

The Dharma-ending Age

Who is responsible for the decline of Buddhism?

A study of Buddhist prophecy based on early Pali sources

selected with notes by Piya Tan ©2003

1 Introduction

The earliest Buddhist sources that predict the decline or disappearance of Buddhism are unanimous in attributing this catastrophe to the failings of the Buddhists themselves. **Jan Nattier**, in her book, *Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline* (1991:120-132), summarizes the factors singled out by the canonical sources into the following seven categories:

- (1) the admission of women into the monastic community;
- (2) the lack of respect toward various elements of the Buddhist tradition;
- (3) the lack of diligence in meditation practice;
- (4) carelessness in the transmission of the teachings;
- (5) the emergence of divisions within the Sangha;
- (6) the emergence of false or “counterfeit” Dharma; and
- (7) excessive association with secular society.

Later texts also mention **external causes** of the religion’s decline of which there are two:¹

- (8) the invasion of India by foreign, non-Buddhist powers; and
- (9) excessive state control.

Many of the early texts often list more than one of these **internal causes** of decline of the religion, and we shall examine them textually rather than topically. We will not discuss the external causes as they are generally political in nature.²

Some of the notes here have been culled from Jan Nattier’s *Once Upon a Future Time* and Liz Williams’ papers (see bibliography), but most of them have been taken from two of my lectures in the series “The Buddha and His Disciples: Profiles and perspectives in self-discovery” delivered at the Buddhist Fellowship, the Buddhist Library and submitted to the Institute of SE Asian Studies Library (at the National University of Singapore) as a documented research in 2002. The two lectures are “The Buddha’s Image and Shadow” (§1.6) and “Was the Buddha Poisoned?” (§1.10)³

2 The Buddha’s assurances

2.1 HOW THE DISPENSATION LASTS. The Vinaya relates an incident where Sāriputta asks the Buddha why the dispensation of some of the past Buddhas⁴ lasted long, while others did not. In reply, the Buddha explains that the Buddhas **Vipassī, Sikhī and Vessabhū** “did not teach the Dharma in detail...the rules of training for the disciples were not made known...the Pāṭimokkha [Code of Discipline] was not

¹ The two external causes are: (1) the invasion of India by foreign, non-Buddhist forces; (2) the over-regulation of the Sangha by the state. (Nattier 1991:126-132).

² However, for various examples, see my 5-lecture series on “A History of Buddhism: A strategic study of Buddhism in society” (2002) available on CD at the ISEAS Library, National University of Singapore, or from <http://dharmafarer.googlepages.com>.

³ “The Buddha and His Disciples” files can be downloaded from: <http://dharmafarer.googlepages.com>.

⁴ The six past Buddhas—Vipassī, Sikhī, Vessabhū, Kakusandha, Koṇāgamana and Kassapa—immediately preceding our Buddha are mentioned in **Mahāpadāna S** (D 14.1.4/ 2:2) where a detailed account of **Vipassī Buddha** is given; see also **Kūṭadanta S** (D 1:134-43, Dīrgh’āgama T1.98b-100b); **Mahā Sudassana S** (D 2:169-98, Dīrgh’āgama T1.21b-24b, Madhyam’āgama T26.515b-518b); **Mahā Govinda S** (D 2:220-51, Dīrgh’āgama T1.30b-34a); **Makhādeva S** (M 2:74-82, Madhyam’āgama T26.511c-515a, Ekottar’āgama T125.806c-810a); **Ghaṭikāra S** (M 2:46-49, 54, Madhyam’āgama T26.499a-503a). See also Winternitz. *History of Indian Literature*, 1933:42, also 122n 378, 598 (see Index: “Buddha”: the Buddhas). Cf J 1:43; DhA 1:84, 3:236.

appointed.” as such after they and their immediate disciples had passed away, the holy life rapidly disappeared:

After the disappearance of these Buddhas, the Blessed Ones, and their immediate disciples (*buddhānubuddha*), those last disciples of various names, of various clans, of various births, who had gone forth from various families, the holy life too disappeared. It is as if, Sāriputta, various flowers lying loose on a piece of wood are scattered about and blown about by the wind. (V 3:8)

On the other hand, the Buddhas **Kakusandha, Koṇāgamana and Kassapa** “taught the Dharma in detail...made known the rules of training for the disciples...appointed the Pāṭimokkha.” As such after they and their immediate disciples had passed away, the holy life remained established:

At the disappearance of these Buddhas, the Blessed Ones, and their immediate disciples, those last disciples of various names, of various clans, of various births, who had gone forth from various families, established the holy life for a very long time. It is as if, Sāriputta, various flowers well strung together by a thread,⁵ are placed on a piece of wood are not scattered about or blown about or destroyed by the wind. (V 3:8)

However, when Sāriputta requests that the Buddha introduce the training-rules and institute the Pāṭimokkha, the Buddha answers that it is not the right time. The training-rules and the Pāṭimokkha would only be introduced after the Order “has attained long standing...has attained great gains...when some conditions causing the cankers (*āsava*) appear here in the Order” Moreover, it was not the right time because at that time “the most backward (*pacchimaka*) of these 500 monks is one who has entered the stream” (V 3:9 f).

Sariputta, the Sangha is devoid of immorality, devoid of danger, stainless, pure, founded on the essence. Sāriputta, the most backward of these 500 monks is one who has entered the stream, not bound for a suffering world, sure of liberation, destined for awakening. (V 3:10)

The Buddha uses this same term *pacchimaka* in connection with Ānanda in **the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** (D 2:155) and **the Kusinārā Sutta** (A 2:80). The Commentaries on these two passages confirm that the term *pacchimaka* refers to Ānanda.⁶

2.2 THE ADMISSION OF WOMEN.⁷

If, Ānanda, women had not obtained the going forth, the holy life, Ānanda, would have lasted long, the True Teaching would have endured for a thousand years. But, Ānanda, since women have gone forth, the holy life now would not last, the True Dharma would endure only for 500 years.⁸ (Vinaya Cullavagga 10.1.6/V 2:255; A 4:278; Miln 4.1.55-61)

This story is also found in other early sources: the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya,⁹ the Mahīśāsaka Vinaya,¹⁰ the Vinaya Mātrkā of the Haimavata,¹¹ the Madhyam’āgama of the Sarvāstivāda¹² and two sūtras of uncertain

⁵ “By a thread,” *suttana*. A clear pun: *sutta* means not only “thread,” but also “discourse (oral teaching and later canonical text), rule of discipline.”

⁶ VA 195, however, is silent; but see A:W 2:89 n2.

⁷ For details see my notes on “Nuns Before Mahā Pajāpatī?” (SD 1.9).

⁸ On problems relating to this remark, see Liz Williams, “Red Rust, Robbers and Rice Fields: Women’s part in the precipitation of the decline of the Dhamma” (*Buddhist Studies Review* 19,2 2002:41-47). For the causes of the disappearance of the True Dharma, see Nattier, 1991:120-121.

