

# ŚĀKYAMUNI'S FINAL NIRVĀNA

- David L. Snellgrove

Despite the admonitions of responsible scholars, writers of books on Buddhism still tend to assume that a reasonably historical account of the life and personal teachings of Śākyamuni Buddha may be extracted from the earliest available canonical accounts. This quest of the historical Buddha began as a Western nineteenth-century interest, imitating both in its pre-suppositions and its methods of inquiry the parallel quest of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. The general principle of operation is set forth succinctly by Hermann Oldenberg in his impressive work, *Buddha, sein Leben, seine Lehre, seine Gemeinde*, Berlin, 1881, 92 :

‘ Abstrahiren wir nun von den Traditionen der bezeichneten Kategorien, welche sämtlich unhistorisch oder doch des unhistorischen Characters verdächtig sind, so behalten wir als festen Kern der Erzählungen von Buddha eine Reihe positiver Thatsachen übrig, die wir als einen zwar sehr bescheidenen, aber vollkommen gesicherten Besitz für die Geschichte in Anspruch nehmen dürfen ’.

Within the terms of his enunciated principles, Oldenberg's work is responsible and scholarly. He has created a figure of the historical Buddha, which has been now popularly accepted by Westerners, and by Westernized Asians. However, cast as it is in the mould of European nineteenth-century liberal and rational thought, it might seem to bear on examination no relationship to the religious aspirations and conceptions relating to Śākyamuni Buddha, as revealed in the earliest Buddhist literature. Furthermore it can easily be shown that the whole process of deliberately abstracting everything of an apparent unhistorical and mythical character, all too often leads away from any semblance of historical truth. This is because the elements that are deliberately abstracted, usually those relating to religious faith and the cult of the Buddha as a higher being, may be older and thus nearer the origins of the religion, than the supposed historical element. This easily reveals itself at best as an honest but comparatively late attempt at producing out of floating traditions a coherent story, and at the worst as a tangle of tendentious fabrications produced to justify the pretensions of some later sectarian group.

In this short article I propose examining briefly the traditions relating to Śākyamuni's final *nirvāna*, for it might be supposed that of all the events of his life, the final ones would be the best remembered. It is well known that a complete 'biography' was a late and extra-canonical operation. As early canonical material we have consecutive accounts of just two separate periods of his life, one describing his leaving home, his six years' training, his enlightenment and the conversion of his first five disciples, and the other describing his last journey and decease. It is this last with which we are concerned here.

The best-known account is based upon the Pali version of the Theravādin sect, already examined in some detail by E. J. Thomas in his *Life of the Buddha as legend and history*, third ed., London, 1949, 142-64.<sup>1</sup> Fortunately a parallel account with interesting variations is available in Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese, as published by Ernst Waldschmidt, *Das Mahāparinirvānasūtra*, Berlin, 1950. This second version represents the traditions of the Mūlasarvāstivādin sect, which was active in north-western India up to the time of the final eclipse of Buddhism in its homeland.<sup>2</sup>

The description of the itinerary of the last journey and the accounts of the various lengthy sermons delivered, run generally parallel in the two versions. Śākyamuni travelled with a company of monks from Rājagṛha, regarded traditionally as the centre of much of his teaching, to Pāṭaligrāma (Tib. dMar-bu-can) on the Ganges. Here he stayed by the *caitya* (Tib. *mchod-rten*), where he was visited by Brahmans and householders, to whom he preached a sermon. Later, when he found Varṣākara, the minister of the land of Magadha, organizing the building of a fortress in preparation for their intended war against the Vṛjis to the north, he prophesied the future greatness of the place as Aśoka's capital city of Pāṭaliputra. Then having crossed the Ganges miraculously, he travelled via Kuṭigrāma (Tib. sPyil-pa-can) and Nādika (sGra-can) to Vaiśāli. Many people had died at Nādika because of a plague, and his monks asked him the reasons for this. He gave general teachings on impermanence, said that all beings must die and there is no need to ask useless questions, and repeated the teaching of the twelvefold 'causal nexus' (*pratītyasamutpāda*). At Vaiśāli he was visited by the Licchavi princes, and entertained by the popular courtesan Ambapāli. Afterwards he went into retreat nearby at Beluvagāmaka (Skt. : Venugrāmaka, Tib. : 'od-ma-can-gyi

<sup>1</sup> This is the *Mahāparinibbānasūtra* as it occurs in the *Dighanikāya*. Another and very short version occurs in the *Samyuttanikāya*, as translated by E. J. Thomas in his *Early Buddhist scriptures*, London, 1935, 51-3.

<sup>2</sup> As edited by Waldschmidt, the Sanskrit version is taken from the edited text of N. Dutt, *Gilgit manuscripts*, III, part I, Srinagar, [1947], and the Tibetan version from a manuscript copy of the Kanjur in the former Prussian State Library in Berlin, and from the rNar-thang block-print, 'Dul-ba, xi, folio 535b ff. I have referred throughout to the Peking block-print as reprinted conveniently in the *Tibetan Tripitaka*, Tokyo-Kyoto, 1958, XLIV, page 210, leaf 1, line 5. Future references to the text will appear in the form e.g. p. 210-1-5.

