DN 16 — Maha-parinibbana Sutta: The Great Discourse on the Total Unbinding

English translation by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

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Changes: Presentation only: original HTML markup reflowed into plain text; wording, numbering and source repetitions retained. No repetitions expanded.

Completeness: PARTIAL. Complete source excerpt preserved, including introductions, notes and verse structure; source omits part of the canonical discourse.

Text

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Then the Blessed One said to Ven. Ananda: "Ananda, let's go to the far shore of the Hiraññavati River. We'll head for Upavattana, the Mallans' sal-grove near Kusinara."

"As you say, lord," Ven. Ananda responded to the Blessed One.

Then the Blessed One with a large community of monks went to the far shore of the Hiraññavati River and headed for Upavattana, the Mallans' sal-grove near Kusinara. On arrival, he said to Ven. Ananda, "Ananda, please prepare a bed for me between the twin sal-trees, with its head to the north. I am tired, and will lie down."

Responding, "As you say, lord," Ven. Ananda prepared a bed between the twin sal-trees, with its head to the north. Then the Blessed One lay down on his right side in the lion's sleeping posture, with one foot on top of the other, mindful & alert.[1]

Now at that time the twin sal-trees were in full bloom, even though it was not the time for flowering. They showered, strewed, & sprinkled on the Tathagata's body in homage to him. Heavenly coral-tree blossoms fell from the sky, showering, strewing, & sprinkling the Tathagata's body in homage to him. Heavenly sandalwood powder fell from the sky, showering, strewing, & sprinkling the Tathagata's body in homage to him. Heavenly music was playing in the sky, in homage to the Tathagata. Heavenly songs were sung in the sky, in homage to the Tathagata.

Then the Blessed One said to Ven. Ananda, "Ananda, the twin sal-trees are in full bloom, even though it's not the flowering season. They shower, strew, & sprinkle on the Tathagata's body in homage to him. Heavenly coral-tree blossoms are falling from the sky... Heavenly sandalwood powder is falling from the sky... Heavenly music is playing in the sky... Heavenly songs are sung in the sky, in homage to the Tathagata. But it is not to this extent that a Tathagata is worshipped, honored, respected, venerated, or paid homage to. Rather, the monk, nun, male lay follower, or female lay follower who keeps practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, who keeps practicing masterfully, who lives in accordance with the Dhamma: that is the person who worships, honors, respects, venerates, & pays homage to the Tathagata with the highest homage. So you should train yourselves: 'We will keep practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, we will keep practicing masterfully, we will live in accordance with the Dhamma.'[2] That's how you should train yourselves."

Now at that time Ven. Upavana was standing in front of the Blessed One, fanning him. Then the Blessed One dismissed him, saying, "Go away, monk. Don't stand in front of me." Then the thought occurred to Ven. Ananda, "For a long time, now, this Ven. Upavana has been an attendant to the Blessed One, staying near him and traveling with him. But now, in his final hour, he dismisses him, saying, 'Go away, monk. Don't stand in front of me.' Now what is the reason, what is the cause, why the Blessed One dismisses him, saying, 'Go away, monk. Don't stand in front of me'?"

Then Ven. Ananda said to the Blessed One, "For a long time, now, this Ven. Upavana has been an attendant to the Blessed One, staying near him and traveling with him. But now, in his final hour, he dismisses him, saying, 'Go away, monk. Don't stand in front of me.' Now what is the reason, what is the cause, why the Blessed One dismisses him, saying, 'Go away, monk. Don't stand in front of me'?"

"Ananda, most of the devatas from ten world-systems have gathered in order to see the Tathagata. For twelve leagues all around Upavattana, the Mallans' sal-grove near Kusinara, there is not the space even of the tip of a horse-tail hair that is not occupied by eminent devatas. The devatas, Ananda, are complaining, 'We have come a long distance to see the Tathagata.[3] Only once in a long, long time does a Tathagata — worthy & rightly self-awakened — arise in the world. Tonight, in the last watch of the night, the total Unbinding of the Tathagata will occur. And this eminent monk is standing in front of the Blessed One, blocking the way. We aren't getting to see the Blessed One in his final hour.'"

"But, lord, what is the state of the devatas the Blessed One is referring to?"

"Ananda, there are devatas who perceive space to be earth. Tearing at their hair, they are weeping. Uplifting their arms, they are weeping. As if their feet were cut out from under them,[4] they fall down and roll back & forth, crying, 'All too soon, the Blessed One will be totally unbound! All too soon, the One Well-gone will be totally unbound! All too soon, the One with Eyes (alternate reading: the Eye) will disappear from the world!' Then there are devatas who perceive earth to be earth. Tearing at their hair, they are weeping. Uplifting their arms, they are weeping. As if their feet were cut out from under them, they fall down and roll back & forth, crying, 'All too soon, the Blessed One will be totally unbound! All too soon, the One Well-gone will be totally unbound! All too soon, the One with Eyes will disappear from the world!' But those devatas who are free from passion acquiesce, mindful & alert: 'Fabrications are inconstant. What else is there to expect?'"

"In the past, lord, the monks in all directions, after ending the Rains retreat, came to see the Tathagata. Thus we got to see & attend to the monks who inspire the heart. But now, after the Blessed One is gone, we won't get to see or attend to the monks who inspire the heart."

"Ananda, there are these four places that merit being seen by a clansman with conviction, that merit his feelings of urgency & dismay (samvega). Which four? 'Here the Tathagata was born' is a place that merits being seen by a clansman with conviction, that merits his feelings of urgency & dismay. 'Here the Tathagata awakened to the unexcelled right self-awakening'... 'Here the Tathagata set rolling the unexcelled wheel of Dhamma'... 'Here the Tathagata was totally unbound in the remainderless property of Unbinding' is a place that merits being seen by a clansman with conviction, that merits his feelings of urgency & dismay. These are the four places that merit being seen by a clansman with conviction, that merit his feelings of urgency & dismay. They will come out of conviction, Ananda — monks, nuns, male lay followers, & female lay followers — to the spots where 'Here the Tathagata was born,' 'Here the Tathagata awakened to the unexcelled right self-awakening,' 'Here the Tathagata set rolling the unexcelled wheel of Dhamma,' 'Here the Tathagata was totally unbound in the remainderless property of Unbinding.' And anyone who dies while making a pilgrimage to these memorials with a bright, confident mind will — on the break-up of the body, after death — reappear in a good destination, the heavenly world."

