

The Buddha's Last Meditation in the *Dīrgha-āgama*

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Introduction

The present article studies the last moments of the Buddha's life in the way these are reported in the *Dīrgha-āgama* parallel to the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya*. I begin by translating the relevant section from the *Dīrgha-āgama* version preserved in Chinese,¹ followed by a comparative study with a particular emphasis on the description of the Buddha's attainment of the immaterial spheres, and of their significance in general.

Translation

The Buddha said to the monks: "If you have doubts about the Buddha, the Dharma, the Community, or doubts about the path, you should swiftly ask [for clarification]. This is proper and the time for it, do not regret it later. As long as I am still present, I shall explain it to you." Then the monks were silent and without a word.

The Buddha said again: "If you have doubts about the Buddha, the Dharma, the Community, or doubts about the path, you should swiftly ask [for clarification]. This is proper and the time for it, do not regret it later. As long as I am still present, I shall explain it to you." Then the monks were still silent.

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¹ The translated part of DĀ 2 is found at T I 26b1 to 26c14, which has already been translated into German by Weller (1940: 181–184).

The Buddha said further: “If you feel personally ashamed and do not dare to ask, you should rely on a good friend to come and swiftly ask [for clarification]. This is proper and the time for it, do not regret it later.” Then the monks were still silent.

Ānanda said to the Buddha: “I am confident that all in this community possess serene faith, not a single monk has doubts about the Buddha, the Dharma, the Community, or doubts about the path.”

The Buddha said to Ānanda: “I, too, know myself that the least [developed] monks amidst this community now have all seen the tracks of the path, will not proceed to an evil destiny and will certainly eradicate the origin of *duḥkha*, returning at most seven times [to be born].” At that time the Blessed One declared that the one thousand two hundred [and fifty] disciples had attained [at the very least] the fruit of the path [of stream-entry].²

Then the Blessed One opened his upper robe, stretched out his golden coloured arm and said to the monks: “You should contemplate that a Tathāgata emerges in the world [only] occasionally, just as an *udumbara* flower manifests [only] at a single time.”³ At that time the Blessed One, contemplating its meaning again, spoke in verse:

“The purplish golden coloured right arm
The Buddha displayed, like an *udumbara* [flower].⁴
Past and future formations are impermanent,
Present ones [also] cease, do not be negligent.

“Therefore, monks, do not be negligent. Through not being

² DĀ 2 at T I 26b13 mentions only one thousand two hundred disciples, 千二百弟子. Such a count of disciples is unusual in the *Dirgha-āgama*, which regularly presents the Buddha in the company of one thousand two hundred and *fifty* disciples; for instances within the same discourse (although related to different episodes) cf. DĀ 2 at T I 11a9, 13c4, and 14b11. The use of such numbers is of course symbolic. Other discourses in the Pāli *Nikāyas* and in other *Āgamas* regularly employ the number five hundred instead; for a more detailed discussion cf. Anālayo (2011a: 417–419). In the present case, I take it that a textual error has occurred; hence in the translation I supplement the missing fifty.

³ For a study of the Indian myth regarding the flowering of the *udumbara* tree cf. Norman (1991/1993).

⁴ The formulation gives the impression of being a reciter’s remark, not something said by the Buddha.

negligent, I reached right awakening myself. An immeasurable multitude of goodness as well can be attained by not being negligent. All the ten thousand existing things are impermanent. These are the Tathāgata's last words.”

Then the Blessed One entered the first absorption.⁵ He rose from the first absorption and entered the second absorption. He rose from the second absorption and entered the third absorption. He rose from the third absorption and entered the fourth absorption.

He rose from the fourth absorption and entered concentration on the sphere of [infinite] space. He rose from concentration on the sphere of [infinite] space and entered concentration on the sphere of [infinite] consciousness. He rose from concentration on the sphere of [infinite] consciousness and entered concentration on nothingness. He rose from concentration on nothingness and entered concentration on neither-perception-nor-non-perception. He rose from concentration on neither-perception-nor-non-perception and entered concentration on the cessation of perception.

Then Ānanda asked Anuruddha: “Has the Blessed One attained Nirvāṇa?” Anuruddha said: “Not yet, Ānanda. The Blessed One is now in the concentration on the cessation of perception. Formerly I heard from the Buddha that he will attain Nirvāṇa on rising from the fourth absorption.”

Then the Blessed One rose from concentration on the cessation of perception and entered concentration on neither-perception-nor-non-perception. He rose from concentration on neither-perception-nor-non-perception and entered concentration on nothingness. He rose from concentration on nothingness and entered concentration on the sphere of [infinite] consciousness. He rose from concentration on the sphere of [infinite] consciousness and entered concentration on the sphere of [infinite] space.

He rose from concentration on the sphere of [infinite] space and entered the fourth absorption. He rose from the fourth absorption and entered the third absorption. He rose from the third absorption and entered the second absorption. He rose from the second absorption and entered the first absorption.

⁵ Adopting a variant without 定, in keeping with the formulation used in the rest of the passage.

He rose from the first absorption and entered the second absorption. He rose from the second absorption and entered the third absorption. He rose from the third absorption and entered the fourth absorption. Rising from the fourth absorption, the Buddha attained Nirvāṇa.

At that time there was a great earthquake and all the devas and the humans in the world were greatly frightened. All the remote and dark places not illuminated by the sun and the moon were completely covered by a great brightness, so that each could see the other, and they said to each other: “Other beings are reborn here, other beings are reborn here!” That light was everywhere, surpassing the light of the heavens.

Then the *devas* of the Thirty-three who were in mid-air strew *mandārava* flowers, *utpala*, *padma*, *kumuda*, and *punḍarīka* flowers on the Tathāgata and the assembled community; and they strew heavenly sandalwood powder on the Buddha and the great community.

Comparative Study

The *Dīrgha-āgama* account of the Buddha’s passing away has discourse counterparts in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* of the *Dīrgha-nikāya*, in Sanskrit fragments of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, and in three discourses preserved as individual translations in Chinese.

The extract translated above begins with the Buddha inviting the monks to have their doubts clarified. The parallel versions report a similar invitation, although with some minor differences in their descriptions as to what such doubts might concern. In agreement with the *Dīrgha-āgama* version, the Pāli *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* indicates that such doubts could be in regard to the three jewels (the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Saṅgha) or in regard to the path.⁶

The *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* preserved in Sanskrit fragments also refers to the three jewels, besides which it mentions *duḥkha*, its arising, its cessation, and the path [to its cessation].⁷

⁶ DN 16 at DN II 154,25 mentions doubts about the *magga* and the *paṭipadā*, alongside the three jewels; the same is also the case for a parallel to this section of DN 16 in AN 4.76 at AN II 79,13.

⁷ Waldschmidt (1951: 390) (§42.2): *yasya syāt kāṅkṣā vā vimatir vā buddhe*

That is, the monks might have doubts about the four noble truths. The same is also the case for one of the individually translated Chinese versions.⁸

Another of the individually translated Chinese versions, however, records a single inquiry about doubts in regard to the discourses.⁹ The third of the individually translated versions just mentions doubts, without further specifications.¹⁰ Clearly the parallel versions show a considerable degree of variation regarding this last exchange between the Buddha and his disciples.

In reply to this inquiry by the Buddha, Ānanda made it clear on behalf of the assembled monks that they had no doubts, something of which the Buddha had of course already been aware. In one of the individual translations, the monks themselves explicitly confirm that they indeed had no doubts.¹¹

The Sanskrit fragments of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* explain why the Buddha had invited the monks to ask questions to clarify their doubts, even though he already knew this was not required as they had no doubts: The Buddha had to act like this out of compassion for later generations.¹² In other words, the point of the description is to convey to future disciples that at the time of the Buddha's death there had been no doubts at all regarding the teachings, etc., among the disciples present on this occasion,¹³

vā dharme vā saṅghe vā duḥkhe vā samudaye vā nirodhe vā mārge vā.

⁸ T 6 at T I 188b4: 有疑望非意在佛及法, 聖眾, 苦, 習, 盡, 道.

⁹ T 5 at T I 172c7: 於經有疑結者; on the translator attribution for the cases of T 5 and T 6 cf. Park (2010).

¹⁰ T 7 at T I 204c8: 若有疑難; this version agrees with the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* and the *Dirgha-āgama* version that the Buddha made his inquiry three times; cf. T 7 at T I 204c12.

¹¹ T 5 at T I 172c11: 吾等無疑.

¹² Waldschmidt (1951: 392) (§42.8), *api tu karaṇīyam etat tathāgatena yathāpi tat paścimāṃ janatām anukampamānaḥ.*

¹³ The circumstance that no *bhikṣuṇīs* are mentioned among those present on this occasion, as noted by von Hinüber (2008: 208), is only to be expected, since according to a rule found in the different Vinayas *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs* were not allowed to travel together; cf. the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya*, T 1429 at T XXII 1018c21, the Lokottaravāda Mahāsāṅghika *Vinaya*, Tatia (1975: 21,15), the Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya*, T 1422 at T XXII 197b14, the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, Banerjee (1977: 34,15), the Sarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, von Simson (2000: 210,5), and the Theravāda *Vinaya*, Vin IV 62,28. Given that this rule is attributed to the Buddha, it is no

thereby providing a contrast to disagreements about the teachings that arose in later times.