Waldschmidt provides a translation of the Chinese version from the Taishō *Tripitaka*, XXIV, pp. 382b ff.

One may note that the various indexes to the Tibetan canon refer not to this *Mahāparinirvānasūtra*, but to later *Mahāvāyāna* versions in the *Sūtra (mDo)* section, viz. Tokyo-Kyoto ed., XXXI, items nos. 787, 788, and 789. I have referred to points of contact with these later works in the footnotes. The corresponding Chinese versions of these later works occur in the Taishō *Tripitaka*, XII.

A most detailed and brilliant analysis of these Pali and Sanskrit versions and of four other Chinese versions has just been completed by André Bareau, namely his *Recherches sur la biographie du Buddha dans les Sūtrapitaka et les Vinayapitaka anciens. Vol. II. Les derniers mois, le parinirvāna et les funérailles*, Paris, École Française d'Extrême Orient, Tom. 1, 1970, Tom. 2, 1971. His conclusions leave hardly any basis for a historical substratum in the texts, certainly even less than I myself envisaged when first writing this short article.

grong). Here he fell ill, and Ānanda who now alone remained with him as his foremost and much devoted disciple, requested him not to enter *nirvāṇa* before he had made some decisions for the order. It was then that Śākyamuni made a reply, which is often quoted as symptomatic of the subsequent lack of organized leadership in the community<sup>3</sup>:

‘Ānanda, I do not have the idea that the order of monks is mine, that I must cleave to the order and lead it, so how should I have a last exhortation, even a slight one, with which to instruct the order? Whatever teachings I have had which were relevant to the order of monks, I have already taught them as the principles which must always be practised, namely the four applications of mindfulness, the four proper efforts, the four magical proficiencies, the five powers and the five strengths, the seven factors of enlightenment, and the eightfold path.<sup>4</sup> As Buddha, I do not have the close-fistedness of a teacher who thinks he must conceal things as unsuitable for others. . . .

From the beginning, Ānanda, I have taught you that whatever things are delightful and desirable, joyful and pleasing, these are subject to separation and destruction, to disintegration and dissociation. So Ānanda, whether now or after my decease, whoever you are, you must remain as islands to yourselves, as defences to yourselves with the *Dharma* as your island and the *Dharma* as your defence, remaining unconcerned with other islands and other defences. If you ask the reason for this, then know that

<sup>3</sup> See Waldschmidt, op. cit., 197-201, and for my extracts as translated *Ti. T* (= *Tibetan Tripitaka*, Tokyo-Kyoto, 1958), XLIV, p. 216-2-6 onwards and p. 216-3-6 onwards: *kun dga' bo nga la ni 'di snyam du dge slong gi dge 'dun ni nga'i yin te / ngas dge slong gi dge 'dun lu bstan par bya'o / ngas dge slong gi dge 'dun drang ngo snyam du dgongs pa mi mngu' na / ngas dge slong gi dge 'dun gyi phyir zhal chems kho na chung zad bstan du ci yod /*

*gzhan yang kun dga' bo nga la dge slong gi dge 'dun gyi rag lus pa ci zhig yod / kun dga' bo ngas rtag tu goms par bya ba'i chos / 'di ltu ste / dran pa nye bur gzhas pa bzhi dang / yang dag par spong ba bzhi dang / rdzu 'phrul gyi rkang pa bzhi dang / dbang po lnga dang / stobs lnga dang / byang chub kyi yan lag bdun dang / 'phags pa'i lam yan lag brgyad pa ni bshul zin to / . . .*

*kun dga' bo gang yang ngas khyod la sdug pa dang / 'phags pa dang / dya' ba dang / yid du 'ong ba thams cad ni 'bral ba dang / 'jig pa dang / 'gyes pa dang / mi ldan par 'gyur ba nga nas bshad zin to / kun dga' bo de ltu bas na da lta 'am / 'das kyang rung gang su dag bdag nyid gling dang / bdag nyid skyabs dang / chos kyi gling dang / chos kyi skyabs kyiis gnas par bya'i / gling gzhan dang / skyabs gzhan ni ma yin no / de ci'i phyir zhe na /*

*kun dga' bo da lta 'am / 'das kyang rung / gang su dag bdag nyid gling dang / bdag nyid skyabs dang / chos kyi gling dang / chos kyi skyabs kyiis gnas par byed kyi / gling gzhan dang / skyabs gzhan gyis ma yin pa de dag ni 'di ltu ste / nga'i nyan thos bslab-pa 'dol pa rnam kyi mchog yin no /*

<sup>4</sup> These are the 37 *bodhipākṣyā dharmāḥ*. For a detailed analysis of them see Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva doctrine*, London, 1932, 80-164. It is interesting to note that this same list forms the climax of the third and shortest *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, *Ti. T*, XXXI, no. 789. See p. 209-4-3. This sūtra is in the form of a prophecy concerning the success of the Dharma under the Emperor Aśoka 100 years after the *parinirvāṇa* and a subsequent decline gradually worse up to 1,100 years after. Ānanda is distressed and asks what are the essential teachings for restoring order. The Buddha quotes the 37 'principles', adding 'total repose' (Skt. *śamatha*, Tib. *zi-gnas*), 'special insight' (Skt. *vipāśyana*, Tib. *lhag-mthong*) and 'final release' (*vimokṣa*, *rnam-par thar-ba*), referred to as 'three doors' (Tib. *sgo-gsum*).

whether now or after my decease, whoever remain as islands to themselves, as defences to themselves, with the *Dharma* as their island and the *Dharma* as their defence, not concerning themselves with other islands and other defences, such ones are the foremost of my questing disciples'.

