

Passing of the Buddha

Source : Maha-parinibbana Sutta

Version : 2007.09.23

Overview

This is the story of the final days of the Buddha who, like Christ 500 years later, took upon Himself the voluntary self-sacrifice of an agonising death, so that His community might live and in following His Way, enter perpetual life.

Tathagata is the term the Buddha always uses in speaking of Himself. It means, 'Journeyer from/to the Absolute/There'.



Last Meal

Cunda the metalworker said to himself, "The Blessed One has arrived at Pava; He is staying in my Mango Grove." He went to the Blessed One, greeting Him respectfully, and sat down on one side whilst the Blessed One strengthened Him in the Way.

Cunda spoke. "O Lord," he said;- "may the Blessed One and His community accept my invitation to come over for their meal tomorrow."

The Blessed One withheld reply, and was silent. Cunda arose from his seat, taking this for approval; he saluted the Blessed One and made his departure.

By the time night had passed by, he had prepared in his house many choice foods, hard and soft, and finally he announced that it was all ready.

So at forenoon, the Blessed One and His disciples came to Cunda's house. The Blessed One, sitting in the seat prepared for Him, spoke to Cunda directly. "Serve Me with the sukara-maddava; with the rest of the other food, hard and soft, serve the disciples."

After eating His food and giving instruction in the Way, the Blessed One again turned and addressed Cunda.

"Whatever is left of the sukara-maddava I have eaten, bury it in a pit. I see none, in all this world, who could eat such a dish save the Tathagata alone." After this, the Blessed One arose from his seat and He set off.

In a short while, a dire sickness began to descend upon the Blessed One, with sharp and deadly pains; He endured them mindfully, clearly comprehending, remaining calm. He turned to Ananda, saying, "Come, Ananda: let us go now to Kusinara."

Thirst

On the way to Kusinara, the Blessed One went aside from the highway, and stopped at the foot of a tree. He requested if Ananda could fold his upper robe in four, and lay it for Him upon the ground, as His body was exhausted and would go no further.

The Blessed One sat down on the seat prepared, and He requested if Ananda might also bring Him some water, for He was afflicted with an overwhelming thirst.

Ananda was distressed at bringing to the Lord water from the nearby stream, as the wheels of unnumbered carts had recently cut through its shallow waters and churned it into

mud. "The Kakuttha River, Lord, is quite close by," he recommended; "its waters are clear, pleasant and cool. The Blessed One should go over there to quench His thirst and refresh His limbs."

The Blessed One requested again for some water; however, Ananda responded just as before. After continuing to express such a wish, Ananda at length yielded and headed with a bowl toward the stream, which, to his utter amazement, appeared to become clear and settled the closer he drew. He fetched some water back to his Master. "Let the Happy One drink," he said; and the Blessed One took the water.

Radiance

Close by, there chanced to be passing a disciple of Alara Kalama, named Pukkusa, of the Malla clan. He was on his way from Kusinara to Pava, and when he saw the Blessed One sitting at the foot of a tree, he approached Him, and, respectfully greeting Him, sat down by one side.

The Blessed One told him a parable, of a man sitting in a barn, conscious, and awake. Rain swept down in torrents; thunders rolled, and lightning flashed all around, striking down two brothers outside with their four oxen; a great crowd emerged, and thronged all about. Tumultuous roar was all around, and yet the man sheltering within the barn saw and heard nothing.

"Lord," replied Pukkusa, "truly it is marvellous and wonderful, the state of calmness of those who have disentangled themselves from the impermanence of the world. That faith I had until now in Alara, I scatter on the mighty wind, to be carried away as by a flowing stream! How excellent it is, Lord; for what was overturned is set aright again, what was hidden is made clear, after straying afar, the path is revealed, with a lamp lighting the darkness, so that those with eyes may see - just so has the Blessed One set forth the Way in so many ways; in a sure heart, I take my whole refuge in the Blessed One, the Way, and the Community. May the Blessed One accept me as His disciple, taking refuge until the closing of my life."