According to early Buddhist doctrine, the complete removal of doubt takes place with stream-entry,¹⁴ in fact in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* and the *Dīrgha-āgama* discourse the Buddha reveals that all of the monks present had at the very least attained stream-entry.¹⁵ In one of the individually translated versions the Buddha instead indicates that those monks present on this occasion who had not yet attained [full] awakening will reach the eradication of the influxes after his Nirvāṇa.¹⁶ The nuance of assurance that emerges with this proclamation becomes more prominent with the other two individually translated discourses, as in them the Buddha predicts the advent of another Buddha in the future.¹⁷

The *Dīrgha-āgama* discourse translated above continues from the level of accomplishment of the assembled monks to the uniqueness of a Buddha appearing in the world. Similar to the *Dīrgha-āgama* presentation, several of the parallel versions also compare the appearance of a Buddha to the *udumbara* flower.¹⁸ The *Dīrgha-āgama* account stands alone, however, in reporting that the Buddha revealed his right arm.¹⁹ According to the Sanskrit fragments of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, the Buddha rather displayed his (upper) body and invited the monks to look at it.²⁰ An earlier version of this description might have been about the Buddha displaying how old age had affected his body, thereby

surprise that in a description of his passing away during one of his journeys the Buddha is accompanied only by monks.

¹⁴ Cf., e.g., Sn 231, with a counterpart in the *Mahāvastu*, Senart (1882: 291,23).

¹⁵ DN 16 at DN II 155,28 and DĀ 2 at T I 26b11.

¹⁶ T 7 at T I 204c16.

¹⁷ In T 5 at T I 172c3 he indicates that in 15 *koṭīs* and 70.600.000 years there will be another Buddha. According to T 6 at T I 188b14, in one *koṭi* and 40.000 years Maitreya Buddha will appear.

¹⁸ This is the case for the Sanskrit version, Waldschmidt (1951: 394) (§42.10), and for two of the individual translations, T 5 at T I 172c6 and T 6 at T I 188b15.

¹⁹ DĀ 2 at T I 26b14.

²⁰ Waldschmidt (1951: 394) (§42.10): *avalokayata bhikṣavas tathāgatasya kāyam, vyavalokayata bhikṣavas tathāgatasya kāyam.*

providing a vivid reminder of impermanence to the assembled disciples.²¹ With the growth of docetic tendencies this would then have become an act of revealing the extraordinary nature of the Buddha's body.

Impermanence is then also the theme of the Buddha's final statement, which the parallel versions report with some differences. According to the Sanskrit fragments of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, the Buddha told the monks to be silent and declared that "all formations are impermanent."²² The *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* combines a similar indication with an injunction to be diligent: "Formations are impermanent, strive on with diligence."²³

One of the individual translations reports the Buddha's final words as follows: "You should know that all formations are entirely impermanent. Even though I now have this *vajra* body, I too am not exempt from being changed by impermanence. Being amidst birth and death is highly fearful, you should diligently make an effort, try to be free quickly from this fiery pit of birth and death. This is my last teaching, the time for my Nirvāṇa has come."²⁴

In the other two individual translations the Buddha points out that half of the night has already passed. According to one

²¹ Waldschmidt (1948: 248) comments: "der Buddha nahm von seinen Jüngern Abschied, indem er seinen Körper vor ihnen entblößte und ihnen die Vergänglichkeit alles Irdischen am Verfall seines eigenen Körpers vor Augen führte;" cf. also Waldschmidt (1939/1967: 87f).

²² Waldschmidt (1951: 394) (§42.11): *aṅga bhikṣavas tūṣṇīm bhavata, vyāyadharmāḥ sarvasamskārah.*

²³ DN 16 at DN II 156,1: *vayadhammā saṅkhārā, appamādena sampādethā ti.* As Law (1933: 99) comments, this saying "strikes the key-note of the Buddha's philosophy and mission."

²⁴ T 7 at T I 204c25: 汝等當知，一切諸行皆悉無常，我今雖是金剛之體，亦復不免無常所遷，生死之中極為可畏，汝等宜應勤行精進，速求離此生死火坑，此則是我最後教也，我般涅槃其時已至；this part has already been translated into German by Waldschmidt (1939/1967: 82). Barreau (1971b: 14) comments on a similar reference to the impermanence of the Buddha's *vajra* body in DĀ 2 at T I 27b12, where it forms part of stanzas spoken by an unnamed monk after the Buddha had passed away: "the author of this strophe probably had the idea that the body of the Beatific could not be constituted of the same flesh as men's, but that it was made of a substance if not truly precious at least more capable of resisting the forces of destruction and, in consequence, extraordinary"; for a detailed study of the *vajrakāya* notion cf. Radich (2011/2012).

version he then tells the monks that they should make an effort, according to the other he indicates that there should be silence now.²⁵

The main theme underlying these different records of the last words spoken by the Buddha would be that he used his own death as a final illustration of the characteristic of impermanence,²⁶ and that he encouraged his disciples to devote themselves fully to their practice.²⁷

In contrast to the considerable number of variations found among the parallel versions so far, these same versions are in close agreement when describing the Buddha's meditative progression. Except for one individual translation, they all report that the Buddha proceeded through the nine successive meditative attainments up and down, and then went up from the first to the fourth absorption to attain Nirvāṇa. The individual translation that differs from this general consensus nevertheless has a reference to the Buddha mentally proceeding from the four heavenly kings up to the sphere of [neither-perception-nor]non-perception, and from there returning to come back to his own body.²⁸

At first sight a variant appears to occur elsewhere in the Pāli tradition, as the Pali Text Society edition of a *Samyutta-nikāya* parallel to this episode does not mention his attainment of cessation.²⁹ Yet, the cessation attainment is found in all Asian

²⁵ T 6 at T I 188b18: 汝其勉之, 夜已半矣, and T 5 at T I 172c12: 夜已且半, 勿復有聲. Waldschmidt (1939/1967: 86) understands the passage in T 5 to be an indication that the Buddha will not say anything further, "kein Laut soll mehr (von mir) vernommen werden." Pachow (1946: 25), however, takes the passage in T 5 to be an injunction to the monks to be silent, which he paraphrases as "the Buddha ordered the Bhikkhus to keep quiet."

²⁶ As Gethin (1996: 210) points out, "one might go so far as to say that it is precisely his own death that constitutes the Buddha's profoundest teaching: whoever one is, whatever one does, one cannot avoid death, this is the nature of the world."

²⁷ Gnanarama (1997: 16) comments that "even in the last few hours of His existence the Buddha was mindful to instill energy, exhorting the monks to exert themselves and strive for Liberation."

²⁸ T 5 at T I 172c14: 從四天王上至不想入, 從不想轉還身中.

²⁹ Rhys Davids (1917/1979: 196 note 1), Geiger (1930/2003: 246 note 3), and Nakamura (2000: 292 note 111) noted that the cessation attainment mentioned in DN 16 is not found in a parallel to this episode in SN 6.15 at SN I 158,11, where the Buddha just goes up to neither-perception-nor-non-

editions, so that this difference is probably a textual error in the manuscripts used for the PTS edition.³⁰

This *Samyutta-nikāya* discourse shows several other differences when compared to the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, however, which are also attested in the Asian editions. The *Samyutta-nikāya* discourse does not report the exchange between Anuruddha and Ānanda regarding the Buddha's attainment of cessation,³¹ nor does it record that an earthquake marked the occasion.³² The *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* and its parallels, however, agree that an earthquake marked the Buddha's passing away.³³

Other partial parallels to the present episode in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* and its parallels can be found in the two *Samyukta-āgamas*. The completely preserved *Samyukta-āgama* (T 99) contains two short discourses, one of which narrates the episode involving the conversion of Subhadda, concluding with a

perception and then descends again. Nakamura (2000: 292 note 111) then even drew the conclusion that “this fact suggests that this term was a later addition to the *Mahāparinibbāna-suttanta*.”

- ³⁰ Unlike the E^c edition, according to B^c, C^c, and S^c, as well as the new PTS edition by Somaratne (1998: 340), the Buddha proceeded up to the attainment of cessation; cf. also Bodhi (2000: 442 note 421). Another textual error on the side of the manuscripts used for the E^c edition appears to be that SN 6.15 at SN I 158,1 has the two parts of the Buddha's final injunction in the opposite order to DN 16, where again B^c, C^c and S^c, as well as the new PTS edition by Somaratne (1998: 340), agree on recording this in the same way as DN 16 at DN II 156,1.
- ³¹ The episode where Ānanda inquires from Anuruddha if the Buddha has already passed away is mentioned only in the commentary on SN 6.15, Spk I 223,15. Another difference is that in SN 6.15 at SN I 158,35 the stanzas spoken by Ānanda in relation to the Buddha's passing away come before those of Anuruddha, whereas DN 16 at DN II 157,12 adopts the opposite sequence. Yet another difference occurs in relation to the stanzas spoken by Anuruddha, where according to DN 16 at DN II 157,13 he referred to the moment “when the sage passed away,” *yaṃ kālaṃ akari muni*, whereas according to the corresponding part in SN 6.15 at SN I 159,4 he stated that “the one with vision [entered] final Nirvāṇa,” *cakkhuma parinibbuto*.
- ³² SN 6.15 at SN I 158,24 continues directly from stating that the Buddha had attained final Nirvāṇa to the stanza spoken on this occasion by Brahmā Sahampati; the great earthquake is then reported in the commentary, Spk I 224,25, with explicit reference to the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*. For a study of earthquakes in Buddhist literature cf. Ciurtin (2009) and (2012).
- ³³ DN 16 at DN II 156,35, Waldschmidt (1951: 398) (§42.19), T 5 at T I 172c17, T 6 at T I 188c6, and T 7 at T I 205b1.

brief reference to the Buddha's passing away.³⁴ This episode is also reported in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* and its parallels. Since this *Samyukta-āgama* discourse only takes up the Subhadda episode, it refers just briefly to the Buddha's passing away to mark the fact that Subhadda had entered Nirvāṇa before the Buddha. The narrative context makes it natural that no further details are given regarding the Buddha.

