

Ānanda

The Guardian of the Dhamma

by

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82,000 teachings from the Buddha
I have received;
2,000 more from his disciples;
Now, 84,000 are familiar to me.¹

Who nothing has heard² and nothing understood,
He ages only oxen-like:
His stomach only grows and grows,
But his insight deepens not.

Who has much heard and learned,
But does despise him who is poor in learning,
Is like one blind who holds a lamp.
So must I think of such a one.

Thou follow him who has heard much,
Then what is heard shall not decline.
This is the tap-root of the holy life;
Hence a Dhamma-guardian³ you should be!

Knowing what comes first and last,
Knowing well the meaning, too,
Skilful in grammar and in other items,⁴
The well-grasped meaning he examines.

Keen in his patient application,
He strives to weigh the meaning well.
At the right time he makes his effort,
And inwardly collects his mind.

— Venerable Ānanda, Th 1024–29

¹ Buddhist tradition has it that there are 84,000 sections of the Teaching (or units of text; *dhammakhandha*). See “The Expositor” (Commentary to *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*), vol. I, pp. 22, 34 (PTS).

² In ancient India, the way of learning and studying was not through books, but by the oral instruction of a teacher. The words “he has heard much (or not)” are, in this context, equivalent to “he is very learned (or not).”

³ Dhamma: literally, the truth, the law. Used for the Buddha’s teaching.

⁴ *Skilful in grammar and in other items*. According to the commentary, this refers to the four “analytical knowledges” (*paṭisambhidā*), of which two are mentioned in these verses, namely “grammar” (or language) and “meaning”; while the words “other items” refer to the remaining two, the analytical knowledges of the law (or conditionality) and of ready wit (perspicuity).

1. Ānanda's Personal Path

The one disciple of the Buddha most often mentioned in his discourses is Ānanda. Amongst all those great monks around the Buddha, he occupies a unique position in many respects, as will be mentioned in these pages. His unique position had already begun before his birth. He came to earth, just as the Buddha did, from the Tusita heaven, and was born on the same day as the Buddha and in the same caste, namely the warrior caste of the royal family of the Sakyas. Their fathers were brothers, so Ānanda was the Buddha's cousin.

He had three brothers, Anuruddha, Mahānāma, and Paṇḍu, and one sister, Rohiṇī. Anuruddha entered the Saṅgha⁵ together with Ānanda and became an arahat, a fully enlightened one. Mahānāma, the prince of the Sakyas, became a once-returner⁶ as a householder. The only thing known about Paṇḍu is the fact that he survived the near-extinction of the Sakya clan during the Buddha's 80th year.

Ānanda's only sister, Rohiṇī, had a skin disease as a result of former jealousy, and lived in seclusion at home until the Buddha talked to her about the kammic cause of her affliction and paved the way to stream-entry for her.⁷ Rohiṇī recovered and was later reborn in the "heaven of the gods of the thirty-three" as the wife of Sakka, the king of the gods.

When he was 37 years old, Ānanda joined his brother Anuruddha and his cousin Devadatta and also many other Sakyan nobles to become a "homeless one", a monk (Cv VII.1).

The venerable Belaṭṭhasīsa, an arahat—a fully liberated saint, became his teacher in the Saṅgha. Only one verse by the venerable Belaṭṭhasīsa has survived to this day:

Just as the noble buffalo
With hairy neck can pull the plough
With little effort, step by step,
So do I let the time flow by
With little effort, day by day,
When joy untainted has been won.

— Th 16

Under the guidance of this holy one, Ānanda was introduced into the monk's discipline. He was a willing and diligent pupil and was able to attain the fruit of stream-entry already during his first rains retreat (Cv VII.1).⁸

Later Ānanda told his fellow monks, that the venerable Puṇṇa Mantāniputta had also been of great help to him during his learning period. He had taught the Dhamma to the new monks and had explained to them that the "I am" conceit does not arise without a cause—namely, it is brought about through form, feeling, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. For a better understanding of this, the venerable Puṇṇa had given a fitting analogy:

⁵ Saṅgha: the company of monks following the Buddha and his teaching.

⁶ Once-returner: the second stage of enlightenment, which still requires one rebirth in the world of fivefold sense experience.

⁷ Stream-entry: the first stage of enlightenment, where the first glimpse of Nibbāna is gained, and the first three fetters abandoned.

⁸ The Buddha decreed that the monks should stay in one place under shelter during the monsoon rains in India (approximately July–September) and intensify their practice. This is followed to this day.

If somebody should want to see his reflection or image, he could do so only through a cause, namely a mirror or a clear body of water. In the same way do the five aggregates⁹ reflect the image of “I am.” As long as one depends on them and is supported by them, for that long will an “I” be reflected. Only when one does not rely on them any longer will the image of “I” disappear.

— SN 22:83

Ānanda thought about this analogy again and again and ever more deeply, until he penetrated the suffering, impermanence and no-self aspects of the five aggregates, and no longer relied upon them as his support. He then began to reap the benefits of monkhood, beginning with the fruit of stream-entry.

During the first years of his life as a monk, Ānanda was fully occupied with the purification of his own mind; he blended easily into the Sangha and slowly developed more and more resilience and mental strength. Ānanda was always well content with his life as a monk. He understood the blessings of renunciation and walking upon the Path, which is a joy to tread if one can cross the stream¹⁰ in company with like-minded friends.

When the Buddha and Ānanda were both 55 years of age, the Buddha called a meeting of the monks and declared: “In my 20 years as a monk, as Father of the Sangha, I have had many different attendants, but none of them has really filled the post perfectly, as again and again some wilfulness has become apparent. Now I am 55 years old and it is necessary for me to have a trustworthy and reliable attendant.” At once all the noble disciples except Ānanda offered their services. But the Buddha did not accept them. Then the great monks looked at Ānanda, who had held back modestly, and asked him to come forward voluntarily. Due to his impeccable behaviour as a monk, he seemed predestined for the post. When he was asked why he was the only one who had not offered his services, he replied that the Buddha knew best who was suitable as his attendant. He had so much confidence in the Blessed One that it did not occur to him to express his own wishes, although he would have liked to become the attendant of the Buddha.

Then the Buddha declared that Ānanda would be pleasing to him and that he wanted him as his attendant. Ānanda was in no way proud that the Master preferred him over his greatest disciples, but instead asked, as a favour, for eight conditions. These were, first of all, that the Master should never pass a gift of robes on to him; second, he should never give him any almsfood which he himself had received; third, having received a dwelling place he should never give it to him; fourth, never to include him in any personal invitation (such as an occasion for teaching Dhamma when a meal would be offered).

Besides these four negative conditions, he also had four positive wishes, namely: if he was invited to a meal, he asked for the right to transfer this invitation to the Buddha; if people came from outlying areas, he asked for the privilege to lead them to the Buddha; if he had any doubts or inquiries about the Dhamma, he asked for the right to present these to the Buddha at any time; and if the Buddha gave a discourse during his absence, he asked for the privilege to have the Buddha repeat it to him privately.

He explained his reasons for these requests in this way: if he did not pose the first four conditions, then people could say that he had accepted the post of attendant only because of

⁹ The five aggregates are the aspects of mind and body, which make up what is called a person: form (body), feeling, perceptions, mental formations (volitions, etc.), and consciousness.

¹⁰ “Crossing the stream to the other shore” is often used as an analogy for those monks and lay people who have left ordinary reactions and emotions behind, and have purified themselves to the extent of becoming “noble ones.”

material gain; and if he did not express the other four conditions, then it could rightly be said that he fulfilled the duties of his post without being mindful of his own advancement on the Noble Path.

The Buddha granted him these very reasonable requests which were quite in accordance with the teaching. From then on and for twenty-five years, Ānanda was the constant companion, attendant and helper of the Blessed One. In those twenty-five years of his fame, he continued with the same incessant striving for purification as in the first eighteen years of his monkhood as an unknown disciple. He said of himself:

Through a full 25 years
As long as I have been in higher training¹¹
I have never had a thought of lust:
See, how powerfully the Dhamma works.

— Th 1039

The subsequent verse expresses the same about thoughts of hate. These verses imply that though he was still a “learner” and “one in the higher training,” no thoughts of lust or hate arose in him because his close connection with the Buddha and his devotion to him gave no room to these.

Only such a man could fill the post of a constant companion for the Buddha. Added to that were Ānanda’s special positive qualities. How Ānanda attained arahatship and survived the Buddha will be related in due course.

¹¹ *Sekha*: lit. “a learner” or “one who trains himself.” This denotes a person who has attained one of the three lower stages of sanctity, i.e. a stream-winner, a once-returner and non-returner.

2. Ānanda's Renown

Ānanda is praised on many occasions in the Pali Canon. The greatest recognition for a monk would surely have been when the Buddha asked him to substitute for him as a teacher and then later confirmed that he, himself, would not have presented the teachings in any other way. This praise was given by the Exalted One to both Sāriputta¹² (another famous disciple) and Ānanda.

A similarly high esteem was evident when the monks to whom the Buddha had given a short discourse would ask an experienced monk to explain the teaching more fully. The venerable Mahā Kaccāna was a master in this, and so were Sāriputta and Ānanda (AN 10:115).

Besides the equal status Ānanda had in these respects with Sāriputta, the disciple who was most similar to the Master, there were occasions when the Buddha specially praised Ānanda. He said, for instance, to the monks that King Pasenadi, to whom Ānanda had given a discourse, was very blessed because he had been given the boon of the sight and company of Ānanda (MN 88). Further, just as the multitude of aristocrats, brahmins, ordinary folk and ascetics found joy in seeing a world ruler, equally joyful were the monks, nuns, and male and female disciples about Ānanda. "If a party of these goes to Ānanda to see him, his presence alone gives them joy. When he speaks Dhamma to them, there will be joy for them because of his words. And they are still not satisfied when Ānanda reverts to silence" (DN 16).

In answer to the question of a lay disciple how he could honour the Dhamma, after having honoured the Buddha and Sangha, the Buddha's reply was the third praise (of Ānanda): "If you, householder, wish to honour the Dhamma, go and honour Ānanda, the Guardian of the Dhamma"; whereupon the lay disciple invited Ānanda to a meal and gave him a gift of valuable cloth. But Ānanda turned it over to Sāriputta, because he had the greatest mastery of the Teaching; Sāriputta, however, gave it to the Buddha, because he alone was the cause of all bliss (J 296). Another time the Master praised him thus: after Ānanda had answered a question of the Buddha and had left, the Buddha said to the other monks: "One on the path of higher training is Ānanda, and it is not easy to find one who equals him fully in experience" (AN 3:78).

A layman who had been following another teaching was converted to the Dhamma after a talk with Ānanda. At the end he exulted how amazing it had been that Ānanda had neither elevated his own teaching into the heavens nor dragged the other into the dirt. "Totally straightforward was the exposition of the Dhamma, the inner meaning was explained and he, himself, was not carried away" (AN 3:72).¹³ A second time he was praised by King Pasenadi after having given a good explanation to the crown prince of Kosala. "Truly, he looks like Ānanda," because the name means esteemed, lovable, agreeable. And King Pasenadi said that Ānanda's words had been well-founded (MN 90).

In view of this abundance of praise, recognition and privileges, mutterings of envy and resentment could have been expected. But this was not the case at all. He was a man who had no enemies. This rare advantage had not come to him without cause but had been enjoyed by him not only in this life but also in many previous existences.

Ānanda was so much taken up by subordinating his entire life to the Dhamma that fame could not touch him and make him proud. He knew that all that was good in him was due to the influence of the Teaching. When seen in this way, there can be no pride. One who cannot be proud has no enemies, and such a one does not meet with envy. If someone turns inward completely and keeps away from any social contact, as Ānanda's brother Anuruddha did, then

¹² See *The Life of Sāriputta*, The Wheel Nos. 90–92.

¹³ See *The Roots of Good and Evil*, The Wheel Nos. 251–253, p. 61.

it is easy to be without enemies. But if someone like Ānanda, who had daily contact with a large number of people with regard to diverse matters, lives without enemies, without rivals, without conflict and tensions, it borders on a miracle. This quality is truly a measure of Ānanda's uniqueness.

Although Ānanda did experience justified criticism and was occasionally admonished, that was something entirely different. A friendly reminder, a warning or even a substantial reproach to change one's behaviour are aids towards more intense purification. Such criticism, if taken to heart, leads to more inner clarity and higher esteem by others.