⁹ T22.1428.923c9.

¹⁰ T22.1421.186a14.

¹¹ T24.1463.818c4. On this identification, see Lamotte 1988a:212.

¹² T1.26.607b9.

sectarian affiliation: the Ch'ü-t'an-mi chi-kuo ching¹³ and the Chung pen-ch'i ching.¹⁴ All these texts exist only in Chinese translation.

In all these sources the reference to the nuns and the duration of 500 years always occur together,¹⁵ leading scholars to surmise “therefore, that these two elements entered the Buddhist tradition together” (Nattier 1991:29). Nattier further notes that all these texts belong to the Nikāya school but “none to the Mahāsaṅghika schools,” from which Nattier estimates that the emergence of the “500-year” tradition should be placed from 340-200 BCE (Nattier 1991:32 f). But this view regarding the absence of references to the nuns in the Mahāsaṅghika sources, as we shall see, is erroneous.¹⁶

It has been questioned, notes Sujato, whether the story, or parts of it, was present in the Mahāsaṅghika, which was one of the earliest schools.¹⁷ There is, however, a fragment present in the Mahāsaṅghika Vinaya, giving just the bones of the background of Mahā Pajāpatī visiting the Buddha before going on to present the *garu, dhammā* in detail. This is entirely characteristic of this Vinaya, which routinely cuts the narrative materials out; presumably the narrative was separated from the Vinaya material and presented in a separate life of the Buddha (the Mahāvastu or similar).

In this case, continues Sujato, the text itself explicitly tells us to “explain in detail as in the Sūtra.”¹⁸ Moreover, the passage is present in the Vinaya of the Lok'uttaravāda, a branch of the Mahāsaṅghikas.¹⁹ Since the Mahāsaṅghika Vinaya itself tells us that the passage has been abbreviated, there is no cause to think the Lok'uttaravāda had borrowed from outside the Mahāsaṅghika tradition. Elsewhere, too, the Lok'uttaravāda Vinaya presents in full passages that are abbreviated in the Mahāsaṅghika, so this is merely a function of the literary forms of these works, rather than a genuine difference in content.

The Sarvāstivāda Vinaya similarly omits the story itself, but again this is characteristic of this school, which preserves the biographical material chiefly in the Suttas rather than Vinaya. The story of Mahā Pajāpatī is accordingly found in a Sarvāstivādin Sūtra of their Madhyama Āgama. But it was known and acknowledged within their Vinaya, for a question by Upāli clearly refers to the story.²⁰ Thus, so far as our sources reveal, concludes Sujato, we must accept that this story is present in all the schools.

2.3 SUDINNA KALANDAKA, PUTTA. Liz Williams, in her paper, “Red Rust, Robbers and Rice Fields: Women’s part in the precipitation of the decline of the Dhamma” (2002),²¹ argues that

the real precipitation of the decline of the Dharma was in fact facilitated by the monk Sudinna and that there is no textual evidence, other than the story in *Cullavagga X*, that women were at all culpable. (Liz Williams, 2002:41)

The story thus far forms an important part of the Verañja,kaṇḍa or introduction to the Section on Defeat (that is, the rules whose transgression entail expulsion from the Sangha). In fact, the following Section deals with the story of **Sudinna Kalandaka,putta**, the only son of a wealthy merchant who joins

¹³ T1.60.857c29.

¹⁴ T4.196.159b8.

¹⁵ Except perhaps in the Mahāyāna scholastic text, the Ta chih-tu lun, attr to Nāgārjuna, in which the figure 500 years occurs without any mention of the nuns (T 1509, 25.68a16).

¹⁶ I had previously accepted Nattier’s view, but through Bhante Sujato’s clarification (email dated 31 Aug 2008), I gratefully share his insight, which I present in the foll paras. These passages are from his upcoming book on the origins of the early nuns.

¹⁷ Nattier 1991: 29.

¹⁸ 如線經中廣說 *rú xiànjīngzhōng guǎngshuō*, in 摩訶僧祇律 *Móhēsēngqí lǜ* (Mahāsaṅghika Vinaya, T22.-1425.471a26-27): http://cbeta.org/result/normal/T22/1425_030.htm.

¹⁹ Roth 1970: 4 ff.

²⁰ 爾時長老優波離問佛言。世尊。摩訶波闍波提瞿曇彌。受八重法故。即是出家受具足戒, *érshí zhǎng-lǎo yōubōlí wèn, fó yán, Shìzūn, Móhē bōshébótí qútánmí, shòu bāzhòngfǎ gù, jìshì chūjiā shòujùzújiè*, “At that time the elder Upāli asked the Buddha, ‘World-honoured One, since Mahā Prajāpatī Gautamī has accepted the eight heavy rule [rules of respect], is this her going forth (*pravrajyā*) and ordination (*upasampadā*)?’” (Sarvāstivāda Vinaya, T23.1435.290c22-24): see http://cbeta.org/result/normal/T23/1435_040.htm.

²¹ *Buddhist Studies Review* 19,1 2002:41-47.

the Order despite his parent's objection. Despite offers of wealth, Sudinna refuses to return to lay life. His parents go on to coax him to at least produce an heir for his worldly wealth. So Sudinna, "seeing no danger, since the training-rules have not been made," has sex with his wife resulting in her conception. As such, Sudinna has tainted the Sangha, that which is formerly pure, with danger and immorality. At this point,

[t]he mythological element is again employed to illustrate that a major cosmic event has occurred, ie the precipitation of the decline of the Dhamma. Again, a "cosmic ripple" is said to go up through the various layers of gods, causing the earth to shake. (Liz Williams 2002:43)

The actors of this cosmic ripple are the very same ones who exulted at the first turning of the Wheel of Truth at the Deer Park;²² only this time, they cried out a graphically suggestive lament:

The earth-bound devas cried out:

"The Sangha was tumour-free;²³ it was free from danger. But now a tumour has arisen, danger has arisen in the community of monks; the swelling²⁴ on account of Sudinna Kalandaka,-putta has caused this danger to arise!"

Having heard the cry of the earth-bound devas, the devas of the Four Great Kings...

...the devas of realm of the Thirty-three...

...the Yāma devas...

...the Tusita devas...

...the Nimmāṇa,rati devas...

...the Paranimmita,vasavatti devas...

...the devas of Brahmā's host cried out:

"The Sangha was tumour-free; it was free from danger. But now a tumour has arisen, danger has arisen in the community of monks; the swelling on account of Sudinna Kalandaka,putta has caused this danger to arise!" (V 3:18 f)

When the Buddha is informed of Sudinna's offence, he rebukes him, saying: "Foolish one, you are the first doer of many wrong things!" (V 3:21). Sudinna has provided the reason for the introduction of the training-rules and the Pāṭimokkha, "in direct opposition to Koṇḍañña who had been instrumental in the setting forth of the Wheel of Dhamma" (Liz Williams 2002:43). The Buddha then lays down the first Pārājika: "On account of this I will proclaim the training for monks...²⁵ Whatever monk should indulge in sexual intercourse is one who is defeated: he is no longer in communion."²⁶ (V 3:21).