Another discourse in the same collection then takes as its main theme the various stanzas that were held to have been spoken by *devas* and men present on this occasion. Here, too, the actual passing away of the Buddha is not the main theme, but is only referred to in the introductory narration.³⁵ Hence here, too, it is natural that no further details are given.³⁶

Another relevant discourse is found in the partially preserved *Samyukta-āgama* (T 100). As already suggested by Bareau, this discourse is simply a combination of what in the completely preserved *Samyukta-āgama* (T 99) are two discourses.³⁷ This discourse in the partially preserved *Samyukta-āgama* (T 100) also has only a brief reference to the Buddha's passing away, presented together with the indication that Subhadda passed away before him.³⁸

Similar to the two discourses in the completely preserved

³⁴ The relevant part of SĀ 979 at T II 254b29 reads: "Then, after the venerable Subhadda had first [entered] Nirvāṇa, the Blessed One [entered] Nirvāṇa," 時尊者須跋陀羅先般涅槃已, 然後世尊般涅槃。

³⁵ SĀ 1197 at T II 325b10 indicates that: "At that time the Blessed One, in the middle of the night, [entered] Nirvāṇa in the Nirvāṇa [element] without remainder," 爾時世尊即於中夜, 於無餘涅槃而般涅槃。

³⁶ The Subhadda episode can also be found in EĀ 42.3, which has several episodes that in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* and its parallels occur in close vicinity to their description of the Buddha's passing away. Nevertheless, EĀ 42.3 concludes at T II 752c23 with Subhadda's final Nirvāṇa (T II 752c10) and the Buddha's last instruction regarding how the monks should address each other in future (T II 752c16), without even mentioning the Buddha's own passing away; for a translation cf. Bareau (1987: 28f).

³⁷ Bareau (1979: 60) suggests that SĀ² 110 (his version C) would be the result of combining SĀ 979 and SĀ 1197 (his versions B and D), "la série C ... semble donc résulter d'une combinaison des séries B et D."

³⁸ According to SĀ² 110 at T II 413c22: "Subhadda then first entered Nirvāṇa, after that the Tathāgata also entered Nirvāṇa," 須跋陀羅即時先入涅槃, 如來於後亦入涅槃 (adopting the variant 槃 instead of 盤).

Samyukta-āgama (T 99), the *Avadānaśataka* also has two tales that briefly mention the Buddha's passing away. As in the *Samyukta-āgama*, one of these tales reports the Subhadda episode, while the other records the stanzas spoken after the Buddha had passed away. Here, too, the actual passing away of the Buddha is merely mentioned in passing, without further details.³⁹

Taking into account the narrative contexts of the *Samyukta-āgama* discourses and the tales found in the *Avadānaśataka* makes it clear that these need not be considered as alternative accounts of the Buddha's passing away. Instead, they appear to be simply extracts that focus on a particular aspect of a wider tale. In fact the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* has preserved a full version of the *Mahāparinirvāna-sūtra*,⁴⁰ and this full version reports the Buddha's passing away in detail. In agreement with the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* and its parallels, the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* reports that the Buddha proceeded through the nine meditative attainments in forward and backward order, followed by again ascending up to the fourth absorption in order to enter Nirvāṇa.⁴¹ So this tale was clearly known among Mūlasarvāstivāda reciters.

A comparable case can be seen regarding what tradition reckons to be the Buddha's first discourse. A *Samyukta-āgama* discourse has preserved a version of this first discourse without any reference to the need to avoid the two extremes of sensual indulgence and self-mortification,⁴² which are instead found in another discourse in the same collection.⁴³ The *Sanḅhabhedavastu* of the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, however, has the two extremes as

³⁹ The first tale reports that “then the venerable Subhadra first [entered] final Nirvāṇa, after which the Blessed One [entered] final Nirvāṇa,” Speyer (1906/1970: 234,6): *tatrāyusmān subhadraḥ prathamataram parinirvṛtaḥ, tataḥ paścād bhagavān*. According to the second tale, “then in the middle watch of the night the Blessed One [entered] Nirvāṇa in the Nirvāṇa [element] without a remainder,” Speyer (1909/1970: 198,1): *tatra bhagavān rātriyā madhyame yāme 'nupadhiśeṣe nirvāṇadhātau parinirvṛtaḥ*.

⁴⁰ The close correspondence between the accounts of the Buddha's passing away in the *Avadānaśataka* and the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* has been studied by Przyluski (1918: 488–496).

⁴¹ T 1451 at T XXIV 399b13 and the Tibetan version in Waldschmidt (1951: 397,ult.).

⁴² SĀ 379 at T II 103c13, translated in Anālayo (2012a: 17–19).

⁴³ SĀ 912 at T II 228c18, parallel to SN 42.12 at SN IV 330,26.

part of the first discourse.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, another section of the same *Vinaya*, the *Kṣudrakavastu*, has a version of the first discourse without the two extremes. Moreover, the identical text, attributed to the same Yijing (義淨) who translated the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, is found as an individual discourse in the Taishō edition.⁴⁵ It seems obvious that what we have here are intentional extracts from a larger account known to the reciters of the Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition, not different versions of the first teaching given by the Buddha.⁴⁶

The same also applies to the *Samyukta-āgama* discourses that describe the final moments in the life of the Buddha. These appear to be similarly extracts from a larger account.

Supposed Lateness of the Meditative Progression

While a comparative study of the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* and its parallels thus gives the impression that the Buddha's gradual progression through the four absorptions and the immaterial spheres up to cessation is fairly common ground among most of the otherwise quite different parallel versions, several modern scholars consider this episode to be the result of a later addition. In what follows, I critically survey the reasons given to support this view.

In his comparative study of the accounts of the Buddha's passing away, Bareau comes to the conclusion that the description of his meditative progression is a late element invented on purpose for the *Mahāparinirvāna-sūtra*.⁴⁷ Bareau bases his assessment on

⁴⁴ T 1450 at T XXIV 127b24, translated in Anālayo (2012a: 21–24); cf. also Gnoli (1977: 134,10) and Waldschmidt (1957: 140) (§11.14).

⁴⁵ T 110 at T II 504a7 = T 1451 at T XXIV 292a29, translated in Anālayo (2012a: 39f). The identity between these two texts has already been noted by Chung (2006: 78).

⁴⁶ Pace Bareau (1963: 181), who holds that “à une lointaine époque, une partie au moins de docteurs du Bouddhisme ignoraient quel avait été le thème du premier sermon ou refusaient de considérer comme tel les quatre saintes Vérités.” For a more detailed critical reply cf. Anālayo (2012a) and (2013).

⁴⁷ Bareau (1979: 55): “le long récit de l'Extinction du Buddha, récit célèbre qui décrit les méditations et recueils atteints successivement par le Bienheureux avant de parvenir à la paix suprême de la Délivrance définitive, a sans doute été inventé spécialement pour le *MPNS* [*Mahāparinirvāna-sūtra*].”

the above-mentioned *Samyukta-āgama* discourses, which he sees as different accounts of the Buddha's passing away extant in Chinese translation.⁴⁸ He takes these to represent an ancient tradition which rejected the detailed account in the *Mahāparinirvāna-sūtra*.⁴⁹

Bureau's discussion ignores the detailed study and translation of these two *Samyukta-āgama* discourses by Przyluski, published more than half a century earlier in the *Journal Asiatique* as part of a set of four successive papers on the theme of the Buddha's *parinirvāna*.⁵⁰

In this study, Przyluski comes to rather different conclusions. After noting the close resemblance between the two *Samyukta-āgama* discourses and the two *Avadānaśataka* tales, he suggests that these would have originally come into being as intentional discourse extracts, whose purpose was to introduce the accounts of the so-called councils (*saṅgīti*),⁵¹ thereby investing these accounts with authority.⁵² In fact, one of the two

⁴⁸ Bureau (1979: 55): “la preuve en est que deux autres *sūtra*, qui ne nous sont parvenus que dans leur version chinoise et qui racontent chacun, en une courte série, des épisodes précédant et suivant celui du Parinirvāna, ne font que mentionner très brièvement celui-ci, sans donner aucun détail à son propos.”

⁴⁹ Bureau (1979: 59) sees SĀ² 110 (his version C) and SĀ 1197 (his version D) as representing “auteurs [qui] étaient demeurés fidèles ... à la vieille tradition qui avouait implicitement ne savoir du Parinirvāna du Buddha que le simple fait qu'il avait eu lieu e qu'ils rejetaient comme apocryphe le récit très détaillé que nous en donnent les six versions du *MPNS* [*Mahāparinirvāna-sūtra*]” (in the original the quoted part is in question form, the question being whether EĀ 42.3 can also be seen as reflecting the same ancient tradition).

⁵⁰ Przyluski (1918), (1919a), (1919b), and (1920).

⁵¹ Oldenberg (1879/1997: xxviii) assumed that differences between the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* and the account of the first *saṅgīti* at Vin II 284,2 implied that the reciters of the one text were ignorant of the other; cf. also Dutt (1957: 102), Franke (1908: 66–74), and An (2001: 52). Critical replies to this assumption can be found in Thomas (1927/2003: 165), Finot (1932: 243), Obermiller (1932), Thomas (1933/2004: 29), Frauwallner (1956: 45), Ch'en (1958), Upadhyaya (1971: 43–45), La Vallée Poussin (1976: 13 note 39), Jinananda (1993: 93), Witanachchi (2006: 723), and Anālayo (2011a: 863 note 43).

