

leading to the cessation of suffering is to be cultivated: monks, from this basic mental realization, according to doctrines that were not handed down from previous teachers, there were produced in me knowledge, insight, understanding, enlightenment, intelligence, and wisdom; illumination became manifest.

"This Noble Truth of suffering has come to be known thoroughly.... This origination of suffering has been given up.... This Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering has been realized.... This Noble Truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering has been actualized: monks, from this basic mental realization, according to doctrines that were not handed down from previous teachers, there were produced in me knowledge, insight, understanding, enlightenment, intelligence, and wisdom; illumination became manifest.

"And monks, as long as I did not perceive, with right wisdom, these Four Noble Truths as they are, thrice-turned and in their twelve aspects, I could not claim to have fully attained unsurpassed complete enlightenment, nor would there be produced knowledge in me, nor would I have realized certain emancipation of the mind. But since, monks, I did perceive, with right wisdom, these Four Noble Truths as they are, thrice-turned and in their twelve aspects, I know I have fully attained unsurpassed complete enlightenment. Knowledge was produced in me, and I did realize certain emancipation of the mind, liberation through wisdom."

Thus the Buddha spoke while he was residing in Benares, at the Deer Park in Rājavadana. And hearing this explanation, the Venerable Ājñāta Kaundinya's understanding was awakened, and he attained the perfectly pure, pristine, unstained Dharma-eye into the nature of things....

Source: Translated from *Mahāvastu*, ed. Emile Sénart (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1897), 3:330-34.⁸

1.7 THE "DEATH" AND PARINIRVĀNA OF THE BUDDHA

Ājñāta Kaundinya and his companions, as we have seen, became the first Buddhist monks and formed the initial core of what was to become the Buddhist monastic community. Soon, however, other disciples were attracted to the Buddha and his Teaching, and the new religion grew steadily (see 2.1).

The Buddha is said to have spent forty-five years wandering through northern India, preaching his Dharma, making converts, and firmly establishing his community. But like all compounded things, he too was subject to impermanence, and according to the legend, at age eighty, his "final extinction" (parinirvāna) took place in the small town of Kuśinagara, between two śāla trees. To this day, all over the world, this event marks the beginning (year 0) of the Buddhist calendar.

The parinirvāna can also be called the "death" of the Buddha, with the understanding that, by it, the Buddha is thought to have put an end to the process of death and rebirth, the cycle of suffering. So, although the Buddha is no longer "alive" after his parinirvāna, neither is he "dead" in the usual sense of the term, because he is not subsequently "reborn" anywhere, in any realm. The question of where the Buddha is, or whether he is at all, "in" or "after" his parinirvāna, is one of those inquiries that the Buddha himself, during his lifetime, is said to have labeled as "not conducive to edification," so I shall not even address it here.

It is more interesting, perhaps, to look at the stories of the various events leading up to and immediately following the Buddha's parinirvāna. Quite early on, legends arose, such as the following Sanskrit *Sūtra of the Great Extinction*, recounting not only the Buddha's final words of advice to his followers but also the preparation of his body for cremation and the disposal of his relics thereafter.

Arrival at Kuśinagara

Then the Blessed One, traveling through the land of the Mallas, went to Kuśinagara, where he dwelt in the grove of the twin śāla trees, in the territory of the Mallas. There, the time of his parinirvāna being near, he said to the Venerable Ānanda: "Ānanda, set the Tathāgata's couch out between the two śāla trees, with its head pointing north; for today, in the middle watch of the night, the Tathāgata will attain parinirvāna, the element of complete extinction."

The Venerable Ānanda did so; then, standing to one side, he announced: "Lord, the Tathāgata's couch has been set out in between the two śāla trees, with its head pointing north." And the Blessed One approached the couch and lay down on his right side, one foot on top of the other, . . . attentive, aware, his mind bent on the thought of nirvāna.