The instances in which Ānanda was admonished were mostly related to points of social behaviour and to points of the Vinaya (the monk's discipline); hardly ever to points of self-purification and were never related to his understanding of the Dhamma. The instances were as follows.

Once, when the Buddha was suffering from wind in the stomach, Ānanda cooked a rice gruel for him, which had helped the Enlightened One when he had previous complaints of this sort. The Buddha admonished him thus: "It is not the proper way for ascetics, it is not proper monk's behaviour, to prepare meals in the house." After the incident, it was decreed an offence for a monk to cook for himself (Mv VI.17). Ānanda adhered to this rule from then on, with full insight into its necessity as a part of true homelessness.

Once Ānanda went on alms-round without his double robe. Fellow monks drew his attention to the rule established by the Buddha, that a monk should always wear his three robes when going to the village. Ānanda agreed wholeheartedly and explained that he had simply forgotten it. Since this and the former case concerned a simple disciplinary rule, the matter was thereby settled (Mv VIII.23). That someone like Ānanda, who had a most extraordinary memory, could also forget something was due to the fact that even a stream-winner is not yet perfect. The Buddha, however, required of the monks that they pay diligent attention to the small, everyday things of a monk's life, and that they base their higher spiritual exertions on the foundation of the discipline. This served to eliminate purely intellectual understanding and conceit.

A different kind of criticism was levelled at Ānanda in two instances by the venerable Mahā Kassapa. Thirty disciples of Ānanda had left the Sangha. Kassapa reproached Ānanda that he had not guarded the young men sufficiently. He had gone on walking tours with them without their having the senses well restrained, without having learned to be moderate in eating, and not having trained themselves in wakefulness. Therefore he was a "destroyer of corn,"¹⁴ "a spoiler of the families."¹⁵ His followers crumbled away. "This youngster is still uncontrolled." So did the venerable Mahā Kassapa reprove him (SN 16:11).

To this rather strong reproach, Ānanda only replied that the grey hair had grown on his head in the service of the Sangha and yet Kassapa still called him a "youngster." It may be that in this instance Ānanda had overrated his own strength and underrated the worldliness of his pupils. Ānanda did not argue about the objective justification of the censure for his failure. After all he was not yet an arahat and was still subject to some defilements. He only objected to the generalisation implied by the criticism. One may, however, assume that a saint, an arahat, like Kassapa, would have known which form of criticism would be most helpful to Ānanda.

The second incident with Kassapa had a different background. Ānanda had asked Kassapa to accompany him to a nunnery and to teach there. After initial hesitation, Kassapa had agreed. After the discourse was over, a headstrong nun accused Kassapa that only he had talked and he

¹⁴ By walking about without proper care, he destroyed the "young corn" of the Sangha.

¹⁵ By allowing unrestrained young monks to come into contact with supporting families, he made the latter disaffected.

had not let the wise Ānanda utter a single word. It was, she said, as if the needle salesman had tried to sell his wares in the presence of the needle manufacturer. Ānanda begged Kassapa to forgive her. But Kassapa replied that Ānanda should show restraint, lest an inquiry into his behaviour should be initiated (SN 16:10). This was meant by Kassapa to be a reproach that Ānanda had been overzealous in his teaching, and had overlooked the danger of personal attachment. This criticism also will have benefited Ānanda in the future. In any case, Kassapa blamed Ānanda in both instances because of his love for him; there was always an excellent relationship between these two monks.

Another monk, Udāyi, once criticised Ānanda in the following incident. Ānanda had asked the Blessed One how far his voice would reach in the universe. The Lord had answered that the Enlightened Ones were immeasurable and could reach farther than a thousandfold world system (with a thousand suns, a thousand heavens, and a thousand brahma¹⁶ worlds), even farther than a three-thousandfold world system. They could penetrate all those worlds with their shining splendour and reach all beings living there with their voice.

Ānanda was delighted with this description, so all-encompassing and transcending all horizons, and he exclaimed: “How fortunate I am, that I have such an almighty, powerful master!” Udāyi objected: “What good does it do to you brother Ānanda, that your master is almighty and powerful?” With these few words, Udāyi strongly reproached Ānanda for looking at the person of the Buddha only, and thereby forgetting his real benefit, namely his own enlightenment. But the Buddha immediately took sides with Ānanda with the following words: “Not so, Udāyi, not so, Udāyi! Should Ānanda die without being fully liberated; he would be king of the gods seven times because of the purity of his heart, or be king of the Indian subcontinent seven times. But Udāyi, Ānanda will experience final liberation in this very life” (AN 3:80).

That the Buddha made this prophecy in the presence of Ānanda showed his confidence in him. He knew that his wide knowledge of the Buddha-word would not make Ānanda negligent in his practice. This utterance also indicated that the Buddha found it useful to shield Ānanda from reproach—self-inflicted and by others—by consoling him that his efforts and strivings would result in the highest attainment still in this lifetime. The Tathāgata¹⁷ could make such a declaration only in the case of one who inclined towards being extremely conscientious rather than too negligent.

The only time that the Buddha admonished Ānanda on his own accord was also the most important incident. Previously, the Buddha had instructed Ānanda to oversee the distribution of cloth for robes to the monks. Ānanda had accomplished this task very satisfactorily. The Buddha praised him for his circumspection and told the other monks that Ānanda was very skilled in sewing; he was able to make several different kinds of seams. For a good monk it was necessary that he hemmed his robes, so that they did not fray at the edges, and one could not accuse him of carelessly handling and wasting the offerings of the laity (Mv VIII.12). Later, when the Buddha was residing near his home town he saw numerous seats prepared in a monastery and asked Ānanda whether many monks lived there.¹⁸ Ānanda confirmed this and added, “It is now time to sew our robes, venerable sir.” Ānanda was referring to the Buddha’s instructions that a monk should care for his robes properly.

¹⁶ Brahma: Pali for those gods who enjoy states equivalent to the four deep meditations, or jhāna (see later footnote).

¹⁷ Tathāgata (lit. “one who has thus gone” or “thus come”) is an epithet of the Buddha, used by him when speaking of himself; generally translated as “the perfect one.”

¹⁸ See MN 122 in The Wheel No. 87.

However, Ānanda seemed to have arranged a sort of communal sewing circle, maybe to teach his fellow monks that commended art of making seams. Ānanda had not considered that from this a home-like conversational hour would result. Therefore the Buddha gave this very emphatic injunction concerning the danger of mundane gregariousness for the monk:

“A monk does not deserve praise who enjoys socialising, who finds contentment in it, enjoys togetherness, is pleased with it. It is impossible that such a monk should attain at will the bliss of renunciation, the bliss of solitude, the bliss of tranquillity, the bliss of awakening, in their totality.

“Whosoever finds his whole happiness in togetherness has no access to the bliss which exists independent of the desire for togetherness. Even if one who is still attached to others attains meditative absorption, it will not be fully controlled nor will it be complete. Such absorption can in this case only be a result of forceful suppression. Still greater will be the difficulty of attaining final liberation for a person who makes himself dependent on companionship.”

The Buddha ends his injunction with the statement that he cannot find any form, the attachment to which would not produce *dukkha*,¹⁹ because of the inherent impermanence in it, even if it were the highest divine form of a brahma. This is the universal aspect of the Dhamma.

Subsequently the Buddha expounded the Path of Practice, which he explained solely with reference to Ānanda, not mentioning the first seven steps of the Noble Eightfold Path, but starting with the eighth step. This was because Ānanda had the faculty for deep meditation, and as one in the higher training was as deeply imbued with the Dhamma as anyone outside sainthood could be. He only needed a few hints to put the right perspective on the community work mentioned above.

Therefore the Buddha expounded here the highest goal—total voidness of concepts, objects and names—and showed the last steps. Furthermore he appealed to Ānanda’s love for him as the Master, and emphasised that this love could only be proven if Ānanda followed him into the highest attainment.

Thus one could say that he made use of both approaches, factual and personal, to help Ānanda cut off all remaining worldliness once and for all, and he concluded with this analogy: “Therefore, Ānanda, bear amity towards me, not hostility; long shall that be for your benefit and happiness. I shall not treat you, Ānanda, as the potter treats his unfired pots. Repeatedly admonishing, I shall speak to you, Ānanda, repeatedly testing. He who is sound will stand the test.”

This analogy to a potter will be easier to understand if one takes a look at the 405th Jātaka²⁰ story. It tells of a past life of Ānanda. He had abdicated from a king’s throne and had become an ascetic; at that time the Buddha was still the Bodhisatta and was also an ascetic. One day it transpired that the ascetic who later became Ānanda had a small store of salt to flavour his food which went against the ascetic rule of poverty. The Bodhisatta reprimanded him: he had let go of all the riches of his kingdom, but now he had started to store provisions again. The ascetic became ill-humoured because of the reprimand. He replied that one must not hurt the other person when reprimanding him; one must not be rough with one’s reproach, as if cutting with a blunt knife. The Bodhisatta replied that, amongst friends, it was not necessary to speak like a potter handling his unfired (i.e. very delicate) pots. A friend could also utter words of blame, because only through repeated exhortation and constant, constructive criticism could one give a person that solidity which was like fired clay. Then the ascetic asked the Bodhisatta’s pardon and requested that the Bodhisatta should, out of compassion, always guide him further.

¹⁹ Dukkha: Pali for every kind of unsatisfactoriness, including gross and subtle suffering.

²⁰ Jātaka tales: 547 stories of the Buddha’s past lives.

The analogy of the clay pots—easily understandable in those days because it was a common trade—referred to sensitivity and touchiness. For a potter would take the raw, not-quite-dry clay pot gently and with both hands lest it should break. Then, after firing, he would repeatedly test it for flaws such as cracks or splits, and use it only if it were well-baked. He would tap it again and again, and only a sound pot would stand the test. In the same way, only a sound person, one with excellent qualities, would reach the path and fruit of sainthood.²¹

Just as in that past life the reproach of the Bodhisatta was fruitful and brought the ascetic who was later to become Ānanda to brahma realms (J 406), so it was also fruitful this time, because Ānanda accepted the criticism happily, was content with it (MN 122), took it to heart and followed it until he attained the total destruction of suffering in this life.

²¹ Reaching path and fruit: this expression means that a person not only knows the Noble Eightfold Path, but becomes the Noble Eightfold Path, and gains the fruits of this attainment, which is holiness.

3. Ānanda as the Buddha's Attendant

One of the virtues of Ānanda, which established his fame, was his conduct as the Buddha's attendant. The Buddha said of him, that he was the best of all attendants, was the foremost of all those monks who had ever filled this post (AN 1:19).

The term "attendant" is actually not comprehensive enough. There is hardly an English word which can do full justice to his position. If we were to choose designations such as "secretary" or "adjunct," then we would not express the most intimate aspects of his attendance, extending to many little items of personal assistance given to the Master. If we called him a "servant," then we would omit the organisational and directing aspects which manifested on many occasions. And if we looked for examples in the world's literature of a confidante of a great man, who accompanied him constantly, we still would not find his likeness.

This loving attention for 25 years consisted of the following services: Ānanda brought water for washing to the Buddha and tooth-wood,²² he arranged his seat, washed his feet, massaged his back, fanned him for coolness, swept his cell, and mended his robes. He slept nearby at night to be always on hand. He accompanied him on his rounds through the monastery (Mv VIII.16) and after meetings he checked to see whether any monk had left anything behind. He carried the Buddha's messages (Cv V.20) and called the monks together, even sometimes at midnight (J 148). When the Buddha was sick, he obtained medicine for him. Once when monks neglected a very sick fellow monk, the Buddha and Ānanda washed him and together carried him to a resting-place (Mv VIII.26). In this way Ānanda performed the many daily tasks and cared for the physical well-being of his enlightened cousin like a good mother or a caring wife.

But above all, he also had the duties of a good secretary, namely the smooth communication between the thousands of monks and the Master. Together with Sāriputta and Moggallāna, he tried to sort out and attend to the manifold problems of human relationships turning up in a community.

In a case of dispute of the monks of Kosambi (AN 4:249), and in the case of a schism in the Sangha caused by Devadatta (Ud 5.8 and Cv VII), Ānanda played an important role in clarifying and keeping order. Often he was the go-between for the monks, getting an audience with the Master for them. He brought the Buddha's words to members of other sects. He refused no one and felt himself to be a bridge rather than a barrier.