⁵² Przyluski (1918: 505): “les récits des Conciles relatant des événements postérieurs à Çākyamuni ne pouvaient prétendre d'eux-mêmes à la haute autorité qui s'attachait aux *Sūtra* ... on leur conféra en quelque sorte une

Avadānaśataka tales (no. 100) has the title *saṃgītiḥ*, clearly marking this as its chief topic. Przulski's suggestion thus offers a considerably more natural explanation than Bareau's assumption.

Bareau's remark that the presentation in the *Samyukta-āgama* discourses is only extant in Chinese translation shows that he was also unaware of the parallel versions in the *Avadānaśataka*. He also did not take into account the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* version. This reflects a basic methodological problem with Bareau's study of the biography of the Buddha in general, in that he did not base his various hypotheses on a study of all relevant versions.

In the case of the *Samyutta-nikāya* discourse that also reports the Buddha's meditative progression, Bareau summarily dismisses this version as a text that has been reworked to accord with the presentation in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*.⁵³ The evidence at our disposal stands in contrast to this conclusion. As mentioned above, there are several substantial differences between the *Samyutta-nikāya* discourse and the relevant section of the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*.⁵⁴ These differences are remarkable, given that these two discourse versions pertain to the same Theravāda Pāli canon. Thus the *Samyutta-nikāya* discourse cannot be regarded as merely a late reworking based on the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*.

In sum, it seems preferable to follow the lead of Waldschmidt who, based on his detailed study and on taking into account the research by Przulski, concludes that a comparative study of the relevant sources provides no support for the assumption that the progression of the Buddha through the nine meditative attainments on the eve of his passing away is a later expansion of an earlier shorter account.⁵⁵

authenticité factice en la faisant précéder d'un Sūtra ou d'un fragment de Sūtra. Les textes racontant la fin du Maître furent naturellement désignés pour servir de lien et de transition entre les écrits reproduisant la parole du Buddha et le chroniques des premiers siècles de l'Église."

⁵³ Bareau (1979: 55) refers to SN 6.15 as "un *sutta* pāli qui, selon toute vraisemblance, a été remanié plus tard pour le rendre identique à la version pālie de notre ouvrage, ce qui rend donc nul son témoignage."

⁵⁴ A survey of differences between the two versions can also be found in Przulski (1918: 506–508).

⁵⁵ Waldschmidt (1948: 251): "der Vergleich der verschiedenen überlieferten Parinirvāṇatexte gibt keine Anhaltspunkte zur Stütze dieser Annahme,"

The Buddha's Attainment of the Immaterial Spheres

In what follows I survey other arguments raised in support of the assumption that the description of the Buddha's attainment of the immaterial spheres on the verge of his death is a later addition. Due to the complexity of the topic, my discussion will also include an examination of the immaterial spheres in early Buddhism in general and of the Buddha's pre-awakening meditation practice.

In addition to arguments derived from the comparative study of the parallel versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, Bareau also supports his hypothesis by pointing out that no one could possibly have known what went on in the Buddha's mind. As the Buddha passed away right at the end of his meditative progression through the absorptions and immaterial spheres, he would not have been able to tell others what took place in his mind right on the verge of his own death.⁵⁶ Bareau is not the first one to make this point, as already T.W. Rhys Davids had expressed a similar view.⁵⁷

To be sure, it is not really possible for us to reconstruct historical facts based on mere textual accounts that are the final products of a longer period of transmission. This is especially true in the case of the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* and its parallels, which are clearly interspersed with hagiographic elements.⁵⁸ Nevertheless,

written in relation to the suggestion that the reference to the immaterial spheres is a later addition to the description of the Buddha's passing away (in the introduction to his study, Waldschmidt (1944: 3 note 11) explicitly mentions that he benefited from the work by Przyluski). As a methodological point in relation to studying the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* narrative in general, Snellgrove (1973: 409) comments "how unsatisfactory a proceeding it is to produce a plausible biography from these materials by simply accepting the parts which seem humanly possible and rejecting the miraculous elements as obvious accretions."

⁵⁶ Bareau (1979: 62): "puisque, de toute évidence, le Bienheureux n'a pu expliquer à ses disciples par quelle méthode psychique, en ses derniers instants, il est parvenu au Parinirvāṇa, lui qui en était le seul témoin silencieux, il est donc certain que cette description est purement imaginaire."

⁵⁷ Rhys Davids (1910: 174 note 1) comments that "no one, of course, can have known what actually did occur."

⁵⁸ Williams (2000: 26f) explains that "the life-story of the Buddha is not a historical narrative but a *hagiography* ... in which how it was, how it should have been, and how it must have been ... are united under the overriding

it is possible to consider whether a particular narration is internally coherent and in line with general ideas and notions found in other early Buddhist texts.

According to early Buddhist thought, meditative expertise enables knowing the state of mind of another. Such ability is regularly mentioned among a set of supernormal abilities held to be accessible once the mind has been cultivated up to the depth of concentration and inner stability of the fourth absorption. Such abilities are listed, for example, in the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* and its parallels.⁵⁹

It would therefore be in keeping with such assumptions on the power of the mind when the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* and its parallels attribute the information about the Buddha's meditative experience to Anuruddha.⁶⁰ Anuruddha features in the early Buddhist tradition as an outstanding disciple in the exercise of a supernormal ability called the divine eye,⁶¹ thus evidently he was reckoned to have been an adept in meditative concentration. Hence the idea that no one could possibly have known what went on in the Buddha's mind overlooks the role of Anuruddha in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* narrative, where he explicitly informs Ānanda that the Buddha has entered cessation.⁶²

concern of exemplary truth ... the life-story reflects the unification of is and ought in the vision and needs of the subsequent community ... the 'is' of historical fact was only one dimension, and a subordinate one, in the construction of the original hagiography. Thus the hagiography as a whole is to be read as an ideological document ... the Buddha's hagiography should be read as an illustration of what is to Buddhists important."

⁵⁹ DN 2 at DN I 79,26 and its parallels DĀ 27 at T I 109b8 (which abbreviates and thus needs to be supplemented from DĀ 20 at T I 86a23), T 22 at T I 275b26, and the *Saṅghabhedavastu*, Gnoli (1978: 248,16).

⁶⁰ In reply to the comment by Rhys Davids quoted above in note 57, Walshe (1987: 575 note 454) points out that "since Anuruddha is said to have had highly developed psychic powers, we cannot be so sure." As Nyanaponika and Hecker (1997: 208) explain in relation to DN 16, according to the presentation in the discourse "Anuruddha, an arahant endowed with the divine eye, had been able to gauge the level of meditation into which the Buddha had entered."

⁶¹ AN 1.14 at AN I 23,20 and EĀ 4.2 at T II 557b9.

⁶² The same explanation would also work for SN 6.15, even though this version does not record an explicit exchange between Anuruddha and Ānanda. Nevertheless, the fact that SN 6.15 at SN I 159,1 reports stanzas spoken by Anuruddha shows that he was on record as having been present

Another argument raised by Bareau is that he finds it difficult to understand why the Buddha would have gone up and down these various levels of meditative experience. According to Bareau, this difficulty makes it probable that the original description just mentioned the four absorptions and, having attained the fourth absorption, the Buddha entered Nirvāṇa.⁶³

Here, too, Bareau is not the first one to make such a suggestion. In a detailed study of the absorptions in Buddhism, Heiler (1922: 44) drew a distinction between what he considered to be the ancient tradition of the Buddha's meditation practice on the eve of his passing away and the four immaterial spheres and cessation as what according to him is a later addition. Similar suggestions have also been made by other scholars.⁶⁴

In the case of Heiler, his presentation is part of an overall argument that the immaterial spheres are a late addition to early Buddhist meditation theory. Hence in what follows I first need to address the arguments made in support of this hypothesis by Heiler and other scholars. At the end of my discussion of the presumed lateness of the immaterial spheres, I will return to the significance of the description of the series of meditative attainments the Buddha passed through according to the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* and its parallels.

The Immaterial Spheres in Early Buddhism

Heiler sees the immaterial spheres as being too different in character from the four absorptions to fit a meditative progression that covers both. According to him, while the four absorptions are a

on this occasion and would thus have been able to understand through his psychic powers what was going on in the Buddha's mind.

⁶³ Bareau (1971a: 155f): “ces montées et descentes successives paraissent assez étranges, et l'on ne comprend pas bien, à première vue, pourquoi le Buddha n'est pas entré dans le Parinirvāṇa en sortant du recueillement de cessation, ni les deux premières fois où il a quitté la quatrième méditation ... on est ainsi conduit à admettre une version primitive réduite à cette seconde partie, dans laquelle le Bienheureux montait tout de suite jusqu'à la quatrième méditation, puis s'éteignait.”

⁶⁴ Thomas (1927/2003: 153 note 2), Falk (1939/2004: 339f), Foucher (1949: 313), King (1980/1992: 15), and Zafiropulo (1993: 67); cf. also Rhys Davids (1927: 713), who speaks of a “curious insertion of the Jhāna formulas into the account of the moment of his passing.”

contemplation of religious truths, the immaterial spheres are merely an intellectual abstraction.⁶⁵

Another argument by Falk then even considers the four immaterial attainments to be lacking inner coherence, since the first two occur also among the *kaṣiṇas*, whereas the last two are mere negations. According to Falk, this then makes it probable that these four were put together based on two unrelated sets of two in order to arrive at the same count of four as the four absorptions.⁶⁶

The distinctions drawn by Heiler and Falk seem to be based on a misunderstanding of the nature of the respective experiences. The main difference between the four absorptions and the four immaterial spheres is related to their respective objects. The four absorptions can be cultivated with a variety of objects, hence no specific object is mentioned when these are described. The immaterial spheres involve a transcending of whatever object has been used for attaining the four absorptions, consequently the descriptions refer to such transcendence. This of course does not mean that the experience itself is a mere intellectual abstraction.