Then Ānanda, standing in back of the Blessed One, leaned against the couch, and wept: "Too soon," he exclaimed, "too soon the Blessed One, the Well-Gone-One, will attain parinirvāna! Too soon the Eye of the World will be put out! In the past, monks from various regions used to come from all over to see and to venerate the Blessed One, and the Blessed One would preach the Dharma to them. . . . But from now on, those who used to come to listen to the Buddha will have heard that he has attained parinirvāna, and they will no longer make the journey. Thus the great rejoicing in the Dharma will cease. . . ."

But the Blessed One said to the Venerable Ānanda: "Do not grieve, Ānanda, do not be depressed! You have served me well, with body, speech, and mind, in ways that were loving, unparalleled, immeasurable, helpful, and pleasing. All the completely enlightened Buddhas of the past also had attendants who served them, just as you have served me. So do not grieve, Ānanda, do not be depressed! For how could it be that something born, living, fashioned, karmically constituted, . . . dependently arisen, should not be subject to decay, to change, decline, destruction, . . . and dissolution?" [. . .]

⁸ Alternative English translation, J. J. Jones, *The Mahāvastu* (London: Luzac, 1956).

Now at that time, the Venerable Upamāna was standing in front of the Blessed One, fanning him. And the Blessed One said to him: "Monk! Don't stand in front of me!"

And the Venerable Ānanda said: "I have served the Blessed One for over twenty years, but I have never heard him use such harsh language as he just did with the Venerable Upamāna. What is the reason for this?"

And the Blessed One explained: "Right now, myriads of deities are looking down from the sky and, upset, they are grumbling: 'The appearance of fully enlightened Buddhas in the world is as rare an event as the blossoming of the udumbara tree, and today this Buddha is going to enter parinirvāna in the middle watch of the night, but this prominent monk is standing in front of him, so that we have to try to look around him. Because of him, we are unable to see the Blessed One, or to approach and pay homage to him.' That is why I asked the Venerable Upamāna to move...."

Then the Venerable Ānanda said to the Blessed One: "Lord, how should we pay homage to the Blessed One's body after his parinirvāna?"

"Ānanda, do not worry yourself about the homage to the body of the Buddha; the faithful Brahmanical householders will take care of that."

"But how, Lord, are they to take care of it?"

"Ānanda, they should do what they they would do for the funeral of a cakravartin king."

"And how, Lord, is it with cakravartin kings?"

"The body of a cakravartin king is wrapped in new cotton cloth and cotton wool, five hundred layers of each, and once so wrapped, it is placed in an iron coffin filled with oil, which is then covered with another iron coffin. A funeral pyre of fragrant wood is piled up, set afire, and later extinguished with cow's milk. Then the bones are placed in a golden urn, which is carried on a golden palanquin to a great crossroads, where a stūpa is built, on which umbrellas, flags, and banners are set up.... and to which homage and worship are paid with offerings of perfumes, garlands, flowers, incense, and music." [...]

Last Words of the Buddha

Then the Blessed One said: "It may be that after I am gone some of you monks will think: 'Our Master has attained parinirvāna; we are now without a teacher, without hope of salvation!' You should not see things in that way. The prātimokṣa list of precepts [see 2.3.1] to be recited every fortnight, which I taught you, will henceforth be your Master and your salvation. The saṅgha may, in due time, abolish certain minor and secondary rules of conduct if it so wishes.... for that will lead to your dwelling in harmony."

"And, monks, henceforth, a more recently ordained monk should not address a senior monk by calling him by his personal name or his clan name, but he should call him 'Reverend Sir' or 'Venerable One.' And a senior monk should be kind to a junior monk and help him pay attention to his bowl, his robe, the carrying sling for his bowl, his drinking vessel,

his belt, his subject of study, his topic of inquiry, his explanations, and his practice of yoga....