If the devas' exultation in the Dhamma,cakka-p,pavattana Sutta marks the beginning of the Dispensation, the devas' lamentation here might be taken to mark the beginning of the end of the Dispensation, as it were (that is, if no corrective measures were taken). This is on account of Sudinna's deed, with which begins a steady decline as more and more monks commit offences necessitating more Vinaya rules—there is no mention of the nuns here. As we shall see, this laxity within the Sangha is often and clearly stressed by the Buddha himself as the cause of the decline and disappearance of the Dharma.

²² V 1:10-12; S 56.11; Lalv 540.426 f; Mvst 3:330 f.

²³ "Tumour-free," *nirubbada* (D 3:146), lit "without a swelling," opp *abbuda*, which means (1) excrescence, a swelling (a) the human embryo in the second week of conception (S 1:206); (b) (metaph) a tumour, a cancer (S 1:43); (c) (metaph) stain, scandal (V 3:18); (2) the name of a hell in Avīci (S 1:152 = A 5:173 = Sn p126); (3) a great number (S 1:149). See V:H 1:19 n4.

²⁴ "Swelling," *abbuda*, a pun on Sudinna's misdeed and its consequences. See preceding n.

²⁵ Here the 10 reasons for the training are listed: see **(Anubaddha) Bhikkhu S** (S 47.3) = SD 24.6 Intro (2.1.2).

²⁶ However, it is unlikely that this was the very *first* training-rule laid down by the Buddha. This first rule was probably laid down in connection with the recalcitrant monk Upananda who was the occasion for the promulgation of numerous Vinaya rules (see DPPN: Upananda).

3 The Buddha's prophecies

Early Buddhist prophecies regarding **the decline of the Teaching and the Order** are found all over the Nikāyas, for example,

the Cakka,vatti Sihanāda Sutta (D 26),
 the three Ovāda Suttas (S 16.6-8) [4],
 the Saddhamma Paṭirūpaka Sutta (S 16.13/2:223-225) [5a],
 the Āṇi Sutta (S 10.7/2:266 f) [see Sutta Discovery, 2004];
 the two Adhamma Suttas (A 1.10.34-42, 1.11.1-10/1:18-20);
 the Saddhamma Sammosā Sutta (A 2.2.10/1:58 f);
 the three Kimbila Suttas (A 5.201, 6.40, 7.56) [5b], and others [5].

It is an interesting subject of study yet to be fully studied by many scholars.²⁷ The Aṅguttara Nikāya, for example, contains an interesting set of four suttas all entitled **Anāgata,bhaya Sutta**, the Discourses of Future Dangers (A 3:100-110). The first two suttas are inspirational and the latter two are prophetic. I shall summarize the first, and abridge the second (it is beautiful and inspirational) and the last two suttas:

3.1 THE ANĀGATA,BHAYA SUTTA 1 (A 5.77) exhorts the forest monk to make urgent and earnest effort to “attain the unattained” lest such a spiritual quest would be hindered by death from (1) the venomous bite of a snake, scorpion or centipede; (2) accidents or ill health; (3) dangerous animals; (4) thieves; (5) non-humans (or “inhuman people”). (A 5.77/3:100-102)

3.2 THE ANĀGATA,BHAYA SUTTA 2 (A 5.78) (given in brief in the Samaya Sutta, A 3:66), a beautiful reflection on the urgency of spiritual practice, is here abridged:

- (1) The monk reflects: “I am now young...but the time will come when **old age** will touch this body; then it would not be easy to turn to the Buddha Word, or the forest and woodlands, or the solitary dwelling. Before it comes to me, let me attain the unattained, so that I will dwell comforted (*phāsu*) even when I am old.”
- (2) The monk reflects: “I am healthy...but the time will come when **sickness** will touch this body... Before it comes to me, let me attain the unattained, so that I will dwell comforted even when I am sick.”
- (3) The monk reflects: “Now there is no famine, and food is easy to get...but the time will come when **famine and difficulty in getting food** will arise. Before it comes to me, let me attain the unattained, so that I will dwell comforted even in time of famine and difficulty in getting food.”
- (4) The monk reflects: “Now people dwell in **good fellowship**, like milk and water... but the time will come when fear will reign, when robbers abound, when the fear-stricken gather their things and flee looking for safety, and people will live in groups and communes. It is then not easy to turn to the Buddha Word, or the forest and woodlands, or the solitary dwelling. Before it comes to me, let me attain the unattained, so that I will dwell comforted even in time of fear.”
- (5) The monk reflects: “Now the Order dwell in **spiritual fellowship**, finding comfort in one teaching...but the time will come when the Order is divided. It is then not easy to turn to the Buddha Word, or the forest and woodlands, or the solitary dwelling. Before it comes to me, let me attain the unattained, so that I will dwell comforted even though the Order is divided.”
 (A 5.78/3:103-105)

3.3 THE ANĀGATA,BHAYA SUTTA 3 (A 5.79), in a more serious tone, warns of the growing malpractices and wrong views of the Order members (here abridged and paraphrased):

Bhikshus, there will be on the long road to the future, monks who are not cultivated in body, nor in moral conduct, nor in mind, nor in wisdom.

²⁷ See however Jan Nattier, 1991, & Liz Williams, 2002.

- (1) They will ordain (*upasampādessanti*) others but they will not be able to lead them to higher training (in moral conduct, mind and wisdom), and these undeveloped candidates in turn ordain others, repeating the vicious cycle...
- (2) They will provide training and support (*nissaya*) to others but they will not be able to lead them to higher training (in moral conduct, mind and wisdom), and these undeveloped candidates will repeat the vicious cycle...
- (3) They will give talks regarding Dharma (*abhidhamma*) and on the Catechisms (*vedalla*), and fall into dark teachings (*kaṇha, dhamma*), without any understanding...
- (4) They will not listen to the Buddha Word, neither study nor master them; instead they will listen to and master “discourses that are poetry composed by poets, beautiful in word and phrase, composed by outsiders, spoken by their disciples” [S 2:266 f.]...
- (5) They will become luxurious, lax, backsliders (*okkamane pubbaṅgamā*, “falling back to prior states”), not valuing solitude (*paviveke nikkhitta, dhurā*)...

