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, initiating both in its presuppositions and its methods of inquiry the parallel quest of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. The general principle of exegesis is set forth succinctly by Hermann Oldenberg in his impressive work, Buddha, sein Leben, seine Lehre, seine Gemeinde, Berlin, 1881, 92:

"Aber wir dürfen nicht von den Traditionen des bezeichneten Kategorien, welche sämmtlich unhistorisch oder doch des historischen Charaktere verdächtig sind, so behalten wir als festen Kern der Erzählungen von Buddha eine Reihe positiver Thatsachen übrig, die wir als einen zwar sehr beschleunigten, aber vollkommen geschriebenen Reise 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 mold 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 these relating to religious faith and the cult of the Buddha as a higher being, may be older and thus trace the origins of the religion, than the supposed historical element. This easily reveals itself as a test 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 nirvāṇa, for it might be supposed that of all the events of his life, the final one 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 Theravāda sect, already examined in some detail by E. J. Thomas in his Life of the Buddha as legend and history, third ed., London, 1929, 143–64. Fortunately a parallel account with interesting variations is available in Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese, as published by Ernst Walser, Das Mahāparinirvāṇaraññāyana, Berlin, 1930. This second version represents the traditions of the Mahasanghikī sect, which was active in north-western India up to the time of the final eclipse of Buddhism in its homeland.²

The description of the itinerary of the last journey and the accounts of the various lengthy sessions delivered, run generally parallel, in the two versions. Sākyamuni travelled with a company of monks from Rājagaha, regarded traditionally as the centre of much of his teaching, to Pātaliputra (Th.: Dīmar-bu-can) on the Ganges. Here he stayed by the caitya (Th.: mokhot-riem), where he was visited by Brahmans and householders, to whom he preached a sermon. Later, when he reached Vāsīkara, the minister of the land of Magadhā, organizing the building of a fortress in preparation for their intended war against the Vṛisṇi to the north, he prophesied the future greatness of the place as Aśoka’s capital city of Pātaliputra. Then having crossed the Ganges triumphantly, he travelled via Kujirāna (Th.: Dīpyaka-can) and Nārdika (Gra-can) to Vāsīkā. Many people had died at Nārdika 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 twofold ‘causal nexus’ (padipa-paramāpā). At Vāsīkā he was visited by the Licchavi prince, and entertained by the popular courtesan Anapālī. Afterwards he went into retreat nearby at Beluṣāgārā (Skt.: Venugrāmika, Th.: Uema can-γyi).

1 This is the Mahāparinirvāṇarāññāyana as it occurs in theītripādika. Another and very short version occurs in the Nyetmyinda, translated by E. J. Thomas in his Early Buddhist Scriptures, London, 1930, 51–5.

2 As edited by Walser, the Sanskrit version is taken from the edited text of E. Dutt, Čāpa māranāraññī, 2nd part, 1, Seringapatam (1847), and the Tibetan version from a manuscript copy of the Kangri at the former Peking State Library in Berlin, and from the Darbhanga block print, Darbhanga, s.d. 1825. I have referred throughout to the Peking block print as reproduced correctly in the Tibetan Tripāṭika, Tokyo-Kyoto, 1938, XXIV, page 320, leaf 1, line 5. Future references to the text will appear in the form e.g. p. 218.1.5.

Walser’s translation of the Chinese version from the T’i-khi Tripāṭika, XXIV, pp. 320.5.

One may note that for various reasons the Tibetan text does not always follow the Mahāparinirvāṇa, but to later. Mahāvīśuddha versions in the Śāraṅga Deśī section, see T’i-khi-Kyoto ed., XXIII, page 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 T’i-khi Tripāṭika, XXIV.

A most detailed and brilliant analysis of these Pali and Sanskrit versions and of four other Chinese versions has just been published by André Bareau, namely his Recherches sur la biographie du Bouddha dans le Sūtra-pancha et les Vagābodhi avancés, Vol. I., Les diverses unités, le purushottam et les duchesses, Paris, École Francaise d’Extrême-Orient, Tome 1, 1970, Tome 2, 1971. His conclusions force hardly any basis for a historical substantiation in the text; certainly even less than I myself expected when first writing this short article.
When making an offer or offering, one should offer in a correct manner. When offering, one should offer with a proper method and a correct attitude. When making an offer, one should offer in a proper manner.

