*, pp. 336-337.

¹⁴ This is according to Theravadan tradition as cited in the *Khandhaka* sections of the *Vinaya*. It might actually have taken a little longer but possibly just months from *parinibbana* rather than years.

Rajagaha, Sattapanni Cave, for what has since been known as the first Buddhist Council. It was quite a feat to pull off that gathering at such short notice. The logistical challenge of contacting people and finding a space big enough to host the anticipated number must have been tremendous. Anyhow, the organisers pulled it off.

The first Buddhist Council apparently lasted ‘seven months’. Lead organiser Maha Kassapa also chaired the proceeding. A question-and-answer approach was used to establish the facts of the teachings. Maha Kassapa asked that the Council discussed the *Vinaya* first.¹⁵ Upali took the lead on answering the questions on *Vinaya*.¹⁶ He had undisputed credibility because he had been proclaimed by Buddha as foremost of those knowledgeable on the *Vinaya*.

Then it was Ananda’s turn to take centre stage: he was to help consolidate *Dhamma*.¹⁷ The basis for his being assigned that weighty responsibility was that he was Buddha’s constant companion for over twenty-five years and he was said to have what amounted to an audio version

¹⁵ Nāṇamoli, op. cit., p. 337.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 337-338.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 338.

of a photographic memory so he could remember in detail all the discourses he had heard. (Buddha had once ranked him as foremost of his disciples in retentive memory amongst other qualities.)

After the monks had worked their way through establishing and authenticating the spread and scope of Buddha's *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*, they next had to consider how to organise and categorise the materials. In doing that, they had probably considered the need to make it easier for the monks to memorise the material. It was a daunting task even with the thousands of monks mobilised for the operation. Buddha was a tireless teacher and his 45-year proselytising work yielded tens of thousands of verses. Indeed, in the *Theragatha*, Ananda said that he knew 82,000 discourses by Buddha.¹⁸ Beginning from that generation of elders and their disciples, Buddha's teaching was literally stored in the minds of monks for hundreds of years. The oldest of the ancient texts, the Pali Canon of the Theravada school, was finally written down only around the 1st century BC.

¹⁸ "Ananda" (Thag 17.3), translated from the Pali by Hellmuth Hecker and Sister Khema. Access to Insight (Legacy Edition), 4 August 2010, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/thag/thag.17.03.hekh.html>.

After the monks had finished their most important mission, which was to consolidate Buddha's teaching, Ananda volunteered the information that Buddha had said that the *Sangha* could abolish the minor and lesser *Vinaya* rules after his death. He was asked if Buddha had explained what were the 'minor and lesser' rules and Ananda said no.¹⁹ He was apparently reprimanded for not clarifying that point with Buddha.²⁰ Since the monks present could not agree on which rules to change, they decided not to amend any.²¹ Ananda was apparently also chastised for three other wrongdoings: allowing women to be the first to salute Buddha's remains; for failing to ask Buddha to extend his life; and for lobbying Buddha to allow nun ordination.²²

Reading between the lines

Role of Maha Kassapa

I think it is worth reflecting on the canonical account of the proceedings at the first Buddhist Council. The first

¹⁹ Nāṇamoli, op. cit., p. 339.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 338-339.

²¹ Ibid., p. 339.

²² Ibid., pp. 339-340.

observation is about the role of Maha Kassapa. Today, Buddhist history remembers him as a leading figure at that first Council. Actually, I think he was not just a ‘leading figure’: he might well have influenced the outcome quite substantially. We know that he presided over the Council meetings. As chair, he could possibly have set the agenda for the sessions, scoped the proceeding, determined the speakers, influenced the discussions and possibly even shaped what to include in the final ‘report’ of the meeting. It was at his suggestion that the Council chose Upali to answer the questions on *Vinaya* technicalities and Ananda for *Sutta*. He also recommended that *Vinaya* be discussed first.