After this he returned to Vaiśāli, and having been on a begging round and finished his meal, he went, still accompanied by the faithful Ānanda, on a visit to a near-by shrine (*caitya*) named Cāpāla. It is here that he is said to have proclaimed: 'Whoever, Ānanda, is versed, skilled, and much practised in the four magical powers, can, if he wishes, remain for a world-age or even longer than a world-age. Since I as Buddha, Ānanda, am versed, skilled, and much practised in the four magical powers, I too could, if I wished, remain for a world-age or even longer than a world-age.'<sup>5</sup> Since Ānanda said nothing in reply to this claim, Śākyamuni repeated it up to three times, and in some accounts up to six. Still greeted by silence, he sent his companion away with the harsh-sounding words: 'Lest there should be contention between us, go and sit under another tree'. Then Māra, the lord of death, who had attempted previously to persuade him to pass immediately into *nirvāṇa* at the time of his enlightenment, appeared again and extracted a promise from him that now at last since his rounds of teaching were complete, he would finally leave the world. Earthquakes greeted this decision, and Ānanda, who came to ask the reason for this, was given a lesson in the causes of earthquakes and was sternly chided for not having begged his master to remain in the world when the chance of making such a request had been repeatedly given him. Thus certain later traditions chose to blame Ānanda for the normal limited human life-span of the Buddha of our present world-age.

Śākyamuni then announced his decision of continuing to Kuṣṭhagrāma (Tib. Ru-rta), not mentioned in the Pali version, and on the way he looked back to the town of Vaiśāli and announced his imminent *nirvāṇa* in the realm of the Mallas under two *sāla* trees. From Kuṣṭhagrāma, they passed on to Bhoganagara (Tib. Longs-spyod grong), where Śākyamuni gave more discourses, on the causes of earthquakes, on the various grand assemblies human and divine in which he had taught, and on how to distinguish true from false scripture. Except for the last these are repetitions of previous sermons.

At Pāvā, the next place of rest, Śākyamuni accepted a meal in the house of the metal-worker Cunda.<sup>6</sup> Afterwards he fell ill, possibly from dysentery, and he had to rest by the wayside while Ānanda fetched water which had become

<sup>5</sup> Waldschmidt, op. cit., 205-7.

<sup>6</sup> The Pali version mentions a dish described as *sūkaramaddava*, which is interpreted by Sinhalese commentators, at least from the fifth century A.D. onwards, as specially prepared pork. However, the term is so unusual that others were able to explain it as a kind of mushroom. See E. J. Thomas, *Life of the Buddha*, p. 149, n. 3, and see especially Arthur Waley, 'Did Buddha die of eating pork?', *Mélanges Chinois et Bouddhiques*, I, 1931-2, (pub.) 1932, 343-52. The possibility of Śākyamuni having actually died of dysentery as a result of eating pork has fired the imagination of Western commentators from the nineteenth century onwards. Even so careful and reliable a scholar as Alfred Foucher exclaims: 'Quelle dégradation pour l'Être

clear quite miraculously, although 500 carts had just passed through the near-by stream. While Śākyamuni was resting and recovering, a wealthy layman named Pukkusa, who was the follower of a rival teacher, came and boasted of the powers of concentration of his religious master, who was not disturbed in his meditation when 500 carts passed by. In reply Śākyamuni told how on a certain occasion he himself had remained undisturbed by a thunderstorm and the noise of the villagers, which he had not even heard. Pukkusa was so impressed by this that he sent for two garments of golden hue which he presented to the Buddha in token of his faith and devotion. When Śākyamuni put them on, their splendour was eclipsed by the brilliance of his own corporeal form, and he explained to the astounded Ānanda that this bodily brilliance was the sign of a Buddha's approaching enlightenment or, as in the present case, of his imminent passing into final *nirvāna*.<sup>7</sup>

They continued slowly on their way, for the master was still sick, and at last they reached the outskirts of Kuśinagara, where he lay down, head to the north, between two *sāla* trees, which let fall their blossoms out of season in order to cover him. It was here that he finally expired.

Just as with his final journey, so too with the death scene, a large number of later additions may be easily identified, and especially noteworthy are the later attempts to denigrate Ānanda, who from being once the favourite and most trusted disciple, comes to be presented as a blunderer who lags well behind others in the spiritual quest. A good analysis of the last rites of the Buddha was made by Jean Przyluski in a series of articles published just over 50 years ago, and despite subsequent publications many of his theories would seem to remain valid.<sup>8</sup> Since the verses are less liable to tampering than prose, he concentrates first upon the series of verses pronounced by various mourners

sublime qu'un siècle ou deux plus tard ses fidèles auraient volontiers exempté de toutes les nécessités naturelles ! Mais aussi quelle garantie d'authenticité pour un trait que la légende aurait eu tant d'intérêt à taire ou à déguiser ! ' (*La vie du Bouddha*, Paris, 1949, 305). On such a special dish, reserved for the sole consumption of a Buddha, see A. Bareau, *Recherches sur la biographie du Buddha. II. Les derniers mois*, Tom. 1, 268-73. One should note also his article 'La transformation miraculeuse de la nourriture offerte au Buddha par le brahmana Kasibhāradvāja' in *Études tibétaines dédiées à la mémoire de Marcelle Lalou*, Paris, 1971, 1-10. Thus as is so often the case, this supposedly historical incident may be a later interpretation of an interesting Buddhological concept.