"Lord, what course should we follow with regard to womenfolk?"

"Not-seeing, Ananda"

"But when there is seeing, lord, what course should be followed?"

"Not-addressing, Ananda."

"But when we are addressed, what course should be followed?"

"Mindfulness should be established, Ananda."

"And, lord, what course should we follow with regard to the Tathagata's body?"

"You are not to be concerned about the Tathagata's funeral. Please, Ananda, strive for the true goal, be committed to the true goal, dwell heedful, ardent, & resolute for the sake of the true goal. There are wise nobles, brahmans, & householders who are highly confident in the Tathagata. They will conduct the Tathagata's funeral."

"But, lord, what course should be followed with regard to the Tathagata's body?"

"The course they follow with regard to the body of a wheel-turning monarch, Ananda, is the course that should be followed with regard to the body of the Tathagata."

"And what, lord, is the course they follow with regard to the body of a wheel-turning monarch?"

"Ananda, they wrap the body of a wheel-turning monarch in new linen cloth. Having wrapped it in new linen cloth, they wrap it in teased cotton-wool. Having wrapped it in teased cotton-wool, they wrap it in new linen cloth. Having done this 500 times, they place the body in an iron oil-vat, cover it with an iron lid, make a pyre composed totally of perfumed substances, and cremate the body. Then they build a burial mound for the wheel-turning monarch at a great four-way intersection. That is the course that they follow with regard to the body of a wheel-turning monarch. The course they follow with regard to the body of a wheel-turning monarch, Ananda, is the course that should be followed with regard to the body of the Tathagata. A burial mound for the Tathagata is to be built at a great four-way intersection. And those who offer a garland, a scent, or a perfume powder there, or bow down there, or brighten their minds there: that will be for their long-term welfare & happiness.

"There are these four who are worthy of a burial mound. Which four? A Tathagata, worthy & rightly self-awakened, is worthy of a burial mound. A Private Buddha... a disciple of a Tathagata... a wheel-turning monarch is worthy of a burial mound.

"And for what reason is a Tathagata, worthy & rightly self-awakened, worthy of a burial mound? [At the thought,] 'This is the burial mound of a Tathagata, worthy & rightly self-awakened,' many people will brighten their minds. Having brightened their minds there, then — on the break-up of the body, after death — they will reappear in a good destination, the heavenly world. It is for this reason that a Tathagata, worthy & rightly self-awakened, is worthy of a burial mound.

"And for what reason is a Private Buddha worthy of a burial mound? [At the thought,] 'This is the burial mound of a Private Buddha,' many people will brighten their minds. Having brightened their minds there, then — on the break-up of the body, after death — they will reappear in a good destination, the heavenly world...

"And for what reason is a disciple of a Tathagata worthy of a burial mound? [At the thought,] 'This is the burial mound of a disciple of a Tathagata,' many people will brighten

their minds. Having brightened their minds there, then — on the break-up of the body, after death — they will reappear in a good destination, the heavenly world...

"And for what reason is a wheel-turning monarch worthy of a burial mound? [At the thought,] 'This is the burial mound of a wheel-turning monarch,' many people will brighten their minds. Having brightened their minds there, then — on the break-up of the body, after death — they will reappear in a good destination, the heavenly world. It is for this reason that a wheel-turning monarch is worthy of a burial mound.

"These are the four who are worthy of a burial mound."

Then Ven. Ananda, going into a [nearby] building, stood leaning against the door jamb, weeping: "Here I am, still in training, with work left to do, and the total Unbinding of my teacher is about to occur — the teacher who has had such sympathy for me!"

Then the Blessed One said to the monks, "Monks, where is Ananda?"

"Lord, Ven. Ananda, having gone into that building, stands leaning against the door jamb, weeping: 'Here I am, still in training, with work left to do, and the total Unbinding of my teacher is about to occur — the teacher who has had such sympathy for me!'"

Then the Blessed One told a certain monk, "Come, monk. In my name, call Ananda, saying, 'The Teacher calls you, my friend.'"

"As you say, lord," the monk answered and, having gone to Ven. Ananda, on arrival he said, "The Teacher calls you, my friend."

"As you say, my friend," Ven. Ananda replied. Then he went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, the Blessed One said to him, "Enough, Ananda. Don't grieve. Don't lament. Haven't I already taught you the state of growing different with regard to all things dear & appealing, the state of becoming separate, the state of becoming otherwise? What else is there to expect? It's impossible that one could forbid anything born, existent, fabricated, & subject to disintegration from disintegrating.

"For a long time, Ananda, you have waited on the Tathagata with physical acts of good will — helpful, happy, whole-hearted, without limit; with verbal acts of good will... with mental acts of good will — helpful, happy, whole-hearted, without limit. You are one who has made merit. Commit yourself to exertion, and soon you will be without mental fermentations."

Then the Blessed One addressed the monks, "Monks, those who, in the past, were worthy ones, rightly self-awakened, had foremost attendants, just as I have had Ananda. Those who, in the future, will be worthy ones, rightly self-awakened, will have foremost attendants, just as I have had Ananda. Ananda is wise, he knows, 'This is the time to approach to see the Tathagata. This is the time for monks, this the time for nuns, this the

time for male lay-followers, this the time for female lay-followers, this the time for kings & their ministers, this the time for sectarians, this the time for the followers of sectarians.'

