

Mahaparinibbana Sutta

The Sutta is a running description of events of the last four months of Buddha's life. It comprises of

- Discussion between the Buddha and the minister, Vassakara in Rajagaha just before the rainy retreat of the unity of the Licchavis.
- Details of how Buddha spent the three months of rain retreat from Nalanda to Kusinara, across Pataligama, Vesali, Pava and other cities.
- The Great Decease
- The distribution of relics and erection of eight memorial mounds

Buddha, Aged and ill

Acute illness befell him at Beluva where He spent his rain retreat. Buddha had said, "I am now decrepit, aged, old, advanced in years, my journey is drawing to its close. Just as a worn out cart is made to move with the aid of thongs, my body is kept going by thongs too. It is only in the signless concentration of mind that this body is at ease."

Ananda was deeply upset by Buddha's illness that he was like drunk as he lost his bearings and his faculties were unclear. Buddha consoled Ananda that all conditioned things arise and dissolved; encouraged him to strive and be freed of all influxes.

Yet, Ananda was certain that He would not pass away without leaving his instructions concerning the Order."

Buddha the Great Compassionate Teacher

- Buddha has no "teacher's fist".
- Morality, concentration and wisdom, Four Noble Truths, Four foundations of Mindfulness were the main focal teaching points as He passed through the different villages and towns.
- Vassakara, Ajatasattu's chief minister asked Buddha on the king's behalf whether he could succeed in conquering the Vajjians. Buddha replied that as long as they followed His advice given at Sarandada Shrine at Vesali on the 7 conditions of welfare, the Vajjians would not decline.
 1. Hold regular and frequent assemblies
 2. Meet in harmony, break up in harmony, carry on their business in harmony
 3. Do not authorize what has not been authorized; do not abolish what has been authorized; proceed accordingly to what has been authorized by ancient tradition
 4. Honour, respect, revere and salute the elders among them, and consider them worth listening
 5. Do not forcibly abduct others' wives and daughters and compel them to live with them
 6. Honour, respect, revere and salute the Vajjian shrines at home and abroad, not withdrawing the proper support made and given before
 7. Proper provision made for the safety of Arahants, so that they may come to live there
- Buddha reminded the monks also of the 7 conditions of welfare for monks' dispensation to prosper and not decline.
 1. Hold regular and frequent assemblies
 2. Meet in harmony, break up in harmony, carry on their business in harmony

3. Do not authorize what has not been authorized; do not abolish what has been authorized; proceed accordingly to what has been authorized by rules of training
4. Honour, respect, revere and salute the elders who are long ordained, fathers and leaders of the order
5. Do not fall prey to desires which arise in them and lead to rebirth
6. Devoted to forest lodgings
7. Preserve their personal mindfulness

- Buddha also advised on the 7 things conducive to welfare:

Do not rejoice, delight and absorbed in:

1. Works
2. Chattering
3. Sleeping
4. Company
5. Evil desires
6. Mixing and associating with evil friends and
7. Do not rest content with partial achievements

- A further 7 things conducive to welfare:

1. Faith
2. Modesty
3. Fear of doing wrong
4. Learning
5. Aroused vigour
6. Established mindfulness
7. Wisdom

- Buddha further advised that for successful communal living, monks have to show loving kindness in private and public; share gifts, including contents of alms bowl; maintain rules of discipline in private and public and continue the Noble practice in private and public till liberation.

- If one should hear of the teachings from another who claimed that they were the Four Authorities or Mahapadesas:

1. *Buddhapadesa (from the Buddha)*
2. *Sanghapadesa (from the community of elders and distinguished teachers)*
3. *Sambhulatherapadesa (from the learned theas of tradition, Dhamma, Discipline)*
4. *Ekatherapadesa (from a learned monk)*

One should neither approve nor disapprove his words, but should be carefully noted and compared with what had been said in the Suttas and Vinaya relating to the Four Noble Truths, dependent origination and the abandonment of lust, hatred and delusion.

- Ananda, not wishing Him to be disturbed, refused the wandering ascetic, Subhadda's request to see the Buddha. Hearing the conversation, the Buddha gave a detailed teaching. In whatever dhamma and discipline that the Noble Eightfold Path is not found, there will be no ascetic of the first, second, third or fourth grade. Venerable Subhadda could understand Buddha's teaching and asked for ordination. He was the last personal disciple of Lord Buddha.
- Repeatedly asked the monks in attendance to clear their doubts by questioning him directly or via another.

- As non-personality was His foremost teaching, he did not name any successor. The order of monks is not dependent upon Him. Instead the Dhamma and Vinaya will be the monks' guide to the Practice.
- To the layfollowers at Pataligama, Buddha advised them on the perils of bad morality (loss of property, bad reputation, and shyness in approaching ascetics and others, confused death, and rebirth in woeful states. He also advised on the advantages of good morality (wealth, good reputation, confidence and assurance on meeting ascetics and others, unconfused death and rebirth in happy states)
- *Further instructions by Buddha:*
 1. Lesser and minor rules can be removed.
Venerable Ananda did not verify the exact lesser and minor rules to be discarded.
 2. Brahmadanda to Channa
Whatever the monk Channa wants or says, he is not to be spoken to, admonished or instructed by the monks.

Last Meal

The last meal of the Buddha was Sukaramaddava or 'pig's delight' prepared by Cunda, the smith. Though the Buddha fell gravely ill, he assured Cunda that it was not a misdeed that the Buddha gained final Nibbana after taking the last meal from him. He cleared his doubts and remorse, assuring him that alms for Buddha just before enlightenment and mahaparinibbana were highly meritorious.