Thus, indeed, bhikshus, from corrupt Dharma comes corrupt Discipline; from corrupt Discipline comes corrupt Dharma. (A 3:105-108; cf S 2:266 f)

3.4 THE ANĀGATA, BHAYA SUTTA 4 (A 5.80), gives warning of growing materialism in the Order:

Bhikshus, on the long road to the future, there will be monks who,

- (1) Longing for fine robes, will forsake rag-robes and leave the forest and solitary dwelling, and move into urban areas and metropolises, and commit many improper and unseemly deeds...
- (2) Longing for good almsfood..., will move into urban areas and metropolises, and commit many improper and unseemly deeds...
- (3) Longing for comfortable quarters (“beds and seats”)..., will move into urban areas and metropolises, and commit many improper and unseemly deeds...
- (4) Living with nuns, probationers and novices, will not delight in the holy life and either will commit some foul deed or return to lay life.
- (5) Living with monastery attendants and novices, will enjoy their various hoarded goods, and mark out their lands and crops (P *oḷārikam pi nimittam karissanti paṭhaviyā pi haritagge pi*).

Bhikshus, be fully awake against these things, and so should you strive to get rid of them.

(A 5.80/3:108-110; cf. S 2:195 f)

3.5 THE SUGATA VINAYA SUTTA (A 4.160), one of the most important prophetic suttas of the Buddha, summarizes these concerns into four main factors, given here in full:

Bhikshus, there are these four things that conduce to confusion regarding the True Teaching, to its destruction.

What are the four?

(1) Here, bhikshus, the monks grasp the Suttas in the wrong way, with the sentences and words in the wrong order. Bhikshus, for one who wrongly grasps the Suttas, with their sentences and words in their wrong order, draws out the wrong sense, too.

Bhikshus, this is the first thing that conduces to confusion regarding the True Teaching, to its destruction.

(2) Furthermore, bhikshus, the monks are difficult to speak to; possessed of qualities that make them difficult to speak to;²⁸ impatient; when taught, they learn without respect [for the teaching and the teacher].²⁹

²⁸ “Possessed of qualities that make them difficult to speak to.” **The Anumāna S** (M 15) gives a list of such qualities: (1) one has evil desires and is overcome by it; (2) one lauds oneself and disparages others; (3) one is angry and overcome by it; (4) one is angry, and resentful as a result; (5) one is angry, and stubborn as a result; (6) one is angry and utters words bordering on anger; (7) one is reproved, but resists the reprover; (8) one is reproved, but denigrates the reprover; (9) one is reproved, but counter-reproves the reprover; (10) one is reproved, but beats about the bush; (11) one is reproved, but fails to account for one’s conduct; (12) one is contemptuous and insolent; (13)

Bhikshus, this is the second thing that conduces to confusion regarding the True Teaching, to its destruction.

(3) Furthermore, bhikshus, the monks who are very learned, masters of the sacred texts, Dharma experts, Vinaya experts, experts in the Code of Disciplines,³⁰ do not speak the Suttas to others with respect, and after their passing, the others do not recall the Suttas, cutting them off at the root.

Bhikshus, this is the third thing that conduces to confusion regarding the True Teaching, to its destruction.

(4) Furthermore, bhikshus, many elder monks who, being luxurious, lax, backsliders, shirking the task of spiritual solitude, do not put forth effort to attain the unattained, to master the unmastered, to realize the unrealized.

And the generations that come after them, too, following them, being luxurious, lax, backsliders, shirking the task of spiritual solitude, do not put forth effort to attain the unattained, to master the unmastered, to realize the unrealized.

Bhikshus, this is the fourth thing that conduces to confusion regarding the True Teaching, to its destruction.

Bhikshus, these are the four things that conduce to confusion regarding the True Teaching, to its destruction. (A 4.160/2:147-149)

4 Mahā Kassapa and his prophecies

There are three **Ovāda Suttas** in the Kassapa Saṃyutta (S 16.6-8), where the Buddha instructs Mahā Kassapa thus: “Exhort the monks, Kassapa, give them a Dharma talk. Either I should exhort the monks, Kassapa, or you should. Either I should give them a Dharma talk or you should.” The Commentary here explains that the Buddha says this in order to appoint Mahā Kassapa to his position. Although Sāriputta and Moggallāna are still around, the Buddha knows,

They would not live much longer, but Kassapa will live until the age of 120. After my parinirvana he will hold a recital of the Dharma and the Vinaya in the Sattapaṇṇī Cave, and he will enable my Dispensation to endure for a full 5,000 years. Let me appoint him to my own position. Then, the monks will think he should be heeded. (SA 2:173)

However, it should be noted here that the Buddha is not appointing Mahā Kassapa as a political successor (like a pope) of some holy Buddhahood to come. The Buddha’s desire not to politicize (create a power structure of) the Sangha is clear from his last instructions as recorded in **the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** (D 2:100) and elsewhere (V 2:188).³¹

All three Ovāda Suttas record that Mahā Kassapa turns down the Buddha’s invitation for him to exhort the monks with this reply:

“Venerable Sir, the monks are difficult to admonish now, and they have qualities which make them difficult to admonish. They are impatient and do not accept instruction respectfully.” (S 2:203, 206, 208)

one is envious and avaricious; (14) one is fraudulent and deceitful; (15) one is obstinate and arrogant; (16) one sticks stubbornly to one’s views. (M 15/1:95).

²⁹ As at **Ovāda S 1** (S 16.6/2:204) where the same complaint is made by Mahā Kassapa to the Buddha.

³⁰ “Doctrinal summaries,” *māṭikā*, also tr “matrix, matrices, summaries.” Winternitz: “The Māṭikās are the ‘lists’ or ‘tabulated summaries’ of those ideas which are of importance in the doctrine and the monastic order. These Māṭikās were subsequently worked into the texts of the Abhidhammapiṭaka.” (HIL 1, 1933:11). In Thailand, the ancient tradition of reciting the Māṭikā during last rites is still practised today, but this text includes the summary of the Kathā.vatthu, a post-Buddha work. In the Mahāyāna, the term *māṭrkā* is used syn with their Abhidharma Piṭaka.

³¹ Piya Tan 2002b 5:20.

Sixteen such negative qualities are listed in **the Anumāna Sutta** which records Moggallāna's admonition (M 15).³²

In the first instance, **the Ovāda Sutta 1** (S 16.6), Mahā Kassapa informs the Buddha that he has heard two monks—Bhaṇḍa, a pupil of Ānanda, and Abhiñjika, a pupil of Anuruddha—boasting of their skill in preaching, saying: “Come, let us see who will preach more profusely, more beautifully and at greater length!” Having heard this, the Buddha summons the monks concerned, and after due investigation to establish the facts, he rebukes the monks, admonishing them to give up their childish conceit. (S 2:204 f.)

In the second instance, **the Ovāda Sutta 2** (S 16.7), Mahā Kassapa informs the Buddha that they lack faith in the good, lack a sense of shame and fear towards wrongdoing, and are slack and devoid of wisdom. Kassapa compares such monks, in their state of decline, to the waning moon, which daily loses its beauty (faith), its roundness (moral shame), its splendour (moral fear), its height (energy) and its width (wisdom). The Buddha applauds him and repeats the whole admonition by way of affirmation. (S 2:208-210)³³

In the third sutta, **the Ovāda Sutta 3** (S 16.8), Mahā Kassapa again informs the Buddha that the monks are not ready. This time, the Buddha does not urge Kassapa to change his mind, but he himself speaks the reasons for their conduct:

Formerly, Kassapa, there were elders of the Order who were forest dwellers, almsfood eaters, rag-robe wearers, triple-robe users, with few wishes, content, lovers of solitude, aloof from society, exertive, and energetic—and they spoke in praise of these qualities.

