

Sutta Stories - The Buddha's Last Year

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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This morning will be another day of storytelling from the discourses of the Buddha. This time, the story will be constructed out of the evidence, the pieces that exist. The people who composed the earliest discourses of the Buddha did not seem particularly interested in history or biography. They did not create much of a biography of the Buddha. But snippets of stories do exist. With them, we can connect the dots and understand more of the Buddha's life and times.

I will piece this story together from the early discourses and the commentaries, which came later. The commentaries tried to provide a bigger context for some of the stories. Today's discussion is inspired partly by

the work of Stephen Batchelor, who has pieced together some of the evidence.

This story concerns the end of the Buddha's life – the times and context of his last year. Much of the society around him, and the people he was close to, were dying. War was happening. Kings were being usurped. The Buddha's closest senior disciples were dying. Throughout it all, the Buddha was calm. He died very peacefully under some trees. The contrast between society falling apart around him and his peacefulness is quite strong. Maybe the contrast is relevant for all human times. Every generation seems to think that the world is falling apart around them.

This story begins in the last year of the Buddha's life when he was about 80 years old. I think the text relates that a king comes to the Buddha and says, "Both of us are 80 years old." The Buddha was living in his home country, Sākiya, in the foothills of the Himalayas, in what is now Nepal. He was on retreat or living there quietly in his old age.

A king, Pasenadi, lived in a nearby kingdom. He was the same age as the Buddha. Early in the Buddha's teaching career, they struck up a friendship. They saw each other periodically for over 40 years. Pasenadi was also a student of the Buddha and very devoted to him.

King Pasenadi, in his old age, wanted to visit the Buddha for maybe one last time. He went with a trusted minister. They rode close to where the Buddha was in the forest. The king dismounted his horse or elephant. He said to his minister: “I am going to see the Buddha alone. Here, hold these things.” He handed the minister his sword, maybe his crown or turban, and other insignia that represented his authority as king.

The minister was a bit perturbed and suspicious. He thought: “What is going on here? Is there some secret plan that the king does not want me to hear about?”

The king went into the forest and saw the Buddha. He gave almost a eulogy for the Buddha. Perhaps, the king thought this was the last time he would see him. He gave high praise to the Buddha. That is the end of the story – the sutta ends right there.

We have another discourse, usually called “The Last Days of the Buddha’s Life.” It is the story of the Buddha’s passing away. This discourse provides more of a chronology that takes place over many months. It begins with the Buddha almost as far away as he can be from his home in northern India. I am not sure how far away he was, maybe 300 miles.

Here was the Buddha, an 80-year-old man. He had been in his home country, and then later over the next

year – we do not know exactly when – he was far south, 300 miles away. He could be near the Bay of Bengal, near what was called Pātaliputra. How did he get there? Why did he go there?

The discourse (“The Last Days”) almost begins with a story of the Buddha now walking back home. He went far south, about 300 miles, only to seemingly turn around and go back to his home country. Why did he make such a quick trip?

One idea, according to the commentaries, is that the minister, who held King Pasenadi’s insignia, resented the king. He abandoned the king in the forest, leaving him with a horse and one attendant. The minister returned to the capital and handed the symbols of power to the king’s son, who thereby usurped the throne.

King Pasenadi came out of the forest with only his horse. He went to visit another king – his son-in-law and nephew – at the place where the Buddha ended up. The kings had been at war with each other for 40 years, but they had made peace and had become relatives. King Pasenadi had supposedly nowhere else to go, so he went to see his relative, the other king.

King Pasenadi was old when he made the long trip. He was not in good shape. Some of the texts say that he

was fat and a bit lazy – but he made the trip. He got to the capital where his relative, King Ajātasattu, reigned. (Ajātasattu was the son who had killed his father in the story I told earlier in the week.) Pasenadi arrived at night, and the city gates were closed, so he slept in a home or hall outside the city. He died later that night.

Piecing the evidence together, it seems that the Buddha knew that his friend, King Pasenadi, had been usurped and headed south. So the Buddha followed, maybe to offer support for the king or to intervene. But when the Buddha arrived at the capital, his friend had already died. With not much reason to stay, the Buddha started marching home.

Before the Buddha left, King Ajātasattu sent his minister to talk to the Buddha. The minister said: “We are thinking about attacking the neighboring country.” The neighboring country was between King Ajātasattu’s country and the Buddha’s home country. The Buddha had often visited there. It was a republic and not run by a king.

The minister said, “Do you have any advice for us? What do you think of us conquering the neighboring country?” The Buddha gave some advice. I will not tell you what he said because of the time. The Buddha prevented the war, then and there. But in advising why he should not attack, the Buddha unintentionally gave a

clue for how King Ajātasattu could attack the neighboring country – which he successfully did three years later.

The Buddha left the minister and started heading north to his home country. He was about to cross a river when he saw another minister of King Ajātasattu. The minister was beginning to lay down the ramparts for a great new fort, so preparations for war were going on.

The Buddha began walking north. He described himself as an old man. I want to read you the description the Buddha gave of himself:

I am now old, worn out, venerable. One who has traversed life's path. I have reached the term of life, which is 80. Just as an old cart is made to go by being held together by straps, so the Tathāgata's body is kept going by being strapped up. It is only when I meditate deeply that this body, my body, knows comfort, is at ease.

Here is the Buddha, 80 years old, being held together by straps. In other words, his body is falling apart. He is in pain. In the ancient world, there was no pain medication. Only in meditation is he free of pain. This old man is walking in pain.

His close friend, King Pasenadi, had recently been usurped and had died. Another king, Ajātasattu, was

about to conquer a country that had embraced the Buddha. The Buddha had spent a lot of time there.

During the Buddha's long walk back north to his home country, he learned that his two closest disciples had died. One of them had been killed by bandits.

The Buddha kept walking. At some point, he got dysentery. He was quite sick and in a lot of pain. He revived and continued heading home. At some point, the Buddha realized he was going to die and not reach home. He found two magnificent trees and lied down underneath them. He lied there – never to get up again – and taught his disciples for the last time.

The Buddha carefully asked them, “Do you have any other questions for me before I die?” No one asked anything. The Buddha said his last words:

All things are impermanent. Everything is impermanent. Practice diligently. Carry on diligently. Ongoingly, carry on.

Then the Buddha dies. He dies by going into deep meditation states – as deep as is possible through meditation. He begins coming out. In the fourth *jhāna*, which is one of the most sublime places to be – maybe the ideal place in which to die – the Buddha's life passes away.

This image of the Buddha: peacefully dying, at peace with himself, surrounded by his disciples, giving his last teachings. In deep meditation states, he peacefully goes on one last journey. In those states, his life passes away. Spiritually, in his inner life, the Buddha is deeply at peace, in a peaceful setting under trees in the woods.

But all around the Buddha, kings are being usurped; war is about to happen; people are dying. The Buddha is old, sick, and in pain, walking through India. He is trying to get back to his home country, and he does not reach home. The juxtaposition of a world out of kilter and the Buddha at peace. This is the end of the Buddha's life.

What do we think about this? How do we relate this to our own life? Perhaps, what the Buddha said as his last words can apply to us as well:

All things are impermanent. Practice diligently.

Thank you.