On several occasions the monks made such a great deal of noise that the Buddha asked Ānanda the reason. Ānanda was always able to explain it fully (MN 67; Pāc 65; Ud 3.3). The Buddha then took care of it accordingly. The last of these three occasions is significant. On behalf of the Buddha, Ānanda called the large group of noisy monks together and reproached them for their behaviour and sent them away. Thereupon the group went into solitude and worked so diligently on the purification of their hearts, that all of them attained the three knowledges²³ during one rains retreat. The Master called them together once more. When they arrived at the Awakened One, he dwelt in imperturbable meditation.²⁴ The holy monks realised the depth of their master's meditation, sat down and entered in the same absorption. After they had thus passed the first four hours of the night—truly the kind of "greeting" fit for holy ones—

²² Combines the function of toothbrush and toothpick.

²³ Three knowledges: knowledge of past lives; knowledge of the arising and passing away of beings according to their kamma; exhaustion of the taints. The taints are (a) sensual desire, (b) craving for being, (c) ignorance.

²⁴ *Āneñja-samādhī*: This is the concentration connected with the highest fruit attainment (*arahatta*), based on the fine-material or immaterial absorptions.

Ānanda got up and requested the Buddha to greet the monks who had arrived. Because all of them were in imperturbable meditation, no one could hear him. After a further four hours, Ānanda repeated his request. Again total silence answered him. And a third time, at dawn, Ānanda got up, prostrated before the Buddha, put his hands together and requested a greeting for the monks. Thereupon the Buddha came out of his meditation and answered Ānanda: “If you were able to attain supramundane experiences, then you would have known that all of us had entered into imperturbable absorption, where words cannot penetrate” (Ud 3.3).

This account serves to show Ānanda’s unerring patience, as well as his limitations. Such an occurrence may have contributed to Ānanda’s determination to practise meditation again and again, despite his many duties. The traditional texts speak of two occasions when he asked the Buddha for a meditation subject, which he could practise in solitude. The Master told him on one occasion, to concentrate on the five aggregates (SN 22:158), and the other time to contemplate the six sense-spheres (SN 35:86).

Among the many things which Ānanda requested from the Buddha for others, the following may be mentioned. When the monk Girimānanda and the monk Phagguṇa were sick, Ānanda asked the Exalted One to visit them and strengthen them by teaching them the Dhamma (AN 10:60; AN 6:58). It was also Ānanda who asked the Buddha—upon Anāthapiṇḍika’s suggestion—to have a shrine erected in the monastery (J 479).

In these and many other ways, Ānanda showed himself as a solicitous monk who combined maternal and paternal qualities. His ability for organisation, negotiation, and arrangements had already been manifested earlier, when—in a past life—he fulfilled a similar function for the king of the gods, Sakka. In the few instances when Ānanda’s past lives in the deva and brahma worlds are mentioned, it always related to those lives in which he held the position of a main helper and adjutant of Sakka; for example, as the heavenly charioteer Mātali (in four cases—Jātaka stories 31, 249, 535 and 541), and as devas such as the heavenly architect Vissakamma (J 489), the rain-god Pajjunna (J 75), and the five-crested celestial musician Pañcasikha (J 450).

Especially worth mentioning is Ānanda’s willingness to sacrifice himself. When Devadatta let loose a wild elephant to kill the Buddha, Ānanda threw himself in front of the Buddha, to die himself rather than to see the Exalted One killed or injured. Three times the Buddha asked him to step back, but he did not comply. Only when the Enlightened One moved gently from the spot through supernatural powers, could he be dissuaded from his intention to sacrifice himself (J 533). This action of Ānanda spread his fame even further. The Buddha told the other monks that already in four former lives Ānanda had shown himself equally willing to sacrifice himself. Even in long bygone times as an animal, as a swan (J 502, 533, and 534) and a gazelle (J 501), he had stayed with the Bodhisatta when he had been caught in a trap. And in three other recorded cases, Ānanda—in his former rebirths—saved the Buddha-to-be’s life through his care and skill. In another case the Bodhisatta first sacrificed himself for his monkey mother, and then Ānanda did so (J 222). These stories amplify the virtues of Ānanda and his age-old association with the Buddha.

4. Ānanda as the Guardian of the Dhamma

Amongst the distinctions which gave Ānanda a special place amongst the Buddha's disciples, one of the most noteworthy was that he was the only monk who was not yet an arahat amongst those whom the Buddha called pre-eminent in specific abilities. This means that he had qualities which equalled those of the arahats. While others were mentioned because they excelled in one superior quality, (except two monks who possessed two such qualities), Ānanda was the one amongst the seventy-five pre-eminent disciples who excelled in five abilities—he was pre-eminent among those who had heard much (of the Buddha's words), who had a good retentive memory, who had mastered the sequential order (or what was remembered), who were energetic, and who attended (on the Master) (AN 1:19).

Upon close examination, one can see that these five qualities belong to the vast complex of virtues which give *sati* (Pali for mindfulness) its strength and power. The quality of mindfulness is power of the mind, power of memory, mastery over recollections and ideas. It is the faculty to use the tool of the mind at any time at will and not be driven by it. In short, mindfulness is circumspection and orderliness, self-restraint, control, self-discipline. In a narrower sense, *sati* or mindfulness is the ability to remember. Ānanda had this ability to a phenomenal degree. He could immediately remember everything, even if he had heard it only once. He could repeat discourses of the Buddha flawlessly up to 60,000 words, without leaving out a single syllable. He was able to recite 15,000 four-line stanzas of the Buddha. It may sound like a miracle to us to be able to accomplish such a feat. But the miracle is solely that we encumber our minds with a hundred-thousand useless things, which hinder us from becoming master over our memory. The Buddha said once that the only reason why one forgets anything is the presence of one of the five hindrances²⁵ (AN 5:193). Because Ānanda was one in the higher training, he was able to let go of these hindrances at will (if any were still present in him at all) and so could concentrate completely on what he heard.²⁶

Because he did not want anything for himself, he absorbed the discourses without resistance or distortion, arranged them properly, knew what belonged together, recognised within different expressions the common denominator, and like a faithful and skilled registrar, could find his way around in his own mind.

This is the quality of "having heard much." He who has heard much in this sense, has discarded wilfulness from his own mind and has become a vessel of truth. He has heard much truth and that means that he has erased all untruth in himself. Such a one is "born from the mouth" of the teacher, is truly trained, because he has let himself be shaped by the teaching of the Exalted One. Hence he who has heard much is the one who is most humble and a most sincere champion of truth. Everything good which he carries in his mind and upon which he acts, he does not ascribe to his own ability, but to the Dhamma, which he has heard from his teacher. Such a person is truly humble.

His grow this to be
The vanquished one of ever greater things.

(Rainer Maria Rilke)

²⁵ Five hindrances: sensual desire, ill will, lethargy and drowsiness, restlessness and worry (distraction), and sceptical doubt.

²⁶ Even today in modern Burma there are monks who remember by heart the Discipline, Discourses, and Abhidhamma—the Three Baskets of the Buddhist Scriptures—and can recite them. Printed, they fill forty-five volumes!

This could rightly be said of Ānanda. When he came to the Buddha he was still ignorant, thinking in a wrong way. Each teaching of the Awakened One forced him to correct his outlook. Constantly losing his old concepts, he totally yielded to the truth.

This quality of listening well and training the mind is named as the first of the five specific abilities of Ānanda and it is recorded that all of his disciples, too, were well versed in this respect (SN 14:5). But the Buddha said it would not be easy to find one who equalled Ānanda in this (AN 3:78). The question as to which monk lent radiance to the Gosiṅga Forest,²⁷ was answered by Ānanda in this way:

The monk who has heard much, is guardian of the word, treasurer of the teaching, and of what is good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good at the end, and transmits word by word, and in the right way, the completely purified life of the homeless ones: all this he knows, remembers, ably explains, keeps in his heart and understands completely. He gives discourses on the Dhamma to the four kinds of listeners,²⁸ in completeness, in part and in the right context, to bring them to final eradication of desires.

MN 32

The second quality named is the retention in mind and making use of the discourses heard, and their application to one's own self-inquiry.

For the third quality (in Pali *gatimanta*), translators have given widely differing renderings. According to the ancient commentary, it refers to Ānanda's capacity to perceive in his mind the internal connection and coherence of a discourse. This he was able to do by understanding well the meaning and significance of the teaching concerned, with all its implications. Hence, even when his recitation was interrupted by a question, he was able to resume the recital where he had left off.

The fourth quality was his energy, his unflagging dedication to his task in studying, memorising and reciting the Buddha's words and in personally attending on the Master.

The fifth and last quality was that of a perfect attendant, which was described earlier. Furthermore, because of his key position among the Buddha's entourage of monks, Ānanda was naturally the focus of much attention, and he had to deal with a very large number of people. To all those who came into contact with him, he was a model in his blameless conduct, his untiring solicitude for the Master and for the community of monks, his imperturbable friendliness, his patience and his readiness to help. Some potential conflicts did not arise because of his presence, and those which did arise became mitigated and resolved through his influence. Ānanda, as a man without enemies, had a strong and deep impact upon others through his exemplary conduct as well as through his instructions. His image as the Buddha's faithful companion left particularly strong traces in the minds of his contemporaries.

Ānanda was always master of a situation, and like a king, he had a sovereign comprehension of affairs. Therefore, thanks to his circumspection, he could handle and organise whatever occurred in the daily life of the Buddha and the community. Through the extraordinary power of his memory, he was able to learn from his experiences and never repeat the same mistakes, as most people are liable to do again and again, due to their weak memory. Hence, he could remember people well, even though he may have met them only once, and he could, therefore,

²⁷ At one time the Buddha was staying in the park of the Gosiṅga sāla tree, also described as the Gosiṅga Wood, or Forest, with a number of experienced elder disciples. The venerable Sāriputta mentions that this wood is a delightful place, with the sāla trees all in bloom and their scent pervading the air as if in heaven. The Buddha then poses the above question to all the elder disciples and each one answers according to his own "specialty" in Dhamma.

²⁸ Monks, nuns, and male and female lay devotees.

deal with them suitably, without leaving the impression that he “manipulated” them. His circumspection accorded with the facts of a situation so naturally that all reasonable people could only agree with him.

If one looks at these five qualities, one receives a vivid picture of Ānanda. The central quality, however, is that of a guardian of the Dhamma, which can be seen even more in the following chapters.

5. Ānanda's Attitude Towards Women

Both brothers, Anuruddha and Ānanda, were no longer in need of female companionship, in any way or form, because of their inner detachment from worldliness and their strong spirit of renunciation. To both, however, the other sex presented a challenge in different ways.

If one has much contact with people, one has to take the difference of the sexes into account. With Ānanda this showed as special care and effort to look after all four kinds of disciples, not only monks and laymen, but also nuns and laywomen. Without Ānanda there would have been only three kinds of disciples, because it was he who was instrumental in the founding of the nun's order. This happened as follows (AN 8:51; Cv X.1).

When many nobles of the Sakya clan had become monks, their wives, sisters, and daughters also wished to live a life of purification under the Awakened One. A large number of Sakyan ladies, under the guidance of the Buddha's stepmother, Mahā-Pajāpatī, followed the Exalted One and tried in vain to gain permission to establish an order of nuns. Ānanda saw the Buddha's step-mother with swollen feet, covered with dust, eyes full of tears at the gate of the monastery of Vesāli. When he asked her compassionately for the reason of her sorrow, she replied that the Master had three times rejected her request for the establishment of an order of nuns.²⁹

Ānanda decided out of compassion to intercede himself. He went to the Master, but his request was also denied three times. Then he asked: "Is a woman able to gain the fruit of stream-entry, once-returning, non-returning, and arahatship, if she leaves the household life and enters into homelessness and follows the teaching and discipline of the Exalted One?"

The Buddha affirmed this. Thereupon Ānanda rephrased his request. "If a woman is able to do this, Master—and moreover Mahā-Pajāpatī Gotami has rendered great service to the Master: she is his aunt, his governess and nurse, and nourished the Exalted One with her own milk after his mother died—therefore it would be well if the Blessed One would allow women to leave home for the homeless life, to follow the teaching and discipline of the Master."