"There are these four marvelous & amazing qualities in Ananda. If a group of monks approaches to see Ananda, they are gratified at the sight of him. If he speaks Dhamma to them, they are gratified with what he says. Before they are sated, he falls silent. If a group of nuns approaches to see Ananda... If a group of male lay followers approaches to see Ananda... If a group of female lay followers approaches to see Ananda, they are gratified at the sight of him. If he speaks Dhamma to them, they are gratified with what he says. Before they are sated, he falls silent. These are the four marvelous & amazing qualities in Ananda. There are these four marvelous & amazing qualities in a wheel-turning monarch. If a group of noble warriors approaches to see him... If a group of brahmans approaches to see him... If a group of householders approaches to see him... If a group of contemplatives approaches to see him, they are gratified at the sight of him. If he speaks to them, they are gratified with what he says. Before they are sated, he falls silent. In the same way, monks, there are these four marvelous & amazing qualities in Ananda. If a group of monks... a group of nuns... a group of male lay followers... a group of female lay followers approaches to see Ananda, they are gratified at the sight of him. If he speaks Dhamma to them, they are gratified with what he says. Before they are sated, he falls silent. These are the four marvelous & amazing qualities in Ananda."

When this was said, Ven. Ananda said to the Blessed One, "Lord, may the Blessed One not be totally unbound in this little town, this dusty town, this branch township. There are other great cities: Campa, Rajagaha, Savatthi, Saketa, Kosambi, Vanarasi. May the Blessed One be totally unbound there. In those cities there are many wealthy noble warriors, brahmans, & householders who have high confidence in the Tathagata. They will conduct the Tathagata's funeral."

"Don't say that, Ananda. Don't say that: 'this little town, this dusty town, this branch township.' In the past, Ananda, a king named Mahasudassana was a wheel-turning monarch, a righteous king ruling righteously, who was a conqueror of the four directions, a stabilizer of his country, endowed with the seven treasures. This Kusinara was his capital city, named Kusavati: twelve leagues long from east to west, seven leagues wide from north to south. Kusavati was powerful, rich, & well-populated, crowded with people & prosperous. Just as the capital city of the devas, named Alakamanda is powerful, rich, & well-populated, crowded with yakkhas & prosperous; in the same way, Kusavati was powerful, rich, & well-populated, crowded with people & prosperous. By day or by night, it was never lacking in ten sounds: the sound of elephants, horses, carts, drums, tabors, lutes, songs, cymbals, gongs, with cries of 'Eat! Drink! Snack!' as the tenth.

"Now, Ananda, go into Kusinara and announce to the Kusinara Mallans, 'Tonight, Vasitthas, in the last watch of the night, the total Unbinding of the Tathagata will occur. Come out, Vasitthas! Come out, Vasitthas! Don't later regret that "The Tathagata's total Unbinding occurred within the borders of our very own town, but we didn't get to see him in his final hour!"'"

Responding, "As you say, lord," Ven. Ananda put on his robe and — carrying his bowl & outer robe — went unaccompanied into Kusinara. Now at that time the Kusinara Mallans had met for some business in their assembly hall. Ven. Ananda went to the assembly hall and on arrival announced to them, "Tonight, Vasitthas, in the last watch of the night, the total Unbinding of the Tathagata will occur. Come out, Vasitthas! Come out, Vasitthas! Don't later regret that 'The Tathagata's total Unbinding occurred within the borders of our very own town, but we didn't get to see him in his final hour!'" When they heard Ven. Ananda, the Mallans together with their sons, daughters, & wives were shocked, saddened, their minds overflowing with sorrow. Some of them wept, tearing at their hair; they wept, uplifting their arms. As if their feet were cut out from under them, they fell down and rolled back & forth, crying, "All too soon, the Blessed One will be totally unbound! All too soon, the One Well-gone will be totally unbound! All too soon, the One with Eyes will disappear from the world!"

Then the Mallans together with their sons, daughters, & wives — shocked, saddened, their minds overflowing with sorrow — went to Ven. Ananda at Upavattana, the Mallans' sal-grove near Kusinara. The thought occurred to Ven. Ananda, "If I let the Mallans pay reverence to the Blessed One one by one, the night will be over before they have finished paying reverence. What if I were to have them pay reverence to the Blessed One arranging them family by family, announcing, 'Lord, the Mallan named so-&-so, together with his children & wives, servants & retainers, bows down with his head at the Blessed One's feet.'"[5] So Ven. Ananda, arranging the Mallans family by family, had them pay reverence to the Blessed One, [saying,] "Lord, the Mallan named so-&-so, together with his children & wives, servants & retainers, bows down with his head at the Blessed One's feet."

In this way Ven. Ananda got the Mallans to pay reverence to the Blessed One within the first watch of the night.

Now at that time Subhadda the Wanderer was staying in Kusinara. He heard, "Tonight, in the last watch of the night, the total Unbinding of Gotama the contemplative will take place." Then the thought occurred to him: "I have heard the elder wanderers, teachers of teachers, saying that only once in a long, long time do Tathagatas — worthy ones, rightly self-awakened — appear in the world. Tonight, in the last watch of the night, the total Unbinding of Gotama the contemplative will occur. Now there is a doubt that has arisen in me, but I have faith that he could teach me the Dhamma in such a way that I might abandon that doubt."

So he went to Upavattana, the Mallans' sal-grove and, on arrival, said to Ven. Ananda, "I have heard the elder wanderers, teachers of teachers, saying that only once in a long, long time do Tathagatas — worthy ones, rightly self-awakened — appear in the world. Tonight, in the last watch of the night, the total Unbinding of Gotama the contemplative will occur. Now there is a doubt that has arisen in me, but I have faith that he could teach me the Dhamma in such a way that I might abandon that doubt. It would be good, Ven. Ananda, if you would let me see him."

When this was said, Ven. Ananda said to him, "Enough, friend Subhadda. Don't bother the Blessed One. The Blessed One is tired."

For a second time... For a third time, Subhadda the Wanderer said to Ven. Ananda, "...It would be good, Ven. Ananda, if you would let me see him."

For a third time, Ven. Ananda said to him, "Enough, friend Subhadda. Don't bother the Blessed One. The Blessed One is tired."