We can also surmise that he had a major say on the participant list.²³ This probably meant that the invited monks must have met with his approval, which suggests that they were probably like him: strict and no-nonsense practitioners

²³ It was said that Ananda was invited only after Maha Kassapa’s acquiescence, even though he was only a *sotapanna*. Happily, Ananda did realise *nibbana* right at the eve of the Council meeting so he attended the session as an *arahant*.

who might have leaned towards more conservative views, i.e., to uphold traditional values and with some discomfort with change. The likely conservative profile of the participants might explain why that first Council made the decision to close the door on any amendment to the *Vinaya*. Maha Kassapa apparently argued that if they were to abolish rules arbitrarily and so soon after Buddha's cremation, the lay followers would reproach them for being in a hurry to relax discipline. He recommended that the training rules should be preserved intact without exception.²⁴

But why did the other elders go along with Maha Kassapa and accept him as the unofficial leader of the event? He was probably not the most senior of the monks (for instance, surely the Sakyan cousins who joined the *Sangha* in the second year of post-Enlightenment would be more senior). Maha Kassapa also had no formal leadership positions like Sariputta or Maha Moggallana. Perhaps it was his profound *dhutaṅga* practice that led to him being accorded much respect amongst the elders given that the *Sangha* was a community that highly valued strict austerity.

But there is circumstantial evidence that there were

²⁴ Nāṇamoli, op. cit., p. 339.

probably some monks who were less enthralled with Maha Kassapa. Today, we have the impression that he was sort of an unofficial ‘fourth’ in seniority after Buddha, Sariputta and Maha Moggallana. And there was even a story about how shortly after he was ordained, he met Buddha who initiated an exchange of robes with him. It was supposed to show that Buddha had acknowledged him to be a worthy successor. But we know that Buddha had explicitly said that he would not designate a successor. (See chapter 8.) In any case, if Buddha had intended for Maha Kassapa to succeed him, surely he would have said so clearly and not just make symbolic gestures decades earlier? So why go out of the way to legitimise Maha Kassapa’s leadership role? Perhaps there was resistance to his prominence at the Council and his supporters had found it necessary to defend his role?

Sangha politics

There was some resistance to the work of the Council. The Canon reported that there was at least one prominent teacher who openly declared that he would not comply with the Council’s ruling on what was or was not *Dhamma*. Elder Purana, who was said to lead ‘five hundred’ monks in the Southern Hills (not sure where) told fellow monks

that while he ‘congratulated’ the Council for compiling the *Dhamma-Vinaya*, “I, however, shall remember them as I heard them from the Blessed One’s own lips.”²⁵

The question is, why was there *Sangha* opposition to efforts to consolidate *Dhamma-Vinaya*? Surely the monks could all see that the effort would help to protect and preserve *Dhamma*? Unfortunately, it is not so straightforward. Whether or not it was the intent of the Council organisers, once such a compilation was completed, the pressure would be on all the monks to comply with the approved list of ‘authentic’ discourses and the standardised understanding of Buddha’s teaching. Any understanding contrary to the endorsed official position would be deemed ‘wrong’ or not kosher. Elder Purana was probably not the only monk who caught on to that implication and who insisted on the validity of his own understanding over that of the Council’s collective memory and wisdom. Clearly, the Council’s work was not done when the meeting concluded. The organisers still had to persuade the other monks who had not been participants, to accept the compiled work and the endorsed explanation and interpretation of Buddha’s work.

²⁵ Nāṇamoli, op. cit., p. 340.

Reprimanding Ananda

On a separate note, one big puzzle is why was Ananda slapped with charges of four wrongdoings at the Council? Some of the ‘charges’ against him might even seem trivial, for instance, the wrongdoing of letting women salute Buddha’s remains first. Then there was the strange one chastising him for persuading Buddha to set up the nun order. While it is understandable why monks would be upset with him when the nun order was first set up, but wasn’t forty years a long time to hold on to blame? (The nun order was established in the fifth year of post-Enlightenment.) Surely *arabants* would not dredge up the past, let alone one that was 40 years old? The charge of wrongdoing for not clarifying what were the ‘minor and lesser’ rules was also very strange. Buddha had mentioned this at his deathbed where he was literally surrounded by many *ariya* monks, not just Ananda.²⁶ Why was Ananda the only one blamed for not seeking clarification from Buddha and not the others? And finally, on the charge accusing Ananda of failing to ask Buddha to extend his life: I find that the most doubtful.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 323.

In chapter 8, I have already questioned the authenticity of that exchange in the first place, as it is highly unlikely that Buddha would hint that to Ananda sixteen times!