Then, when such a monk visited a monastery, he was warmly welcomed and honoured as being dedicated to the practice of the Dharma. Then the newly ordained monks would also strive to emulate him in his way of life, and as such would lead to their welfare and happiness for a long time.

But now, Kassapa, the elders are no longer forest dwellers, nor almsfood eaters, nor rag-robe wearers, nor triple-robe users, nor are they with few wishes, nor are they content, nor do they love solitude, nor are they aloof from society, nor are they exertive or energetic—nor do they speak in praise of these qualities.

Now, it is the monk who is well known and famous, one who gains robes, almsfood, lodgings and medical requisites, that the elder monks invite to a seat, saying: “Come, bhikshu. What is this monk's name? This is an excellent monk. This monk is keen on the company of his brothers in the holy life. Come, bhikshu, here's a seat, sit down.” Then the newly ordained monks will also strive to emulate him, and that leads to their harm and suffering for a long time.

Kassapa, one would be speaking rightly to say: “Those leading the holy life are ruined by the ruin of those who lead the holy life. Those leading the holy life are defeated by the defeat of those who lead the holy life.” [That is to say, the decline and fall of the monks—as it is, too, in the case of lay Buddhists—by the wrong examples they emulate.] (S 6.18/2:208-210)

The prophetic tone of these discourses, especially **the Ovāda Sutta 3** (S 2:208-210), is very clear. As Buddhism today grows in more affluent societies and attracts more affluent members, there is a tendency to associate wealth, worldly success and social status with “good karma” and religious attainment. To rephrase the Buddha's concern to fit our own times:

Now, it is those who are well known and famous, who are wealthy, successful and socially influential, that are respected and emulated. This leads to their harm and suffering for a long time.”³⁴ (S 2:208-210)

³² Piya Tan 2002b 5:30, 10:7b.

³³ A more concise application of the same analogy is made by Sāriputta at A 5:123.

³⁴ On how gain and honour can ruin the holy life, see M 3:116 f.

5 Decline of the Dharma

Another important cause of the decline of the True Dharma is the arising of false or counterfeit Dharma. Statements regarding the counterfeit Dharma are found both in the Canon and in the Commentaries. But first let us set straight an ancient misconception.

5.1 SUDINNA, NOT THE NUNS. From all these texts we have quoted, it is clear that the Order of Nuns had posed no “problem” during the Buddha’s lifetime. The Therī,gāthā, for example, record the uplifting voices of many nuns who sing of their spiritual quest and their attainments. None of these women spoke of an ordination by both Orders, but achieved spiritual goals just as the monks and men did. There are no records of any protest or question regarding the Buddha’s decision to admit women into the Order. It appears that problems regarding the Order of Nuns only arose after the Buddha’s parinirvana,

when social and cultural norms were challenged by the presence and the attainments of women in a society which had deep roots in Brahmanism; where the most common and acceptable role for a woman was that of wife and child-bearer. Perhaps because of the necessity for so many Vinaya rules, caused by infringements by both men and women, a scapegoat was needed to explain the diminishing standards of monastic behaviour. Who better then, than women, who were occupying the privileged position previously held by men in society and by monks in the Saṅgha?

Whether women are any more responsible for the demise of the Dharma than men, remains a matter of conjecture but the responsibility for the precipitation of the decline of a formerly pure institution remains unequivocally with Sudinna. (Liz Williams 2002:47)³⁵

5.2 PROPHETIC SUTTAS. The Aṅguttara Nikāya contains three suttas—the Kimbila Suttas 1-3³⁶—recording conversations at Velu,vana or Nicelu,vana between Kimbila and the Buddha where Kimbila asks him the causes of the Dharma-ending after the Buddha passes away. From the Commentaries, he is probably Kimbila the guildmaster’s son (*seṭṭhi,putta*) of Kimbilā who joined the Order and won the power of recalling past lives.³⁷ He recalled how he had been a monk at the time when Kassapa Buddha’s dispensation was declining. Seeing how the Dharma was neglected by its followers, he made a staircase up a cliff and lived there as a recluse. It was this past-life memory that prompted him to ask the question (AA 3:323).

In the **Kimbila Sutta 1** (A 5.201), the monk Kimbila asks the Buddha a similar question: “Blessed One, what is the reason, what is the cause, that when the Blessed One has passed into final nirvana, the True Dharma does not last long?” The Buddha gives the same answer in terms of the five things as in the Saddhamma,paṭirūpaka Sutta, except that the last item is the lack of mutual respect and deference:

Here the monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen dwell without reverence and deference towards the Teacher, towards the Dharma, towards the Saṅgha, towards the training, towards one another. (A 5.201/3:247)

The Kimbila Sutta 2 (A 6.40) give six items, and is a repeat of the first sutta, with two items—heedfulness (*appamāda*) and hospitality (*paṭisanthāra*)—replacing “concentration” as the last items:

Here the monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen dwell without reverence and deference towards the Teacher, towards the Dharma, towards the Saṅgha, towards the training, towards heedfulness, towards hospitality. (A 6.40/3:339 f)

In the **Kimbila Sutta 3** in the Book of Sevens of the Aṅguttara (A 7.56), seven reasons are given, in an apparent elaboration of the shorter Kimbila Suttas. The True Dharma will decay and disappear when

³⁵ See Sponberg 1992, where he suggests a symbolic or mythical process of mediation to reconcile the problem of the Order of Nuns.

³⁶ A 5.201/3:247, 6.40/3:339 f, 7.56/4:84.

³⁷ As such, he is not the Kimbila, who is a comrade of Anuruddha and Nandiya, for which, see **Upak-kilesa S** (M 128/3:152-162) = SD 8.2.

the monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen lack reverence and deference towards the Teacher, toward the Dharma, toward the Sangha, toward the training, toward concentration, toward heedfulness, toward hospitality. The True Dharma will grow and prosper when the fourfold company of Buddhists show respect and deference toward the Teacher, toward the Dharma, toward the Sangha, toward the training, toward concentration, toward heedfulness, toward hospitality. (A 4:84)

5.3 SADDHAMMA PAṬIRŪPAKA SUTTA. The **Saddhamma Paṭirūpaka Sutta** (S 16.13/2:223-225) is perhaps the most important of the prophetic suttas, delivered in Anāthapiṇḍaka's Park in Jetavana at Sāvattihī where the Buddha addresses Mahā Kassapa's concern regarding the decline of the Dharma:

Venerable Sir, what is the reason, what is the cause, that formerly there were fewer training-rules but more monks were established in final knowledge (aññā), while now there are more training-rules but fewer monks are established in final knowledge [become arhats]?