Pukkusa turned and addressed a certain man. "Friend," he said, "bring at once two sets of golden robes, all burnished and ready to wear." The robes were brought, and Pukkusa offered them to the Blessed One. "May the Blessed One, O Lord, out of compassion, accept this gift from me." The Blessed One accepted one of them, and instructed the other be given to robe Ananda. Pukkusa arose from his seat, and respectfully saluted the Blessed One; keeping his right side toward Him, he journeyed upon his way.

Ananda was struck silent with awe and wonder, for the form of the Blessed One appeared to him transfigured and radiant, and the golden robes faded and dim. "O Lord!" he exclaimed, "how wonderful is the radiance of the Tathagata that I see!"

The Blessed One answered Ananda, and said: "The night the Tathagata becomes fully illumined with limitless Enlightenment, and the night when the Tathagata comes to His final passing from this world, are two opportunities to witness the Tathagata exceedingly clear and radiant. This very night, in the last watch, in the Mallas' Sala Grove, between two sala trees, the flame of the Tathagata will perfect its stillness. Let us now journey to the Kakuttha River."

When the Blessed One and Ananda reached the River, a great Community of disciples were there; He descended into the limpid waters and bathed His weary frame, and drank the pleasant water. Crossing over, with the thronging of followers eagerly attentive to His sacred words, He arose out from the water, and went to the Mango Grove, where He spoke to Cundaka, who folded His upper robe into four and laid it down for His rest. The Blessed One lay down on His right side in the posture of a lion, placing one foot upon the other, and so disposed Himself, mindfully and clearly comprehending, thoughtful for the time of His rising. Cundaka sat down right in front of Him.

Relieving Cunda's Remorse

Then the Blessed One spoke to Ananda, saying: "The remorse of Cunda should be dispelled; tell him that it was a great blessing that the Tathagata took His last meal from him, and so came to attain His goal - that in offering the meal taken by the Tathagata before His passing into the beyond, his deed is of exceptional and immortal worth."

The Blessed One then breathed forth a solemn utterance. "Whoever gives, virtues increase; whoever is self-curbed, no hatred is found; whosoever is skilled in virtue, evil is avoided; rooting out all lust, hate and delusion, Peace is attained."

Last Place of Rest

The Blessed One addressed Ananda. "Come; let us cross to the farther bank of the Hiraññavati; let us go to the Mallas' Sala Grove near Kusinara." There they travelled in the company of a large number of disciples.

"I am weary," said the Blessed One; Ananda prepared for Him a place of rest between the twin sala trees, so that His head faced toward the north, and the Blessed One took His place much as before.

Although it was not the season for flowering, the twin sala trees were in full bloom, with blossoms raining down, and heavenly sounds seemed to be heard in the air.

Seeing Ananda's surprise, the Blessed One said to him, "It is not through miracles and wonders, that the Tathagata is honoured; rather, whenever a disciple or follower lives uprightly, or walks in the Way, through such is the Tathagata respected. Therefore, train yourselves so!"

Lamentation and Understanding

Upavana was standing before the Blessed One, fanning Him. Although he had associated with the Blessed One and served Him for a long time, the Blessed One requested that he move aside, so that He might be seen plainly by all.

"There are beings," remarked the Blessed One, "all around, heavenly and earthly; the earthly-minded, with dishevelled hair and uplifted arms weep, shaking and flinging themselves down; they lament, 'Too soon has the Blessed One come to His ascension! Too soon will the Happy One, the Eye of the World, vanish from sight!' However there are those beings who are freed from passion, mindful and comprehending; they reflect in this way: 'Impermanent are all composed things - how could this be otherwise.' - Such should be your manner!"

Up until now, whenever the disciples would leave their quarters after the rains, they would set forth on a pilgrimage to visit the Tathagata, bringing back the gain and benefit of their visit to everyone they associated with. But with the Blessed One soon to be gone, no longer would this gain and benefit be present.

"There are," observed the Blessed One, "four places a pious person will visit and look upon with feelings of reverence. Where the Tathagata was born, where the Tathagata became fully illumined, where the Tathagata set rolling the unexcelled Wheel of the Way, and where the Tathagata passed away into the state of unexcelled Peace, where all cravings are stilled. These are places that pious people will come to visit and look upon with feelings of reverence."