So did the charge against Ananda really happen? I hesitate to accept the account unreservedly because there are strong evidences that it was inserted at a later date and was not a first Council eyewitness record. Esteemed Buddhist scholars have argued that the record of the first Council was actually done in the second Council, which took place a hundred years later. If they are right (and I think they are), then the so-called reprimand against Ananda was probably inserted at a later point when *Sangha* leaders of the day were very conservative and held chauvinistic views about women. At least two of the charges smacked of strong male chauvinistic disdain for females.

Concluding thoughts

It is really an incredible achievement for *Dhamma* to survive over 2500 years. Considering that even simple everyday conversations could be captured wrongly, it boggles the mind how Buddha's original words are still with us and relatively intact. In contrast, most of Buddha's spiritual contemporaries have long been forgotten and their

teachings almost completely lost in the dusts of history. So Buddha was right in urging practitioners to depend only on *Dhamma-Vinaya* as their spiritual guide. Many have wondered about his wisdom in refusing to designate a leader yet the fact remains that his approach did succeed in preserving true *Dhamma*.

While Buddha had provided the vision, it was Maha Kassapa and a few hundred dedicated *ariya Sangha* who made it come alive. They were all taught by the Master himself: they knew him, were guided and inspired by him, and one can only imagine the gratitude they must have felt for him when they realised *nibbana*. On their own, they would have done their part to keep *Dhamma* alive, through teaching and guiding others. But collectively, they achieved the extraordinary. They collected, compiled and categorised tens of thousands of his discourses, and then divided the precious load amongst themselves and their disciples to memorise and pass down to the next generations of monks. It was through their incredible work that *Dhamma* as we know it first took shape and form.

But just as important is that there have been generations of *ariya* practitioners who have walked the path successfully, overcome the *dukkha* of their minds and tasted spiritual

relief. Those *ariya Sangha* are not only living inspirational proof that the path works, but more importantly, they have the knowledge of what *Dhamma* really is and how to practise correctly. Had it not been for them, it may not be possible to preserve a 2500-year-old knowledge that is so sublime that only one who has seen and realised would be able to teach it properly.

It is thus imperative that we must practise hard and strive to see *Dhamma* for ourselves. Only then can we really contribute properly to the age-old effort to keep true *Dhamma* alive and pass it on. Just as we have benefitted from the *ariya* practitioners who came before us: we have a duty to get our understanding right and do likewise for the seekers who come after. Seeing *Dhamma* and passing it on is the only worthy tribute to a great Teacher who will always live on as long as there are *ariya* practitioners.

Short Reflection on Volume Two

This volume was far more difficult to write than volume one. The first big challenge was trying to capture Buddha's life chronologically, which is the usual thing to do when writing a biography. I tried very hard to do that but at some point, it was simply not possible any more. The Canon was not compiled to tell his life story: it was so organised to make it easier for generations of monks to memorise his teaching and pass it on. I actually depended a lot on Bhikku Ñāṇamoli's landmark book, "The Life of the Buddha," to help me place several important events in broad periods of Buddha's life. It would have taken me far longer to do the research and structure the story had it not been for this book.

There were also so many fascinating little details that can be gleaned about his life from the discourses that I had serious information overload. For a while, I was at my wits end trying to figure out how to organise the materials such that his story could be told in a meaningful way with as many useful insights as possible but without going in various random directions. The result of a few weeks of musing on this perplexing dilemma was two chapters that

covered Buddha's middle age respectively examining the pleasant and unpleasant events of his life in a thematic manner. Naturally, it was not possible to include every little juicy life episode. Many were dropped either because they didn't fit the flow of the story or because there were enough examples to explain a theme already.

This volume was difficult to write also because it had more controversial issues to examine and explain. In particular, those would include the establishment of the Nun Order and the politics, problems and infighting within the *Sangha*. It was not straightforward writing. I found conventional characterisations of those events not completely satisfactory but how does one question generations of assumptions and conclusions in a constructive way? That required very careful, nuanced and sensitive writing. My hope is to promote critical thinking and a willingness to ask questions because of a desire for the truth, but without unnecessarily raising heckles.