Now, the Blessed One heard the exchange between Ven. Ananda & Subhadda the Wanderer, and so he said to Ven. Ananda, "Enough, Ananda. Don't stand in his way. Let him see the Tathagata. Whatever he asks me will all be for the sake of knowledge, and not to be bothersome. And whatever I answer when asked, he will quickly understand."

So Ven. Ananda said to Subhadda the Wanderer, "Go ahead, friend Subhadda. The Blessed One gives you his leave."

Then Subhadda went to the Blessed One and exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he said to the Blessed One, "Venerable sir, these brahmans & contemplatives, each with his group, each with his community, each the teacher of his group, an honored leader, well-regarded by people at large — i.e., Purana Kassapa, Makkhali Gosala, Ajita Kesakambalin, Pakudha Kaccayana, Sañjaya Belatthaputta, & the Nigantha Nataputta: Do they all have direct knowledge as they themselves claim, or do they all not have direct knowledge, or do some of them have direct knowledge and some of them not?"

"Enough, Subhadda. Put this question aside. I will teach you the Dhamma. Listen, and pay close attention. I will speak."

"Yes, lord," Subhadda answered, and the Blessed One said, "In any doctrine & discipline where the noble eightfold path is not found, no contemplative of the first... second... third... fourth order [stream-winner, once-returner, non-returner, or arahant] is found. But in any doctrine & discipline where the noble eightfold path is found, contemplatives of the first... second... third... fourth order are found. The noble eightfold path is found in this doctrine & discipline, and right here there are contemplatives of the first... second... third... fourth order. Other teachings are empty of knowledgeable contemplatives. And if the monks dwell rightly, this world will not be empty of arahants."

At age twenty-nine I went forth, seeking what might be skillful, and since my going forth more than fifty years have passed. Outside of the realm of methodical Dhamma, there is no contemplative.

"And no contemplative of the second... third... fourth order. Other teachings are empty of knowledgeable contemplatives. And if the monks dwell rightly, this world will not be empty of arahants."

Then Subhadda the Wanderer said, "Magnificent, lord! Magnificent! Just as if he were to place upright what was overturned, to reveal what was hidden, to point out the way to one who was lost, or to carry a lamp into the dark so that those with eyes could see forms, in the same way has the Blessed One — through many lines of reasoning — made the Dhamma clear. I go to the Blessed One for refuge, to the Dhamma, & to the community of monks. Let me obtain the going forth in the Blessed One's presence, let me obtain admission."

"Anyone, Subhadda, who has previously belonged to another sect and who desires the going forth & admission in this doctrine & discipline, must first undergo probation for four months. If, at the end of four months, the monks feel so moved, they give him the going forth & admit him to the monk's state. But I know distinctions among individuals in this matter."

"Lord, if that is so, I am willing to undergo probation for four years. If, at the end of four years, the monks feel so moved, let them give me the going forth & admit me to the monk's state."

Then the Blessed One said to Ven. Ananda, "Very well then, Ananda, give Subhadda the going forth."

"Yes, lord," Ananda answered.

Then Subhadda said to Ven. Ananda, "It is a gain for you, Ananda, a great gain, that you have been anointed here in the Teacher's presence with the pupil's anointing."[6]

Then Subhadda the Wanderer received the going forth & the admission in the Blessed One's presence. And not long after his admission — dwelling alone, secluded, heedful, ardent, & resolute — he in no long time reached & remained in the supreme goal of the holy life, for which clansmen rightly go forth from home into homelessness, knowing & realizing it for himself in the here & now. He knew: "Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for the sake of this world." And thus Ven. Subhadda became another one of the arahants, the last of the Blessed One's face-to-face disciples.

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Then the Blessed One said to Ven. Ananda, "Now, if it occurs to any of you — 'The teaching has lost its authority; we are without a Teacher' — do not view it in that way. Whatever Dhamma & Vinaya I have pointed out & formulated for you, that will be your Teacher when I am gone.

"At present, the monks address one another as 'friend,' but after I am gone they are not to address one another that way. The more senior monks are to address the newer monks by their name or clan or as 'friend.' The newer monks are to address the more senior monks as 'venerable' or 'sir.'

"After I am gone, the sangha — if it wants — may abolish the lesser & minor training rules.[7]

"After I am gone, the monk Channa should be given the brahma penalty."

"What, lord, is the brahma penalty?"

"Channa may say what he wants, Ananda, but he is not to be spoken to, instructed, or admonished by the monks."[8]

Then the Blessed One addressed the monks, "If even a single monk has any doubt or perplexity concerning the Buddha, Dhamma, or Sangha, the path or the practice, ask. Don't later regret that 'The Teacher was face-to-face with us, but we didn't bring ourselves to cross-question him in his presence.'"

When this was said, the monks were silent.

A second time, the Blessed One said, "If even a single monk has any doubt or perplexity concerning the Buddha, Dhamma, or Sangha, the path or the practice, ask. Don't later regret that 'The Teacher was face-to-face with us, but we didn't bring ourselves to cross-question him in his presence.'"

A second time, the monks were silent.

A third time, the Blessed One said, "If even a single monk has any doubt or perplexity concerning the Buddha, Dhamma, or Sangha, the path or the practice, ask. Don't later regret that 'The Teacher was face-to-face with us, but we didn't bring ourselves to cross-question him in his presence.'"

A third time, the monks were silent.

Then the Blessed One addressed the monks, "Now, if it's out of respect for the Teacher that you don't ask, let a friend inform a friend."

When this was said, the monks were silent.

Then Ven. Ananda said to the Blessed One, "It's amazing, lord. It's marvelous. I'm confident that, in this community of monks, there is not even a single monk who has any doubt or perplexity concerning the Buddha, Dhamma, or Sangha, the path or the practice."

"You, Ananda, speak out of confidence, while there is knowledge in the Tathagata that, in this community of monks, there is not even a single monk who has any doubt or perplexity concerning the Buddha, Dhamma, or Sangha, the path or the practice. Of these 500 monks, the most backward is a stream-winner, not destined for the planes of deprivation, headed to self-awakening for sure."

Then the Blessed One addressed the monks, "Now, then, monks, I exhort you: All fabrications are subject to decay. Bring about completion by being heedful." Those were the Tathagata's last words.