Turning to His disciples, the Blessed One said, "Whoever should die with his heart established in faith, at the breaking up of the body, after death," He assured, "he will be reborn in a realm of heavenly happiness."

A disciple set before the Lord a question regarding women; the Blessed One turned to him, and observed, "You should establish mindfulness."

Ananda asked, "How should we act, Lord, respecting the body of the Tathagata?" The Blessed One replied, "Do not be hindered by the concerns of honouring the body of the Tathagata. You should strive, and be zealous for your own self; unflinchingly, ardently, and resolutely addressing your improvement. There are many wise nobles, brahmans, and householders who are devoted to the Tathagata, and they will concern themselves with honouring the body of the Tathagata."

Ananda asked, "How, Lord, should they act toward the body?"

The Blessed One replied, "Just after the manner most befitting a Universal King."

Ananda

Ananda went into the shelter, and leaned against the doorpost and wept.

"I am still just a learner," he cried; "so much to strive, for my perfecting. Alas, now my Master, who is so compassionate towards me, is about to pass away!"

The Blessed One, turning to His disciples, said, "Where is Ananda?" They told Him how he was. So the Blessed One requested a certain disciple to beckon Ananda into His presence with the words, "Friend Ananda, the Master calls you." And so Ananda came, bowing down to the Blessed One, and sat just to one side. The Blessed One comforted him. "Do not grieve, Ananda; do not lament. I have taught from the beginning that all you hold most dear and cherish, must change; all that is born, grows and is compounded together into a greater thing, and is then subject to decay and dissolution. For a long time you have served the Tathagata with loving-kindness, in deed, word, and thought, and graciously, pleasantly, with your whole heart and beyond measure. Great good have you gathered, Ananda! Now you must endeavour with energy, and soon you will be free from impurity."

The Blessed One turned to His disciples and said, "The Enlightened Ones of past times also had excellent and devoted attendants, just as I have Ananda. And so too, will

the Blessed Ones of times to come. Capable and judicious is Ananda; he knows the proper way to approach matters. He brings people joy with his ways and discourse, and they are sad by his silence."

Past Glory of Kusinara

Ananda begged the Blessed One, "Let it not be, Lord, that the Blessed One should pass away in this mean place, an uncivilized township in the midst of the jungle, a mere outpost of a province. There are great cities where the Blessed One may have his final passing, where dwell nobles and householders devoted to the Tathagata: they will properly honour His remains."

The Blessed One responded. "Say not, that this is a mean place; for indeed in long times past, it saw a king of outstanding righteousness, whose realm was established in security, extending far and wide, and resounding with great sounds."

Lamentation of the Mallas

"Proclaim to the Mallas: they are all invited to approach, for today in the last watch of the night, the Tathagata will ascend. They will be remorseful later if they feel that present within their township they failed to see Him at the end!"

Taking bowl and robe, Ananda arose and set out with a companion for Kusinara.

The Mallas were gathered together in council for public business, and Ananda approached with the news. They and their families became deeply grieved in their hearts; some wept and flung themselves upon the ground in despair. Afflicted with grief, they journeyed to the Sala Grove, the recreation park of the Mallas.

Ananda brought them through by clan and by family in the first watch of the night, presenting them before the Blessed One, and they offered their homage at His feet.

The Last Convert

At that time dwelling in Kusinara, there was a wandering ascetic named Subhadda. He had heard how in the third watch of the night, the ascension of Gotama would take place. In His heart there lingered doubts, and he came to the Blessed One trusting that by learning the Way, his doubts would be resolved.

As he entered the Sala Grove and drew near to Ananda, he explained his wish to enter the Blessed presence. Ananda turned him away, saying, "Do not trouble the Tathagata at this late time; the Blessed One is weak." Three times his request was declined.