In addition, unlike in volume one where the mood of the story was light and optimistic, this volume was increasingly darker and more despairing. From Devadatta's betrayal to the massacre of the Sakyans, from the deaths of the beloved *arabants*, Sariputta and Maha Moggallana,

to Buddha's own *parinibbana*, it was a constant pounding of bad news and painful tales. It was a challenge to remain completely objective and clinical while trying to do justice to the inevitable thick emotions.

Finally this two-volume work is the culmination of over twenty years of learning about Buddha and trailing in his footsteps on the *Dhamma*. Although the actual writing of the volumes took only two years, this was possible only because of all the learning and prep work before. It has been a most satisfying writing journey. I managed to share much of what I have understood about Buddha but more importantly, I have gained a deeper and richer understanding of him. I am deeply grateful for the experience.

Cessation

Mountains of bones
Ocean of tears
Life after life
We are still here.

When will this end?
It all depends
Is there the wisdom
To let things rest.

To let go of wanting
That relentless hunting
To sit in abiding
And enjoy just being.

Life's quiet rhythm
A gentle throbbing.
Mind's silent watching
Eventually ceasing...

Timeless

Serene abiding
Time just passing
No past no future
A peaceful knowing
A smile for the moment
Joy in space
Grateful for the Dhamma
Timeless grace.

Glossary of Pāli Words

Pāli word	Meaning
<i>Anāgāmī</i>	‘Non-returner’: this is the third of four stages of sainthood in Theravada Buddhist tradition. Upon death, a Non-returner will be reborn in a heavenly realm called ‘Pure-Abode’. There he will continue his spiritual practice until he realises <i>nibbāna</i> and then lives out his remaining life-force as an <i>arahanta</i> .
<i>Arahanta</i>	‘Worthy or Noble One’: a title given to one who has realised the fourth and final stage of sainthood. Buddha had described him as having transcended ‘the round of birth and death and destroyed the taints’. He knows <i>Dhamma</i> fully, has experienced <i>nibbāna</i> , and is fully free in his mind.
<i>Ariya</i>	‘Noble one’: a generic term for any of the four levels of saints, namely, <i>sotāpanna</i> , <i>sakadagami</i> , <i>anāgāmī</i> and <i>arahanta</i> .
<i>Bhikkhu</i>	Monk belonging to Buddha’s Order and dedicated to practising his doctrine for spiritual enlightenment.

<p><i>Brahmaṇa</i></p>	<p>Priestly caste during Buddha's time: its key social role was to perform religious duties as prescribed in the mainstream religious text, the <i>Vedas</i>. Its members have long maintained that they were worthy of the highest respect by virtue of their birth. Buddha disagreed and used the term to apply to those who had realised spiritual enlightenment.</p>
<p><i>Brahma-vihāra</i></p>	<p>Literally means 'noble way of living', it is a collective term for four sublime mental qualities, namely, compassion (<i>karuṇā</i>), loving-kindness (<i>mettā</i>), altruistic joy (<i>muditā</i>) and equanimity (<i>upekkhā</i>).</p>
<p><i>Dāna</i></p>	<p>Generosity or giving: it is a very important instinct to cultivate in Buddhism and helps one to overcome his propensity to cling, to crave, and to have endless desires.</p>
<p><i>Deva</i></p>	<p>Deity or divine beings: the conventional belief in Buddha's India was they existed in several levels of heavenly realms, and enjoyed incredibly long lives under the most pleasant or happy conditions.</p>

<p><i>Dhamma</i></p>	<p>In this book, the term is usually used to refer to Buddha’s teaching/philosophy. But it also has the following meanings: the law of Nature; mental qualities that must be cultivated for enlightenment; and a phenomenon in and of itself.</p>
<p><i>Dukkha</i></p>	<p>Traditionally translated as ‘suffering’, the term actually means the entire range of negative experiences from mild discontent to discomfort, annoyance, distress, and to the more extreme, pain, agony and suffering.</p> <p>See “<i>Dukkha</i>”, edited by Access to Insight, <i>Access to Insight (Legacy Edition, version ati-legacy-2013.12.21.11)</i>, 5 Nov 13, http://www.accesstoinsight.org/ptf/dhamma/sacca/sacca1/dukkha.html.</p>
<p><i>Jhāna</i></p>	<p>This is a meditative state of profound stillness and concentration in which the mind becomes fully immersed and absorbed in the chosen object of attention.</p> <p>See “<i>Jhana; jhana</i>”, edited by Access to Insight. <i>Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)</i>, 30 Nov 13, http://www.accesstoinsight.org/ptf/dhamma/sacca/sacca4/samma-samadhi/jhana.html.</p>