In the case of the four absorptions, the differences between them concern the depth of concentration reached. The early discourses describe this deepening of concentration in two complementary ways:

The more commonly found descriptions are oriented on the type of happiness experienced. This proceeds from the rapture and happiness of seclusion in the first absorption, via the rapture and happiness of concentration in the second absorption and the

⁶⁵ Heiler (1922: 29): “Den Ausgangspunkt der vier *jhāna* und *appamaññā* bildet die ernste Betrachtung der religiösen Wahrheiten ... den Ausgangspunkt der *arūpa* hingegen bildet die gedanken- und gefühllose Konzentration der Aufmerksamkeit auf ein bedeutungsloses äußeres Objekt oder die rein intellektuelle Abstraktionstätigkeit, deren Stoff außerreligiöse neutrale Vorstellungen abgeben ... dort echtes und tiefes religiöses Erleben – hier eine äußerliche Psychotechnik.”

⁶⁶ Falk (1939/2004: 340): “La serie dei quattro *arūpadhyāna* é a sua volta composita. I primi due elementi ... ricompaiono in un’ altra classe di esercizi meditativi, nella classe dei *kaṣiṇa* ... gli ultimi due ... sono invece definiti per mera negazione ... non hanno però nessun chiaro rapporto con i primi due ... appare probabile che due gruppi di due elementi siano stati saldati insieme per riempire uno schema numericamente preformato, per ottenere quattro *dhyāna* dell’*ārūpya-dhātu* corrispondenti, in posizione superiore, ai quattro *dhyāna* del *rūpadhātu*.”

happiness devoid of rapture in the third absorption, to a culmination point in the cultivation of concentration reached with the equanimity of the fourth absorption.

Another presentation focuses on the role of mental application (*vitarka*) and its sustaining (*vicāra*), resulting in a threefold distinction: 1) both are required, 2) only sustaining is required 3) both are no longer required. Numbers 1 and 2 of this presentation correspond to the first absorption in the fourfold scheme, number 3 covers the rest of the four.

With the fourth absorption attained, the standard descriptions in the discourses indicate that the mind has reached an acme of concentration considered as being “imperturbable”.⁶⁷ With such imperturbability reached, according to early Buddhist meditation theory various options for further practice present themselves.

A practitioner might decide to proceed towards the gaining of the threefold knowledge or the six higher knowledges. Both of these sets include the attainment of awakening, alongside various other supernormal abilities that are not in themselves considered necessary for reaching awakening.

An alternative route to be taken based on the fourth absorption is to cultivate the immaterial spheres. These are at times individually or collectively reckoned to be forms of imperturbability, reflecting the fact that they are based on the same degree of concentrative imperturbability as the fourth absorption.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Cf., e.g., DN 2 at DN I 76,15 and its parallels D 20 at T I 85c7, T 22 at T I 275a13, and Gnoli (1978: 245,15). Such imperturbability stands according to MN 66 at MN I 454,28 and its parallel MĀ 192 at T I 743b2 in contrast to the “perturbation” caused by the mental factors still present in the lower absorptions.

⁶⁸ All four immaterial spheres are presented as ways to reach the imperturbable in AN 4.190 at AN II 184,29. MN 105 at MN II 255,5, as well as MN 106 at MN II 263,13 and its parallels MĀ 75 at T I 542c10 and D 4094 *ju* 228a6 or Q 5595 *tu* 260b5, proceed from imperturbability to the third immaterial sphere, so that here imperturbability would stand for the lower two immaterial spheres. The third immaterial sphere is qualified as imperturbable in MN 102 at MN II 230,2 and its Tibetan parallel edited in Skilling (1994: 318,3). While there evidently is some variation in the application of the term “imperturbable”, it nevertheless seems clear that the four immaterial spheres are based on the level of imperturbable concentration reached with the fourth absorption. As Gunaratana (1985/1996: 108f) explains, progression “from one formless attainment to

Progress towards the immaterial spheres takes place by way of a change of the meditative object that has been the basis for cultivating the four absorptions.⁶⁹ This is first replaced by the meditative experience of the space that this object had occupied. This space is then attended to as being experienced by one's own consciousness. This in turn is seen as insubstantial and thus in a way "nothing". Eventually even this concept is given up, resulting in a condition where the mind can be said to be neither perceptive nor non-perceptive.

There is thus indeed a difference between the four absorptions and the four immaterial spheres, but all of these eight experiences are 'religious experiences', if such terminology is to be used, and none of them involves mere intellectual abstraction.

There is also indeed a difference between the first two and the last two of the four immaterial spheres, but there is also a difference between the first and the second, as well as between the third and the fourth immaterial sphere. All four, however, are part of a continuous meditative dynamic whose trajectory is based precisely on the progression that results from these differences, instead of being the outcome of a merely artificial construction with the aim to arrive at a total count of four.

Heiler, based on the assumption that the four absorptions and the four immaterial spheres are incompatible with each other, comes to the conclusion that the immaterial spheres must be a later addition, resulting in an arbitrary and merely theoretical combination of two completely different forms of meditation practice.⁷⁰ He finds confirmation for his assessment in the fact that

another is brought about by changing the object of concentration, not by eliminating or replacing component factors ... the fourth fine material *jhāna* and the four immaterial [spheres] ... contain the same basic constellation of mental concomitants ... and the same two *jhāna* factors, namely one-pointedness and neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling." Govinda (1961/1991: 96) points out that "from the stand point of consciousness (*cetasika*), the *arūpa-jhānas* can be classified" under the fourth absorption, "with which they agree in the elimination of the first four factors (*vitakka*, *vicāra*, *pīti*, *sukha*)."

⁶⁹ King (1980/1992: 41) explains that "*jhāna*' is a mode of meditative concentration not a content, whereas the immaterial states represent a content."

⁷⁰ Heiler (1922: 29) comments in relation to "die ganze Konstruktion dieser *jhāna* und *arūpa* umfassenden Versenkungsleiter. Es handelt sich um die

the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* does not mention the immaterial spheres. Moreover, the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* reports the Buddha's formal refusal of the immaterial spheres taught by his first teachers, which according to Heiler shows that the immaterial spheres were not accepted by the Buddha himself, but only taken over by later dogmatists.⁷¹

Regarding the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta*, it needs to be kept in mind that the topic of this discourse is a description of the "fruits of recluship" to a contemporary king. Therefore it is only natural that, out of the alternative routes to be taken after the fourth absorption,⁷² the description focuses on supernormal abilities and knowledges, instead of taking up the immaterial spheres. Within the narrative context, descriptions of such supernormal abilities are a better way of impressing on the king that the life of a recluse is indeed fruitful.

Given the fact that the immaterial spheres are only one of the routes of mental cultivation possible after mastery of the fourth absorption also explains why in other passages at times the four absorptions are mentioned, but the immaterial spheres are absent. In fact, at times neither the immaterial spheres nor supernormal abilities and knowledges are mentioned. Depending on the context, a reference to the four absorptions can suffice to cover the concentrative development of the mind. This does not mean that those responsible for these passages were unaware of the possibility of attaining the immaterial spheres or of the

willkürliche und künstliche, rein theoretische Kombinierung zweier völlig verschiedener Versenkungsmethoden." Yet, as pointed out by King (1980/1992: 50), "the jhānic series leads naturally, even inevitably, into the formless or immaterial-base meditations."

⁷¹ Heiler (1922: 45) comments that in this way "schweigt die dogmatische Darstellung des Heilspfades, das *Sāmañña-phala-Sutta*, von ihr [d.h. von der Stufenleiter der *arūpa*] vollständig. Ja, das *Ariya-pariyesana-Sutta* des *Majjhima-Nikāya* berichtet uns ebenso wie *Lalita Vistara* sogar von einer förmlichen Absage Buddhas an die Methode der abstrakten Versenkung ... aus dieser alten und glaubwürdigen Erzählung geht hervor ... daß die Theorie und Praxis des *arūpa jhānam* nicht von Buddha selbst, sondern erst von der späteren Ordensdogmatik übernommen und weiter ausgestaltet wurde."

⁷² Be it noted that the exposition of the various meditative attainments is not found at all in one of the versions of the discourse, EĀ 43.7 at T II 762a7 (the other parallels are listed above note 67). Meisig (1987: 35f) takes this to be an indication that the whole exposition is a later addition.

supernormal knowledges. In fact on such a reasoning one would have to conclude that, for example, the fact that the *Sallekha-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel list the four absorptions and the immaterial sphere without following this with a reference to awakening implies that the possibility to reach awakening was unknown among those responsible for this discourse.⁷³

Instead of drawing such unconvincing conclusions, it seems more reasonable to take shorter references that do not exhaustively cover all aspects of the early Buddhist meditative path to be simply due to the context in which the respective exposition occurs.⁷⁴

In the case of the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta*, the point at stake is not a wholesale refusal of the immaterial spheres.⁷⁵ Instead, the discourse only reports that the Buddha-to-be considered the third and fourth immaterial spheres he had learned from his teachers Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta to fall short of being the final goal. Once the Buddha had reached awakening, according to the same discourse's narration he thought that his former teachers would easily understand and wished to share his discovery with them.⁷⁶ This description clearly reflects a rather high value accorded to the immaterial spheres, however much they are considered to fall short of being the final goal.⁷⁷

⁷³ MN 8 at MN I 40,27 and its parallel MĀ 91 at T I 573b26.