The Blessed One summoned Ananda, saying to him, "Do not refuse Subhadda, call him into the presence of the Tathagata. Whatever he will ask Me, he will ask for the sake of understanding, not as an offence. The answer I shall give him, he will readily perceive." Ananda returned to Subhadda and informed that the Blessed One gave him leave to come.

As the wanderer approached the Blessed One, he saluted Him kindly with pleasant greetings, and seating himself at one side, addressed the Blessed One, saying: "There are, Venerable Gotama, ascetics and brahmans who are heads of great companies, leaders of schools, with large retinues of disciples, well known among the people. Have all of

these attained realization, as each of them would have it believed, or has none of them, or is it that some have whilst others have not?"

"Enough, Subhadda!" the Blessed One replied; "Let it be as it may, whether all of them have attained realization, as they would like it supposed, or whether none or only some. I will show you the Way, Subhadda - so listen, and heed well."

The Lion's Roar

"Wherever the Noble Path is not seen, you will find not even one who is truly detached and saintly. The systems devised by these teachers are devoid of true sacrifice. A disciple must live righteously, that the world should never be destitute of those who are alive. For fifty years I have been a wanderer in the kingdom of virtue and truth, outside of which there can be no holy person."

After hearing these stirring words, Subhadda declared his yearning to take refuge in the Blessed One, the Way, and the Community, and he was accepted by the Blessed One. This was the last disciple from the call of the Blessed One Himself.

Last Words

The Blessed One spoke again. "Some among you will feel you are without your Master, and His word is ended; yet it should not be considered so. I have proclaimed and made known the Way, and you shall find in it a Master after I have journeyed on. The Community may change lesser practices as it finds suitable. After I am gone, the undisciplined Channa should not be associated with, neither encouraged nor warned.

In whatsoever you are unsure regarding the Buddha, the Way, or the Community, ask now. Do not be given later to remorse with the thought that the Master was with you face to face, yet you failed to ask Him; so question Me now."

The disciples were still. A second and a third time the Blessed One requested this, and each time they were silent. "It may be out of respect you do not ask; so let friend communicate it to friend." Yet still there was not a sound.

The Blessed One declared: "Behold, now, I exhort you: all composite things are subject to extinction. Strive, with earnestness!" This was the last word of the Lord.

Ascension

As the Blessed One passed away, there came a tremendous earthquake, dreadful and astounding, and thunders were heard rolling across the heavens.

There was terror and fear, and some disciples, swept away by their passions, lifted up their arms and wept, flinging themselves to the ground lamenting. Others more mindfully understood the impermanence of the nature of this world.

Ananda conveyed the Blessed One's passing to the Buddha's cousin, Anuruddha.

"No, friend Ananda," Anuruddha replied, "the Blessed One has not passed away. He has journeyed through the infinite worlds of change and impermanence to the state of Serenity."

Anuruddha addressed the disciples, saying, "Enough, friends! Do not grieve, do not lament! For has not the Blessed One declared that all that is dear and beloved, is subject to change and separation?"

Anuruddha and Ananda spent the rest of the night talking of the Way. After deciding about the matter, Ananda journeyed to Kusinara before noon and announced to the Mallas as they were gathered in the council hall, "The Blessed One has passed away. Do now as seems fitting to you."

Homage to the Remains

The Mallas organised their men, gathering perfumes, flowers, musicians and clothing, and went to the Sala Grove, and approached the body of the Blessed One. They erected canopies and pavilions, and spent the day showing respect, honour, and veneration to the body. After this had continued for an extended period, they carried the remains northward to the northern part of the town; and then passing through the northern gate, they entered the town centre, and continued east through the eastern gate, carrying it to the cetiya of the Mallas, Makuta-bandhana.

They swathed His earthly form in new linen and wool, and placing the body in an iron vessel, attempted to cremate the body of the Blessed One, but at first they were unable to light the pyre.

At that time the Maha Kassapa was journeying from Pava to Kusinara together with a large company of five hundred brethren. Along the way, he went aside from the highway and sat down at the foot of a tree. As he was sitting there, a certain Ajivaka came by, on his way to Pava, bringing with him a mandarava flower from Kusinara. When Maha Kassapa saw the Ajivaka approaching from a distance and drawing close by, he enquired of him, "Do you know, friend, anything of our Master?"