<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that this 'transfiguration' story, which is here placed in a quasi-historical setting by the mention of a wealthy layman, named Pukkusa, is expanded in an extraordinary manner in one of the later Mahāyāna versions, mentioned above, p. 400, n. 2. See *Ti. T.*, xxxi, pp. 134-2-5-135-1-6. The Buddha puts on a pair of garments as he sits on his lion-throne, and he becomes the colour of purified gold, filling the directions with rays before an astounded fourfold assembly. Again and again he mounts to the skies in a chariot made of the seven jewels, and as the display goes on, he explains repeatedly that this is the sign of his approaching *nirvāna*.

<sup>8</sup> 'Le parinirvāṇa et les funérailles du Buddha', *Journal Asiatique*, xi<sup>e</sup> Sér., xi, mai-juin 1918, 485-526; xii, nov.-déc. 1918, 401-56; xiii, mai-juin 1919, 365-430; xv, jan.-mars 1920, 5-54.

over the dying Buddha. Of several similar versions I quote from the Tibetan *Vinaya* version.<sup>9</sup>

'The Lord expired like a lion at the foot of those two excellent *sāla* trees in the grove of twin *sāla* trees which let fall their blossoms as soon as the Lord Buddha passed from sorrow. Then some other monk recited these verses :

" Here in this grove of fine trees,  
of this beautiful pair of *sālas*,  
The Teacher as he passes from sorrow  
is thoroughly scattered with flowers "

As soon as the Lord Buddha passed from sorrow, Indra, chief of the gods, recited these verses :

" Impermanent, alas, are compounds,  
for being born they are subject to destruction.  
Having been born, they are then destroyed,  
but their tranquillization is bliss "

As soon as the Lord Buddha passed from sorrow, Brahmā, the lord of the universe, recited these verses :

" All beings in the world cast off  
the accumulated totality (of their own persons).  
Thus he who is peerless in the world,  
all-seeing Buddha, winner of special powers,  
Even a teacher such as he,  
has finally passed from sorrow "

\* Waldschmidt, op. cit., 399-401: *sangs-rgyas bcom ldan 'das mya ngan las 'das ma thag tu shing sa la zung gnyis kyi tshal sa la'i ljon shing mchog las me tog 'thor ba'i drung du / bcom ldan 'das seng ge lta hur gzims pa dang / de'i tshé dge slong gzhan zhiy gis tshigs su bead de smras pa / sa la zung ni rab mdzes pa'i / ljon shing mchog gi tshal lu 'dir / ston pa mya ngan 'das pa la / me tog dag gis rab tu gtor /*

*sangs rgyas bcom ldan 'das mya ngan las 'das ma thag tu / lha'i dbang po brgya byin gnyis tshigs su bead de smras pa /*

*kye ma 'du hyed ni rtag ste / skye zhing 'jig pa'i chos can yin /*  
*skyes nas 'jig par 'gyur ba ste / de dag nye bar zhi ba bde /*

*sangs rgyas bcom ldan 'das mya ngan las 'das ma thag tu / mi mjed kyi ldag po tshangs pa tshigs su bead de smras pa /*

*'byang po kun gyis 'jig rten 'dir ni btags pa'i mtha' /*  
*'dor 'gyur 'jig rten 'di na gang zag zla med cing /*  
*de bzhin gshegs pa stobs rnam brnyes pa spyan ldan pa /*  
*ston pa 'di lta bu yang yongs su nya ngan 'das /*

*sangs rgyas bcom ldan 'das yongs su mya ngan las 'das ma thag tu / tshé dang ldan pa ma 'gags pas tshigs su bead de smras pa /*

*brtan pa'i thugs kyi skyob mdzad cing / mi g-yo zhi ba brnyes gyur pa /*  
*dbugs 'byung ba dung rtag 'gags nas / spyan ldan yongs su mya ngan 'das /*  
*rnam pa thams cad mchog ldan pa / gang tshé ston pa dus mdzad de /*  
*de tshé rab tu sangs gyur cing / de tshé spu yang lang par gyur /*  
*zhun pa med pa'i thugs kyi ni / tshor ba dag lu lhaq par gnas /*  
*de yi thugs ni rnam grol ba / sgron ma de 'dru mya ngan 'das /*

For the text of the Peking print, see *Ti. T.*, XLIV, p. 232-3-6 ff. Once again it is interesting to glance at the expanded Mahāyāna version in XXXI, p. 136, where the Lord lies down 'on a jewelled couch' under the *sāla* trees, and at the following elaborate account. The general framework of the earlier version is preserved in that sets of verses, much lengthened, are recited in turn by Brahmā (p. 137-1-2 ff.), Indra (137-2-1 ff.), Aniruddha (137-3-1), and Ānanda (137-4-3 ff.).