⁷⁴ This would explain the observation by Bronkhost (1993/2000: xiii) that some summary listings of meditational states cover the four absorptions, but not the immaterial spheres; thus it is certainly not the case that “the most plausible explanation is again that the Formless States were not accepted during the earliest period of Buddhism.” It would also explain why the definition of *uttarimanussadhamma* in relation to the fourth *pārājika* at Vin III 91,30 just mentions *jhāna*, etc., but does not refer to the immaterial spheres. This does certainly not mean, as assumed by Zafiropulo (1993: 59), that at the time of the formulation of this explanation the immaterial spheres were not part of the known practices. It would be impossible to claim having attained an immaterial sphere without at the same time implicitly claiming to have attained *jhāna*. Thus the context does not require an additional listing of the immaterial spheres, since the way it reads already suffices for covering false claims to having attained an immaterial sphere.

⁷⁵ Pace Senart (1900: 347), who even speaks of “une attitude d’hostilité intransigante.”

⁷⁶ MN 26 at MN I 170,6+19 and its parallel MĀ 204 at T I 777a25 and 777b3; for a translation of the relevant section from MĀ 204 cf. Anālayo (2012b: 32).

⁷⁷ This has already been pointed out by Wynne (2007: 21f), who notes that

While Heiler takes the description in the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* to be plausible, a similar argument regarding the supposed lateness of the immaterial spheres has been made by Bronkhorst on the assumption that the bodhisattva's period of apprenticeship under Ārāḍa Kālāma and Udraka Rāmaputra is a later invention.⁷⁸

Such a suggestion had already been made earlier by Bareau, based mainly on the fact that the Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya* does not report the apprenticeship of the future Buddha under these two teachers, but only his post-awakening wish to share his discovery with them.⁷⁹

This supposed discrepancy is simply due to the fact that the Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya* proceeds from the bodhisattva's meeting with King Bimbisāra directly to his attainment of awakening.⁸⁰ In view of the narrative emphasis adopted in this *Vinaya*, it is only natural

“the teachers' meditative practices are not denigrated, and it is implied that they must be of some soteriological benefit, for the Buddha is in no doubt as to the teachers' spiritual qualities,” wherefore the discourse is “not a total condemnation of the teachers' meditative methods.”

⁷⁸ Bronkhorst (1985: 308) suggests that “the meditational states covered by the term *ārūpya* do not appear to have been originally part of Buddhist meditation ... the Bodhisattva learned from them [his two teachers] the *ākiñcanyāyatana* and the *naivasamjñānāsamjñāyatana* respectively, but rejected these states since they did not lead him to the desired end. This story does not appear to be historical and was intended as a denouncement of these two states, and consequently of the 4 *ārūpya*.”

⁷⁹ Bareau (1963: 16) notes that this episode, found in MN 26 at MN I 163,31, MĀ 204 at T I 776b8, and the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya*, T 1428 at T XXII 780b8, is absent from the Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya*, which nevertheless does report the intention to teach them, T 1421 at T XXII 104a11. Bareau (1963: 20) then concludes that therefore Ārāḍa Kālāma and Udraka Rāmaputra “son probablement fictifs”, a conclusion accepted by Vetter (1988: xxii). Several arguments raised in support of this hypothesis have already been successfully refuted by Zafiropulo (1993: 22–29) and Wynne (2007: 9–26); so in what follows I only intend to supplement their discussion by taking a look at the Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya* passage in question.

⁸⁰ T 1421 at T XXII 102c14 describes that the bodhisattva, after King Bimbisāra had left, approached the *bodhi* tree and asked a person nearby for some grass to sit on. Applying Bareau's mode of interpretation consistently, one would have to conclude that the Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya* presents an alternative account according to which the bodhisattva attained awakening right away, without any need to search for a way to attain it and without any practice of asceticism. This of course does not match the remainder of the narration in the same *Vinaya*.

that neither the apprenticeship under Ārāḍa Kālāma and Udraka Rāmaputra nor the practice of austerities are mentioned.

The same Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya* reports, however, that after his awakening the Buddha first wanted to disclose his discovery to Ārāḍa Kālāma and Udraka Rāmaputra, and then decided to approach his five former companions from the time of his ascetic practices.⁸¹ It seems thus fairly obvious that the reciters of the Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya* were aware of what tradition generally associates with the period that precedes the Buddha's awakening, and it is only due to its narrative emphasis that this *Vinaya* does not provide a full account of these as part of its pre-awakening narrative.

In fact the Theravāda *Vinaya*, in the way it has come down to us, does not mention any of the pre-awakening events.⁸² To be sure, this does not imply that the Theravāda *Vinaya* reciters were not aware of the tradition concerning events believed to have preceded the Buddha's awakening. So the absence of a full account in these two *Vinayas* need not be taken to have any deeper significance beyond the narrative choice of the reciters responsible for compiling and transmitting the respective texts.

The future Buddha's apprenticeship under these two teachers is in fact also mentioned in texts that Bareau did not take into account in his study, namely the *Mahāvastu*,⁸³ a *Vinaya* text of the Mahāsāṃghika Lokottaravāda tradition,⁸⁴ and the *Sanḅha-bhedavastu* of the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*.⁸⁵

In sum, the arguments proposed in support of the assumption that the immaterial spheres are a later addition to the descriptions of meditative practice in the early discourses are not convincing. This in turn implies that the mere fact that the immaterial spheres occur in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* and its

⁸¹ T 1421 at T XXII 104a19 reports the Buddha reflecting that he could teach his five former companions and at 104b20 records that they refer to his former asceticism when expressing their disbelief in his awakening.

⁸² Vin I 1,1 sets out only with the awakening already attained; cf. the discussion in Zafiropulo (1993: 24).

⁸³ Senart (1890: 118,6); the wish to teach them is then found in Senart (1897: 322,11).

⁸⁴ On the *Vinaya* nature of this text cf. Tournier (2012).

⁸⁵ Gnoli (1977: 97,4); the wish to teach them is found in Gnoli (1977: 130,16).

parallels as part of meditative practice of the Buddha on the verge of his death is not in itself a sign of later addition.

Based on this general assessment I am now able to return to the query raised by Bareau, namely why the Buddha would have been depicted as going up and down these various levels of meditative experience before passing away.

A discourse in the *Samyutta-nikāya* and its *Samyukta-āgama* parallels report the Buddha proclaiming that he can freely attain each of the four absorptions and each of the four immaterial spheres.⁸⁶ This proclamation implies that to be able to do so is a mark of meditative mastery. Hence for the Buddha to be on record as proceeding through the same series on the verge of his death is a way of showing that, in spite of being about to pass away, he was in full possession of his meditative mastery.

There is thus a fairly straightforward rationale behind the description of the Buddha's meditative progression at this moment. This rationale is fully in keeping with the general tendency in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* and its parallels to show the self-possession of the Buddha when confronted with the most fearful of all human experiences: one's own death. The same is evident, for example, in the depiction of his deliberate giving up of his life force on an earlier occasion.⁸⁷ The step-by-step progression through this range of meditative attainments in forward and backward order is thus not a detour, leave alone a tortuous procedure,⁸⁸ but from a Buddhist perspective much rather depicts the most peaceful and self-possessed way to meet one's own death, exemplifying the Buddha's high degree of self-mastery.

Another discourse that helps bring out a further aspect of the significance of the Buddha's meditative progression up to cessation at the time of his death can be found in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*. According to this discourse, the Buddha had reached awakening by progressing step-by-step through the same nine

⁸⁶ SN 16.9 at SN II 211,5 and its parallels SĀ 1142 T II 302a18 and SĀ² 117 at T II 416c24. A difference is that the attainment of cessation is only mentioned in SN 16.9 at SN II 212,8.

⁸⁷ DN 16 at DN II 106,21, Waldschmidt (1951, 212) (§16.14), DĀ 2 at T I 15c20, T 5 at T I 165a23, T 6 at T I 180c6, and T 7 at T I 191c8; cf. also Cowell and Neil (1886, 203,7).

⁸⁸ Pande (1957: 105) wonders: "one may ask why this tortuous procedure?"

levels of meditative mastery. Thus from the viewpoint of this discourse, the descriptions in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* and its parallels stand in a close relationship to the Buddha's awakening. In other words, on the verge of his Nirvāṇa the Buddha once more passed through the experiences that had led him to his original attainment of Nirvāṇa.

The Buddha's Progress to Awakening

In order to substantiate this suggestion, in what follows I take a closer look at this *Aṅguttara-nikāya* discourse and other discourses that describe the Buddha's progress to liberation.

In this *Aṅguttara-nikāya* discourse, of which no parallel seems to be known, the Buddha reports that he attained the four absorptions, the four immaterial spheres, and cessation, whereupon his influxes were destroyed.⁸⁹ The last in this series could imply that the Buddha's actual realization of Nirvāṇa on the night of his awakening should be understood to have taken place through the attainment of cessation [or perception and feeling].⁹⁰ That is, for one who has mastery of the four absorptions and the immaterial spheres, it would be possible to attain full awakening through entry into cessation.

The next discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* sets out with a verse, according to which the Buddha awakened to absorption, followed by depicting the same series of nine successive stages culminating in cessation.⁹¹

⁸⁹ AN 9.41 at AN IV 448,7: *āsavā parikkhayam agamamsu*, which thus uses an aorist form that differs from the standard formulation *parikkhīṇā honti*. Somaratne (2003: 216) explains that the reading *āsavā parikkhayam agamamsu* in AN 9.41 implies that here "the Buddha is talking about a past experience where he achieved the cessation for the first time."

⁹⁰ Commenting on AN 9.41, Bronkhorst (2009: 54) reasons that "since no mental processes take place in the cessation of ideation and feeling, the highest enlightenment cannot take place" in this attainment. Yet, as pointed out by Wynne (2002: 31), the description in AN 9.41 indeed "means that the Buddha attained liberation whilst in the state of cessation," and thus by way of the most complete and thorough mode of experiencing Nirvāṇa. As Somaratne (2006: 750) explains, the ability to attain cessation means that "one is able to experience *nibbāna* physically here and now in its completeness."