"Yes, friend, I know," he said. "It is now seven days since the ascetic Gotama passed away. From there I have brought this mandarava flower." Upon hearing his story, some of the brethren began to be overtaken by sorrow and lamented.

A certain Subhadda, having joined in his old age, was also seated in this assembly. He greatly disturbed his colleagues, saying, "Do not grieve! now we are rid of Him, we shall be able to do and ignore anything we like!"

Maha Kassapa approached the pyre of the Blessed One. Arranging his upper robe on one shoulder, he clasped and raised his hands in salutation, and walked three times around the pyre, and keeping his right side towards the body, he paid homage at the feet of the Blessed One, as did also the five hundred disciples.

After this, the pyre was set aflame, until nothing remained, and the rain fell and extinguished the fire.

The Mallas of Kusinara laid the relics of the Blessed One inside their council hall, and surrounded them with a lattice-work of spears and an encircling fence of bows; for seven days they paid homage to the sacred remains.

Partition of the Relics

Although Ananda had advised a sacred memorial be raised at a crossroads, the king and various other notable people each pressed their claim for a portion of the relics of the All-Seeing One, either because He was from their clan, or their caste, or had passed away from the world in their town. Others responded with forbearance, fearing strife and bloodshed would arise over the custody of His remains. In the end, His remains were divided among the eight claimants, who raised stupas in various places over their portions and devised festivals around them. A ninth arrived with a late claim, and to them they gave the ashes, and the urn made a tenth.

So it came about that there were eight stupas for the relics, a ninth for the urn, and a tenth for the ashes.

Buddhism

The Way of the Buddha began to spread and His Community to flourish, receiving especial public support several centuries later from the great king Asoka, from which Buddhism began to spread far afield.

Some Figures Mentioned

Siddhārtha Gautama - the Buddha, "Shakyamuni", born in Nepal and raised a Prince though he gave up that material position and followed His spiritual purpose (approx 563 BC - 483 BC (or 490/80-410/00 BC))

Ananda - First cousin of the Buddha by their fathers, known as the Guardian of the Dharma for his retentive memory.

Anuruddha - Cousin of the Buddha.

Maha Kassapa - One of the Buddha's most revered early disciples, who convened and directed the first council.