As soon as the Lord Buddha passed from sorrow, the Venerable Aniruddha recited these verses :

“ He who bestowed protection firm-mindedly  
and has won unshakeable tranquillity,  
His in-breathing and out-breathing have stopped,  
the all-seeing one has passed from sorrow ”.  
Possessed of all forms of excellence,  
when our Teacher made an end of life,  
We were most terribly afraid  
and our hairs stood up on end.  
But with spirit undismayed,  
extremely steady in his feelings,  
Like the extinguishing of a lamp  
his mind was liberated.’

It is significant that in the two versions preserved in the Pali canon, the second set of verses suggesting fear and alarm are pronounced by Ānanda instead of by Aniruddha, and Ānanda’s set of verses, which now follow Aniruddha’s in certain other versions noted by Przyluski, do not occur at all in Pali.<sup>10</sup> The *Vinaya* of the Mūlasarvāstivādin canon, however, preserves them, as quoted below, but after several accounts of various happenings, all related in prose and corresponding more or less with the Pali, as retold by E. J. Thomas.<sup>11</sup>

After the verses just quoted, some monks were quite distraught, but others, remembering their master’s teaching that one must finally part with all things that cause pleasure in the world, reacted more in accordance with his doctrine of renunciation. Aniruddha consoled them with suitable words, but it is significant that in the Mūlasarvāstivādin version, where he appears as by no means unshaken himself, he first asked Ānanda to do the consoling. How shameful, he said, that monks should behave in such a way, when hundreds of shocked gods are all looking on in amazement at such lack of restraint. Then he sent Ānanda into Kuśinagara to tell the inhabitants what had occurred. Hearing the news, they too were distraught, and came out in throngs, both men and women (the Pali discreetly omits the reference to women) to honour and worship the corpse. Then they asked Ānanda how they should prepare the corpse, and he replied that they should do things as for a universal monarch.

“ O, most worthy Ānanda, how should things be done for a universal monarch ? ”

“ Townsfolk, the body of a universal monarch should be wrapt in muslin. Having been wrapt in muslin, it should be wrapt in 500 pairs of

<sup>10</sup> These other versions occur in the Sanskrit original in the last story of the *Avadhānātaka* (ed. J. S. Speyer, St. Petersburg, 1906, II, 198–200), and in Chinese translations of a Mūlasarvāstivādin *Saṃnikā-āgama* (Nanjio nos. 544 and 546). See Przyluski, art. cit., *J.A.*, XI<sup>e</sup> Sér., XI, mai-juin 1918, 496–505.

<sup>11</sup> E. J. Thomas, *Life of the Buddha*, third ed., 154–5.

clothes. Having been wrapt in 500 pairs of clothes, it should be placed in an iron coffer. When this has been filled with vegetable oil, it should be closed with a double iron lid. Then heaping up all kinds of scented woods and having burned it, one extinguishes the fire with milk, and having placed the bones in a golden vase, one constructs a tumulus for the bones at a cross-roads, and honours it with parasols, banners of victory, flags, scents and garlands, perfumes, powders, and music. One has a great festival, honouring, venerating, and worshipping it." ' ' 12

The townsfolk replied that it would take them quite seven days to do all this. Having prepared everything as detailed by Ānanda, they prepared to move off. According to the *Vinaya* of the Mūlasarvāstivādins, an elder instructed the women and maidens to hold up the processional canopy over the bier which was to be carried by the men and youths. They were to pass through Kuśinagara, entering by the west gate and leaving it by the east. According to the Pali account, where no women are mentioned, they were to carry the bier to the south side of the town. In neither case could they lift the bier, for the gods prevented them, in the case of the Mūlasarvāstivādin account because they wanted to have a full part in the worship of the bier themselves, and in the case of the Pali account because they wanted the corpse to be carried to the north side of the town, entering at the west and going out at the east. Once they acceded to the gods' wishes, as interpreted by Aniruddha, the procession was able to move off. 13

When everything was ready on the funeral pyre, the gods again interfered, this time to prevent it from taking light, because the Venerable Mahākāśyapa was on his way to salute the Buddha's corpse. Mahākāśyapa was regarded afterwards as the first patriarch, who presided over the first council, supposedly held at Rājagṛha immediately after the Buddha's death, and so later tradition considered it desirable that he should be given a place of honour at the funeral rites, and be shown to establish his authority over Ānanda. He duly arrived, took off all the 500 sets of garments, worshipped the corpse, and then replaced them all. Then he placed the corpse in its iron coffer, filled it with oil, closed it with a double lid, all the details being repeated just as before. Only then did the pyre ignite ' of its own accord by the power of the buddhas and the power