⁹¹ AN 9.42 at AN IV 451,20.

While of this discourse, too, no parallel seems to be known, the verse recurs in the *Samyutta-nikāya* and in the two *Samyukta-āgamas*. In the complete *Samyukta-āgama* (T 99), the verse refers to the Buddha's realization of what is to be realized in relation to absorption, the other *Samyukta-āgama* (T 100) speaks of his realization on emerging from absorption.⁹² While differing in formulation, the point common to the different versions of this verse appears to be that an aspect of the Buddha's awakening was his penetrative insight into the nature of absorption, based of course on having mastered it.

The main point made in the second *Aṅguttara-nikāya* discourse that also has this verse appears to be the same as in the preceding *Aṅguttara-nikāya* discourse, in that the Buddha's awakening took place after he had progressed through the four absorptions and the four immaterial spheres and, in a way, seen through them. It is through such seeing through that he would have been able to proceed further and attain cessation.

Returning to the first of these two *Aṅguttara-nikāya* discourses, the eight concentrative attainments that precede cessation are specified to have each taken place at a different time, *aparena samayena*.⁹³ In other words, the discourse covers an extended time period, not a single meditation session.

That it took some time for the Buddha before being able to proceed through the absorptions is also reported in the *Upakkilesa-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel, which adopt the alternative mode of describing the absorptions that focuses on the role of *vitarka* and *vicāra*. The two parallels agree that before being able to master absorption attainment, the future Buddha had to overcome a series of various mental obstructions one after the other.⁹⁴ The *Madhyama-āgama* version makes explicit what would be implicit in the *Upakkilesa-sutta*, namely that the Buddha's pre-awakening cultivation of absorption took place during consecutive

⁹² SN 2.7 at SN I 48,29: *jhānam abuddhi*, B^c: *jhānam abujjhi*, C^c: *jhānam budhā*, new E^c ed. by Somaratne (1998: 110): *jhānam abudhā*, and its parallels SĀ 1305 at T II 358c3: 禪思覺所覺 and SĀ 304² at T II 477a25: 從禪出覺了。

⁹³ The qualification *aparena samayena* is found in all editions I have been able to consult; the remark in Bodhi (2012: 1832 note 1947) refers only to a doubling of this expression in E^c.

⁹⁴ MN 128 at MN III 157,29 and MĀ 72 at T I 536c19.

days and nights.⁹⁵ Thus when the Buddha is on record for having attained the four absorptions on the night of his awakening,⁹⁶ this appears to reflect his relying on a meditative expertise he had acquired on an earlier occasion.

According to the *Mahāvastu* and the *Divyāvadāna*, as well as the Pāli commentarial tradition, the bodhisattva had trained under a seer before joining Ālāra Kālāma.⁹⁷ The *Saṅghabhedavastu* adds that he had been well established in the absorption meditation, *dhyāna*, that was being practiced at the place of this seer.⁹⁸ Judging from these texts the bodhisattva had already cultivated absorption before meeting Ālāra Kālāma, who then taught him how to progress further to the attainment of the third immaterial sphere.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ MĀ 72 at T I 538c9.

⁹⁶ This is reported in MN 4 at MN I 21,33 and its parallels EĀ 31.1 at T II 666b11, translated in Anālayo (2011b: 215), SHT IV 32 folio 37 and SHT IV 165 folio 15, Sander and Waldschmidt (1980: 131f and 190f), and SHT IX 2401, Bechert and Wille (2004: 195). Another instance indicating the same is MN 36 at MN I 247,17 and its parallels Sanskrit fragment 337r4, Liu (2010: 228), and EĀ 31.8 at T II 671c27. The same report is also found in the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya*, T 1428 at T XXII 781a23, and in the *Mahāvastu*, Senart (1890: 131,16).

⁹⁷ Cowell and Neil (1886: 391, 27): *asmin pradeśe bhārgaveṇāśrameṇopani-mantritaḥ* (this is part of a description given during a tour of sacred places); Senart (1890: 195,12): *bodhisatvo dharmāraṇyaṃ vaśiṣṭhasya ṛṣisya āśramapadaṃ praviṣṭaḥ*; Thī-a 2,17: *bhaggavass' ārāmaṃ gantvā tassa samayaṃ pariggaṇhitvā, tato ālāruddakānaṃ samayaṃ pariggaṇhitvā*. Thus three different traditions agree that the bodhisattva had gone to stay with a seer, only disagreeing on his name.

⁹⁸ Gnoli (1977: 96,18): *ṛṣiṇām āśramapadam, tatropasankrāntaḥ, teṣāṃ cāravihāratayā dhyānaparo vyavasthitaḥ*.

⁹⁹ MN 26 at MN I 165,12 and 166,31 explicitly indicates that the attainments reached under the two teachers would lead to the corresponding rebirth, making it clear that the description intends the full attainment of the respective immaterial sphere. The same is also evident in the parallel MĀ 204 at T I 776b12+24, Anālayo (2012b: 27 and 29), where Ārāda and Udraka describe the attainments taught by them as a going beyond the respective lower immaterial sphere. Thus the assumption by, e.g., Ireland (1998: 195) that the “experiences the Buddha had with these two former teachers had no relation to the *jhānas* as later taught by him” is simply unconvincing. It would in fact be difficult to find corroboration for the assumption that the immaterial spheres can be reached without previous training in absorption, since elsewhere the discourses present the four absorptions as what leads up to the immaterial spheres and from there to the attainment of cessation; cf., e.g., MN 25 at MN I 160,8 and its parallel MĀ

The *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* and its parallel in fact report that the bodhisattva was “quickly” able to reach the attainments described by his two teachers.¹⁰⁰ For him to be able to accomplish swiftly what his teachers found so impressive an accomplishment that they were willing to elevate him to their own rank of teacher makes it clear that he must have already been proficient in the cultivation of concentration.

In fact according to the *Mahāsaccaka-sutta* and its Sanskrit fragment parallel the bodhisattva already had an experience of the first absorption before going forth.¹⁰¹ A reference to this experience occurs in an account of the Buddha's approach to awakening given to the debater Saccaka, who appears to have been an advocate of asceticism.

The *Mahāsaccaka-sutta* and its parallel agree that in this account of his own asceticism the Buddha throughout indicated that the pain he experienced never overwhelmed his mind.¹⁰² This provides a reply to the question asked by Saccaka if the Buddha had at some point been overwhelmed by pleasure or pain.¹⁰³ The *Mahāsaccaka-sutta* states explicitly what is also implicit in the

178 at T I 720a22, just to mention one occurrence. Such an assumption would also not square too well with the indication that Udraka himself had not reached what he taught, which had only been accomplished by his father Rāma; cf. the discussion in Skilling (1981). This indication only makes sense if the immaterial attainment he taught did indeed require a high degree of meditative expertise. The fact that the training in moral conduct and concentration required to reach the third and fourth immaterial spheres is not mentioned explicitly is simply due to the narrative purpose of MN 26 and its parallel, which is to depict the Buddha's “noble quest”. Hence it is important to describe the attainments the Buddha reached and then rejected as not being the fulfilment of his noble quest, but the context does not require a complete account of the entire course of practice undertaken that led up to these attainments.

¹⁰⁰ MN 26 at MN I 164,25 and 166,7: *nacirass' eva khippam eva* and MĀ 204 at T I 776b20 and 776c19: 不久.

¹⁰¹ MN 36 at MN I 246,31 and fragment 336v6, Liu (2010: 222); cf. also the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya*, T 1428 at T XXII 781a5; the *Mahāvastu*, Senart (1890: 130,15); and the *Saṅghabhedavastu*, Gnoli (1977: 107,27).

¹⁰² Such a remark is also found in the account of the Buddha's pre-awakening experiences in the *Saṅghabhedavastu*, Gnoli (1977: 103,11+24 and 104,5). This gives the impression that the original elements of this account might stem from a setting similar as what is depicted in MN 36.

¹⁰³ MN 36 at MN I 240,12 and fragment 331r4, Liu (2010: 143).

Sanskrit version, in that since going forth no feeling of pleasure or pain had been able to overwhelm the Buddha's mind.¹⁰⁴ This indication helps appreciating the reference to the first absorption experience before he had gone forth.

The *Mahāsaccaka-sutta* and its parallel report that, once the bodhisattva recognized that nevertheless his ascetic striving was not fruitful, he reflected on alternative approaches and realized that the first absorption experienced before going forth was the path to awakening.

Needless to say, the first absorption is not in itself the whole path to awakening. The whole path to awakening in early Buddhist thought is rather the noble eightfold path, where in the standard definition all four absorptions are one of the eight factors required for progress to liberation. But in the context of the situation depicted in the *Mahāsaccaka-sutta* the recollection of the former experience of the first absorption was the first step on the path to awakening, since it triggered the insight that the pleasure of such absorption is not something to be feared.¹⁰⁵

This first absorption had been experienced at a time before the future Buddha had gone forth and therefore before he had established the type of mental detachment that ensured that no feeling would overwhelm his mind. Nevertheless, the pleasure he had experienced at that time had no unwholesome repercussions. This would have confirmed to the bodhisattva that pleasure is not a problem as such. It appears to have corroborated his dawning insight that the path to liberation does not require just engaging in pain and avoiding all forms of pleasure and happiness, which the fruitlessness of his asceticism had already made plain to him.¹⁰⁶ Wholesome pleasures, like those experienced during absorption attainment, are instead an integral part of the path to awakening.