Ānanda here brought two arguments to bear. First was the fact that a woman in the Order could gain the highest fruit, become a saint, an arahat in this very life, a goal which can be attained only very rarely in the household life. Second, he brought up the very personal element of gratitude for the particularly meritorious services of Mahā-Pajāpatī to the Buddha, which would be a good reason for him to help his step-mother now to gain final liberation. In response to these arguments the Buddha agreed to the establishment of an order of nuns, provided certain cautions and rules were followed.

One might gain the impression from this account, that it needed Ānanda's intense and clever arguments to change the Buddha's mind. But an awakened one's mind cannot be changed, because he is always in touch with absolute reality. What happened here was the same event which all Buddhas encounter, because all of them have established an order of nuns. The whole incident was not meant to prevent the founding of the female branch of the Order, but only to strengthen by that hesitation the message that this brought great dangers with it. For this reason, the Buddha stipulated eight conditions, which were selected so that only the best

²⁹ It seems that the Buddha did not absolutely refuse Mahāpajāpatī Gotami, but perhaps wished to test her determination. It would have been a very difficult thing for aristocratic ladies in those days to do—to become nuns and live a hard life in the forest, subsisting on almsfood. Ladies then had no experience in looking after themselves or organising anything, as their social scope under Brahmanism was very much restricted.

women would agree to abide by them. They also served to bring about a separation of the sexes in the Order in the best possible manner. In spite of this, the Exalted One declared that because of the founding of the Order of Nuns the dispensation would last only five hundred instead of a thousand years.³⁰

Following the Buddha's proclamation of the rules and regulations for nuns, Ānanda asked him about the qualities a monk should have to be a teacher of nuns. The Buddha did not reply that he had to be an arahat, a saint, but indicated eight practical and concrete qualities, which also someone like Ānanda, who was not yet an arahat, could possess. These eight qualities were: the teacher of nuns must be virtuous; second, he must have comprehensive knowledge of the Dhamma; third he must be well acquainted with the Vinaya, especially the rules for nuns; fourth, he must be a good speaker with a pleasant and fluent delivery, faultless in pronunciation, and intelligibly convey the meaning; fifth, he should be able to teach Dhamma to the nuns in an elevating, stimulating, and encouraging way; sixth, he must always be welcome to the nuns and liked by them—that is, they must be able to respect and esteem him not only when he praises them but especially when there is an occasion for reproach; seventh, he must never have committed sexual misconduct with a nun; and eighth, he must have been a fully ordained Buddhist monk for at least 20 years (AN 8:52).

Since Ānanda had been instrumental in the founding of the Order of Nuns, he now also wanted to help them to advance on the Noble Path. This brought about some difficulties for him. There were two occasions in which nuns stood up for him without justification against Kassapa (SN 16:10–11). One of them was mentioned above in Section 2, "Ānanda's Renown." Both nuns left the Order; they showed thereby that they were no longer able to sustain the necessary impersonal and purely spiritual relationship with their teacher, Ānanda.

Even more extreme was the case of the nun in Kosambi, whose name is not known. She sent a messenger to Ānanda, asking him to visit her as she was sick. In reality she had fallen in love with Ānanda and wanted to seduce him. Ānanda mastered the situation with complete aplomb. In his sermon to her he explained that this body had arisen because of nutrition, craving and pride. But one could use these three as means for purification. Supported by nutrition, one could transcend nutrition. Supported by craving, one could transcend craving. Supported by pride, one could transcend pride. The monk took in such nutriment as would enable him to lead the holy life. He sublimated his craving and was supported by his longing for holiness. And pride spurred him on to reach that which others had already attained, namely the realisation of Dhamma in himself. In this way he could, in due course, transcend nutrition, craving and pride. But there was a fourth cause for the arising of the body, namely sexual intercourse, but this was an entirely different matter. This had been called the destruction of the bridge to Nibbāna by the Blessed One. In no way could its sublimation be used as a path to holiness.

Thereupon the nun got up from the bed, prostrated before Ānanda, confessed her offence and asked for forgiveness. Ānanda accepted the confession and declared that in the Order it was an advantage to confess one's faults and to restrain oneself thereafter (AN 4:159). This incident is an excellent example of Ānanda's great skill to give a suitable Dhamma discourse on the spur of the moment, to find the right word at the right time.

³⁰ In the Vinaya (monk's discipline) the Buddha is represented as saying this, but such a prophecy involving time is found only here. There is no other mention anywhere in the whole of the Vinaya (discipline) and the Suttas (discourses). This makes one suspect an intrusion. The Commentaries, as well as many other later Buddhist writings; have much to say about the decline of the Buddha's Dispensation in five-hundred-year periods, but none of this is the word of the Buddha and only represents the view of later teachers.

Another incident happened with regard to the wives of King Pasenadi. They had pondered over three things: seldom does a Buddha appear in the world, seldom is one reborn as a human being and seldom is one healthy in mind and body. Yet in spite of the existence of these favourable conditions, they could not go to the monastery and hear the Dhamma. As the king's women they were confined to the harem like birds in a cage, and that was really a disaster for them.

They went to the king and asked him to request the Buddha to send a monk to the palace to teach them the Dhamma. The king promised. The lay disciple praised by the Buddha—a non-returner—declined to do it, because it was a monk's duty. Thereupon the king asked his wives which monk would be most acceptable to them. They discussed it among themselves and unanimously requested the king that he should ask Ānanda, the guardian of the Dhamma, to come and teach them. The Blessed One complied with the request presented to him by the king, and from then on Ānanda taught the Dhamma to the women.

One day during this period, one of the crown jewels was stolen. Everywhere was searched and the women felt very troubled because of the unrest occasioned thereby. Because of this they were not as attentive and eager to learn as usual. Ānanda asked them for the reason and when he heard it, out of compassion he went to the king and advised him. In order to end the anxiety and unrest, he told the king to summon everyone who could possibly be the thief and give them an opportunity to return the jewel unobtrusively. He advised him to have a tent erected in the courtyard of the palace, to put a large pot of water inside and have everyone enter alone. So it was done, and the jewel thief, alone in the tent, let the jewel drop into the pot. Thereby the king regained his property, the thief went unpunished, and peace reigned once again in the palace. This incident increased Ānanda's popularity even more and thereby the popularity of the Sakyan monks. The monks also praised Ānanda, that he had restored peace through gentle means (J 92).

Shortly before the Buddha died, Ānanda asked him a question concerning women: "How shall we relate to women, Master?"—"Do not look at them."—"But if one sees one, Master?"—"Do not address her."—"But if one talks to us?"—"Keep mindfulness and self-control." (DN 16).

This question was posed by Ānanda in view of the imminent death of the Buddha, just before the preparations for the funeral. This problem must therefore have been an important one for him. For himself he did not need an admonition to practise self-control; sensual desire had been overcome by him for 25 years. But during the years he had seen how the problem of the relationship between the sexes again and again stirred the emotions.

The question may have been asked by him for this reason, but also on account of the warning of the Buddha that the Order was endangered through the foundation of the Nun's Order and its lifespan shortened. He wanted to give his contemporaries and his successors a last word of the Buddha on this topic.

6. Ānanda and His Fellow Monks

Of all the monks, Sāriputta was Ānanda's closest friend. There does not seem to have been a close relationship between Ānanda and his brother Anuruddha, because the latter preferred solitude whereas Ānanda was fond of people. Sāriputta was the disciple who most resembled the Master, and with whom he could talk in the same way as with the Buddha. It is remarkable that of all the monks only Sāriputta and Ānanda received an honorary title from the Buddha: Sāriputta was called the Commander-in-Chief of the Dhamma (*dhamma-senapati*) and Ānanda its Guardian. One can see their complementary roles in this. Sāriputta, the lion, was the active teacher; Ānanda more the preserver and treasurer. In certain aspects, Ānanda's methods resembled more those of Mahā-Moggallāna, whose inclinations were also motherly and preserving.

Ānanda and Sāriputta often worked together. They visited the sick Anāthapiṇḍika (MN 153; SN 55:26) together twice, dealt with the dispute of the monks of Kosambi (AN 4:221), and had many Dhamma discussions with each other. When Ānanda received the message one day that Sāriputta had died, he was deeply affected:

All the quarters are bedimmed
And the Dhamma is not clear to me,
Indeed my noble friend has gone
And all about seems dark.

— Th 1034

He felt physically quite wretched and even the Dhamma was not alive in him at that moment, such was the impact of the death message. Then the Buddha afforded him great consolation. He asked Ānanda to reflect whether Sāriputta had taken with him virtue or meditation, or wisdom, or liberation, or the purity of liberation? Ānanda had to agree that these, the only important aspects, had not changed. But, he added, Sāriputta had been such a helpful companion and friend for him and others. Again the Buddha directed the conversation onto a higher level by reminding Ānanda of what he, the Buddha, had always taught: that nothing that has arisen can remain forever. The death of Sāriputta was, for the other disciples, like cutting off the main branch of a large tree. But that should only be another reason for relying on oneself, on no one else, and be one's own light and refuge (SN 7:13).

Many discussions which Ānanda had with other monks are also recorded. Only a few can be related here.

One day the Venerable Vaṅḡisa accompanied Ānanda on his alms round. On the way Vaṅḡisa was overcome by dissatisfaction,³¹ the most dangerous illness of ascetics. His heart was flooded by sensual desire. All of a sudden a monk's life seemed senseless and a waste to him, but house and family life attractive and wholesome. The Venerable Vaṅḡisa asked Ānanda for help. When Ānanda became aware of what was going on in his companion, he spoke to him in verse, because Vaṅḡisa, the poet in the Sangha, had voiced his request also in verse. Ānanda said:

Since your perception is distorted,
Your heart with passion is aflame.
The marks of beauty should you shun,
Bound up with lustful longing and desire.

³¹ Dissatisfaction with celibacy.

Your mind, one-pointed and collected,
In seeing foulness should be cultivated.
With mindfulness directed on the body,
Dwell often in disgust concerning it.

— Th 1224–25

Ānanda showed him that he constantly refuelled sensual desire because his perception was not controlled, and so he became captivated by feminine charm. When the feeling of deprivation became too strong it would manifest as weariness of mind and dissatisfaction, as a kind of aversion towards the ascetic life. Therefore Vaṅgīsa had to contemplate soberly those things which seemed beautiful and desirable; then he would understand that the body was not beautiful. This would be wholesome practise.

The monk Channa was plagued with doubts about the Dhamma. He understood that the five aggregates are impermanent, but he was afraid of Nibbāna, thought it to be the destruction of the ego. So he came for advice to Ānanda. Ānanda consoled him: he would understand the teaching, he was already beginning to break through the hard shell. Channa was delighted and listened with undivided attention to Ānanda's exposition of the Buddha's discourse on being and not-being (SN 12:15). Thereupon Channa exclaimed how wonderful it was to have such wise brothers as teachers. Now he was firm in the Dhamma again (SN 22:90).

7. Ānanda's Conversations with the Buddha

If one considers conversation as also the silent, inner rapport with a Dhamma discourse, then the whole of the Pali Canon actually consists of Ānanda's conversations with the Buddha. He was almost always present when the Buddha gave a discourse, and not only during the time he was his attendant. And those few discourses which the Blessed One gave in Ānanda's absence, he repeated for him afterwards.³²

We cannot repeat here all the specific dialogues between the Buddha and Ānanda. The Buddha often addressed Ānanda with a question or teachings, which were either meant for Ānanda's spiritual growth or gave the occasion for a discourse to all the monks present. It is always more stimulating for the listeners when two experts discuss a subject with each other, rather than having only one speaking. In this way many of the conversations between the Buddha and Ānanda are discourses for the instruction of others.

Special occasions for a discourse were when the Buddha smiled when he came to a certain locality. Ānanda knew that a fully enlightened one does not smile without cause, and understood immediately that here was reason for a question. So he asked the Awakened One why he had smiled. Thereupon the Master gave detailed explanations of an incidents in past births, Jātaka stories, which had taken place at those localities (MN 81; MN 83; AN 5:180; J 440).

The conversations in which Ānanda asked the question and took the initiative are far more numerous than the ones the Buddha started. For instance, Ānanda asked whether there was a fragrance which went against the wind, different from that of flowers and blossoms. The answer was: the fragrance of him who has taken the triple refuge, is virtuous and generous (SN 3:79).

Another time Ānanda asked how one could live happily in the Order. The answer was: if one is virtuous oneself, but does not blame others for lack of virtue; if one watches oneself, but not others; if one does not worry about lack of fame; if one can obtain the four meditation absorptions without difficulty; and finally if one becomes a holy one, an arahat. So here the first step on the path to holiness is mentioned as not criticising or watching others, but only making demands on oneself (AN 5:106).