The controversy of the meal was its actual content:

1. Pork of a young pig
2. Soft rice cooked with 5 kinds of food obtained from cows
3. Chemical food prepared by Chunda to prevent Buddha's demise
4. Bamboo shoots trampled by pigs
5. Medicinal herb
6. Truffle grown under the ground

Buddhaghosa interpreted the first 3.

Dhammapala, author of Tika took it to mean soft pork.

Rhys Davids gave the last interpretation

Great Decease

Buddha approached the sala grove of the Mallas in Kusinara and asked Ananda to prepare a couch with the head to the north. He laid down on His right side with one leg resting on the other. In this manner, he gave instructions to the monks during his last few hours.

He entered the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th jhana states, into the Spheres of Infinite Space, Infinite Consciousness, Nothingness, Neither- perception-nor –Non perception and attained cessation of feeling and perception. Leaving that attainment of Cessation of feeling and perception, he entered Sphere of Neither- perception-nor –Non- perception, Spheres of Nothingness, Infinite Consciousness, Infinite Space and entered to the 4th, 3rd, 2nd, and 1st jhanas. Leaving the 1st jhana, entered the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th jhanas and expired. This happened in the 3rd watch of the night.

Site of Mahaparinibbana

Buddha passed away in Kusinara. The Mahasudassana Sutta and the glory of King Mahasudassana served as an excuse for the demise of Buddha in Kusinara rather than in any populous large city with wealthy householders.

Poor Conduct of Subhadda and the First Buddhist Council

The conduct of Subhadda was the leading cause of summoning the first Buddhist Council.

Mahakassapa proceeding from Pava to Kusinara, came to know from a Ajivika that the Buddha had passed away 7 days before. Some monks wept, some were quiet but a monk who ordained in old age named Subhadda rejoiced. “Enough sirs, do not weep nor lament, we are well rid of the great Samana. We shall be able to do what we like and not do what we do not like”.

Mahakassapa was alarmed to hear of this as wrong dhamma and wrong vinaya may prevail after the Master’s death. It is one of the leading causes to hold the first Buddhist Council 3 months after Buddha’s Mahaparinibbana. This would be an effective method to ensure unity of teaching and concord among fellow monks. Disruptive and dissenting elements had to be kept at bay for peace and solidarity among the monk community.

When the Nigantha Nataputa passed away, his followers became quarrelsome and interpreted the doctrine at will. The Samgiti Sutta of Digha Nikaya illustrated the strife amongst the followers of the Sect. It was imperative that for the Buddhist dispensation to continue long, the right dhamma and vinaya had to be recorded.

Cremation Ceremony

The veneration of the Mallas in Kusinara for the Buddha threw light on funeral rites and rituals prevalent in ancient India.

The Mallas treated the deceased body of the Buddha as one would for a universal monarch. “They wrapped the body in five hundred successive layers of new linen cloth with teased cotton wool, then placed the body in an oil vessel of iron, which is covered with another iron pot. They built a funeral pyre of all kinds of perfumes and erected a stupa at the crossroads.” The Mallas paid respect with dance, song, music, perfumes and garlands throughout the week. Mandarava flowers were strewn knee deep everywhere in Kusinara.

The Mallas wanted to bring the body through the southern gate but were unable to move it as Venerable Anuruddha noted that the gods wished otherwise. The gods wanted the funeral procession to go through the northern gate, going through the center of the city and the cremation ceremony to be held outside the eastern gate at Makutabandhana Cetiya.

The Mallas came forward to light the funeral pyre but the pyre refused to catch fire. According to Venerable Anuruddha, the gods were waiting for Venerable Mahakassapa. On arrival, Venerable Mahakassapa arranged his robes on one shoulder, bowed down with clasped hands, walked respectfully around the pyre. Uncovering Buddha’s feet, he bowed down with reverence. The 500 monks did likewise and it was said that the pyre caught fire by itself.

When the cremation was over, it was said that only the outer and innermost cloth were

consumed by fire. Streams of water from the storehouse below and perfumed scented water poured by Mallas extinguished the funeral pyre.

His remains

The Brahmin, Dona divided the relics and handed them to the following who build a stupa for them:

1. Ajatasattu of Magadha
2. Licchavis of Vesali
3. Sakyans of Kapilavatthu
4. Bulayas of Allakappa
5. Koliyas of Ramagama
6. Brahmin of Vethadipa
7. Mallas of Pava
8. Mallas of Kusinara

The Brahmin Dona built a great stupa for the urn and the Moriyas of Pippalavana built a great stupa for the embers.

Conclusion

Brahma Sahampati uttered this with the passing of the Buddha with a resounding earthquake:

All beings in the world, all bodies must break up:
Even the Teacher, peerless in the human world,
The mighty Lord and perfect Buddha has passed away.

Sakka, king of Devas uttered this

‘Impermanent are compounded things, prone to rise and fall,
Having risen, they are destroyed, their passing truest bliss.’

Venerable Anuruddha uttered this:

‘No breathing in and out – just with steadfast heart
The Sage who is free from lust has passed away to peace.
With mind unshaken he endured all pains:
By Nibbana the Illumined’s mind is freed

Buddha’s Last words

With the passing of the Buddha, his last words for all to heed were:

**Vayadhamma sankhara,
Appamadena sampadetha**

**All conditioned things are subject to decay.
Strive on with diligence**