<i>Karuṇā</i>	Compassion, one of the four <i>brahma-vihāras</i> .
<i>Khattiya</i>	‘Warrior’ caste likely to have been the predominant political power during Buddha’s time.
<i>Mettā</i>	Friendliness, loving-kindliness or goodwill, one of the four <i>brahma-vihāra</i> .
<i>Nāga</i>	Magical serpents
<i>Nibbāna</i>	<p>A state of being when the mind experiences liberation. The term literally means the “unbinding” of the mind from cankers and defilements that keep it shackled to rounds of rebirths. Term also connotes the extinguishing of fire: cooling, stilling, calming and peace.</p> <p>See “<i>Nibbana: nibbana</i>”, edited by Access to Insight, <i>Access to Insight (Legacy Edition, version ati-legacy-2013.12.21.11)</i>, 30 Nov 13, http://www.accesstoinight.org/ptf/dhamma/sacca/sacca3/nibbana.html.</p>

<p><i>Parinibbāna</i></p>	<p>The complete cessation of the aggregates (i.e., physical form, feeling, perception, thought construction and consciousness) that occur upon the death of an <i>arahanta</i>.</p>
<p><i>Saṅgha</i></p>	<p>In a conventional sense, it means the community of monks and nuns. At the ideal level, this refers to followers of Buddha, lay or ordained, who have attained at least <i>sotāpanna</i>.</p>
<p><i>Sakadāgāmī</i></p>	<p>Once-returner: the second stage of sainthood where the individual weakens two fetters, namely, sensual craving and ill-will, in addition to having eliminated three others as a <i>sotāpanna</i>. He would have only one rebirth. This means that even if he had not realised <i>nibbāna</i> in that life, upon death, he would be reborn in a heavenly plane, where he would complete his spiritual journey.</p>

<p><i>Satipaṭṭhāna</i></p>	<p>Literally foundations of mindfulness: it is in essence a method of focusing the mind to observing closely four objects as they arise: body, feelings, mind and <i>Dhamma</i>. Through mindful and objective observation of these objects, the mind may be calm, quiet, clear and sharp enough to realise the nature of itself as it really is.</p>
<p><i>Sotāpanna</i></p>	<p>Stream-winner: the first stage of sainthood where the individual catches a glimpse of <i>Dhamma</i> for the first time, and eliminates three fetters that chain him to the cycle of rebirths. These fetters are belief in a Self, perplexed confusion about <i>Dhamma</i> and attached to rites and rituals (in the belief that they would bring spiritual salvation). He will be reborn for a maximum of seven times and none of them in the lower states, such as in hell, as hungry ghosts or as animals.</p> <p>See “Path and Fruit”, Sister Ayya Khema, in http://www.buddhanet.net/ayyatalk.html.</p>
<p><i>Suddhāvāsa</i></p>	<p>Pure Abode: a heavenly plane that only the Non-returner (<i>anāgāmi</i>) will be reborn in.</p>

<i>Sutta</i>	<p><i>Dhamma</i> discourses preached mainly by Buddha although some were by his closest disciples. They number more than 10,000, and are compiled in five collections: known as long (<i>digha</i>), middle-length (<i>majjhima</i>), connected (<i>samyutta</i>), numerical (<i>anguttara</i>) and minor (<i>khuddaka</i>).</p>
<i>Vassa</i>	<p>Rain retreat: a three-month period from July to October, corresponding roughly to the rainy season in India. During this time, the monk is required to stay put in one place.</p>
<i>Vessa</i>	<p>Trader or merchant caste during Buddha's time.</p>
<i>Vinaya</i>	<p>Rules of discipline governing the way of life for the <i>Sangha</i> members. It spans six volumes in printed text.</p> <p>For a good summary, see “<i>Vinaya Pitaka: The Basket of the Discipline</i>”, edited by Access to Insight. <i>Access to Insight (Legacy Edition, version ati-legacy-2013.12.21.11)</i>, 17 Dec 13, http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/vin/index.html.</p>

Pāli Canon

The Pāli Canon is a collection of scriptures of the Theravada Buddhist tradition. Today, it is also known as *Tipitaka* (“Three Baskets”) and it comprises:

- *Vinaya Pitaka* – dealing with disciplinary rules for monks and nuns;
- *Sutta Pitaka* – discourses by Buddha and some leading disciples; and
- *Abhidhamma Pitaka* – literal translation: “higher” *Dhamma*, it is mainly a compilation of Buddhist philosophical or metaphysical thesis.