"Furthermore, monks, there are four places on earth that laymen and laywomen endowed with faith should recall all their lives. Which four? The places where, [as pilgrims], they will say: 'Here the Blessed One was born; here, he attained unsurpassed complete enlightenment; here he set in motion, three times and in twelve ways, the Wheel of the Dharma; and here he attained the state of complete nirvāna.' Going to these places, after my death, they should circumambulate the shrines there and pay homage to them.... All those who do so, with minds filled with faith for me, will, at the time of their death, be reborn in heaven...."

Then the Blessed One said to the monks: "Monks, do not hesitate to ask me, if you have any doubts or uncertainties about the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Saṅgha or about suffering—its origination, its cessation, or the path to its cessation—and I will elucidate these points for you. It may be that you are feeling: 'Why should we trouble the Master with our questions now?' Do not think that, but make your doubts known, as one monk to another, one friend to another, and I will clarify them."

And [when no monks had any questions], the Venerable Ānanda said....: "Not a single monk in this assembly has any doubt, any uncertainty as to the points raised earlier! This has been done by the Tathāgata for the sake of those people who will follow hereafter."

Then the Blessed One took off his outer robe and said: "Monks, gaze now upon the body of the Tathāgata! Examine the body of the Tathāgata! For the sight of a completely enlightened Buddha is as rare an event as the blossoming of the udumbara tree. And, monks, do not break into lamentations after I am gone, for all karmically constituted things are subject to passing away." Those were the last words of the Buddha. [...]

The Distribution of the Relics

[There follows an account of the preparation of the body of the Buddha in the manner described above and of its cremation, an event that is delayed by seven days until the arrival of the Buddha's disciple Mahākāśyapa. After the cremation fire is extinguished, the Mallas of Kuśināgarī then gather up the remains of the Buddha's body (bones and ashes) with the intention of building a stūpa over them. But shortly thereafter, representatives of seven other cities and kingdoms (Pāṇā, Calakalpā, Viṣṇudvīpa, Rāmāgrāma, Vaiśālī, Kapilavastu, and Magadha) arrive and lay claim to the Buddha's remains as well. But the Mallas are not willing to give up their claim to the relics, and soon matters come to a head: armed parties gather, ready to fight in what the tradition came to know as the "war over the relics." At the last moment, however, bloodshed is avoided by the intervention of the brahmin Droṇa, known in this version of the story as the brahmin Dhūmasagotra].

Now the brahmin Dhūmasagotra knew that the various parties arranged in battle formation would quickly come to kill one another, so... he approached the Mallas of Kuśināgarī and said: "May the honorable Mallas of Kuśināgarī here assembled listen to me! For many years, the

Blessed One, peaceful and not given to passion, celebrated tolerance and preached forbearance. Now, departing from his peacefulness, from his passionlessness, from his advocacy of patience, you are ready to kill one another on account of his bodily relics! I propose to divide right away the relics of the Blessed Gautama into eight shares, [so that each of the contending parties may get a portion].... To this the Mallas of Kuśinagarī agreed.

Then the brahmin Dhūmasagotra went and [similarly announced his intention to the seven other parties involved. And when they too had all agreed to his plan], he divided the relics of the Blessed One into eight shares.

He gave the first share to the Mallas of Kuśinagarī, who erected a stūpa in Kuśinagarī, surmounted it with umbrellas, flags, and banners, instituted a festival in its honor, and paid homage to it, worshipping and venerating it with perfumes, garlands, flowers, incense, and music.

The second share he gave to the Mallas of Pāpā, and they likewise erected a stūpa for the bodily relics of the Blessed One, in Pāpā, and similarly paid homage to it.

The third share he gave to the Bulakas of Calakalpā, who likewise erected a stūpa, and similarly paid homage.

The fourth share he gave to the Kraudyas of Rāmāgrāma....

The fifth share he gave to the brahmins of Viśnudevīpa....

The sixth share he gave to the Licchavis of Vaiśālī....

The seventh share he gave to the Śākya of Kapilavastu....