Info

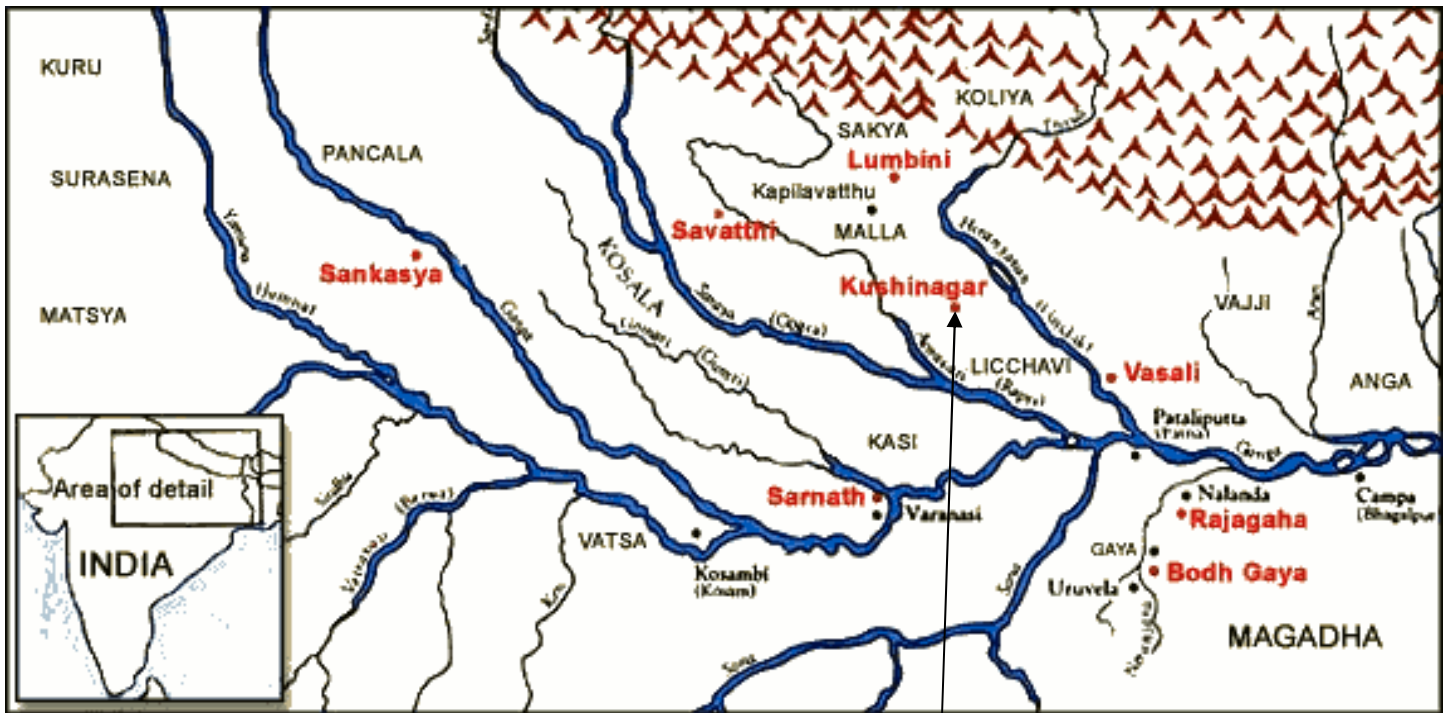
Author : David Merrick, Edinburgh

All comments appreciated : davidmerrick a@paintdrawer.co.uk

This Version : 2009-05-07 23:21

Latest Version : <http://www.paintdrawer.co.uk/david/folders/Spirituality/001=Buddhism/Passing%20of%20the%20Buddha.pdf>

See Also : [Sources](#) • [Other Stories](#)



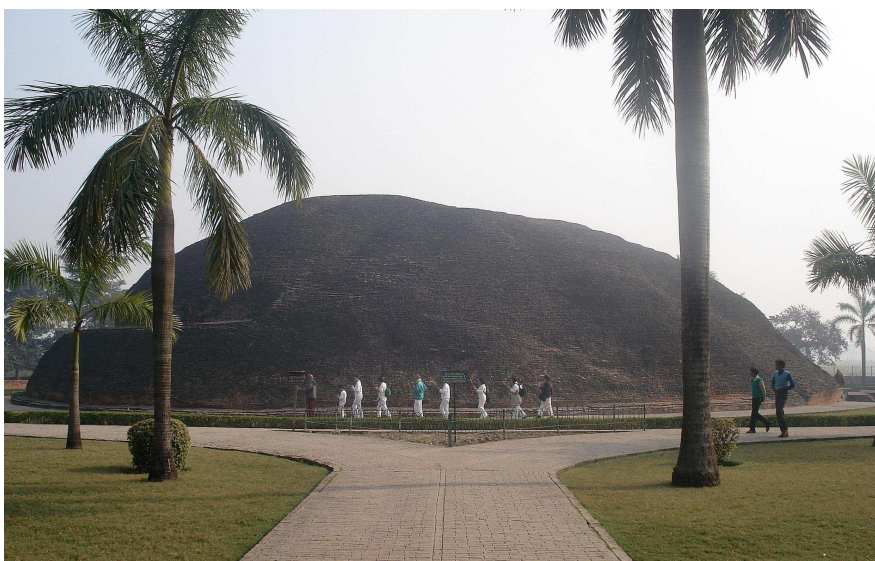
Kushingar



Mathakuar Shrine
Place held to be where the Buddha Ascended



Nirvana Stupa and the Mahaparinirvana Temple
Alternative places for the Buddha's cremation



Ramabhar stupa - Place held to be where the Buddha was cremated