Ānanda inquired about many aspects of the Dhamma. For instance, Ānanda asked what were the purposes and blessings of virtue. The answer was: to be free of self-reproach, free of guilt feelings, with a clear conscience. But Ānanda asked further: what were the purposes and blessings of a clear conscience. The Buddha replied that it would bring joy in wholesome thoughts and actions, happiness with progress made and incentive for further striving. And what would result from that? One would experience exaltation in one's heart, being drawn towards the good and perfect bliss; and from that would further result deep calm and insight (AN 10:1).

Sometimes Ānanda reported certain views of his to the Buddha, so that the Buddha could either accept or correct them. For instance he said that good friendship was half of the holy life. Unexpectedly the Buddha disagreed: noble friendship was more than half; it was all of it. What would the holy life be like, if they had not all come to the Buddha, as their best friend, to be shown the right way? (SN 45:2 and SN 3:18; further examples: AN 6:57; MN 121).

³² But obviously there are many discourses of the Buddha which were not recorded in full—for instance, the detailed exposition of his “graduated talk” which he gave so many times; and also the many occasions in the account of his last days when only the subject headings are mentioned.

Ānanda's best-known remark must surely be the one where he said that causal arising³³ was very profound, but it seemed quite clear to him. Again the Buddha disagreed: it was profound, but very difficult to penetrate. Because it was not properly understood, there was no liberation for beings caught in the wheel of life and death.³⁴ And then the Buddha explained to Ānanda causal arising in its manifold aspects (DN 15). At one time, Ānanda saw an archer perform extraordinary feats. When he told the Buddha how he had admired this (Ānanda came from the warrior caste and probably greatly appreciated such skill), the Buddha used his statement to draw an analogy. He said it was more difficult to understand and penetrate the Four Noble Truths³⁵ than to hit and penetrate with an arrow a hair split seven times.

Another report says that Ānanda once saw the famous Brahman Jāṇussoṇi (MN 4; MN 27; MN 99; AN 2:15; etc.), a disciple of the Buddha, driving along in his glorious white chariot. He heard people exclaim that the chariot of the priest of King Pasenadi's court was the most beautiful and best of all. Ānanda reported this to the Buddha and asked him how one could describe the best chariot according to Dhamma. The Buddha explained in a detailed analogy what the vehicle to Nibbāna had to consist of: the draught-animals had to be faith and wisdom, moral shame the brake, intellect the reins, mindfulness the charioteer, virtue the accessories, *jhāna*³⁶ the axle, energy the wheels, equanimity the balance, renunciation the chassis; the weapons were love, harmlessness and solitude; and patience was its armour (SN 45:4).

³³ Causal arising: dependent origination; see The Wheel Nos 15, 140, and also 147–149.

³⁴ The wheel of life and death: because each cause has an effect, and ordinary beings cannot see the impact of their cravings, they are caught in rebirth after rebirth, as if in a revolving wheel.

³⁵ The Four Noble Truths; the core of the Dhamma:

1. the noble truth of dukkha (unsatisfactoriness);
2. the noble truth of the cause of dukkha, which is craving;
3. the noble truth of the cessation of dukkha which is Nibbāna;
4. the noble truth of the path to cessation, which is the Noble Eightfold Path.

³⁶ *jhāna*: four deeply-inward and purified levels of mind at a high degree of concentration, when there is no sense of awareness present but only a brilliant and mindful awareness within. The Pali term may be rendered by "meditative absorption."

8. Ānanda's Former Lives

A summary of Ānanda's former lives shows that he was only seldom a god, seldom an animal, and mostly a human. His most frequent birth was as a human, while his brother Anuruddha had almost always been a god, and Devadatta very often an animal. His close connection with the Buddha is shown in the fact that he was often his brother.

The examples of former lives given here will be mainly those which exemplify that he, too, had to exert himself to attain virtue.

Jātaka 498. He and the Bodhisatta were born as cousins among the outcastes or caṇḍālas. Their job was the fumigation of malodorous places. In order to escape the contempt they were held in, they disguised themselves as young men of the Brahman caste and went to the University at Takkasilā to study. Their deceit was discovered and they were beaten up by their fellow students. A wise and kindly man ordered the students to stop and advised the two Caṇḍālas to become ascetics. They followed this advice and, in due course, died; as the consequence for their deceit, they were reborn as animals, namely as offspring of a doe. They were inseparable and died together by the arrows of a hunter. In the next life they were sea hawks and again died together because of a hunter.

With this, their existences below the human level came to an end. Ānanda was born as the son of a king and the Bodhisatta as the son of the priest at court. While Ānanda held the higher position in a worldly sense, the Bodhisatta had more inner abilities because, for one thing, he could remember all the above three lives. But Ānanda could only remember his life as a Caṇḍāla. At the age of sixteen, the Bodhisatta became a sincerely striving ascetic while Ānanda became king. Later on the Bodhisatta visited the king. He praised the happiness of asceticism and explained the unsatisfactoriness of the world of the senses. Ānanda admitted that he realised this, but that he could not let go of his desires, that he was held fast like an elephant in a swamp. Thereupon the Bodhisatta advised him that even as a king he could practise virtue, such as not levying unjust taxes, and supporting ascetics and priests. But when hot passions arose in him, he should remember his mother. How he had been completely helpless as a baby, and if his mother had not brought him up, he would never have become king. Thereupon Ānanda resolved to become an ascetic, and both attained to the brahma realm.

Jātaka 421. The Bodhisatta had been born as a poor labourer and endeavoured to keep the fast days.³⁷ His longing to be reborn as a king in his next life was fulfilled. Ānanda lived in his kingdom as a poor water-carrier. His whole fortune was a coin which he had hidden under a stone in a certain place. When a festival was observed in the city, the water-carrier's wife urged him to enjoy himself too and asked him whether he had any money at all. He said he had this coin but it was twelve miles away. She replied he should get it and that she had saved up the same amount. They could buy garlands, incense and drinks with that. Ānanda set out in spite of the midday heat, happy in the expectation of the festival. When he passed through the courtyard of the king's palace, he sang a song. The king saw him and asked the reason for his joyfulness in such heat. He answered that he did not notice the heat, as he was being driven by hot desire, and told his story.

The king asked how much his treasure amounted to, maybe one hundred thousand pieces? When he finally heard that it was only one coin, he exclaimed that Ānanda should not walk through the heat for he would give him a similar coin. Ānanda replied that he was very grateful

³⁷ *Uposatha*: marking the four phases of the moon when, especially on full moon, devout Buddhist lay men and lay women observe eight precepts.

because then he would have two coins. The king then offered him two coins but Ānanda said he would fetch his own one nevertheless. The king now became excited and raised his offer to millions, to the post of viceroy, but Ānanda would not let go of his coin. Only when the king offered him half his kingdom did he agree. The kingdom was divided up, and Ānanda was called King One Coin.

One day the two of them went hunting. When they became tired, the Bodhisatta put his head in the lap of his friend and fell asleep. Then the thought came to Ānanda to kill the king and to rule the whole kingdom by himself. He was drawing his sword when he remembered how grateful he—a poor yokel—should be to the king, and how wicked it was of him to have such a wish arise. He put his sword back in its sheath, but even a second and a third time he was overcome by the same desire. Feeling that this thought might rise in him again and again and could lead him on to very evil deeds, he threw away his sword, woke the king, prostrated before him and asked his forgiveness. The Bodhisatta forgave him and said he could have the whole kingdom and he would be satisfied to serve as viceroy under him. But Ānanda replied that he was finished with his lust for power, he wanted to become an ascetic. He had seen the cause of desire and how it grew; now he wanted to pull it out by the roots. He went to the Himalayas and reached perfect insight. The Bodhisatta remained in the world.

Jātaka 282. The Bodhisatta was a righteous king of Benares who practised the ten royal virtues, in that he gave alms, practised the moral rules and observed the sacred days. Now one of his ministers carried on an intrigue in his harem. When he was brought to justice, the gentle king waived the death penalty, only banishing him and allowing him to take his family and fortune along. The minister then went to live at a neighbouring king's court, became his confidant and told him one could easily occupy Benares, because its king was much too gentle. But the neighbouring king, Ānanda, was suspicious, because he was well acquainted with the strength and power of the State of Benares. The minister advised him to experiment. He should destroy one village of Benares. If any of his men were caught, the king would probably even reward the prisoners. True enough, when the marauders were brought before the Bodhisatta, and lamented they had plundered out of hunger, he gave them money.

This served to convince Ānanda of the truth of the treacherous minister's words and he marched into the State of Benares. The commander-in-chief of the Bodhisatta wanted to defend the kingdom, but the king said that he did not want to be the cause of harm for others. If the other king wanted his kingdom, he should have it. He let Ānanda capture him and put him into prison. There he practised loving kindness meditation towards the rapacious King Ānanda, who was struck down by a fever and plagued by a guilty conscience. Ānanda asked the Bodhisatta's pardon, returned his kingdom to him and swore to be his ally forever. The Bodhisatta returned to his throne and spoke to his ministers about the virtues and rewards of harmlessness, saying that because he had made peace with the invaders, hundreds were spared death on the battlefield. Then he renounced his throne, became an ascetic and attained to the brahma realm. Ānanda, however, remained king.

9. The Last Days of Gotama the Buddha

A welcome addition to Ānanda's conversations with the Awakened One is the account concerning the last events in the life of the Buddha in which Ānanda played a leading role. It is the Mahā-Parinibbāna Sutta (DN 16), the discourse on the Buddha's passing away and his ultimate entrance into Nibbāna.³⁸ These records convey a special mood, namely that of parting, which was especially painful for Ānanda. It is also the first small beginning of the decline of the Dhamma, which will slowly disappear with increased distance from the Buddha's lifetime until a new Buddha arises. This entire text gives, as it were, voice to the admonition to practise Dhamma while there is still a chance. It reflects once more Ānanda's whole character, and therefore we will follow its course, and emphasise those points which are important as far as Ānanda is concerned.

The first section of the Mahā-Parinibbāna Sutta starts at Rājagaha, the capital of the State of Magadha. Devadatta's attempt to create a schism in the Sangha had happened seven years earlier. King Ajātasattu reigned in Magadha. King Pasenadi of Kosala had just been overthrown and the Sakya clan had come to its tragic end in which Ānanda's brother, Prince Mahānāma, was killed.

At that time, three famous warrior clans lived north of the Ganges near the Himalayas. They were the Koliyas, the Mallas and the Vajjians, all of which had retained relative independence from the Mahārāja Ajātasattu. Ajātasattu had the intention of destroying the Vajjians and to incorporate their land in his. While the Buddha could not prevent the overthrow of those Sakyans who had not entered the Order because they had to pay a kammic debt, he did help the Vajjians and later indirectly also the Mallas. This is the external "political" background of the last years of the Buddha's life.

In detail, this incident happened as follows:

The king Ajātasattu gave orders to his minister, Vassakāra, to go to the Buddha and announce his intention to go into battle against the Vajjians. While Vassakāra delivered his message, Ānanda stood behind the Buddha and fanned him. The Awakened One turned to Ānanda and put seven questions to him about the life style and conditions of the Vajjians.

Ānanda declared that they often had council meetings in which they deliberated harmoniously, they did not repeal their old laws, they followed the advice of their elders, did not rape women, honoured their temples and shrines, did not revoke gifts to religious places, and that they gave protection and hospitality to all true priests and ascetics. Some time earlier the Buddha had given these seven rules to them. With these seven qualities, said the Buddha to Vassakāra, one could expect prosperity for the Vajjians, not decline. The king's minister replied that even one of these qualities would be enough for their continued existence as a clan. As long as the Vajjians kept to these seven rules, it would be impossible for the king to conquer them, except through inner dissension or treachery. He left with this conviction in mind and reported to the king that it would be useless to start a war against the Vajjians. Indians in those days had so much confidence in the spiritual strength of a people, that the hint of moral superiority was sufficient to prevent a war. Only much later, after the death of the Buddha, was it possible for the king to overrun the Vajjians, and this was only because they had in the meanwhile forsaken their moral integrity.