12 Waldschmidt, op. cit., 411; *Ti. T.*, XLIV, p. 233-2-2: *blaun pa kun dga' bo 'khor lo sgyur ba'i rgyal po la ji llar bgyid lags / gnas 'jog dag 'khor lo sgyur ba'i rgyal po la ni / lus shing bal gyi 'da' bas dki' zhing / shing bal gyi 'da' bas bkris nas / ras zung lnga brgyas bkri bar bya o / ras zung lnga brgyas bkris nas lcags kyi sgrom du bcug ste / 'bru mar gyis bkang ste steng nas lcags kyi kha gab gnyis kyis bkab ste / dri zhim po'i shing thams cad spungs te / des baregs nas / me de dag 'o mas bead de / de'i rus pa gser gyi bum pa'i nang du bcug nas / lam po che'i bzhi mdor rus pa'i mchod rten brteigs nas / gdugs dang / rgyal mtshan dang / ba dan bleugs te / dri dang / phreng ba dang / bdug pa dang / phye ma dang / rol mo'i sgras bkur stir byed / bla mar byed / ri mor byed / mchod par byed cing / dus ston chen po yang byed do /*

13 Waldschmidt, op. cit., 415-17. In the Sanskrit and Tibetan versions the gods object in particular to the women of Kuśinagara honouring the bier. The Chinese version has removed all reference to women, and in this respect comes into line with the Pali account. For detailed comparisons see Przyluski, art. cit., *J.A.*, XI<sup>e</sup> Sér., xv, jan.-mars 1920, 28-34.



of the gods'. Finally Ānanda, coming to the fore again, pronounced his final verses over the ashes, which do not appear in the Pali canon <sup>14</sup>:

'The leader with his jewel of a body,  
the great worker of miracles, has gone to the Brahma-world.  
His Buddha-body was wrapt with five hundred pairs of garments  
and with a thousand religious costumes.  
By its own splendour this corpse  
has been consumed although so well wrapped,  
But the two religious garments were not burnt,  
these two, the inner and the outer'.

These verses were clearly pronounced by Ānanda in the role of master of ceremonies, and their absence from the Pali canon, where he is given a verse to say which expresses fear and alarm and which is elsewhere attributed to Aniruddha, may reasonably be connected with the early tendency to denigrate Ānanda, which is one of the most significant features of early Buddhist 'history', or at least of some of its interpreters. His real denigration takes place at the supposed first council at Rājagrha, and it is interesting to note that one of the accusations made against him on that occasion was that he allowed women to see the Buddha's naked body.<sup>15</sup> As Przyluski has observed, there may be preserved here a reference to women attending upon the corpse of Śākyamuni immediately after his death, possibly washing it as would have been the normal course of events; whereas such a suggestion was later removed from the accounts of the last rites as something unseemly, it may have been well enough remembered to be included in the later concocted charges against Ānanda.<sup>16</sup>

The comparative antiquity of the pair of verses spoken by him in the Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese versions, is indicated not only by such a term as Brahma-world, used as equivalent for the more negative term *nirvāna*, but also by the specific reference to religious garb (*cīvara*), whereas the previous prose account refers only to muslin and to the 500 pairs of garments. If one assumes that Śākyamuni was cremated, if indeed he was ever cremated, in simple religious garb, one must clearly treat the number 500, which occurs in Ānanda's verses, as a readjustment in the text in order to bring it more into line with the previous prose account. Once, however, one embarks upon this

<sup>14</sup> Waldschmidt, op. cit., 431; *Ti. T.*, XLIV, p. 234-4-3:

*rnam pa 'dren pa rin chen sku mnga' ba /*  
*rdzu 'phrul chen po tshangs pa'i 'jig rten gshegs /*  
*sangs rgyas sku la ras zung lnga rgya dang /*  
*chos gos stong snyed kun tu dkris gyur pa /*  
*nyid kyi gzi brjid kyis ni sku gdung dang /*  
*shin tu bkris par rab tu tshig par gyur /*  
*de la chos gos gnyis ni ma tshig pa /*  
*nung rim dang ni phyi rim 'di rnam gnyis /.*

<sup>15</sup> See A. Bareau, *Les premiers conciles bouddhiques*, Paris, 1955, 9-12.

<sup>16</sup> Przyluski, art. cit., *JA*, XI<sup>e</sup> Sér., xv, jan.-mars 1920, 11-12.

kind of speculation, it becomes difficult to set any limit, and the whole story begins to disintegrate.

Śākyamuni's death at Kuśinagara may well be historical fact. Old and ailing, he was possibly travelling from Rājagṛha, which had been probably the centre of his years of wandering and teaching, on a last visit to Kapilavastu to see what remained of his homeland. The route lay through Pātaligrama (Pātaliputra), Vaiśālī, Kuśinagara, and Pāvā. Taken extremely ill as he travelled, he could go no further than Kuśinagara, and he died in a grove just outside this mud-hut village, attended by Ānanda and Aniruddha, whose verses of lament must represent the earliest account of his death that is ever likely to be traced. The gods Indra and Brahmā would have been associated very early on with this last scene, and their lament was joined with that of the two disciples. The inclusion of verses by some 'other monk' suggests already a certain vagueness about who was present, and is in marked contrast with the precision, however fantastic, of names, attributes, and so on of all the other visitors ranging in importance from Mahākāśyapa downwards, whom later traditions felt bound to associate with these last scenes. It is possible that Śākyamuni died attended by a very few followers in a remote place, where he was little if at all well known. The memory of the actual place of his death may have represented a firm and so inviolable tradition, but later devout apologists found the death of their lord and teacher in such a remote place insufficiently edifying. The words are put into Ānanda's mouth: 'O holy one, why have you avoided the six great towns of Śrāvastī, Saketa, Campā, Vārānaśī, Vaiśālī and Rajagṛha, which are distinguished in the world, and resolved on passing from sorrow by this wretched village, so remote and so vile, the appendage of a village, the mere remnant of a village?'<sup>17</sup> In reply Śākyamuni is made to explain that this place was once one of the greatest cities of the world, and so eminently suitable for the 'passing from sorrow' of a Buddha. This insertion may suggest a firm historical tradition, for doubtless story-tellers would have preferred, if they could have dared, to transfer the death scenes to a more glorious place, but perhaps it was known that he had indeed died at Kuśinagara which was a wretched little place.<sup>18</sup>