That's the way it is, Kassapa...

Kassapa, just as gold does not disappear so long as counterfeit gold has not arisen in the world, even so, the True Dharma does not disappear so long as a counterfeit Dharma does not arise in the world. But when a counterfeit Dharma has arisen in the world, then the True Dharma disappears.

It is not the earth element, Kassapa, that causes the True Dharma to disappear, nor the water element, nor the heat element, nor the air element. **It is the spiritually empty people (mogha,-purisa) who arise right here (in this religion) who cause the True Dharma to disappear.**

(S 2:223 f, abridged)

This same question about training-rules and attainment is asked by the monk **Bhaddāli** (M 1:445 f.) to which the Buddha replies the Teacher does not introduce the training-rules or code of conduct until "certain bases for taints become manifest here in the Sangha," that is, to say, until the Sangha has reached the peak of worldly gain, the peak of fame, the peak of learning, the peak of long-standing renown (M 1:446). The Buddha gives a similar but shorter reply to Sāriputta's request that the Buddha introduce the training-rules (V 3:8).³⁸

The Commentary to **the Saddhamma Paṭirūpaka Sutta** (SA 2:201 f) explains that there are two counterfeit forms of the True Dharma (*saddhamma,paṭirūpaka*): one with respect to **attainment** (*adhigama*), the other with respect to **learning** (*pariyatti*). The former is the 10 corruptions of insight knowledge, namely, with regards to illumination, knowledge, zest, calm, bliss, resolution, exertion, assurance, equanimity and attachment, explained in the Visuddhi,magga (Vism 20.105-128/633-638).

The latter counterfeit form comprises texts other than the Buddha Word as authorized at the three Buddhist Councils, with the exception of these five topics of discussion (*kathā,vatthu*): discussion on the elements, on mental objects, on foulness, on the bases of knowledge, on the casket of true knowledge. The counterfeit texts, according to the Commentary, include the following: The Secret Vinaya (*gulha,-vinaya*), the Secret Vessantara, the Secret Mah'osadha, the Vanna Piṭaka, the Aṅgulimāla Piṭaka, the Ratṭhapāla Gajjita, the Āḷavaka Gajjita and the Vedalla Piṭaka.³⁹

The Porāṇa Ṭikā on the Commentary glosses that **the "Vedalla Piṭaka"** is the Vetula Piṭaka, that some say was brought up from the abodes of the nagas [alluding to Nāgārjuna and the Prajñā,pāramitā Śūtras]; others say it consists of what was spoken in debates (*vāda,bhāsita*).

The Saddhamma Paṭirūpaka Sutta continues with the Buddha saying:

³⁸ See Piya Tan 2002b 5:27.

³⁹ An attempt to identify the texts cited by the Saṃyutta Commentary is made in the 14th century work, *Nikāya,-saṅgraha*, discussed in Adikaram, *Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, pp. 99-100. The *Nikāya,sanṅgraha* assigns each text to a different non-Theravādin school. The late date of this work, according to Bodhi, casts doubts on its reliability, and its method of identification is just too neat to be convincing. The Porāṇa Ṭikā's comment on the Vedalla Piṭaka suggests it may be a collection of Mahāyāna sūtras. The Mahāyāna is referred to in Sri Lankan chronicles as the Vetullavāda (Skt. Vaitulyavāda); see Rahula, *History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, pp. 87-90. (S:B 808 n312)

The True Dharma does not disappear all at once in the way a ship sinks. There are, Kassapa, five detrimental things that lead to decay and disappearance of the True Dharma. Here the monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen dwell without reverence and deference towards the Teacher, towards the Dharma, towards the Sangha, towards the training, towards concentration.

These five things, Kassapa, lead to the longevity of the True Dharma, to its non-decay and non-disappearance. Here the monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen dwell with reverence and deference towards the Teacher, toward the Dharma, towards the Sangha, towards the training, towards concentration. (S 2:225, abridged)⁴⁰

6 Problems and prevention

6.1 DOMESTICATION OF THE SANGHA. It appears as **Gregory Schopen** thrives on the domestication⁴¹ and failures of Buddhism (mediaeval Buddhism⁴² to be more exact), and has apparently become a small celebrity for it.⁴³ Where his works are really insightful, we have much to ponder over what actually transpired in the monastic community of India after the Buddha. In his paper entitled “Death, funerals, and the division of property in a monastic code” (1995), for example, he gives an interesting insight into how “secularism” (greater concern for worldly matters) of the mediaeval Sangha—the “landed, institutional monastic Buddhism”—in India and an important reason for the rise of Mahayana:

...Unless we know what landed, institutional monastic Buddhism had become when Mahāyāna sūtras were being written, it is difficult to understand the attacks on “abuses” associated with sedentary monasticism found most stridently in Mahāyāna texts like the Raṣṭrapāla-paripreṣhā; it is also difficult to understand similar, if less shrill, criticisms in Mahāyāna texts like the Kāśyapa-parivarta, or the constant calls in such texts to return to a life in the forest, or why long sections of the Samādhirāja-sūtra are given over to extolling ascetic practices, and why the necessity and value of these same practices is a topic of sharp debate in the Aṣṭasahāśrikā-prajñāpāramitā. Unless we have a clear picture of what the authors of these Mahāyāna texts were surrounded by and reacting to, we will have little chance of appreciating what they were producing. And an important source for that picture will be the vinayas that were being compiled at the same time. It is in this light, I would suggest, that the following selections [from the Mūla,sarvāsti,vāda Vinaya] should be read.

The following sections are of interest for at least two related reasons. They provide some interesting examples of the sorts of things that institutionalized monastic Buddhism was concerned with in the Middle Period: the proper performance of funeral rituals for deceased fellow monks; the inheritance of property;⁴⁴ the performance of death rituals for fellow monks; and negotiating ritual privileges, control of sacred relics, and economic resources. There is perhaps some added interest from the fact that such monastic concerns have rarely been identified or studied. But these selections illustrate as well how far monastic Buddhism had moved away from what we consider “spiritual” concerns—how far, in other words, it had developed strictly as an institution and become preoccupied with institutional concerns. These developments, of course, made it ripe for reformation. And this was very likely what many of the Mahāyāna groups were attempting to effect. (Schopen 1995:477)

⁴⁰ On another discussion of the dangers of internal decay, see **Cosmis Buddhas and Paradises** = SD 40b.3 (3.4).

⁴¹ I use “domestication” here in the sense of social secularization, ie, the process of becoming more “housed” and more concerned with worldly affairs, esp status, power, money, and pleasure, all done in the name of religion.

⁴² Schopen calls this “the Middle Period of Indian Buddhism, the period between the beginning of the common era and the year 500 CE” (1995: 476).

⁴³ His prolific writings are listed in SD 9 Biblio.