In the beginning, I have taught you that whatever things are delightful and desirable, joyful and pleasing, there are subject to separateness and destruction, to disintegration and dissolution. So likewise, whether new or old, after my decease, whoever you are, you must remain as islands to yourselves, as defenses to yourselves, as defenses to yourselves, as defenses to yourselves, as defenses to yourselves, as defenses to yourselves, as defenses to yourselves. If you ask me the reason for this, then know that I have already taught you in the principle which must actually be practiced, namely the four applications of mindfulness, the four proper efforts, the four magical purposes, the five powers and the seven factors of enlightenment, and the eightfold path.

As Buddha, I do not have the close-knittedness of a teacher who thinks he must conceal things as unsuitable for others.

I have taught you that whatever things are delightful and desirable, joyful and pleasing, there are subject to separateness and destruction, to disintegration and dissolution. So likewise, whether new or old, after my decease, whoever you are, you must remain as islands to yourselves, as defenses to yourselves, as defenses to yourselves, as defenses to yourselves, as defenses to yourselves, as defenses to yourselves, as defenses to yourselves. If you ask me the reason for this, then know that I have already taught you in the principle which must actually be practiced, namely the four applications of mindfulness, the four proper efforts, the four magical purposes, the five powers and the seven factors of enlightenment, and the eightfold path.

As Buddha, I do not have the close-knittedness of a teacher who thinks he must conceal things as unsuitable for others.

I have taught you that whatever things are delightful and desirable, joyful and pleasing, there are subject to separateness and destruction, to disintegration and dissolution. So likewise, whether new or old, after my decease, whoever you are, you must remain as islands to yourselves, as defenses to yourselves, as defenses to yourselves, as defenses to yourselves, as defenses to yourselves, as defenses to yourselves, as defenses to yourselves. If you ask me the reason for this, then know that I have already taught you in the principle which must actually be practiced, namely the four applications of mindfulness, the four proper efforts, the four magical purposes, the five powers and the seven factors of enlightenment, and the eightfold path.

As Buddha, I do not have the close-knittedness of a teacher who thinks he must conceal things as unsuitable for others.

I have taught you that whatever things are delightful and desirable, joyful and pleasing, there are subject to separateness and destruction, to disintegration and dissolution. So likewise, whether new or old, after my decease, whoever you are, you must remain as islands to yourselves, as defenses to yourselves, as defenses to yourselves, as defenses to yourselves, as defenses to yourselves, as defenses to yourselves, as defenses to yourselves. If you ask me the reason for this, then know that I have already taught you in the principle which must actually be practiced, namely the four applications of mindfulness, the four proper efforts, the four magical purposes, the five powers and the seven factors of enlightenment, and the eightfold path.

As Buddha, I do not have the close-knittedness of a teacher who thinks he must conceal things as unsuitable for others.
whether now or after my decease, whoever remain as islands to themselves, as defences to themselves, with the Dharmas as their island and the Dharmas as their defence, not concerning themselves with other islands and other defences; such ones are the foremost of my teaching disciples.

After this he returned to Vaissali, and having been on a holy round and finished his meal, he went, still accompanied by the faithful Ananda, on a visit to a near-by shrine (utpala) named Cakula. It is here that he is said to have proclaimed: ‘Whoever, Ananda, is versed, skilled, and much practiced 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, Ananda, am versed, skilled, and much practiced in the four magical powers, I too could, if I wished, remain for a world-age or even longer than a world-age.’ Since Ananda said nothing in reply to this claim, Sakyaumann 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: ‘Lost there should be contention between us, go and await another tree.’ Then Mara, the lord of death, who had attempted previously to persuade him to pass immediately into涅槃 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 Ananda, who came to ask the reason for this, was given a lesson in the causes of earthquakes and was sternly warned 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 choose to blame Ananda for the normal limited human life-span of the Buddha in our present world-age.