However, *Abhidhamma pitaka* as we know it today was not recited at the first Buddhist Council. It was only at the third Buddhist Council that there was an incidental mention of *Abhidhamma* pitaka: it was said that Moggalliputta Tissa, the chair of that council authored the fifth of the seven *Abhidhamma* collections, *Kathavatthu*. The third Council was convened about 250BC, during the reign of Emperor Asoka, over 230 years or so after Buddha’s *parinibbana*.

Commentarial literature

These are essentially addendum texts to the Pali Canon. There are several such commentaries. Some scholars believe that the earliest amongst them could have been composed possibly as early as during the time of Buddha. Nevertheless, even for those, their origin remains murky. Most of the commentaries were composed after 4th century AD, in Sri Lanka. Below is a sample list of commentarial literary work:¹

1. *Atthakatha* – Commentarial works by Buddhaghosa and Buddhadatta both of 5th century AD, amongst others.
2. *Tika* – Commentaries to *Atthakatha*
3. *Dipavamsa* – “The Island Chronicle” (4th century AD)
4. *Mahavamsa* – ”The Great Chronicle” (6th century AD)
5. *Culavamsa* – “The Lesser Chronicle”
6. *Mahabodhivamsa* – Account of the Bodhi tree of

¹ Refer to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pali_literature for a more comprehensive compilation on the commentarial literature.

Anuradhapura (11th century AD)

7. *Thupavamsa* – Chronicle of the Great Stupa in Anuradhapura (12th century AD)
8. *Dathavamsa* – Poem on the sacred tooth relic of the Buddha
9. *Samantakutavannana* – poem on the Buddha's life and his visits to Sri Lanka
10. *Saddhamma-sangaha* – Ecclesiastical history of Buddhism (14th century AD)
11. *Cha-kesadhatuvamsa* – History of the six stupas that enshrine the Buddha's hair relics (14th century AD)
12. *Sāsanavamsa* – A Burmese history of Buddhism (19th century AD)

About the Author

The volume 2 of Miss Sylvia Bay's thought-provoking book "Between the Lines" on Buddha's biography and early Buddhist history provides the reader with an analytical exploration of the scriptural records on Buddha's dispensation at its formative stage. Just as we have seen in volume 1, her discussions in each and every chapter of volume 2 are methodical, critical and intellectually sound. As the Buddha had given permission in the *Vīmaṃsaka Sutta* to subject not only his teaching but himself to an 'acid test', she has the liberty to compare and contrast some canonical accounts critically and sequentially by reading between the lines.

Her innovative intellectual acumen is quite explicit in the book. The chapters on the establishing of the *Bhikkhuni* order and Buddha's treatment of the order, the trouble in Buddha's middle age, troubling time for Buddha and *Sangha*, Buddha's decision to leave Rajagaha and the role of Mahakassapa and *Sangha* politics, all demonstrated her rational evaluation of facts and figures of Buddhist history that have been repeated in Buddhist annals.

Miss Sylvia Bay is highly qualified to read between the

lines of scriptures and arrive in sound conclusions. As she holds a B.A. (Hons.) first class in Buddhist Studies from the Buddhist and Pali University Sri Lanka, a B.Soc.Sci. (Hons.) from National University of Singapore and a Masters in International Public Policy from the School of Advanced International Studies, John Hopkins University, she is fully equipped with the academic qualifications and training to undertake a task of this nature. She has also been teaching Buddhist studies at the Buddhist and Pali College of Singapore for almost 15 years, and has regularly given talks at Buddhist forums on Buddhist history, social aspects of Buddhism and application of Buddhism to daily life.

While we highly appreciate her critical approach to Buddhist history, we hope she will continue her research on other fields of Buddhist studies by reading between the lines.