Then the Blessed One entered the first jhana. Emerging from that he entered the second jhana. Emerging from that, he entered the third... the fourth jhana... the dimension of the infinitude of space... the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness... the dimension of nothingness... the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception. Emerging from that, he entered the cessation of perception & feeling.

Then Ven. Ananda said to Ven. Anuruddha, "Ven. Anuruddha,[9] the Blessed One is totally unbound."

"No, friend Ananda. The Blessed One isn't totally unbound. He has entered the cessation of perception & feeling."

Then the Blessed One, emerging from the cessation of perception & feeling, entered the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception. Emerging from that, he entered the dimension of nothingness... the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness... the dimension of the infinitude of space... the fourth jhana... the third... the second... the first jhana. Emerging from the first jhana he entered the second... the third... the fourth jhana. Emerging from the fourth jhana, he immediately was totally Unbound.

When the Blessed One was totally Unbound, simultaneously with the total Unbinding, there was a great earthquake, awesome & hair-raising, and the drums of the devas sounded.

When the Blessed One was totally Unbound, simultaneously with the total Unbinding, Sahampati Brahma uttered this verse:

All beings — all — in the world, will cast off the bodily heap in the world where a Teacher like this without peer in the world the Tathagata, with strength attained, the Rightly Self-Awakened One, has been totally Unbound.

When the Blessed One was totally Unbound, simultaneously with the total Unbinding, Sakka, ruler of the gods, uttered this verse:

How inconstant are compounded things! Their nature: to arise & pass away. They disband as they are arising. Their total stilling is bliss.

When the Blessed One was totally Unbound, simultaneously with the total Unbinding, Ven. Anuruddha uttered this verse:

He had no in-&-out breathing, the one who was Such, the firm-minded one, imperturbable & bent on peace: the sage completing his span. With heart unbowed he endured the pain. Like a flame's unbinding was the liberation of awareness.

When the Blessed One was totally Unbound, simultaneously with the total Unbinding, Ven. Ananda uttered this verse:

It was awe-inspiring. It was hair-raising when, displaying the foremost accomplishment in all things, the Rightly Self-Awakened One was totally Unbound.

When the Blessed One was totally Unbound, simultaneously with the total Unbinding, some of the monks present who were not without passion wept, uplifting their arms. As if their feet were cut out from under them, they fell down and rolled back & forth, crying, "All too soon is the Blessed One totally unbound! All too soon is the One Well-gone totally unbound! All too soon, the One with Eyes has disappeared from the world!" But those monks who were free from passion acquiesced, mindful & alert: "Fabrications are inconstant. What else is there to expect?"

Then Ven. Anuruddha addressed the monks, "Enough, friends. Don't grieve. Don't lament. Hasn't the Blessed One already taught the state of growing different with regard to all things dear & appealing, the state of becoming separate, the state of becoming otherwise? What else is there to expect? It's impossible that one could forbid anything born, existent, fabricated, & subject to disintegration from disintegrating. The devatas, friends, are complaining."

[Ananda:] "But, Ven. Anuruddha, what is the state of the devatas the Blessed One is referring to?"

"Friend Ananda, there are devatas who perceive space to be earth. Tearing at their hair, they are weeping. Uplifting their arms, they are weeping. As if their feet were cut out from under them, they fall down and roll back & forth, crying, 'All too soon is the Blessed One totally unbound! All too soon is the One Well-gone totally unbound! All too soon, the One with Eyes has disappeared from the world!' Then there are devatas who perceive earth to be earth. Tearing at their hair, they are weeping. Uplifting their arms, they are weeping. As if their feet were cut out from under them, they fall down and roll back & forth, crying, 'All too soon is the Blessed One totally unbound! All too soon is the One Well-gone totally unbound! All too soon, the One with Eyes has disappeared from the world!' But those devatas who are free from passion acquiesce, mindful & alert: 'Fabrications are inconstant. What else is there to expect?'"

Then Ven. Anuruddha & Ven. Ananda spent the remainder of the night in Dhamma talk.

Then Ven. Anuruddha said to Ven. Ananda, "Go, friend Ananda. Entering Kusinara, announce to the Kusinara Mallans, 'The Blessed One, Vasitthas, is totally unbound. Now is the time for you to do as you see fit.'"

Responding, "As you say, sir," Ven. Ananda in the early morning put on his robe and — carrying his bowl & outer robe — went unaccompanied into Kusinara. Now at that time the Kusinara Mallans had met for some business in their assembly hall. Ven. Ananda went to the assembly hall and on arrival announced to them, "The Blessed One, Vasitthas, is totally

unbound. Now is the time for you to do as you see fit."

When they heard Ven. Ananda, the Mallans together with their sons, daughters, & wives were shocked, saddened, their minds overflowing with sorrow. Some of them wept, tearing at their hair; they wept, uplifting their arms. As if their feet were cut out from under them, they fell down and rolled back & forth, crying, "All too soon is the Blessed One totally unbound! All too soon is the One Well-gone totally unbound! All too soon, the One with Eyes has disappeared from the world!"

Then the Kusinara Mallans ordered their men, "In that case, I say, gather scents, garlands, & all the musical instruments in Kusinara!" Then, taking scents, garlands, & all the musical instruments in Kusinara, along with 500 lengths of cloth, the Kusinara Mallans went to the Blessed One's body in Upavattana, the Mallans' sal-grove near Kusinara. On arrival, they spent the entire day in worshipping, honoring, respecting, & venerating the Blessed One's body with dances, songs, music, garlands, & scents, in making cloth canopies and arranging floral wreaths. Then the thought occurred to them, "It's too late today to cremate the Blessed One's body. We'll cremate the Blessed One's body tomorrow." And so they spent the second day, the third day, the fourth day, the fifth day, the sixth day in worshipping, honoring, respecting, & venerating the Blessed One's body with dances, songs, music, garlands, & scents, in making cloth canopies and arranging floral wreaths.