Sakyaumann then announced his decision of continuing to Kusaghrama (Tib. Ru-cha), not mentioned in the Pali version, and on the way he looked back to the town of Vaissali and announced his imminent nirvana in the realm of the Mallas under two asle trees. From Kusaghrama, they passed on to Skiyamuni (Tib. Long-mi-yod gru-ma), where Skiyamuni 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 three are repetitions of previous sessions.

At Parn, the next place of rest, Sakyaumann accepted a meal in the name of the metal-worker Cunda. Afterwards he fell ill, possibly from dysentery, and he had to rest for a while. While Ananda fetched water which had become

---

1 Wallis, p. 296-7.

2 The Pali version mentions a dish described as adikaramaddina, 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. T. Thomas, Life of the Buddha, p. 169, n. 3, and see especially Arthur Waley, ‘Did Buddha die of eating pork?’, Multan Chron. at Buddhism. 1, 1922-2, (proh.) 1923, 343-53. The possibility of Skiyamuni having seriously died of dysentery as a result of eating pork has led the imagination of Western commentators from the nineteenth century onwards. Even the careful and reliable a scholar as Alfred Gachter concludes: ‘Quelle dégradation pour l’Eve
clear quite miraculously, although 500 carts had just passed through the near-by stream. While Śākyamuni was resting and recovering, a wealthy layman named Pukkus, 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 him on a certain occasion he himself had remained undisturbed by a thunderstorm and the noise of the villagers, which he had not even heard. Pukkus 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 astounding Ananda 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 nirvana.\footnote{La transformation miraculeuse de la riche vête.} They continued slowly on their way, for the master was still sick, and at last they reached the outskirts of Kusinagara, 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 demagrace Ananda, who from being once the favourite and most trusted disciple, comes to be presented as a blunderer who logs 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.\footnote{La transformation miraculeuse de la riche vête.} Since the verses are less liable to tampering than prose, he concentrates first upon the series of verses pronounced by various vonners.

sublime qu’un siècle ou deux plus tard ses fidèles avaient volontairement trouvé dans de toutes les traditions religieuses. Mais avec quelle garantie d’authenticité peut-on traiter le texte sur le déjeuner ? (La vie du Buddha, Paris, 1928, 305). On such a special dress, reserved for the sole consumption of a Buddha, see A. Roux, "Études théâtrales à la biographie du Buddha", in. Des maitres maîtres, Tome I, 290-73. One should also see also his article "La transformation miraculeuse de la riche vête" of Études théâtrales dédiées à la mémoire de Maurice Lebas, Paris, 1973, 1-31. Thus as in so often the case, this supposedly historical incident may be a later interpretation of an interesting Buddhological concept.

\footnote{La transformation miraculeuse de la riche vête.} 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 Pukkus, is expanded in an extraordinary manner in one of the later Mahayana versions, mentioned above, p. 400, n. 2. See T.I. T. XXX, pp. 134-2-331-2-2. The Buddha puts on a pair of garments as he sits on his lotus throne, and he becomes the color of purified gold, filling the direction with rays before an asstained fourfold assembly. Again and again he repeats to the gods in a chant of the seven jewels, and as the display goes on, he explains repeatedly that this is the sign of his approaching nirvana.

\footnote{La transformation miraculeuse de la riche vête.}
over the dying Buddha. (Of several similar versions I quote from the Tibetan "Dzogschen version.)

"The Lord expired like a bee at the foot of those two excellent silk trees in the grove of twin silk trees which had fall their blossoms as soon as the Lord Buddha passed from sorrow. Then some other monk recited these verses:

"Here in this grove of fette trees,
of this beautiful pair of silk

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 transmigrations is bliss"

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

NIL 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,
had finally passed from sorrow"...
As soon as the Loci Buddha passed from sorrow, the Venereal 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 Ananda instead of by Aniruddha, and Ananda's set of verses, which now follow Aniruddha's in certain other versions noted by Prayuriki, do not occur at all in Pali.10 The Visaya of the Mulasarvastivadin canon, however, preserve 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.11

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 consolcd them with suitable words, but it is significant that in the Mulasarvastivadins version, where he appears as by no means unshaken himself, he first asked Ananda to do the consoling. How shrewdful, 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 Ananda into Kusinagara 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 Ananda how they should prepare the corpse, and in replied that they should do things as for a universal monarch.