This highly political discussion with Vassakāra was used by the Buddha as an occasion to request Ānanda to call all monks of the area together. He then gave them an exhortation about

³⁸ See *Last Days of the Buddha (Mahā-Parinibbāna Sutta)*, The Wheel Nos 67–69.

seven things which would serve for the continued existence of the Sangha. The monks should: assemble frequently; conduct their affairs amicably; not make new rules but obey the old ones; honour the elders of the Sangha and give heed to their advice; resist craving; enjoy solitude; and practise mindfulness at all times, so that like-minded persons would be attracted and those who were already living the holy life would be happy.

After the Buddha had spoken in this way to the monks, he gave them the following terse summary of the teaching, which recurs many times throughout this narrative:

“That is virtue, that is concentration, that is wisdom. Concentration fortified with virtue brings great benefits and great fruits. Wisdom fortified with concentration brings great benefits and great fruits. The mind fortified with wisdom becomes liberated from all taints, namely from the taint of sensual desire, the taint of (desire for) being and the taint of ignorance.”

After this exhortation, the Buddha commenced his last journey as described in the second chapter of the sutta. He always went to places where there were people ready to understand Dhamma, or where misunderstandings needed to be sorted out, or where brute force could be prevented. On this last journey he went first in the direction of the Ganges River to Nālandā, which later became a famous Buddhist teaching centre. This town was Sāriputta’s birthplace and here he took leave of the Buddha. He wanted to stay there and teach the Dhamma to his mother before he died. When saying farewell, this great disciple voiced once more the Buddha’s praise: “It is clear to me, Lord, that there is no one more distinguished in wisdom.”³⁹

Then the Awakened One went with a large company of monks to Vesāli. This town was the capital of the Vajjians, whose virtue he had praised, and from whom he had averted the threat of King Ajātasattu’s attack. Why did the Buddha go to the capital of the Vajjians and spend his last rains retreat in that vicinity? It is not too far-fetched to think that this was meant as a non-aggressive warning to King Ajātasattu to keep the peace, and to the Vajjians to maintain their virtue.

At Vesāli the Awakened One became ill with a deadly disease. He overcame it by will-power, as he did not want to die without having assembled the disciples once more. That a Buddha can become ill is due to the imperfection of the body, but that he can master illness at will is due to the perfection of the Awakened One.

Ānanda was extremely grieved by the Buddha’s illness. He was so worried that he could not think properly. He related to the Buddha that he had found consolation in the fact that surely the Awakened One would not attain final Nibbāna without having given regulations about the Community of monks. But the Buddha rejected this. What was there left to pronounce to the disciples? He had taught the Dhamma in all its aspects and kept nothing secret. Only a person who believed that it was he who had to guide the monks, a person who still possessed the “I am” conceit, could conceive himself to be so important. Furthermore the Buddha declared that he was now eighty, had reached old age, and could move the body only with difficulty, just like an old cart. His body was only at ease when he entered upon and dwelled in the signless deliverance of the mind.⁴⁰ With this he implied that a Buddha’s body is also subject to the law of impermanence. But he immediately gave Ānanda an antidote for the sadness caused by these words: “So Ānanda, each of you should be an island unto himself, with himself and no other as his refuge; each of you should make the Dhamma his island, have the Dhamma and no other as his refuge.”

³⁹ See Sāriputta’s Lion’s roar in *The Life of Sāriputta*, The Wheel Nos 90–92.

⁴⁰ *Animitta-cetovimutti*: a deep state of meditation that transcends the “signs,” or marks, of conditioned existence.

The third chapter of the Mahā-Parinibbāna Sutta is also located at Vesāli, where the Buddha was dwelling for the rains retreat. One day he requested Ānanda to take a sitting mat and to go with him to the Capala Shrine and pass the day there in meditation. When they were seated, the Blessed One looked at the peaceful landscape before him and reminded Ānanda of the many beautiful spots in the vicinity.

The Buddha said that anyone who had developed the Four Bases to Success,⁴¹ had made them his vehicle and his foundation could, if he wished, live out the age. The Exalted One had done all that, and he could, if requested, live to the end of this age.⁴² Although Ānanda was given such a plain and broad hint, which certainly coincided with his longing, he did not beg the Buddha to stay alive, out of compassion for all beings. Not only once, but a second and third time, the Buddha addressed Ānanda in this way. But Ānanda did not take these hints; in his confusion he was not himself, being ensnared by Māra.⁴³ Māra had power over him, as he had not yet fully purified himself.

Ānanda, who usually was so circumspect, had lost his mindfulness, which previously had happened only in negligible matters. Otherwise our whole aeon would have taken quite a different turn. Could it be that Ānanda was too much absorbed in the pleasant feeling of being at that moment in so close companionship with the Buddha, in that enchanting evening hour in the peaceful scenic environment of the sāla forest? Was it, perhaps, just this very attachment to the Buddha's company that prevented a response which properly should have issued out of that very attachment—a response that would have accorded with his deepest wishes for a longer life for the Exalted One? If Māra had not intervened, Ānanda would have asked the Buddha to accept the burden of a prolonged life, out of compassion for the world. But Māra prevented it, because innumerable beings would have escaped his clutches in such an event.

This scene belongs to the mysteries of the Pali Canon and one could puzzle about it endlessly. One can only accept the fact that it is our own doing which brought us into an age in which the person who could have kept the Awakened One alive to this day was blinded by Māra and remained silent.

Let us continue the account. The Buddha dismissed Ānanda, who seated himself under a nearby tree and started meditating. Then Māra appeared before the Buddha and reminded him of a promise made forty-five years before, immediately after his enlightenment. Māra had then requested the Buddha to enter final Nibbāna and not to teach. But the Buddha had replied that he would not die until he had established and well taught the four kinds of disciples,⁴⁴ and until the holy life was well advanced. But now that had been accomplished, Māra declared, and it was time to fulfil his promise. The Buddha replied that he would attain final Nibbāna in three months from that time. One might wonder why the Buddha even gave Māra a promise and also why it was Māra, the Evil One, to whom he first announced the time of his death.

⁴¹ Four bases to success (*iddhi-pada*): will (desire to practise); effort; perseverance (repeatedly applying the mind); and examination (leading to insight).

⁴² The discussion that follows is based on the commentary's interpretation of *āyukappa*: that the Buddha potentially had the age or lifespan of an *aeon*. The author has followed this interpretation. However, *āyukappa* can also mean one's natural lifespan. In that case the Buddha could perhaps have willed himself to live to a hundred years or even longer (120 is always given in Pali as representing extreme old age), but disease was already upon his body and perhaps he saw that it would be difficult to continue teaching, even though his mind would, of course, remain unaffected.

⁴³ Māra: the Buddhist "tempter" figure, the personification of evil, passion, and worldliness, obstructing people on their way to liberation.

⁴⁴ Four kinds of disciples: Monks, nuns, laymen, laywomen.

But just here the supreme detachment of an Awakened One becomes apparent. He considered this mortal body, which he carried around, as belonging to Māra. Immediately after enlightenment, the Awakened One had determined for himself how long he wanted to keep this body. There is no reason for a Buddha to go back on such a resolve, and only Māra would understand it is a “promise,” rather than a freely arrived at, voluntary ending.

In any case, the Buddha now dismissed the idea of remaining alive throughout the aeon. He had to specifically let go of this possibility, as it seems to have been the norm for a Buddha to continue living. When the Awakened One relinquished the will to live, there was a great earthquake, and thunder resounded, such was the powerful effect on the natural elements when he renounced them as a basis for life.

When Ānanda became aware of the quake and thunder, he asked the Buddha for their cause. The Buddha replied that there were eight reasons for earthquakes: there are occasions when great forces move, this was the first reason; a monk or Brahman possessing supernormal power may have reached a certain kind of meditation, that was the second reason; the last six concerned the conception, birth, enlightenment, the start of the teaching of the Dhamma, the relinquishing of the will to live, and the final Nibbāna of a Buddha. One can see from this how deeply connected a Buddha, the highest of all beings, is with the whole cosmos.

The expositions that follow on eight kinds of assemblies, eight fields of mastery and eight liberations⁴⁵ seem quite unmotivated in this context. It appears to be one of those occasions for a spontaneously arisen discourse. Scholars speak about insertions into the text because at first there were eight reasons for earthquakes, then three other “eights” were brought in. In reality there is a deeper connection, designed to bring Ānanda from the superficial to the profound and to let him know the quickly approaching death of the Buddha in such a way that it would not disturb him.

After the Buddha had helped to direct Ānanda on the path towards enlightenment, he related how he had told Māra forty-five years ago that he would not attain final Nibbāna until the Dhamma was well established. Now Māra had appeared before him and he, the Buddha, had told him he would live only for another three months. Therefore he had now relinquished the will to live. That had been the reason for the earthquake.

Thereupon Ānanda begged the Awakened One three times that he should remain for the whole aeon. But the Buddha replied that the appropriate time for this had lapsed. When Ānanda asked for the third time, the Buddha inquired whether he had faith in the Perfect One’s enlightenment. When Ānanda affirmed this, he asked why then was he urging him three times.

Ānanda replied that his reason was because the Awakened One had said he could remain for an aeon due to his practice of the four bases to success. The Buddha asked whether Ānanda had believed this. Ānanda affirmed it. Then the Buddha made it clear to him that he had let the opportunity slip by—“what you missed in this hour, no eternity can return,” and told him that, if Ānanda had then requested him, he would have complied the third time. And he also reminded him that not only now, but already fifteen times previously he had made this statement to Ānanda, that due to the four bases to success he could remain for a whole aeon. Five of the places where he had said it were near Vesāli, and it was in this respect that the Buddha had reminded Ānanda of the many beautiful spots in the vicinity at the beginning of this account. But Ānanda had always remained silent.

Finally the Buddha added the admonition that he had always spoken about the impermanence of all phenomena, and that it was unthinkable that a perfect one should go back on his word. In three months time he would attain final Nibbāna. Thereupon he requested

⁴⁵ For these groups of “eight,” see *The Last Days of the Buddha*, The Wheel Nos 67–69.

Ānanda to assemble the monks of the area. He then addressed the assembly with the exhortation always to practise insight, so that this holy life may endure long for the welfare and happiness of many. At the end of the discourse he made it known that he would pass away in three months. He gave them some stanzas for contemplation; amongst them are these:

My years are now full ripe,
the life span left is short.
Departing, I go hence from you,
relying on myself alone.

Be earnest, then monks,
be mindful and of virtue pure!
With firm resolve
guard your own mind!

Whoso untiringly pursues
the Teaching and the Rule,
Shall go beyond the round of births,
and make an end of suffering.⁴⁶

The fourth chapter of the sutta tells of the Buddha resuming his journeys after the rains retreat and declaring that he would not return to Vesāli. On the way he spoke to the monks on the same topics he had expounded earlier: that they had to travel through this long round of rebirths because they had not penetrated four things. Previously he had named them as the four truths, but now he spoke on the four stages of the fourth truth: a noble one's virtue, a noble one's concentration, a noble one's wisdom, and a noble one's deliverance. And again, as so often on his last journey, he emphasised concentration fortified by virtue.

At the next resting place he explained to the monks how they should act if someone purported to quote his words. One should remember these quoted sentences and look for their verification in the Vinaya or confirmation in the suttas.⁴⁷ If one could not find them there, then one would have to come to the conclusion that it had been wrongly learned by that person, and they should reject it.⁴⁸ This admonition was extremely important for the faithful transmission of his words and has been the reason why to this day one can distinguish between the Buddha's own words and post-canonical or unauthentic texts.

After this, the Buddha journeyed to the province of the Mallas, the warrior clan nearest to the Himalayas. It is possible that on the way he had also been in not-too-distant Sāvattihī, because it was there that the news of Sāriputta's death reached him.

In the land of the Mallas, the neighbours of the Sakyas, he became seriously ill, after taking food from the goldsmith Cunda. He had asked the goldsmith to give the mushroom dish⁴⁹ only to him and to offer the monks something else. Then he asked that the remainder of the dish be buried, because only a Buddha could digest it and no one else. Also this second illness, dysentery, was born by the Buddha with equanimity and he was not deterred from his journey.

⁴⁶ Translation of the verses from *Last Days of the Buddha*, The Wheel Nos 67–69.

⁴⁷ Sutta: discourse of the Buddha; literally “thread,” threading together the gems of the words of the Buddha.