And the eighth share he gave to Varsākāra, the prime minister of Magadha, whose king, Ajāśatru, son of Vaidehi, erected a stūpa for the bodily relics of the Blessed One, surmounted it with umbrellas, flags, and banners, instituted a festival in its honor, and paid homage to it, worshipping and venerating it with perfumes, garlands, flowers, incense, and music.

And the urn in which the bones of the Buddha had first been placed was given to the brahmin Dhūmasagotra, and he built a stūpa over the urn in his hometown of Dronagrāma and paid homage to it in the same manner.

Then, a young man named Pippalāvāna, who was sitting in the assembly, said to the Mallas of Kuśinagarī: "May the honorable Mallas of Kuśinagarī here assembled listen to me! For many years, the Blessed One was dear to my people. Now he has attained parinirvāna in your village. We deserve a share of his bodily relics, but since those relics have been divided, give us the ashes of his cremation fire, and we will erect a stūpa over them in Pippalavati, and pay homage to it. The Mallas of Kuśinagarī then gave the youth Pippalāvāna the ash-relics...."

Thus, at that time, there were eight stupas for the bodily relics of the Blessed One, one for the urn, and one for the ashes of his cremation fire.

Source: Translated from *Das Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, ed. Ernst Waldschmidt, Abhandlungen der deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, Philologisch-historische Klasse, 1949-50, (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1950-51), pp. 292-300, 356-60, 386-94, 442-50.

1.8 A STORY OF A BUDDHA IMAGE

The legend of the Buddha does not end with his death. As we have just seen, relics and the stūpas enshrining them were a means of remembering the Buddha after his parinirvāṇa, but they were not the only ones. As centers of Buddhist pilgrimage developed and Buddhist devotional art flourished, devotees found additional ways of recalling the presence of the Blessed One. At first, in art, he and the places where he had been were represented by symbols such as footsteps, thrones, trees, wheels of the Dharma, and the like, but eventually, after a number of centuries, anthropomorphic images and statues of him came to the fore.

Scholars have much debated the issue of when (probably around the first century C.E.), where (probably in northwestern India), and by whom the first images of the Buddha were made, but Buddhist legends did not hesitate to assert that depictions of him had already been fashioned during his lifetime. Thus the famous sandalwood image of King Udrāyana is said to have been carved by artists so that people could venerate it while the Buddha himself was absent in one of the heavens, preaching the Dharma to his mother, and the assembled deities. Such an image was clearly seen as a substitute for the Buddha in his absence and was itself thought to be "alive" in a variety of ways. Stories are told of its standing up, preaching the Dharma, making converts, and so on.

In the following tale, the image featured is not a statue but a painted tracing of the shadow of the Buddha projected on a screen. It was sent as a gift by the Buddha's contemporary, King Bimbisāra, to King Udrāyana, the ruler of the distant land of Roruka. The image itself does not become animate, but it is effective nonetheless: along with the verses of Dharma inscribed next to it on the canvas, it serves to convert Udrāyana to Buddhism and lead him to enlightenment.

[Although they have never met, Bimbisāra, king of Magadha, and Udrāyana, king of Roruka, have been writing letters and sending presents to each other. In time, their exchange of gifts has taken on the features of a potlatch: the generous gift of the one is met by an even more lavish return gift from the other. Matters come to a head when Udrāyana sends Bimbisāra a marvelous and utterly priceless gem-strudded suit of armor.]

"What," wondered Bimbisāra, "am I to send as a return gift?"

Then the brahmin Varsākāra, the prime minister of Magadha, said: "Your Majesty, in your kingdom as well there is a Gem whose value transcends the Triple World, namely, the Tathāgata, the completely enlightened one! Why don't you have a picture of the Buddha painted on a piece of cloth and send it as a return gift?"

With this in mind, King Bimbisāra approached the Blessed One, prostrated himself at his feet, sat down to one side, and said: "Revered Sir, in the city of Roruka there dwells a king named Udrāyana, a friend, although I have never met him. He sent me a jeweled coat of mail endowed