"O, most worthy Ananda, how should things be done for a universal monarch?"

"Townsmen, the body of a universal monarch should be wrapped in muslin. Having been wrapped in muslin, it should be wrapped in 500 pairs of

10 These other versions occur in the Sanskrit original in the last story of the Avadana-katha (ed. J. S. Speyer, St. Peterborough, 1906, ii, 198-209), and in Chinese translations of a Mulasarvastivadin Samayadipana (Wangun nos. 541 and 546). See Fyvie's, art. cit., J.A. xi, 560, xii, 452.
cloth. Having been wrapped 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 tumult for the bones at a cross-roads, and honours it with parasols, banners of victory, flags, scarlets and garlands, perfumes, powders, and music. One has a great festival.

honouring, venerating, and worshipping it. 18

The townsfolk replied that it would take them quite seven days to do all this. Having prepared everything as detailed by Śāntaka, they prepared to move off. According to the Vinaya of the Mālasārvātivādin, an elder instructed the women and maidens to hold up the processionary canopy over the bier which was to be carried by the men and youths. They were to pass through Kuṇinagara, 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 Mālasārvātivādin 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 ascended to the gods’ wishes, as interpreted by Aniruddha, the procession was able to move off. 19

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 restrained afterwards as the first patriarch, who presided over the first council, supposedly held at Rājagaha immediately after the Buddha’s death, and so later tradition considered it desirable that he should be given a place of honor 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 placed 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 18 of its own accord by the power of the buddhas and the power

18 Wallichsmith, op. cit., 41; PL P. 124, p. 223-22: labha pa lha dmigs pa ’bsal chen po ’byung po ’byung pa ’byung pa la la ba / la ba chen po ’byung po ’byung po la la ba / ’byung pa chen po ’byung po la la ba / la ba chen po ’byung po ’byung pa la in. 19 Wallichsmith, op. cit., 415-17. In the Sanskrit and Tibetan versions the gods object in a similar to the women of Kuṇinagara honoring 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 Prahavang, op. cit., 44, pp. 59, 64, 73. 12
of the gods'. Finally Ánanda, coming to the fore again, pronounced his final verses over the ashes, which do not appear in the Pali canon.46

"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 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 Ánanda 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 designate Ánanda, which is one of the most significant features of early Buddhist 'history', or at least of some of its interpreters. His real designation takes place at the supposed first council at Rājagaha, 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.47 As Puṣyotthaka has observed, there may be preserved here a reference to women attending upon the corpse of Śākyamuni immediately after his death, possibly wishing 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 uncouth, it may have been well enough remembered to be included in the later connected charges against Ánanda.48

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 verse as Brahma-world, used as equivalent for the more negative term nirman, but also by the specific reference to religious gah (śrāvaṇa), whereas the previous prose account refers only to musīn and to the 500 pairs of garments. If one assumes that Śākyamuni was cremated, if indeed he was ever cremated, in simple religious gah, one must clearly treat the number 500, which occurs in Ánanda's verses, as a readjudgment in the text in order to bring it more into line with the previous prose account. Once, however, one embarks upon this

46 Waluschke, op. cit., 431; T. S., xxiv, p. 314 4.3-

47 Puṣyotthaka, manuscript, 5.14.

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

Śākyamuni's death at Kusinagara may well be historical fact. Old and reliable, he was possibly travelling from Rajgirh, which had been probably the center of his years of wandering and teaching, on a last visit to Kapilavastu to see what remained of his homeland. The route lay through Pataliputra (Pataliputra), Vaishali, Kusinagara, and Pāvā. Taking extremely ill as he traveled, he could go no further than Kusinagara, and he died in a grove just outside this modest village, attended by Aṭantika and Aniruddha, whose voices 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 significance about who was present, and in marked contrast with the precision, however fantastic, of names, attributes, and so on of all the other visions ranging in importance from Kapilavastu downwards, when 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 Aṣāṭa's mouth. 'O holy one, why have you avoided the six great towns of Śravasti, Saketa, Cauḍā, Vārānasī, Vaishali, and Rajgirh, which are distinguished in the world, and resolved to pass from sorrow by this wretched village, so remote and so vile, the appendage of a village, the mere remnant of a village?'15 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 many tales would have been preferred, if they could have handled, to transfer the death scenes to a more glorious place, but perhaps it was known that he had indeed died at Kusinagara which was a wretched little place.16