⁴⁴ On the same page, Schopen notes that “‘robe and bowl’ was a euphemism that covered a large variety of personal property” (1995:477).

Schopen does not spare the forest-dwelling monks, too. A few pages earlier in the same paper, he notes:

Much has been written about modern Buddhist “forest-monks,” and the Pāli Vinaya also speaks of such monks. But in one of the passages in this monastic code in which the life style of such monks is most clearly described there are, again, some surprises:

At that time the venerable Udāyin was living in the forest. The monastery of that venerable was beautiful, something to see, and lovely. His private chamber was in the middle, surrounded on all sides by the main house, well appointed with couch and chair, cushion and pillow, well provided with drinking water and water for washing, grounds well kept. Many people came to see the venerable Udāyin’s monastery. A brahman and his wife approached the venerable Udāyin and said they would like to see the monastery.

“Have a look,” he said, and taking the key, unfastening the bolt, and opening the door, he entered... [Saṅgh’ādisesa 2 = V 3:119]

Though this is in the forest, these are not the quarters that one might expect for a monk who relied on the four requisites: he had a private room, well-appointed furniture, lock and key, and his monastery was something of a tourist attraction. And yet this, apparently, is how the compilers of the Pāli Vinaya saw the forest life. Their forest life was little different from their vision of monastic life in general: both, for them, were permanently housed and well appointed, well ordered, maintained, secured by lock and key, and the focal point of lay activities.

These passages from several different vinayas—and a large number of other passages—make it difficult to avoid the conclusion that if the ideal of the individual rag-wearing, begging, forest dwelling monk was in fact ever the rule in the early history of Indian Buddhism, if the ideal was ever anything more than emblematic, then it was, by the time the vinayas that we have were compiled, all but a dead letter. (Schopen 1995:475)

Schopen does not quote this Udāyi episode (V 3:119) in full nor mention its context. In fact, the account—more correctly, a legal case study—goes on to say that while the brahmin was (unwisely) impressed at the dwelling, the brahminee complained that Udāyi had (wittingly or unwittingly, it is not said) “rubbed up against me limb by limb.” It was then that the brahmin, being upset, began complaining instead. And it was this incident that a major rule was introduced, whereby “whatever monk, affected by desire, with a perverted mind, should come into physical contact with a woman, holding her hand, or holding a braid of her hair, or rubbing against any one or other of her limbs—this is Saṅgh’ādisesa (an offence entailing a formal meeting before the Sangha for rehabilitation).” A detailed case analysis then follows (V 3:119-127). Furthermore, this Udāyi is a recalcitrant repeat offender and had an impressive slew of offences to his credit, besides Saṅghādisesa 2.⁴⁵

One of the greatest weaknesses in Schopen’s ideas regarding his perception of the materialism in mediaeval Buddhist monasticism is exemplified above: he tends to base many of his arguments mainly in terms of the Vinayas of the various schools and archaeological artefacts, and as is clear here, he often fails to mention the context of his scriptural sources; he also fails to give his references here. The Vinaya is mostly a study of the dark side of Buddhism; as such, understandably much of its dirty linen are to be found there. Schopen generally tends to look at Buddhism’s dark side and monumental ruins, often without the benefit of the light of its spiritual legacies.

Gethin, on the other hand, gives a more balanced criticism of similar cases of monastic domestication, thus:

⁴⁵ The major rules made on Udāyi’s account were: **Saṅgh’ādisesa** rules: 1 against masturbation (V 3:110-119), 2 against lustfully touching women (V 3:119-127), 3 against lewd talk (V 3:127-131), 4 soliciting for sex (V 3:131-134) 5 match-making (V 3:135-144), 6 improperly building a hut (V 3:144-155); the 2 **undetermined** (*aniyata*) rules: against associating with a woman in private (V 3:187-191), and associating with a woman out of earshot (V 3:191-194). For others, see indexes to V:H.

While the very success of the Saṅgha may have in certain respects compromised the original ascetic ideal of the Buddhist monks, it would be a mistake to conclude that it extinguished it. The ascetic ideal remained alive and not only continued to inspire the life of the Saṅgha, but continued to be realized. Of course the grand monasteries of the “city-dwelling” (*grāma-vāsin*) monks patronized by royalty and the wealthy will inevitably leave more substantial remains than the abodes of “forest-dwelling” (*āraṇya-vāsin*) monks; the literary activities of scholar (*gantha-dhura*) monks leave material evidence in the forms of manuals and treatises; monks who commission statues or stūpas and dedicate the merit to their deceased parents leave behind inscriptions.

But the signs left by anonymous monks following the path of meditation (*vipassanā-dhura*) in the forest are harder to trace and follow. This makes problematic Schopen’s assertion that the literary and archaeological evidence forces us to the conclusion that the ascetic ideal of the forest monk became early in the history of Buddhist monasticism can merely “a dead letter.”

The history of Buddhist monasticism can be seen in the light of a continued interplay, and sometimes tension, between the town-dwelling monks and the forest monks, between the scholar monks and the practitioners. Although the former may have been considerably more significant, the ideal of the forest saint has continued to exercise a considerable power over the imaginations of both the Saṅgha and the laity down to the present day, with the consequence that there have always been significant attempts to put that ideal into practice.⁴⁶ (Gethin 1998:105)

6.2 PROTECTING THE TEACHING. The Aṅguttara contains the **Appamāda Sutta 2** (A 1.10.17-32) where the Buddha exhorts his disciples on what threatens and what protects the Teaching:

Bhikshus, I do not see a single other thing that conduces to the confusion and destruction of the True Dharma except for heedlessness. Heedlessness, bhikshus, conduces to the confusion and destruction of the True Dharma.

Bhikshus, I do not see a single other thing that conduces to the establishment, non-confusion and non-destruction of the True Dharma except for heedfulness. Heedfulness, bhikshus, conduces to the establishment, non-confusion and non-destruction of the True Dharma.

Bhikshus, I do not see a single other thing...except for indolence...conduces to the confusion and destruction of the True Dharma.

Bhikshus, I do not see a single other thing...except for persistent effort [in what is wholesome]... conduces to the establishment, non-confusion and non-destruction of the True Dharma.

Bhikshus, I do not see a single other thing...except for excessive desires...conduces to the confusion and destruction of the True Dharma.

Bhikshus, I do not see a single other thing...except for contentment...conduces to the establishment, non-confusion and non-destruction of the True Dharma.

Bhikshus, I do not see a single other thing...except for unwise attention...conduces to the confusion and destruction of the True Dharma.

Bhikshus, I do not see a single other thing...except for wise attention...conduces to the establishment, non-confusion and non-destruction of the True Dharma.

Bhikshus, I do not see a single other thing...except for lack of full awareness...conduces to the confusion and destruction of the True Dharma.

Bhikshus, I do not see a single other thing...except for full awareness...conduces to the establishment, non-confusion and non-destruction of the True Dharma.