In this way the attainment of absorption can be seen to have had a crucial role in the path to awakening that according to the

¹⁰⁴ MN 36 at MN I 240,8.

¹⁰⁵ This point is made explicit in the *Mahāsaccaka-sutta* itself, where the bodhisattva reflects why he is afraid of a form of pleasure that is apart from sensuality and unwholesome states, MN 36 at MN I 246,37; cf. also Anālayo (2011a: 242f).

¹⁰⁶ In MN 85 at MN II 93,15 the Buddha reports that before his awakening he believed that progress to happiness requires going through pain. After having reached awakening he of course knew better.

textual accounts the Buddha himself traversed. His mastery of the four absorptions up to the level of mental imperturbability would have earlier enabled him to reach the lofty immaterial attainments described by Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta. On the eve of his awakening he would have followed the alternative meditative route possible based on the same level of mental imperturbability by developing the three higher knowledges (*tevijjā*), the third of which corresponds to the breakthrough to full awakening.

The Buddha's Attainment of the Immaterial Spheres

In this way the four absorptions, the four immaterial spheres, and the experience of Nirvāṇa are clearly central elements of the Buddha's own mental cultivation as depicted in the early discourses. From this perspective, then, the description in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* and its parallels does indeed seem to be mirroring the meditative progression that had led up to the Buddha's awakening. This progression proceeds through eight levels – the four absorptions and the four immaterial spheres – that appear to have been common ground among contemporary practitioners, but on attaining the ninth level the distinct Buddhist contribution to this series is reached.

Considered in this way, the attainment of cessation appears to be indeed required in the present context to convey the central message. This central message is to throw into relief the Buddha's mastery and his transcendence of what in other traditions apparently was reckoned to be the final goal.

Support for this suggestion can be found in the *Brahmajāla-sutta* and its parallels, for example. As part of a survey of what from a Buddhist viewpoint are mistaken views, the parallel versions show that the immaterial spheres had led contemporaries of the Buddha to adopt annihilationism, while the four absorptions had been mistaken to be Nirvāṇa here and now.¹⁰⁷ In the Pāli

¹⁰⁷ DN 1 at DN 34,32, DĀ 21 at TI 93b4, a Tibetan discourse parallel in Weller (1934: 56) (§186), a discourse quotation in the **Śāriputrābhidharma*, T 1548 at T XXVIII 660b1, and a discourse quotation in D 4094 *ju* 151b5 or Q 5595 *tu* 174b8; for a comparative study cf. Anālayo (2009); for Sanskrit fragments corresponding to the section on annihilationism cf. also Hartmann (1989: 54) and SHT X 4189, Wille (2008: 307). This of course does not mean, as assumed by Zafīropulo (1993: 57f), that at the time of the formation of this discourse the immaterial spheres and the four absorptions

Nikāyas, the *Brahmajāla-sutta* is one of the few discourses quoted elsewhere in another Pāli discourse, giving the impression that this discourse must be fairly early.¹⁰⁸

Another relevant instance would be the *Cūlasakuludāyi-sutta* and its parallel, just to mention one more example. The two discourses report the dismay of a group of contemporary practitioners on finding out that the Buddha knew an attainment that went beyond the realm corresponding to the third absorption, considered by them to be the supreme goal.¹⁰⁹ Notably, these practitioners are depicted as being ignorant of the way of practice that leads to what they considered as the highest goal. In other words, this discourse seems to reflect the existence of an ancient form of practice that led up to the third absorption.¹¹⁰ However, by the time of the encounter with the Buddha these practitioners were apparently only aware of the goal, the actual practice having fallen into oblivion. The *Cūlasakuludāyi-sutta* and its parallel thus show the Buddha being able to teach these practitioners how to reach the goal of their aspiration, at the same time indicating that there are attainments that surpass their goal.

The *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* and its parallels fit well with

were not yet seen as related to each other. The point is only that some non-Buddhists are shown up for having mistaken the attainment of the absorptions as the final goal, leading to one particular type of wrong view, but other non-Buddhists who had further progressed to the immaterial attainments instead took these to be the final goal, resulting in another type of wrong view.

¹⁰⁸ The “sixty-two [forms of] going into views mentioned in the *Brahmajāla-sutta*” are quoted in SN 41.3 at SN IV 286,12 and 287,12, (such a full reference is not found in the parallel SĀ 570 at T II 151a18, however, which just speaks of these views in general). The count of sixty-two corresponds to the grounds for views discussed in the *Brahmajāla-sutta* and its parallels, including the four annihilationist views based on the experience of the immaterial spheres and the four views that uphold Nirvāṇa here and now, based on the attainment of the four absorptions. This gives the impression that by the time of the coming into being of this reference, the set of sixty-two views was already well established and known.

¹⁰⁹ MN 79 at MN II 37,16 and MĀ 208 at T I 786a24; cf. also the discussion in Anālayo (2011a: 435f).

¹¹⁰ This is explicitly stated in the commentary, Ps III 275,2; Bodhi in Ñāṇamoli (1995/2005: 1287f note 784) explains that according to the commentary these practitioners “knew that in the past meditators would ... attain the third jhāna.”

the depictions in the *Brahmajāla-sutta* and the *Cūlasakuludāyisutta*, together with their respective parallels. In this way, even on the verge of his death the Buddha is endowed with complete mastery over all these attainments, the four absorptions and the four immaterial attainments. He is able to attain and leave each of them freely, proceeding onwards until he reaches what goes beyond the teachings and attainments known among his contemporaries, the attainment of cessation. His degree of detachment and self-mastery is such that he executes this progression in the forward order and the reverse direction, in line with what in early Buddhist meditation theory is a criterion for true meditative mastery: being able to proceed through a series of meditative attainments in the forward and backward order.¹¹¹ After this demonstration of his meditative mastery, he uses the same step-by-step approach once again up to the fourth absorption, as a basis for his entry into final Nirvāṇa.

The main point made in this way also emerges when turning to Buddhist art, such as a depiction of the Buddha's *Mahāparinirvāṇa* from cave 26 at Ajaṅṭā (see next page). The depiction of the Buddha's passing away in this image conveys an air of calm self-possession, of being at ease and in peace.¹¹²

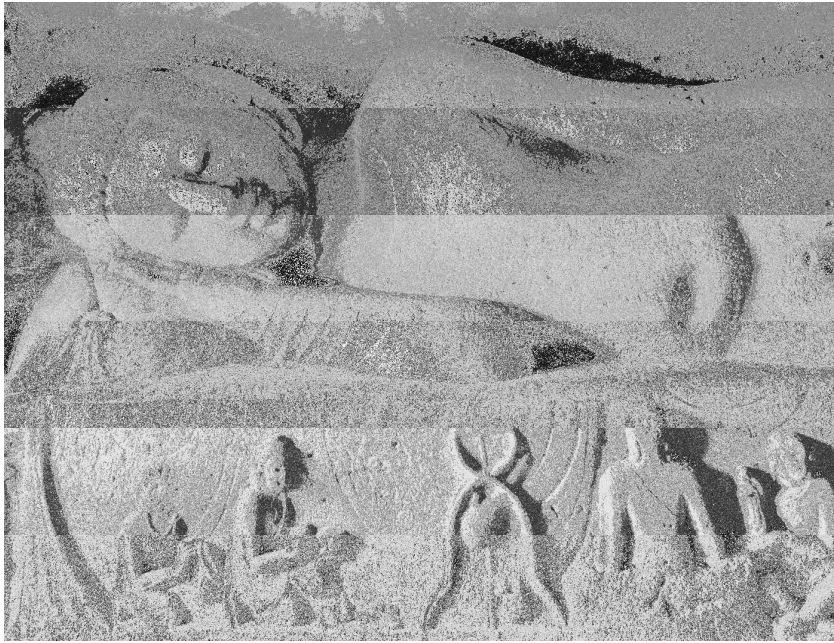
Conclusion

When considered from the viewpoint of early Buddhist meditation theory in the way this has been preserved in the early discourses, there seems to be nothing inherently incoherent or problematic in the depiction of the Buddha's meditation practice on the verge of his passing away. This accords with the finding from a comparative study of the relevant passage, which gives the impression that the Buddha's gradual progression through the four absorptions and the immaterial spheres is fairly common ground among otherwise quite different parallel versions. The main point of the passage is simply to show the Buddha's meditative mastery right on the eve of his passing away, and at the same time

¹¹¹ Cf., e.g., AN 9.41 at AN IV 448,8, according to which the precondition for the Buddha's attainment of awakening was precisely his ability to progress through the nine meditative attainments in forward and backward order.

¹¹² Photograph by John C. Huntington; courtesy Huntington Photographic Archive at The Ohio State University.

exemplify his transcendence of meditative attainments esteemed among contemporary practitioners in ancient India with his attainment of Nirvāṇa.



Abbreviations:

AN	<i>Āṅguttara-nikāya</i>
B ^c	Burmese edition
CBETA	Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association
C ^c	Ceylonese edition
D	Derge edition
DĀ	<i>Dīrgha-āgama</i> (T 1)
DN	<i>Dīrgha-nikāya</i>
E ^c	PTS edition
EĀ	<i>Ekottarika-āgama</i> (T 125)
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i> (T 99)
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
Q	Peking edition
Ps	<i>Papañcasūdanī</i>
PTS	Pali Text Society
SĀ	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 99)
SĀ ²	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 100)
S ^c	Siamese edition
SHT	Sanskrithandschriften aus den Turfanfunden
SN	<i>Samyutta-nikāya</i>
Sn	<i>Sutta-nipāta</i>
Spk	<i>Sāratthappakāsinī</i>
T	Taishō edition (CBETA)
Thī-a	<i>Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā</i>
Vin	<i>Vinaya</i>

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