⁴⁸ For the three remaining of these so-called “four great Authorities,” see *Last Days of the Buddha*, The Wheel Nos 67–69, p. 46

⁴⁹ It is not quite certain that this was a mushroom dish. See the thorough discussion in *The Last Days of the Buddha*. Arthur Waley also wrote on this subject using Chinese sources (see the volume of collected poetry and articles published to honour his death). It may be assumed that the Buddha instructed Cunda not to give it to the other monks as he knew it would make them ill, while for himself this was not important since death was near.

On the way he asked Ānanda to spread his robe as he was exhausted and wished to rest. Ānanda should bring him some water from the nearby stream. Ānanda would have preferred to bring water from the river, because the stream had been churned up by many carts. After the Buddha had repeated his request three times, however, the obedient Ānanda went to the stream and saw that the water had become quite clear in the meantime. He was delighted about his Master's magical powers. A similar incident had happened earlier in the land of the Mallas where a well had been stopped up.

On the way, the Buddha met Pukkusa, a prince of the Mallas, a disciple of Ālāra Kālāma. Pukkusa had been together with that ascetic some fifty years earlier. Pukkusa started his conversation with the statement how astounding it was, what a deep peace those could achieve who had gone forth into homelessness. Once his master had been so deeply concentrated that he did not see nor hear five-hundred carts passing by him and yet there was no question of his being asleep. The Buddha countered this with the question, whether it was more difficult to be so deeply concentrated while there was thunder and lightning, and rain torrents coming down. Pukkusa agreed that it was. Thereupon the Buddha related that he had abided once like that, while all around him oxen and ploughmen were killed by lightning. This account sufficed for Pukkusa to declare that the Buddha had thereby expounded the Dhamma in its manifold aspects; he took refuge and became a lay disciple, the last one in the Buddha's lifetime. Then he presented two sets of golden-hued robes to the Buddha. The Buddha asked that he give one to him and the other one to Ānanda. On this occasion Ānanda did not reject the gift. He remarked that the golden hue of the robe was almost without brilliance compared to the bright radiance of the Buddha's skin. The Exalted One said that there are two occasions when the complexion of the Perfect One becomes exceptionally clear and bright: on the day of enlightenment and on the day of his death. In the last hours of the following night he would attain final Nibbāna.

After he had taken a bath in the vicinity, the Buddha turned to Ānanda and said that no one should reproach the goldsmith Cunda that the Buddha had died after taking a meal from him. There were two offerings in the world that are best: the almsfood after which the Bodhisatta becomes enlightened and the almsfood after which he attains final Nibbāna. Cunda would gain much merit from his gift; his life would be prolonged and his well-being heightened. He would gain much influence, fame and a heavenly rebirth.

The fifth chapter starts with the Buddha's request to Ānanda to accompany him to the region of Kusināra, to the sāla-tree grove of the Mallas. When they arrived, Ānanda arranged a couch for him, with his head to the north, between two large sāla trees. Although it was not the right season, the trees were in flower and sprinkled their blossoms over the body of the Buddha. And blossoms of the heavenly mandārava tree fell from the sky, together with heavenly scents, and there was music of the spheres. This peaceful, idyllic picture of the last hours of the founder of Buddhism has been compared with the death of Jesus Christ by a Japanese Buddhist, D.T. Suzuki. In both cases the deaths of the founders have become symbols for those who follow their teachings.

The Awakened One then said that veneration for him through heavenly music, scents, and blossoms was a great honour: yet one who, as a disciple of the Master, enters upon the proper way and practises the Dhamma, honours the Perfect One with the greatest reverence.

At that time, the Venerable Upavana was fanning the Blessed One. Then the Buddha requested Upavana to stand aside. Ānanda asked why Upavana was so summarily dismissed. The Buddha explained that innumerable deities had come from all directions of the world to have a last glance at a fully enlightened one, who so seldom can be seen. But since Upavana, an eminent monk, was standing in front of him, they could not see him. Upavana's spiritual radiance must have been more powerful than the penetrative ability of the gods.

Ānanda inquired further into details about the gods and learned that some were weeping and wailing, but that those free from sense desire were resigned and calm. The Buddha gave Ānanda another directive: there were four places in the world worthy of veneration, which would inspire a faithful follower—the birthplace of the Buddha (near Kapilavatthu), the place of enlightenment (near Uruvela), the place where he taught the Law for the first time (near Benares) and the place of final Nibbāna (near Kusināra). (It is noteworthy that each of these places is in the forest and near a city, but never inside one.) All those who would travel to visit these shrines with confident hearts would attain a heavenly rebirth.

Seemingly out of context, Ānanda asked the question, already narrated, how one should act towards women. Following that, he asked how to deal with the body of the Blessed One. That was a matter for lay people, the Buddha replied; the monks should be concerned with striving for their own deliverance. Then Ānanda wanted to know how the lay people should carry out the funeral ceremony. The Buddha gave detailed instructions about the cremation and the erection of a stupa.⁵⁰ There were four beings worthy of a stupa: a perfect Buddha; an enlightened one who does not teach (*pacceka-buddha*); a disciple who is an arahat—fully enlightened; and a universal monarch.⁵¹ He who worships there would also attain good results.

Then Ānanda, overpowered by grief, went aside, clasped the door jamb and wept. He knew he still had to battle and conquer, and the Master, who had compassion for him, would soon be no more. What remained as the fruit of his twenty-five years of service? This famous scene is often depicted in Buddhist art and is reminiscent of the weeping Christians beneath the cross.

When the Buddha did not see Ānanda near him and inquired where he was, he had him summoned and said to him: “Do not sorrow. Have I not told you many times that everything changes and vanishes? How could something that came to being and was formed not be destroyed? For a long time, Ānanda, you have attended the Perfect One, gladly, sensitively, sincerely and without reserve, with bodily acts of loving kindness, as well as with speech and thoughts. You have made great merit, Ānanda; keep on endeavouring and soon you will be free from all taints.”

Following this, he told him an incident of long ago, in which Ānanda already served him and made much worldly merit (J 307).

After the Awakened One had foretold a second time that Ānanda would soon attain arahatship, he turned to the monks and once more proclaimed the praise of Ānanda: all the Buddhas of the past had had such excellent attendants and all Buddhas of the future would have them too. His skill in dealing with people was admirable. Each assembly of monks who were taught by Ānanda were always overjoyed, and everyone wanted to listen to him further. Ānanda had such remarkable, extraordinary popularity, as one otherwise only finds in a universal monarch. Here too, as so often in the texts, one can find the two ways he addressed Ānanda: on the one hand, great praise for him and a summons to the monks to appreciate his greatness; on the other hand, however, always the reminder to overcome the last defilements.

After this praise, Ānanda turned the conversation to another topic. He suggested that it might be better if the Buddha did not die here in the backwoods, but in one of the great capitals, such as Sāvattihī, Rājagaha, Kosambi, or Benares. It is noteworthy, that he did not propose the

⁵⁰ Stupa: a reliquary monument used before the Buddha's days and akin to barrows and tumuli in western countries. The remains of the famous would be set in a central place and a great mound raised over them. In India this was surmounted in the case of kings with a parasol. This is the origin of the innumerable stupas, cetiyas, dagobas, and pagodas found now in Buddhist lands, all of which have some precious articles interred there. Not all, of course, hold Buddha-relics.

⁵¹ Universal monarch (*cakkavatti-rāja*): The ideal world ruler of Buddhist texts. He gains power by Dhamma and not by greed and so differs from most who are in authority.

Buddha's hometown of Kapilavatthu. It would have been the most appropriate with respect to distance as well as suitability. But Kapilavatthu had been ransacked and almost destroyed recently by the son of King Pasenadi. So Ānanda did not mention it, just as he did not mention Vesāli, because the Buddha had said that he would not return there. Ānanda thought that the funeral ceremony could be performed better in one of the large cities by the lay followers living there. But the Buddha, lying on his deathbed, explained to him in great detail, why Kusināra was not an unimportant place at all.

The Buddha had lived there a long time ago as the universal monarch Mahā-Sudassana, and he had left his body there no less than six times as the universal monarch; this was the seventh and last time. The splendour and magnificence of that kingdom had been destroyed, had disappeared and vanished. This, indeed, was enough to make one weary of all conditioned things as one of the most famous stanzas of the Dhamma taught:

Conditions truly they are transient.
Their nature is to arise and cease,
Having arisen, then they pass away,
Their calming and cessation is true bliss.

— Th 1159⁵²

The Buddha's discourse about Mahā-Sudassana was the last great teaching he gave. Subsequently he let Ānanda summon the Mallas of Kusināra, so that they could bid farewell to him. At that time, a wanderer called Subhadda was in Kusināra and heard about the forthcoming final Nibbāna of the Buddha. He thought that it was rare that a Buddha appeared in the world; therefore it would be well if he could have a doubt resolved by him, before it was too late. He begged Ānanda to let him approach the Buddha. Ānanda refused him, saying that the Master should not be troubled any more. Ānanda refused permission three times out of love for his master. But the Buddha told Ānanda to let the wanderer approach him, because he wanted to inquire for the sake of knowledge and not to cause trouble. Subhadda then asked him a question about which teaching was actually correct, as some of the teachers of different sects contradicted each other. The Buddha replied that he would rather teach him the Dhamma: wherever one follows the Noble Eightfold Path, there one can find the true holy life, there the four fruits of the homeless life would be found. If monks live in the right way, then the world will never be devoid of arahats, or true saints. Over fifty years he has been a monk and had expounded the Dhamma—and apart from adherence to Dhamma there could be no holy life.

This short discourse was sufficient for Subhadda, just as it had been for Pukkusa, to realise the Dhamma in its manifold aspects, and to go for refuge to the Buddha and ask for admission into the order of monks. The Buddha remarked about the rule, according to which wanderers of other sects had to be put on probation for four months. Subhadda agreed readily, he even wanted to be put on probation for four years. Thereupon the Buddha accepted him immediately, making a last exception, and this very last monk disciple of the Buddha soon became an arahat.

The sixth and last chapter of the sutta begins with the final instructions of the Buddha. First of all the monks should never think, after his death, that they now did not have a teacher, because now the Dhamma and Vinaya would be their teacher. To this day, the word of the Buddha laid down in the texts is decisive for the followers of his teaching. Second, after his death the monks should no longer address each other indiscriminately as "friend."⁵³ The senior monks, senior in years in the Order, could address the junior ones as "friend" or with their names, while the

⁵² These verses are also found in DN 16 (IV); DN 17; SN 15:20; SN 1:11; SN 6:15; SN 9:6; and J 307.

⁵³ Friend: Pali *āvuso*, lit. "One of long life," a more respectful word for friend.

junior ones should use “Venerable Sir.”⁵⁴ This rule also served as an affirmation of the tradition in which the senior monks set an example, and should be honoured just as they had previously honoured the Buddha. This is the way of reverence according to seniority in the Order and does not depend on any qualities that monks or nuns may have.

The third instruction gave the monks permission to abolish the lesser and minor rules and all that they entailed, according to their own judgment. After his death some details would be difficult to understand and might be considered petty. As a guarantee that at least the main rules would be followed, the assembly of monks may decree that minor rules would no longer be binding. Whoever wanted to could keep them, but there would be no compulsion any more. The fourth and last instruction was to impose the higher penalty on the monk Channa. Ānanda asked how that was to be understood. The Buddha explained that Channa was not to be spoken to, or advised, or instructed, no matter what he did.

After these primarily external instructions which Ānanda was to fulfil, the Buddha once more turned to the whole assembly of monks and asked them whether they had any doubt or problem concerning actions or teachings of the Enlightened One, the content and meaning of the Dhamma, the order of monks and, above all, about the Path or the way of practice. Those were the four important points for questions. They should consider them, so that they would not regret it later when the voice of the Teacher had been silenced. But upon being asked three times, the group did not respond.

Thereupon Ānanda said it was amazing that not even one monk had any doubts. The Buddha corrected him once again: you, Ānanda, speak from faith. Only the Tathāgata could know for sure that really no one had any doubts. Ānanda, the least one of these five-hundred monks is a stream-winner, incapable of doubt, because the absence of doubt is one of the signs of this attainment. Only with such total knowledge could one speak in this manner. The Buddha showed in this way the difference between Ānanda’s confidence and his own, the Perfect One’s, insight.

And once more the Master turned to the assembly of monks to give them his final words of farewell. “Now, monks, I declare this to you: it is the nature of all formed things to dissolve. Strive with diligence!”