⁴⁶ Gethin on the folk works on the “forest tradition”: Ray, *Buddhist Saints in Ancient India*, 1994:447; Stanley Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of the Amulets*, Cambridge 1984; J.L. Taylor, *Forest Monks and Nation-state: An anthropological and historical study in northeastern Thailand*, Singapore, 1993; Michael Carrithers, *The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka*, Delhi, 1983; Kamala Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in Twentieth Century Thailand*, Honolulu, 1997.

Bhikshus, I do not see a single other thing...except for evil friends...conduces to the confusion and destruction of the True Dharma.

Bhikshus, I do not see a single other thing...except for spiritual friends...conduces to the establishment, non-confusion and non-destruction of the True Dharma.

Bhikshus, I do not see a single other thing that conduces to the confusion and the destruction of the True Dharma except for neglect of the wholesome. Heedlessness, monk, conduces to the confusion and destruction of the True Dharma.

Bhikshus, I do not see a single other thing that conduces to the establishment, non-confusion and non-destruction of the True Dharma except for devotion to the wholesome. Heedfulness, bhikshu, conduces to the establishment, non-confusion and non-destruction of the True Dharma.

(A 1.10.17-32/1:17 f)

The Saṃyutta has two suttas—the longer **Ṭhiti Sutta** (S 47.22)⁴⁷ and the shorter **Parihāna Sutta** (S 47.23)⁴⁸—dealing with the monk Bhadda’s question: “What is the cause and reason why the Dharma does not endure long after the Tathāgata’s final nirvana? And what is the cause and reason why the Dharma endures long after the Buddha’s final nirvana?” Ānanda answers: “Friend, it is because the four stations of mindfulness are not developed and cultivated that the True Dharma does not endure long after the Tathāgata’s final nirvana. And it is because the four stations of mindfulness are developed and cultivated that the True Dharma endures long after the Tathāgata’s final nirvana.”⁴⁹

7 The Buddha’s last instructions

7.1 SELF AS REFUGE. Learning of the Buddha’s impending death, **Ānanda** is greatly alarmed:

“Venerable sir, I have seen the Blessed One in comfort, and I have seen the Blessed One’s patient enduring. And, venerable sir, my body is like a drunkard’s. I’ve lost my bearings and things are unclear to me because of the Blessed One’s sickness. The only thing that is some comfort to me is the thought: ‘The Blessed One will not attain the final nirvana until he has made some statement about the order of monks.’”

The Buddha consoles him by explaining that he has no secret teachings nor regards himself as the leader of the Order, how he overcomes his bodily pains and that his followers should be self-reliant:

But Ānanda, what does the Order of monks expect of me? I have taught the Dharma, Ānanda, making no “inner” and “outer”: the Tathāgata has no “teacher’s fist”⁵⁰ in respect of doctrines. If there is anyone who thinks: “I shall take charge of the Order (*P saṅghaṃ pariharissāmi*),” or “The Order should refer to me (*P mam ’uddisako bhikkhu,saṅgho*),” let him make some statement about the Order, but the Tathāgata does not think in such terms. So why should the Tathāgata make a statement about the Order?

Ānanda, I am now old, worn out, elderly, my time has gone, I have reached the term of my life, which is eighty. Just as an old cart is made to go by being held together with straps, so the Tathāgata’s body is kept going by being strapped up. It is only when the Tathāgata withdraws his attention from outward signs, and by the cessation of certain feelings, enters into the signless concentration of mind, that this body knows comfort.

Therefore, Ānanda, you should live as islands unto yourselves,⁵¹ being your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge, with the Dharma as an island (*dhamma.dīpa*, Skt *dharmā,dvīpa*), with

⁴⁷ S 47.22/5:172.

⁴⁸ S 47.23/5:173.

⁴⁹ S 47.23/5:172-174. For a further discussion on the Buddha’s prophecies, especially the 4 Anāgata,bhaya Suttas, see §3.

⁵⁰ *nāsti ācārya,muṣṭi/n ’atthi ācariya,muṭṭhi*.

⁵¹ *P attā,dīpa*, Skt *ātma,dvīpa*. See S:B 1921 n143.

the Dharma as your refuge, with no other refuge. And how does a monk live as an island unto himself...with no other refuge?

Here, Ānanda, a monk abides contemplating the body as body, earnestly, clearly aware, mindful and having put away all covetousness and discontent for the world, and likewise with regard to feelings, mind and mind-objects. That, bhikshus, is how a monk lives as an island unto himself...with no other refuge.

And those who now in my time or afterwards live thus, they will become the highest,⁵² but they must be anxious to learn. (D 2:101 = 3:58, 77; S 3:42, 5:154, 163, 164)

7.2 THE BUDDHA’S LAST CONVERT. The Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta (D 16) records how **Subhadda**, a wanderer, hears of the impending demise of the Buddha and decides to clear his doubts at this most opportune moment. At first Ānanda refuses to allow him to see the Buddha, thinking that the Buddha should not be troubled by questions at such a time. The Buddha, however, overhears their conversation and invites Subhadda over. He asks the Buddha whether any or some, and which ones, of the six sectarian teachers⁵³ of the time have realized the truth. The Buddha replies with this lion-roar, that he need not bother about such questions:

In whatever Dharma and Discipline the noble eightfold path is not found, no ascetic is found of the first, the second, the third or the fourth grade [ie the stream-winner, the once-returner, the non-returner, the arhat, respectively]. But such ascetics...are to be found where the noble eightfold path is found. Now, Subhadda, in this Dharma and Discipline the Noble eightfold path is found, and in it are found the four kinds of ascetics. Those other schools are devoid of such ascetics. But here if the monks were to live rightly, this world will not be empty of arhats.

At twenty-nine I went forth, Subhadda,
 Seeking for the good.
 Now over fifty years have passed
 Since the day that I went forth, Subhadda.
 Outside of the realm of this True Dharma
 There are no ascetics. (D 2:151 f)

7.3 THE DHARMA-VINAYA AS TEACHER. The Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta continues as follows:

Ānanda, it may be that you would think: “The Teacher’s instruction has ceased; now we have no teacher.” It should not be seen like this, Ānanda, for what I have taught and explained to you as Dharma and Discipline will, at my passing, be your teacher.” (D 2:154)

The “Three Refuges” of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha are here revised and reduced to the barest minimum: the Dharma and oneself. Matthew Dillon, in his insightful comparative study of the last days of Socrates and the Buddha in “Dialogues with Death.” remarks: “However much support may be offered by teacher and community, it all comes down to you and the Truth” (2000:547). The Buddha is gone, long live the Dharma!

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⁵² “The highest,” (*tamatagge*). On the difficult term, *tamatagge* (“the highest”), see *Last Days of the Buddha*. (D no 16). Tr. (rev. ed.) Sister Vajirā & Francis Story. Wheel 67/68/69. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, [<http://www.accesstoinight.org/canon/digha/dn16.html>]1998: n20.

⁵³ Piya Tan 2002b 8:7.

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