Apart from these few reasonable assumptions, one is free to make up the rest of the story in accordance with one's own deductions. It is likely that the villagers visited the corpse of this renowned holy man, wailing in accordance with conventional mourning rites. It is not impossible that the womenfolk

<sup>17</sup> Waldschmidt, *op. cit.*, 305; *Ti. T.*, XLIV, p. 222-3-5: *btsun pa ci'i slad du 'jig rten tha dad pa grong khyer chen po drug po gang dag mnyan yod dang / gnas bcas dang / tsam pa dang / bā rū na sī dang / yangs pa can dang / rgyal po'i khab la sogs pa grong khyer chen po drug po 'di lta bu spangs nas / gang grong khyer ngan pa dang / dyon dung dang / mkhar ngan pa dang / grong khyer gyi yan lag dang / grong khyer gyi tho shul tsam 'dir yongs su mya ngan las 'da' bar dgongs /*

<sup>18</sup> One must note, however, that Śākyamuni's reply represents an insertion of traditional material in the form of the *Mahāśūdarśanasūtra*. For references, see É. Lamotte, *Le traité de la grande vertu de sagesse*, II, Louvain, 1949, 763-6.

washed the body, for this would have been normal practice, and wrapt it in a piece of hempen cloth, as used for shrouds in those times. The corpse was probably burned and perhaps the remains were somewhere entombed. Because of the persistent reference to the coffer filled with oil, in which the corpse was said to be immersed, and references to a shrine containing the Buddha's relics which was said to be looked after by water spirits (*nāga*), mentioned in many later legends, Przyluski has evolved the ingenious theory that Śākyamuni's body was preserved in oil so that it could be transported to the banks of a river, probably the Ganges, and either cast in the stream, or interred on the bank.<sup>19</sup> This is certainly one way in which one might have disposed of a revered ascetic. If the bones were indeed entombed in any particular place, especially in the vicinity of Kapilavastu, it is strange that tradition preserved no memory of a single original *stūpa* (tumulus) for Aśoka's benefit. The land of the Śākyas had long since been laid waste, but tradition was able to identify for him the birthplace at Lumbini.

This brief analysis should be sufficient to indicate how unsatisfactory a proceeding it is to produce a plausible biography from these materials by simply accepting the parts which seem humanly possible and rejecting the miraculous elements as obvious accretions. In fact most of the materials which make up the stories, whether miraculous or not, are later accretions, and thus very little indeed can be established with historical certainty. The earliest account was probably very brief, consisting of the verses of lament and already introducing Indra and Brahmā. A factual account of Śākyamuni's passing probably never existed as traditional oral material learned and recited, but verses of lament might well have been intoned, and it would have been around such a kind of ritual core that stories were woven to satisfy later tendentious requirements. They need not be regarded as pure invention, for many of the discourses now appearing in the account of Śākyamuni, such as that about earthquakes or the eight kinds of august assemblies, could well have existed as a kind of floating material. On the other hand Mahākāśyapa's intrusion with his 500 monks was presumably a deliberate fabrication of those who later could not allow that the supposed organizer of the sacred canon, assuming there was such an early canon, was not also present at the funeral ceremony in a primary position of importance.

#### *The cult of the stūpa*

Despite Śākyamuni's supposed instructions that a *stūpa* should be built over his remains at a cross-roads, the canonical accounts insist that his relics were shared at the very start between eight contestants, the Mallas of Kuśinagara, who were under attack by the other seven, the Mallas of Pāpā, the Bulayas of Calakalpa (or Allakappa), the Brahmins of Viṣṇudvīpa

<sup>19</sup> See J. Przyluski, 'Le partage des reliques du Buddha' *Mélanges Chinois et Bouddhiques*, iv, 1935-6, (pub.) 1936, 341-67.