Then on the seventh day the thought occurred to them, "Worshipping, honoring, respecting, & venerating to the Blessed One's body with dances, songs, music, garlands, & scents, let's carry it to the south, around the outside of the town, and cremate it to the south of the town."

Then eight leading Mallans, having bathed their heads and wearing new linen cloth, thinking, "We'll lift up the Blessed One's body," were unable to lift it. So the Kusinara Mallans asked Ven. Anuruddha, "What is the reason, Ven. Anuruddha, what is the cause, why these eight leading Mallans, having bathed their heads and wearing new linen cloth, thinking, 'We'll lift up the Blessed One's body,' are unable to lift it?"

"Your intention, Vasitthas, is one thing. The devas' intention is another."

"But what, Ven. Anuruddha, is the devas' intention?"

"Your intention, Vasitthas, is, 'Worshipping, honoring, respecting, & venerating the Blessed One's body with dances, songs, music, garlands, & scents, let's carry it to the south, around the outside of the town, and cremate it to the south of the town.' The devas' intention is, 'Worshipping, honoring, respecting, & venerating the Blessed One's body with heavenly dances, songs, music, garlands, & scents, let's carry it to the north of the town, enter the town through the north gate, carry it through the middle of the town and out the east gate to the Mallans' memorial called Makuta-bandhana, to cremate it there.'"

"Then let it be, venerable sir, in line with the devas' intention."

Now at that time Kusinara — even to its rubbish heaps & cesspools — was strewn knee-deep in coral-tree flowers. So the devas & the Kusinara Mallans, worshipping, honoring, respecting, & venerating the Blessed One's body with heavenly & human dances, songs, music, garlands, & scents, carried it to the north of the town, entered the town through the north gate, carried it through the middle of the town and out the east gate to the Mallans' memorial called Makuta-bandhana. There they set it down.

Then the Kusinara Mallans said to Ven. Ananda, "Venerable sir, what course should we follow with regard to the Tathagata's body?"

"The course they follow with regard to the body of a wheel-turning monarch, Vasitthas, is the course that should be followed with regard to the body of the Tathagata."

"And what, venerable sir, is the course they follow with regard to the body of a wheel-turning monarch?"

"Vasitthas, they wrap the body of a wheel-turning monarch in new linen cloth. Having wrapped it in new linen cloth, they wrap it in teased cotton-wool. Having wrapped it in teased cotton-wool, they wrap it in new linen cloth. Having done this 500 times, they place the body in an iron oil-vat, cover it with an iron lid, make a pyre composed totally of perfumed substances, and cremate the body. Then they build a burial mound for the wheel-turning monarch at a great four-way intersection. That is the course that they follow with regard to the body of a wheel-turning monarch. The course they follow with regard to the body of a wheel-turning monarch, Vasitthas, is the course that should be followed with regard to the body of the Tathagata. A burial mound for the Tathagata is to be built at a great, four-way intersection. And those who offer a garland, a scent, or a perfume powder there, or bow down there, or brighten their minds there: that will be for their long-term welfare & happiness."

So the Kusinara Mallans ordered their men, "In that case, I say, gather the Mallans' teased cotton-wool."

Then they wrapped the Blessed One's body in new linen cloth. Having wrapped it in new linen cloth, they wrapped it in teased cotton-wool. Having wrapped it in teased cotton-wool, they wrapped it in new linen cloth. Having done this 500 times, they placed the body in an iron oil-vat, covered it with an iron lid, made a pyre composed totally of perfumed substances, and set the body on the pyre.

Now at that time Ven. Maha Kassapa was traveling on the highway from Pava to Kusinara with a large community of monks, approximately 500 monks in all. Leaving the road, he sat down at the foot of a tree. Meanwhile, a certain naked ascetic, carrying a coral-tree flower from Kusinara, was traveling on the highway to Pava. Ven. Maha Kassapa saw the naked ascetic coming from afar, and on seeing him said to him, "Do you know our teacher, friend?"

"Yes, friend, I know him. Seven days ago Gotama the contemplative was totally unbound. That's how I got this coral-tree flower."

With that, some of the monks present who were not without passion wept, uplifting their arms. As if their feet were cut out from under them, they fell down and rolled back & forth, crying, "All too soon is the Blessed One totally unbound! All too soon is the One Well-gone totally unbound! All too soon, the One with Eyes has disappeared from the world!" But those monks who were free from passion acquiesced, mindful & alert: "Fabrications are inconstant. What else is there to expect?"

Now at that time a monk named Subhadda[10] who had gone forth when old was sitting among the group. He said to the monks, "Enough, friends. Don't grieve. Don't lament. We're well rid of the Great Contemplative. We've been harassed by [his saying], 'This is allowable. This is not allowable.' But now we will do what we want to do, and not do what we don't want to do."[11]

Then Ven. Maha Kassapa addressed the monks, "Enough, friends. Don't grieve. Don't lament. Hasn't the Blessed One already taught the state of growing different with regard to all things dear & appealing, the state of becoming separate, the state of becoming otherwise? What else is there to expect? It's impossible that one could forbid anything born, existent, fabricated, & subject to disintegration from disintegrating."

Then four leading Mallans, having bathed their heads and wearing new linen cloth, thinking, "We'll ignite the Blessed One's pyre," were unable to ignite it. So the Kusinara Mallans asked Ven. Anuruddha, "What is the reason, Ven. Anuruddha, what is the cause, why these four leading Mallans, having bathed their heads and wearing new linen cloth, thinking, 'We'll ignite the Blessed One's pyre,' are unable to ignite it?"

"Your intention, Vasitthas, is one thing. The devas' intention is another."

"But what, Ven. Anuruddha, is the devas' intention?"

"The devas' intention, Vasitthas, is, 'This Ven. Maha Kassapa is traveling on the highway from Pava to Kusinara with a large community of monks, approximately 500 monks in all. The Blessed One's pyre will not catch fire until Ven. Maha Kassapa has worshipped the Blessed One's feet with his head.'"

"Then let it be, venerable sir, in line with the devas' intention."