Ven. Dr. P. Gnanarama Thera

Principal
Buddhist Pali College of Singapore
30 Jalan Eunos
Singapore

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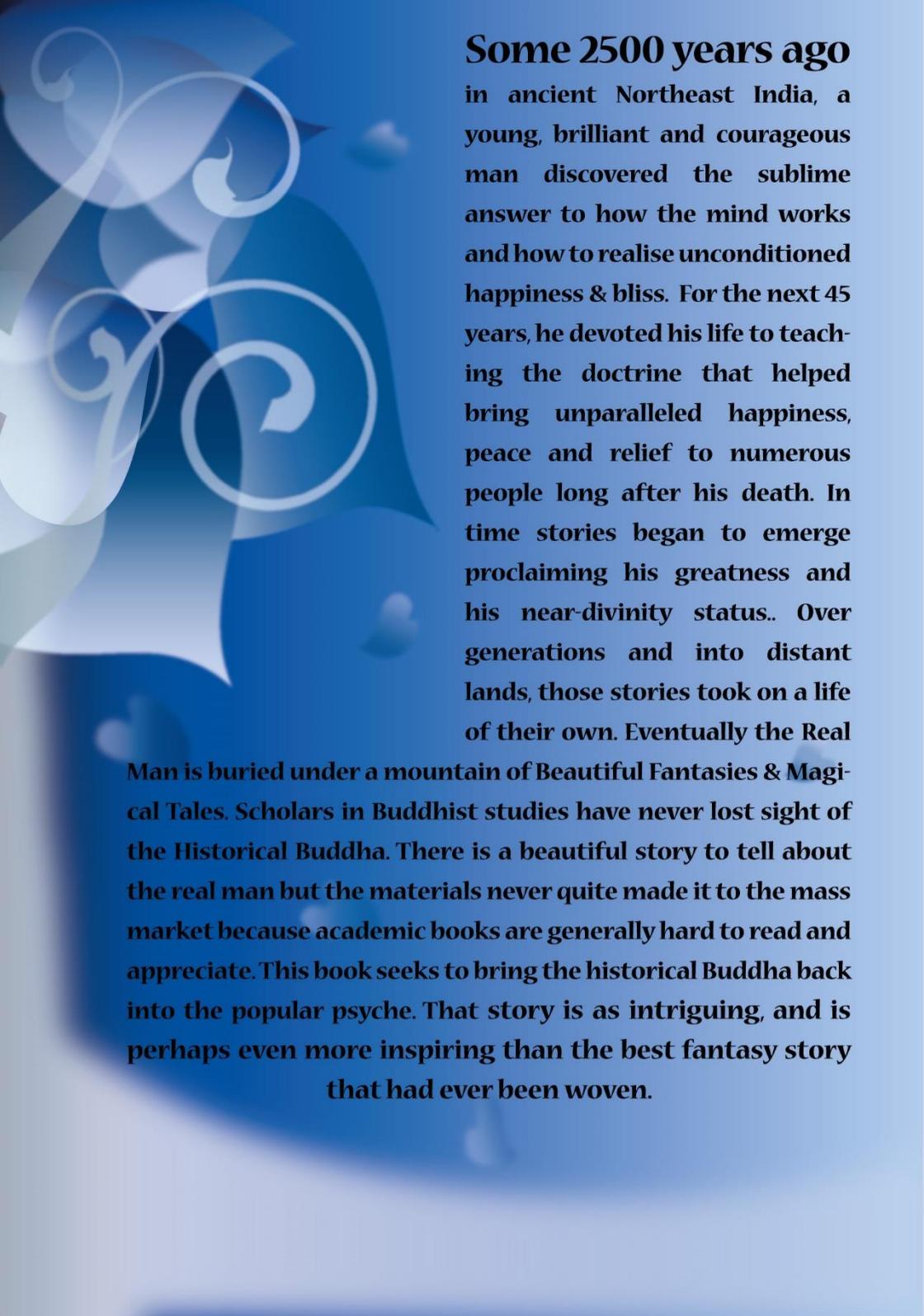
Dhamma has been kept
alive over the centuries by
countless individuals.

Their names may have been lost
but their **Effort** lives on...

Here are the names of
more who continue in
that **Noble Service.**

May their good work yield
great merits to support their
Spiritual Journey...