(Vethadīpa), the Krauḍyas (Kolliyas) or Rāmagrāma, the Licchavis of Vaiśālī, and the Śākya of Kapilavastu. Then the Mallas of Kuśinagara gave the vase which had contained the relics to the Dhūmrasagotra Brahman who had divided them, and he took it back to his village named Droṇa and built the ninth *stūpa*. 'Then a Brahman youth from Pippalāyana said to the Mallas of Kuśinagara: "Listen, O noble ones. For a long time the Lord Gautama was beloved and dear to us. He has gained *nirvāṇa* in your village, but we deserve a share in the relics. So give us now the burning ashes as our share, and we will build a *stūpa* for the ashes of the Lord Gautama in Pippalāyana."' He was given the ashes and so a tenth *stūpa* was built.<sup>20</sup>

This is a curious story, and the little-known places included in this list of 10 *stūpa*-sites give it a semblance of veracity, but the most one can safely deduce from it is that in pre-Aśokan times there were in existence 10 special Buddhist tumuli, situated in the area between Rājagṛha and Kapilavastu, where Śākyamuni had lived, taught, and died. Tombs, sometimes in the shape of semi-spherical mounds, may have been common in pre-Buddhist India, as in many other parts of the world at that time, and tombs of the great would have presumably enjoyed a special distinction in the richness of the offerings to the dead that might be periodically placed by them. This may be conjecture, but what is absolutely certain so far as the earliest pre-Aśokan testimony is concerned, is that these early Buddhist tumuli, usually known as *stūpas*, were believed to contain relics of past Buddhas, and especially of the latest Buddha, Śākyamuni. 'Historically' it would seem to be incontrovertible that according to the earliest traceable Buddhist traditions, Śākyamuni's physical remains, through the extraordinary story of the contesting townships, dissolved into a cult of relics enshrined in these special tumuli.

There is no reference in the earliest known traditions to staid philosophically-minded disciples simply honouring the tomb of a revered religious master, who has left the world for ever. There is certainly reference to all the complex last rites as the proper responsibility of the layfolk rather than the monks, but we know from the evidence of inscriptions and scriptures that even in the earliest period the cult of the relic-containing *stūpa* was by no means left to the layfolk, and all the accounts of the extraordinary cult were recorded, recited, and finally written down by monks.<sup>21</sup> There is no over-all account of Śākyamuni's final *nirvāṇa* which is not heavy with mythological significance. Apart from this cult, which identified him effectively as a Buddha, like the Buddhas of former times, Śākyamuni would probably remain quite unknown to us. It was precisely because of the faith that he instilled, that subsequent efforts were made to reconstruct important parts of his life. But these attempts were not made before the actual events were forgotten, or were so interpreted in accordance with mythical beliefs as to submerge almost entirely the historical person.

<sup>20</sup> Waldschmidt, op. cit., 447-51; *Ti. T.*, XLIV, p. 235-5-3 ff.

<sup>21</sup> For elaboration of these points see Louis de La Vallée Poussin, *Nirvāṇa*, Paris, 1925, 7 ff.

It is true that his subsequent followers included a number, certainly a minority, of philosophizing contemplatives, who were suspicious of excessive religious enthusiasm, but it is significant that they have preserved no tradition of a plausible historical figure. Their Buddha remains still the great miracle-working and omniscient sage. They may argue that since he has passed into final *nirvāna*, he can no longer give help to his followers in the realm of *samsāra*, and many of the more rational philosophical sayings that they attribute to him, may well represent a reliable tradition of some of his actual teachings. But of the events of his life they record nothing which does not correspond with the presumably earlier mythological and legendary conceptions.

This may seem to be much ado about very little, but the recognition of the primacy of mythology and legend over factual story-telling in the canonical presentation of Śākyamuni affects radically any history that we may produce of the Buddhist religion. Having produced a kind of Socratic sage by ignoring the earlier mythological elements, and taking carefully from the legendary elements those references that do not offend rational thought, one assumes that one has discovered an historical figure, who was the founder of a small rationally and philosophically minded community, and that this movement represents 'original Buddhism'. One then goes on to assume that this originally pure doctrine was distorted by later mythical and popular beliefs. There were certainly pure philosophical doctrines propounded during the early history of Buddhism, just as there have been ever since, but there is no such thing as pure Buddhism *per se* except perhaps the cult of Śākyamuni as a supramundane being and the cult of the relic *stūpa*. These ideas are not new. They were propounded long ago by Louis de La Vallée Poussin, probably the most keen-sighted of Western scholars of Buddhism. In his *Nirvāna*, Paris, 1925, he writes: 'Il est utile de distinguer dans le Bouddhisme, comme dans d'autres religions, la foi et les systèmes, celle-ci essentielle et stable, ceux-là secondaires et variables. L'indianisme officiel ignore la foi bouddhique au profit d'un des systèmes que la communauté a patronés, et fait sortir le Bouddhisme de ce système' (p. 26).

With direct reference to the main thesis of this article, one might also quote from *The Buddhist religion* of Richard H. Robinson, who died tragically in 1970: 'The quest for the objective Gautama, like that of the historical Jesus, is foredoomed to a measure of failure. We cannot get behind the portrait that the early communities synthesized for their founders; their reports are all we have. But though the Community (*Saṅgha*) created the image of the Buddha, the Buddha created the Community and in so doing impressed upon it his personality. The master exhorted his disciples to imitate him, and they formulated and transmitted an image of him, along with his teachings, as a model for later generations to imitate' (Dickenson, Encino, California, 1970, 13). It is not for us to distort this total image, in order to fit it into an invented historical framework, suitable perhaps to other times and other places, but entirely remote from the religious life of India in the fifth century B.C.