So Ven. Maha Kassapa went to the Blessed One's pyre at Makuta-bandhana, the Mallans' memorial near Kusinara. On arrival, arranging his robe over one shoulder, he placed his hands palm-to-palm over his heart, circumambulated the pyre, uncovered the Blessed One's feet,[12] and worshipped them with his head. And the 500 monks, arranging their robes over one shoulder, placed their hands palm-to-palm over their hearts, circumambulated the pyre, and worshipped the Blessed One's feet with their heads. As soon as it had been worshipped by Ven. Maha Kassapa and the 500 monks, the Blessed

One's pyre caught fire of its own accord. In the burning of the Blessed One's body, no cinder or ash of the outer skin, inner skin, flesh, tendons, or oil of the joints could be discerned. Only the bone-relics[13] remained. Just as in the burning of ghee or oil, no cinder or ash can be discerned; in the same way, in the burning of the Blessed One's body, no cinder or ash of the outer skin, inner skin, flesh, tendons, or oil of the joints could be discerned. Only the bone-relics remained. And of the 500 twin-wrappings only two were burnt: the innermost & the outermost.

When the Blessed One's body was consumed, a cascade of water fell from the sky, extinguishing the Blessed One's pyre. Water shot up from a sal-tree as well, extinguishing the Blessed One's pyre. The Kusinara Mallans, with all kinds of scented water, extinguished the Blessed One's pyre. Then for seven days they kept the bone-relics in their assembly hall — setting them round with a lattice of spears surrounded by ramparts of bows — worshipping, honoring, respecting, & venerating them with dances, songs, music, garlands, & scents.

Then King Ajatasattu Vedehiputta of Magadha heard, "The Blessed One, they say, has been totally unbound in Kusinara." So he sent an envoy to the Kusinara Mallans: "The Blessed One was a noble warrior. I, too, am a noble warrior. I deserve a share of the Blessed One's bone-relics. I, too, will build a burial mound and hold a ceremony for them."

The Licchavis of Vesali heard, "The Blessed One, they say, has been totally unbound in Kusinara." So they sent an envoy to the Kusinara Mallans: "The Blessed One was a noble warrior. We, too, are noble warriors. We deserve a share of the Blessed One's bone-relics. We, too, will build a burial mound and hold a ceremony for them."

The Sakyans of Kapilavatthu heard, "The Blessed One, they say, has been totally unbound in Kusinara." So they sent an envoy to the Kusinara Mallans: "The Blessed One was the greatest of our relatives. We deserve a share of the Blessed One's bone-relics. We, too, will build a burial mound and hold a ceremony for them."

The Buliyans of Allakappa... The Koliyans of Ramagama heard, "The Blessed One, they say, has been totally unbound in Kusinara." So they sent an envoy to the Kusinara Mallans: "The Blessed One was a noble warrior. We, too, are noble warriors. We deserve a share of the Blessed One's bone-relics. We, too, will build a burial mound and hold a ceremony for them."

The Brahman of Vetha Island heard, "The Blessed One, they say, has been totally unbound in Kusinara." So he sent an envoy to the Kusinara Mallans: "The Blessed One was a noble warrior. I am a brahman. I deserve a share of the Blessed One's bone-relics. I, too, will build a burial mound and hold a ceremony for them."

The Pava Mallans heard, "The Blessed One, they say, has been totally unbound in Kusinara." So they sent an envoy to the Kusinara Mallans: "The Blessed One was a noble warrior. We, too, are noble warriors. We deserve a share of the Blessed One's bone-relics. We, too, will build a burial mound and hold a ceremony for them."

When this was said, the Kusinara Mallans said to the groups & factions, "The Blessed One was totally unbound within the borders of our own town. We will not give up a share of the Blessed One's bone-relics."

When this was said, Dona the brahman addressed the groups & factions,

Listen, good sirs, to a word from me. Our Awakened One taught forbearance. It's not good that there should be combat over the relics of the highest one. Let's unite in concord, on friendly terms, and make eight shares. Let there be burial mounds in the various directions, many people made confident in the One with Eyes.

"In that case, brahman, you yourself divide the Blessed One's bone-relics into eight equal shares."

Responding, "As you say, good sirs," to the groups & factions, Dona the brahman divided the Blessed One's bone-relics into eight equal shares and then said to the groups & factions, "Good sirs, give me this urn. I will build a burial mound and hold a ceremony for the urn." They gave him the urn.

Then the Moriyans of Pipphalivana heard, "The Blessed One, they say, has been totally unbound in Kusinara." So they sent an envoy to the Kusinara Mallans: "The Blessed One was a noble warrior. We, too, are noble warriors. We deserve a share of the Blessed One's bone-relics. We, too, will build a burial mound and hold a ceremony for them."

"There is no [remaining] share of the Blessed One's bone-relics. They have been divided. Take the embers from here." They took the embers from there.

Then King Ajatasattu Vedehiputta of Magadha built a burial mound and held a ceremony for the Blessed One's relics in Rajagaha.

The Licchavis of Vesali built a burial mound and held a ceremony for the Blessed One's relics in Vesali.

The Sakyans of Kapilavattu built a burial mound and held a ceremony for the Blessed One's relics in Kapilavattu.

The Buliyans of Allakappa built a burial mound and held a ceremony for the Blessed One's relics in Allakappa.

The Koliyans of Ramagama built a burial mound and held a ceremony for the Blessed One's relics in Ramagama.

The brahman of Vettha Island built a burial mound and held a ceremony for the Blessed One's relics on Vettha Island.

The Pava Mallans built a burial mound and held a ceremony for the Blessed One's relics in Pava.

The Kusinara Mallans built a burial mound and held a ceremony for the Blessed One's relics in Kusinara.

Dona the brahman built a burial mound and held a ceremony for the urn.

The Moriyans of Pipphalivana built a burial mound and held a ceremony for the embers in Pipphalivana.

Thus there were eight burial mounds for the bone-relics, a ninth for the urn, and a tenth for the embers.

That is how it was in the past.