Lee Cheng Leona Ho Steven Chua Alvin Tan
Henry Baey Puay Q Jerry Ong Ken Chuan
Winnie Joel Tian Kartini Karen Koh Jolyn Chuah
James Phoon Eva Ch'ng Lee Cheng Ng Chee
Ronald Goh Peng Hwa Kenneth Tan Delia Tan
Zhang Xin Ng Yuen Yen Sylvia Bay Nixon Na
Annie Tan Jennifer Bay Meixuan Alwyn Rusli
Chandima Wijebandara Henry Baey Jerry Ong
Mr & Mrs Loh Sai Yin Mr & Mrs Vincent Chua Ho
Steven Chua Jovina Lim June Quek Jadin Ong P
Sharon Nai Foo Kum Fong Puay Q Yuen Suet Yin
Edmund Hooy Ken Chu Kitt Leong Eva Ch'ng Y
Yap Pei Ling Alex Tan Song Thiew Choy Peng Quan
Lee Hian Hui Yap Boon Tiong Hsu Moh Cheng Seah
Seah Chin Siang Siah Lay Choo Quek Pek Noi Marcu
Goh Ling Chih Marcus Lee Alvin Tan Foo Kum Fong
Zaw Min Tun See Cheng Kok See Hee Cheo Tan Joo Sim
Gan Cheng Yong Suzanna See Sock Cheng Zeb Lim Kai Kok
Ng Guat Hua Kyaw Kyaw Naing James Phoon Joel Tian Lau
Winnie Lim Chew Hui Kartini Karen Koh Yeoloo Bee Joly
Sim Teng Kwan Wei Yen Ko Guat Hua Woo Siew Lee Tan Joo
Sylvia Bay Annie Tan Jennifer Bay Kenneth Tan Sharon Nai J
Delia Tan Meixuan Nixon Na Ng Yuen Yen Ng Chee
Ronald Goh Peng Hwa Alwyn Rusli Lee Cheng Leona Ho K
Chandima Wijebandara Jolyn Chuah Sim Teng Kwan Wei
Edmund Hooy Ken Chu Kitt Leong Yap Pei Ling Sylvia C
Eva Ch'ng Ng Chee Henry Baey Lynn Chuan
Yap Pei Ling Jerry Ong June Quek Foo
Mr & Mrs Vincent Chua Steven Chua
Mr & Mrs Loh Sai Yin Sharon Nai
Suzanna See Sock Cheng See Chee
Gan Cheng Yong Ng Guat Hua
Zeb Lim Kai Kok James Phoon
Lau Lee Hua Kyaw Kyaw Naing
Winnie Lim Chew Hui Joel Tian
Kartini Karen Koh Yeoloo Bee
Jolyn Chuah Sim Teng Kwan Wei
Ko Guat Hua Woo Siew Lee T
Koh Mei Zuan Yeoloo Bee K
Kwan Wei Yen Yuen Suet Yin J
Choy Peng Quan Alex Tan Song
Lee Hian Hui Goh Ling Chih
Yap Boon Tiong Zaw Min Tun
Seah Chin Siang Siah Lay Choo
Quek Pek Noi Marcus Lee
Alvin Tan Suzanna See Sock C
Tan Joo Sim Koh Mei Zuan J
Edmund Hooy Ken Chu K
Yap Pei Ling Sylvia C
Puay Q S
Nixon Na
Me



Some 2500 years ago in ancient Northeast India, a young, brilliant and courageous man discovered the sublime answer to how the mind works and how to realise unconditioned happiness & bliss. For the next 45 years, he devoted his life to teaching the doctrine that helped bring unparalleled happiness, peace and relief to numerous people long after his death. In time stories began to emerge proclaiming his greatness and his near-divinity status.. Over generations and into distant lands, those stories took on a life of their own. Eventually the Real

Man is buried under a mountain of Beautiful Fantasies & Magical Tales. Scholars in Buddhist studies have never lost sight of the Historical Buddha. There is a beautiful story to tell about the real man but the materials never quite made it to the mass market because academic books are generally hard to read and appreciate. This book seeks to bring the historical Buddha back into the popular psyche. That story is as intriguing, and is perhaps even more inspiring than the best fantasy story that had ever been woven.