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8. THE BUDDHA' S LAST SUPPER

Dr Taltaje Vasanthakumara



The sun shines by day. The moon in the night. The warrior shines with weapons. A brahmana by meditation shines. But all day and night the Buddha shines in glory.

Dhammapada 5.387

Even when he went with his begging bowl, as was the Buddhist monks' way, the Buddha shone.

At the age of 29 years, Siddhartha the prince left behind his wife, his son, his possessions and luxuries to become a monk. At 35, he attained *Bodhi*, his enlightenment. Thereafter, in a life that was spent propagating the Dhamma, the Buddhist tenets, for the next 45 years, the Buddha's mornings began the same way. He would meditate for a while after awakening and go for *Chankramana* - Pali for what would translate into a morning walk - and then set out with his begging bowl along with the other *bhikkus* or monks, his disciples. They would collect food from different *Upasakas*, householders who followed his eight-fold path. Stale food wouldn't do, it had to have been cooked that day, fresh. That apart, there were neither any restrictions, nor any choice that the monks had in the kind of

food they would be served. Meat was allowed, it was just that the monks wouldn't kill the animals themselves.

When the begging bowl was sufficiently full, the Buddha and his disciples would seek a secluded spot, perhaps a mango grove, and have their one meal allowed for the day. Around noon, it would make a 'brunch'.

The Buddha's food habits, his daily routine and what was in perhaps among the last of his suppers were duly recorded in the *Nidaana* literature, part of the *Vinaya Pitaka* collection of writings. His last supper is the subject of much debate among Buddhist scholars.

The enlightened one that he was, the Buddha foresaw his death about the time he turned 80. Starting his last journey from Rajagaha, the capital of the ancient kingdom of mighty Magadha, he passed through Nalanda, Pataligama, Vessali and reached Paava, a town extensively populated by the Malla community.

There was much fanfare, the Buddha was here. The *Upasakas* there prepared to receive him.

Amongst the townspeople, Chunda, a blacksmith prepared a delicacy, something rare for the Buddha. He cooked the *Sookaramaddava*, meat of a pig. The *Nidaana* literature notes the exact recipe to be used to make this dish; the meat cannot be of a pig that is too old, or too young, it has to be just so. Noticing something amiss, yet not wanting to offend a devout follower, the Buddha instructed Chunda to serve the dish only to him and not to his disciples. He said that the rest of the meat should be buried and that Chunda cook something else for the rest of the monks. Days after the meal, the Buddha fell severely ill, poisoned by the meat perhaps, scholars speculate.

The Buddha bore the discomfort of food poisoning calmly. Weakening every passing day, he walked to Kusinara, his final resting place. Along the way, resting under a tree, he asked Ananda, his closest disciple, to bring him some water. It took Ananda some time, what with five hundred carts having crossed the stream and

made the water muddy. Under that tree, the Buddha pronounced that at the third watch of the night, he would breathe his last, in the Saala grove of the Mallas, between twin saala trees.

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It was then time. The Mallas
had paid their last respects,

his disciples stood aside. The
Tathagata addressed Ananda and

said, "Whatever
doctrine and
discipline has
been taught and
promulgated by me,
Ananda, they will
be your teacher
when I am gone."
Furthermore,
addressing his
disciples, the
Buddha said,

*"Behold, O
disciples, I
exhort you.
Subject to change
are all component
things. Strive on
with diligence."*

With these
last words, the
Buddha attained
Mahaparinibbana
on the *Vaishakha*
Shukla-poornima
day, corresponding
with the full moon
day of the month
of May, in 543 BC.

Time and again,
the politicization
of what the Buddha
ate in his last
meal is raked
up in certain



circles. One of the national poet of India, M Govinda Pai, adds a footnote to his poem *Vaishakhi*, that the Pali word *sookara* can also be translated as mushroom. Some scholars perceive this as a clear Brahminisation of Buddhism, a religion which does not propagate any dietary restrictions. Except during the *Vassa vaasa*, the monsoon months when the *bhikkus* cooked their own meals in the *sangharamas* where they lived, the monks ate what they were offered. There is near consensus among scholars that it was, after all, a pork dish that led to the Buddha's last illness. He is believed to have taken on the burden of the ill-cooked meat upon himself to spare the rest of the monks.

That was, his final act of sacrifice.

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NOTES:

* Preachings of the Buddha are collected by his followers under three baskets or Pitakas, called Vinaya pitaka, Suttas pitaka and Abhidamma pitaka. While the second and third record the philosophical teachings and tenets of the Buddha, the first consist of writings on the cultural, food and other daily life aspects of those who followed the teachings of the Buddha. Assemblies of his disciples took place at various places through the ages. His teachings were repeated at these assemblies, codified and written down in the Tripitakas. All these are written in Pali, a language whose literature precedes that of Sanskrit.

* The Buddha's Mahaparinirvana, or Mahaparinibbana in Pali, took place on a full moon night in the Vesak month. He took birth and attained enlightenment on a full moon night in the Vesak month as well. Hence Buddhists observe the Vaishaka Poornima festival to commemorate all three occasions.

* Nirvana or Nibbana in Pali is a state of mind and body that is beyond the perception of the five senses and leads to spiritual deliverance. In several religions, nirvana is the ultimate goal of the devout, a state where the soul rises above the physical space that the mind and body occupy.



Dr Taltaje Vasanthakumara is a Buddhist scholar and retired Professor of Kannada, Mumbai University. He can be reached at vtaltaje@gmail.com

[1]. Illustration by *Nanaiah Chettira*