After the Exalted One had spoken these last words, he entered into the four jhānas and the formless spheres of meditation absorption, until he attained the stage of cessation of perception and feeling. He thus went once more through the whole sequence of meditation states up to that of cessation. While the Master was reclining on the couch and going through the jhānas, Ānanda said to his brother Anuruddha: “The Exalted One has attained final Nibbāna, Venerable Sir.” He no longer addressed him as “friend,” but as a senior monk, although both had been ordained on the same day. Anuruddha, however, had the divine eye and corrected him: the Buddha was absorbed in the state of “cessation,” but had not yet passed away. To recognise this last subtle difference of a state of mind was only possible for an arahat, who was—like Anuruddha—skilled in clairvoyance. Subsequently the Buddha entered the nine stages of concentration in reverse order, back to the first jhāna. Then he attained again to the four jhānas, and during his absorption in the fourth jhāna his body died.

As soon as his body ceased to live, an earthquake and thunder occurred, just as he had predicted. The Brahma Sahampati, who had induced the Buddha to teach and who himself was a non-returner, spoke a stanza, which pointed to the impermanence of even a Buddha’s body. The king of the gods, Sakka, also spoke a stanza. He who was also a stream-winner, recited once more the famous lines which the Buddha had proclaimed during his own discourse: Conditions

⁵⁴ Venerable Sir: Pali *bhante*, lit. “One who is auspicious.”

truly they are transient. As a third, Anuruddha gave voice to two verses: Peaceful had been the death of the Master, without mortal pangs, gentle like a lamp he was extinguished. But Ānanda lamented:

Then was there terror, and the hair stood up, when he,
The all-accomplished one, the Buddha, passed away.

— Th 1046

And all those of the five-hundred monks who had not yet attained full liberation from passions, lamented like Ānanda. Anuruddha, however, consoled them all. He pointed to the immutable law of impermanence and turned their attention to the presence of invisible deities, amongst whom there were also those who lamented and those who were free of passions, fully enlightened.

Anuruddha passed the rest of the night talking to his brother about the Dhamma. In the forty-three years of their lives as homeless ones, not a single conversation about the Dhamma seems to have taken place between these two very dissimilar brothers. But now Anuruddha devoted himself to his brother who was in need of consolation. Towards morning, Anuruddha asked him to take the message of the final Nibbāna of the Buddha to the Mallas. Out of the circle of close disciples, Anuruddha seems to have naturally taken over the role of the one who gives the directives. And Ānanda went to the town and informed the Mallas.

Thereupon the Mallas gathered all the requisites for a great funeral ceremony, such as flowers and incense, and went in a procession to the sāla-tree forest. There they paid homage to the body of the Buddha with festive dance, singing, and music, with banners and flags, with flowers and incense, until the seventh day. One may wonder why they thought of festivities at such a time. But why should they grieve? That would change nothing. They showed respect and veneration for the Master with their dancing and singing. They exulted that a Buddha had appeared in the world, that they had heard more or less of his Dhamma, that he had wandered through India for such a long time teaching the multitudes, and that he had founded the Sangha to preserve the Dhamma.

On the seventh day they erected a pyre for the cremation. At this time, Mahā-Kassapa, who had not been with the Buddha during his last days, was on his way to Kusināra with a group of monks. He met a naked wanderer on the road and asked him about the Master. The wanderer replied that he had attained final Nibbāna seven days before. Then the monks in his company who had not become holy ones yet, grieved and lamented. One of the monks present, however, declared that it was a good thing that the stern ascetic had died, because now one could do again what one pleased. So soon the voice of the world, the voice of craving, had made itself heard. This monk, whose name was Subhadda, just as the last disciple of the Buddha was called, expressed what ignoble beings feel towards a Buddha: he is a troublesome reproach for them, a disturber of their superficial ways.

When the Mallas wanted to light the funeral pyre, they were unable to do so. Anuruddha said that the deities were preventing them, because they wanted to wait for the arrival of the venerable Kassapa. The venerable Kassapa soon arrived and, together with his company of monks, he circumambulated the corpse as a last mark of respect towards the “Giver of the Deathless.”⁵⁵ Then the funeral pyre ignited itself. The corpse burned until only the bones remained; no ashes were to be seen.

When the neighbouring clans heard the news of the Master’s death, they all sent messengers to ask for relics so that they could erect stupas for them. However, the Mallas requested the

⁵⁵ Giver of the Deathless: an epithet of the Buddha.

relics for themselves, because the Buddha had died on their land. Only when a Brahman urged them not to argue about the relics of the greatest peace-maker, and suggested that they divide everything into eight parts did they relent. So it came about that the bones of the Buddha were divided into eight parts. The Brahman asked for the urn, and another clan received the ashes of the coals. In this way ten stupas were erected as memorials.

10. After the Death of the Buddha

Ānanda said in verse about himself:

The friend⁵⁶ has passed away,
The Master, too, has gone.
There is no friendship now that equals this:
The mindfulness directed to the body.
The old ones now have passed away,
The new ones do not please me much,⁵⁷
Today alone I meditate
Like a bird gone to its nest.

— Th 17.3 (vv. 1035–36)

After the funeral ceremonies were over, Ānanda saw only one duty left to him, namely to attain total liberation as prophesied to him by the Buddha. Kassapa advised him to live in the forest in the province of the Kosala, which was near the Mallas and the Sakyans. When it became known that the Buddha's cousin was living in solitude in the forest nearby, he was inundated with visitors. The lay disciples wanted to be consoled about the death of the Buddha and also about the death of Sāriputta and Moggallāna, as well as the death of their just and beloved King Pasenadi. All four had died within the year. Day and night, in the village and in the forest, Ānanda had to console the lay disciples and was never alone. Thereupon a deity who lived in the forest appeared to him. He was concerned about Ānanda's spiritual progress and advised him as follows:

Now that you're sat at the foot of a tree
And in your heart, Nibbāna you've placed,
Meditate, Gotama, do not be negligent,
What has this hurly-burly to do with you?

SN 9:5

The venerable Ānanda, exhorted by the deity, was stirred again to a sense of urgency.

In the meantime the venerable Mahā-Kassapa had decided to call a council of monks together to strengthen the Teaching and the Discipline. Because of unsafe conditions in the country of Kosala, the council was to take place in Rājagaha under the protection of King Ajātasattu. All living arahats, almost five hundred, were to take part and, in addition, Ānanda, the only one who was not an arahat. Ānanda knew most of the discourses of the Buddha and therefore was indispensable to the council.

When the date set for the council came closer, Anuruddha suggested that his brother Ānanda should only be admitted if he had overcome the last taints and had become an arahat. He knew the power of such an incentive. When Ānanda heard this, he decided to employ every bit of strength and ability he possessed to realise Nibbāna. He practised the four foundations of mindfulness, a way which came most natural to him according to his tendencies. In the early hours of the morning, when he wanted to rest after his exertion, he knew without a doubt that he had attained release from all passions. The next day the council began. A place had been kept

⁵⁶ The venerable Sāriputta.

⁵⁷ "The old ones" means not only the Buddha but also such eminent disciples as Sāriputta and Moggallāna. Some of the newer disciples of the Buddha who were not yet *ariya* (noble ones) and may have caused some trouble in the Sangha were doubtless "the new ones."

for him. Ānanda appeared through the air by supernatural power and sat down at his place. When Anuruddha and Kassapa became aware that he had become an arahat, they expressed their brotherly joy with him and opened the council, which took place during the rains retreat. Other monks could not come to Rājagaha at this time.

During the council, Kassapa questioned the Keeper of the Discipline, Upāli, about each rule and its origin, so that the Vinaya was laid down first. The next item on the agenda was the Doctrine. Kassapa asked Ānanda first about the longest discourses, then about the middle-length discourses, and then the other collections.⁵⁸

After the recitation of the Dhamma and Discipline, Ānanda mentioned those matters which the Buddha had left as a legacy with him to settle. He told the assembly that the Master had allowed the lesser rules to be abolished. The holy monks could not agree what was meant by “lesser rules.” Thereupon Kassapa suggested: the lay people would say that the monks had become slothful after the death of the Master if now they abolished rules. Since it was not known which rules were meant, it would be best not to abolish any of them. In that case, one would be sure not to act against the Master’s wishes. And so it was done.

The elder monks then said that it had been a breach of the training rules that Ānanda had not asked which rules were meant, and he should confess this as a wrongdoing. Second, he was accused of having sewn a robe for the Exalted One, after having stepped on it. He replied that nothing had been further from his mind than disrespect for the Blessed One. Nevertheless, if the venerable ones considered it a wrongdoing, he would acknowledge it as such. Third, he was criticised for the fact that he had allowed women to salute the remains of the Blessed One first. He replied that at the time of the funeral arrangements, he had thought it would not be an unsuitable time for them (that is, too late) and therefore he had allowed them to pay their homage first. But here too he would accept their verdict. The fourth accusation which the monks levelled at Ānanda, referred to the time when he had neglected to beg the Blessed One to remain for an aeon. Ānanda defended himself by saying he had been possessed by Māra at the time, and therefore had not been responsible for his actions—how could he have otherwise failed to make this request? Ānanda’s behaviour in the face of these accusations was exemplary: he submitted to the judgment of the other holy ones, although he, himself, could not see any wrongdoing, a fact which he did not fail to mention.

Ānanda then reported the second instruction which the Buddha had given immediately before his death, namely imposing the higher penalty on the monk Channa. The present assembly requested Ānanda to present this decision to Channa himself. Ānanda objected, saying that Channa was a violent and unruly person. The assembly advised him to take a number of monks along. Leading a large group he journeyed to Kosambi where Channa was living, and informed him of the last will of the Buddha, namely that he had been declared dead in the Order.

This penalty had been explained by the Buddha to the horse trainer Kesi. He would use it against monks who could not be changed to wholesomeness either through admonition or discipline. Whoever could not be trained in this way would be considered as dead in the Order: he would not be spoken to, whatever he did. When Channa heard this, he became so horrified that he lost consciousness. When he regained his sense, he was deeply ashamed that the Master had proclaimed this penalty against him as his last instruction given to the Order. This gave him the impetus to put forth his most strenuous effort; within a short time he became an arahat. So this penalty showed itself to be the Buddha’s last act of compassion for the benefit and happiness of the monk Channa, being effective even after the Buddha’s death. When Channa

⁵⁸ It is probable that the actual order of the discourses within the various collections was also standardised at this council.

had become a holy one, he went to Ānanda and begged him for a repeal of the penalty. Ānanda replied that as soon as he had attained release from the passions, the penalty was no longer operative in any case.

After the death of the Buddha, the venerable Mahā-Kassapa, as the most respected disciple, had taken over the guidance of the Order. He had however not the status of being a “refuge” as the Buddha had been, nor was he his deputy. He was simply the foremost of the monks with the ten higher qualities.⁵⁹ He was, so to say, the symbol for the observance of Dhamma and Discipline.

Everyone turned to him for all questions regarding the Order. In this way he became the Elder of the Sangha. After him, Ānanda became the second leading elder, the second most venerated holy one, who was designated to look after the Order. After he had already been a monk for over forty years, he survived the Buddha for another forty. And after having been the personal attendant of the Buddha for twenty-five years, he became the foremost of the holy ones for a similar length of time. At the time of the second council (another assembly of arahats), one hundred years after the final Nibbāna of the Buddha, a personal disciple of Ānanda was still alive. He was a very old monk by name of Sabbakāmi, who—it was said—had been in the Order for one hundred and twenty years (Cv XII).

When Ānanda reached one hundred and twenty years, he felt that his death was near. He went from Rājagaha on a journey to Vesāli, just as his master had done. When the king of Magadha and the princes of Vesāli heard that Ānanda would soon die, they hurried to him from both directions to bid him farewell. In order to do justice to both sides, Ānanda chose a way to die in keeping with his gentle nature: he raised himself into the air through his supernormal powers and let his body be consumed by the fire element. The relics were divided and stupas erected.

The virtuous, wise man,
The hero strong and ever resolute,
The guardian of the word so true,
Ānanda found extinction now.

— Th 1049)

⁵⁹ Ten higher qualities: virtue and restraint as according to the Vinaya—perfection in conduct; much learning, and remembering well; contentment with robes, almsfood, and shelter; ability to attain at will the four jhānas; supernormal abilities with the body as far as the heavenly realms; divine ear; seeing into the mind of other beings; recollection of past lives; divine eye; and exhaustion of the taints.