Eight portions were the relics of the One with Vision, the highest, the foremost of men: seven honored in Jambudipa, and one in Ramagama honored by kings of the nagas. One tooth the devas of the Thirty-three worship; one is honored in Gandharapura; one in the realm of the king of Kalinga; another is honored by kings of the nagas. These, with their splendor, their excellent gifts, embellish this wealth-bearing earth. Thus the relics of the One with Vision are honored by those honored by those who are honored. He is worshiped by deva kings, naga kings, human kings, and likewise is worshiped by the most excellent people. So pay homage to him, with hands palm-to-palm over the heart, for the Awakened are rarely encountered in the course of one hundred eons.

Notes

1.

In preceding sections of the discourse, the standard phrase describing the Buddha's act of lying down to rest reads, "Then the Blessed One lay down on his right side in the lion's sleeping posture, with one foot on top of the other, mindful & alert, having made a mental note to get up." Here, however, the Buddha is lying down for the last time and will pass away in this posture, so he makes no mental note to get up.

2.

SN 12.67 states: "If a monk practices for the sake of disenchantment, dispassion, & cessation with regard to aging & death... birth... becoming... clinging/sustenance... craving... feeling... contact... the six sense media... name & form... consciousness... fabrications... ignorance, he deserves to be called a monk who practices the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma."

3.

From Vedic times, it has been considered auspicious in India to gaze on a holy person or heavenly being, and to be gazed on by such a being as well. Here the fact that heavenly beings themselves want to gaze on the Buddha indicates the high regard they have for him (this is also the motive for their Great Meeting in DN 20); the phrase later in this paragraph, "the One with Eyes," indicates that they also regarded his gaze as highly auspicious for them. Later passages in this discourse indicate that human beings have similar feelings about the auspiciousness of the Buddha's gaze and the Buddha as an object of one's own gaze. A great deal of the later history of Buddhism in India — including devotional practice, Buddhology, meditation practice, and even the architecture of monasteries — grew out of the continuing desire to have a vision of the Buddha and to be gazed on by the Buddha, even after his Parinibbana.

It is sometimes assumed, based on a passage in SN 22.87, that the Pali canon is uniformly negative toward this aspect of Buddhist tradition. There, Ven. Vakkali, who is ill, states that "For a long time have I wanted to come & see the Blessed One, but I haven't had the bodily strength to do so," and the Buddha comforts him, "Enough, Vakkali. Why do you want to see this filthy body? Whoever sees the Dhamma sees me; whoever sees me sees the Dhamma." It should be noted, however, that the Buddha's treatment of this topic is sensitive to the context. In SN 22.87, he is talking to a monk who (1) is too sick to come see the Buddha on his own strength; and (2) is on the verge of arahantship. Here in DN 16, however, the Buddha dismisses Ven. Upavana so as to honor the desire of the devas who want to see him in his last hour; and he sends Ven. Ananda into Kusinara to inform the lay people there so that they too will be able to see him in his last hour. His motive here may be similar to that given for encouraging the building of a burial mound dedicated to him: seeing him will help human & heavenly beings brighten their minds, and that will be for their long-term welfare & happiness. Thus the attitudes expressed on this topic in the Pali canon, when taken in their entirety, are more complex than is generally recognized.

4.

Reading chinna-pada with the Thai edition.

5.

The desire to have one's name announced to a holy person appears to have been a part of pre-Buddhist devotional practice in India. This passage, along with others in the Canon, indicates that it was quickly adopted into Buddhist devotional practice as well. It lived on in later Buddhist practice in the custom of having the donor's name inscribed in bas-reliefs placed near or on a stupa, even in locations where the name would not be visible to human eyes.

6.

The commentary notes that Subhadda makes this statement based on non-Buddhist practices he knew from his previous sectarian affiliation.

7.

The Cullavagga (XI.9) tells of how the monks at the First Council could not agree on which rules should be classed as lesser & minor. Ven. Ananda himself confessed that he neglected to ask the Buddha on this point. One of the monks made a motion that — since many of the rules affect the laity, and the laity would look down on the monks for rescinding them after the Buddha's death — none of the rules should be rescinded. This motion was adopted by the Council.

8.

A monk named Channa is depicted at several spots in the Vinaya as despising all other monks on the grounds that "The Buddha is mine, the Dhamma is mine, it was by my young master that the Dhamma was realized." (Sanghadisesa 12) This would fit in with the post-canonical tradition identifying Channa as the horseman who accompanied the young Prince Siddhartha on the night of the latter's Great Renunciation. Two rules in the Vinaya — Sanghadisesa 12 & Pacittiya 12 — depict him as devious & impossible to admonish. Cv.XI reports events after the Parinibbana, telling of how news of the brahma-penalty shocked Channa to his senses. As a result, he changed his ways and eventually became an arahant. As Ven. Ananda then explains in that passage, the brahma-penalty was automatically lifted at the moment of Ven. Channa's final attainment. SN 22.90 tells a different version of how Ven. Channa changed his attitude and broke through to the Dhamma.

9.

Ven. Ananda, assuming that the Buddha has passed away, addresses Ven. Anuruddha — his senior — as "venerable sir," in line with the Buddha's instructions.

10.

A different Subhadda from the Buddha's last face-to-face disciple.

11.

In Cullavagga XI.1, Ven. Maha Kassapa cites this statement as good reason to hold a council for standardizing the Dhamma & Vinaya "before what is not-dhamma shines out and dhamma is obscured, before what is not-discipline shines out and discipline is obscured; before those who speak what is not-dhamma become strong and those who speak what is dhamma become weak; before those who speak what is not-discipline become strong and those who speak what is discipline become weak." Thus the First Council was held during the Rains Retreat following the Buddha's Parinibbana.

12.

The commentary notes that Ven. Maha Kassapa entered the fourth jhana, which he used as the basis for a feat of psychic power so that the Buddha's feet would appear out of their extensive wrappings.

13.

Up to this point in the narrative, the Buddha's body is called a sarira (singular). Here the noun becomes plural, with the meaning of "relics," and remains plural for the remainder of the narrative.

See also: AN 3.72; AN 3.78; AN 4.42; AN 4.192.