

# THE BUDDHA'S LAST JOURNEY

## BHANTE DHAMMIKA

The last months of the Buddha's life are recounted in the *Maha Parinibbana Sutta*, the longest and in many ways the most interesting discourse in the whole of the Tripitaka. It opens with the Buddha leaving Rajagaha, describes the events that took place during his journey North and then West, his passing away in Kusinara and the disposal of his remains, and ends with the sharing out of his ashes. It is only necessary to relate the final days and anything previously relevant to them.

The Buddha foretold the time and place of his passing, saying that he would die three months hence in the small town of Kusinara. That he had a premonition of when he would die and that it actually came true is perhaps not surprising. People have occasionally been known to have the strange ability to predict the time of their death. That he accurately predicted where he would die seems less credible. A look at the map of the route the Buddha took during this last journey strongly suggests that he intended to make one final visit to his hometown Kapilavattu and die there. As it happened, he was delayed

by a serious illness and died in Kusinara before reaching Kapilavattu.

## Severe sickness

The Buddha, Ven. Ananda Thera and the party of monks accompanying them arrived in Vesali just at the beginning of the monsoon and, in accordance with the tradition among ascetics; they found places to stay for the next three months. The Buddha took up lodgings in "the small village of Beluva", one of the outer suburbs of the city. While there "he was attacked by a severe sickness, with sharp pains as if he was about to die. But he endured all this mindfully, clearly aware and without complaint". Even today in India waterborne diseases are common during the monsoon. After the monsoon the party set off again, passing through Bhandagama, Jambugama, Bhoganagama and eventually Pava, where they stayed in a mango orchard owned by a blacksmith named Cunda. According to the eminent archaeologist Dilip Chakrabarti, the large mound at Jharmatiya about 20 km from Kusinara may be identified with Pava. Cunda welcomed them and invited them to a meal the next day. During the meal the Buddha was

served and ate a dish called *sukaramaddava* after which "he was attacked by a severe sickness with bloody diarrhoea (*lohitapakkhandika*) and sharp pain".

There has been a great deal of speculation and controversy around this incident. *Sukaramaddava* literally means 'boar's softness' although what it consisted of is unknown. It may have been a pork preparation of some kind, e.g. tender pork, but not necessarily. Then as now, culinary preparations can be given names entirely unrelated to their ingredients. It has also been claimed that the Buddha died from eating poison mushrooms, from food poisoning or even that he was deliberately poisoned. The fact that his main symptom was exudative diarrhoea suggests that he suffered from either gastroenteritis or some water borne disease. However, given that he had been sick while staying in Vesali and that he was around 80, this points to his death being due to a return of this earlier sickness, whatever it was, exacerbated by exhaustion. Earlier during his journey the Buddha had mentioned the only time he was physically comfortable was when he went into deep meditation.

Having recovered somewhat, the



**Passing Away of the Buddha**

Buddha and the monks continued on their way but he grew increasingly frail and they had to stop, and he asked Ven. Ananda Thera to fold a robe into four so he could rest at the foot of a tree. While resting they were approached by a man named Pukkusa, who had been a disciple of the Buddha's old teacher Alara Kalama. Pukkusa offered the Buddha two cloth of gold robes. The Buddha accepted one and asked that the other be given to Ven. Ananda Thera. When Pukkusa left, Ven. Ananda Thera draped one robe over the Buddha and almost immediately his body was transfigured, becoming "radiant and glowing", so much so that the cloth of gold robe appeared dull. When Ven. Ananda Thera mentioned this, the Buddha said that this phenomenon had only happened to him once before, on the night he attained Awakening. The account of the Buddha's Awakening mentions that rays (*ramsī*) of blue and yellow, red, white and orange light emanated from his body.

The party moved on to the Kukuttha River, where they all bathed. The

Buddha then asked Cundaka to fold a robe into four and place it on the ground so he could lie down and rest again. Cundaka did this and then sat watch beside the Buddha to attend to anything he might need, keeping awake the whole time. He had been attentive to the Buddha's needs in the past as well. Once when the Buddha was sick, he had visited Him and the two of them talked about the Dhamma. The texts suggest that the Buddha's illness eased as a result of Cundaka's presence.

## Flower petals

The party continued until they arrived at the *sal* grove on the outskirts of the Malla's main town Kusinara. The Buddha asked Ven. Ananda Thera to prepare a bed for him between two large *sal* trees. As he lay down, the tree spontaneously burst into blossom and flower petals showered down over his body. When Ven. Ananda Thera expressed his astonishment at this the Buddha took the opportunity to make an important point. "These *sal* trees have burst

into blossom out of season. Never before has the Tathagata been so honoured and revered, revered, esteemed and worshipped. But the monk or the nun, the layman or lay woman disciple who lives practising the Dhamma fully and perfectly fulfils the Dhamma way, it is they who truly honour Tathagata, revere, reverence and worship him in the highest way." This is yet another example of the Buddhist idea that miracles are of minor importance compared with living in accordance with the Dhamma.

Realising that the end was near the Buddha, gave some final advice and instructions. He encouraged every devotee to go on pilgrimage to the place where he was born, where he attained Awakening, where he proclaimed the Dhamma for the first time, and where he passed away. He warned monks not to become too familiar with women, and gave instructions of how his remains were to be disposed of. He thanked and praised Ven. Ananda Thera for his many years of selfless service and gave permission for any of the minor monastic rules to be changed if necessary. As a final encouragement he also said: "Ananda, it may be that you think, 'The Teacher guidance has ceased, and now we have no teacher.' But this is not how you should see it. The Dhamma and training I have taught you, after I am gone let them be your teacher."

Now the Buddha's end had come. With the Mallas of Kusinara, the monks who had accompanied him during his final journey and others gathered around, he uttered his final words. "Now monks I declare to you; all conditioned things are impermanent. Strive on with awareness (*Vayadhammasankhara. Appamadena-sampadetha*)." Now that the full moon of Vesak illuminates the night sky it is a good time to contemplate these words of wisdom.



**Kusinara, India**



**A mural depicting Buddha's Parinibbana**