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

---


16 Our much note, however, this Śākyamuni's reply represents an insertion of traditional material in the form of the Mahābhārata. For references, see F. L. Carpenter, Le Commentaire du preambule du Mahābhārata, I, Leiden, 1925: 123-4.
washed the body, for this would have been normal practice, and wrapped it in a piece of kammam 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 coffers 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 (pujapi), mentioned in many later legends. Przylipiński 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. This 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 Kāśīvārāja, it is strange that tradition preserved no memory of a single original stūpa (stupak) for Aśoka’s benefit. The land of the Śākyas had long since been had 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 those materials by simply accepting the parts which seem humanly possible and rejecting the miraculous elements as obvious fictitious. 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 Brahmas. A factual account of Śākyamuni’s passing probably never existed as traditional oral material burned 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十年前 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 auspicious assemblies, could well have existed as a kind of frequent 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 organiser 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 Nāgas of Kūmaragana, who were under attack by the other Nāgas, the Nāgas of Pāṇi, the Bālalaś of Cāndalalaśa (or Alīkāpaśa), the Bālanaś of Vīyakalāśa,

(Vehalippa), the Kruvina (Kollima) or Zamaguna, the Lopamuna of Yuvati, and the Šakyas of Kapilavastu. Then the Mallas of Kusinagara gave the vase which had contained the relics to the Nārāyanagega Brahman who had divided them, and he took it back to his temple and placed it on the altar.

Then a Brahman youth from Pippalāyana said to the Malla of Kusinagara:

"Listen, O noble one. For a long time the Lord Gautama was beheaded and dear to us. He has gained nineteen 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 stupa for the ashes of the Lord Gautama in Pippalāyana."

It was given the ashes and a tenth stupa was built.

This is a serious story, and the little-known places included in this list of 10 stupa-ways 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 tuññais, situated in the area between Rajagaha and Kapilavastu, where Šākyamuni had lived, taught, and died. These, sometimes in the shape of semi-spherical tumuli, 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 conjectural, but what is absolutely certain is that as the earliest pre-Aśokan testimony is concerned, that there were these Buddhist tumuli, usually known as stūpas, were believed to contain relics of past Buddhas, and especially of the latest Buddha, Šākyamuni. Historically it would seem to be most worthwhile to according to the earliest traceable Buddhist traditions, Šākyamuni's physical remains through the extraordinary story of the burning ashes, translated into a cult of relics maintained in these special tumuli.

There is no reference in the earliest known traditions to such philosophically-minded discourses 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, recalled, and finally written down by monks. There is no over-all account of Šākyamuni's final events which is not heavy with mythological significance. Apart from this cult, which identifies him effectively as a Buddha, like the Buddhas of former times Šākyamuni would probably remain quite unknown to us. It was precisely because of the faith that he was installed, 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.

\*\* Wiesehöfer, op. cit., 493-517; P. T. W., xxxiv, p. 250-53 E.

For discussion of these points see Louis de La Victoire Pissar, Indianes, Paris 1941, 71f.
It is true that his subsequent followers included a number, certainly a majority, 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 nirvana, he can no longer give help to his followers in the realm of samsara, 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 Sakyamuni 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 carelessly from the legendary elements those references that do not offend rational thought, we assume 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 Sakyamuni as a supermundane being and the cult of the relic strips. 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 Premiers, Paris, 1929, 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-ci secondaires et variables. L'idéalisme officiel ignore la foi bouddhique au profit d'un ensemble qu'il la communauté a patronné, et fait sortir le Bouddhisme de ces systèmes" (p. 30).

With direct reference to the main thesis of this article, one might also quote from The Buddhist Religion of Richard F. Robinson, who died tragically in 1972: "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 (Sangha) created the image of the Buddha, the Buddha created the Community and in so doing impressed upon it his personality. The master exalted 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" (Richardson, <i>Science</i>, California, 1970, 15). 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.