Despite the admonitions of responsible scholars, writers of books on Buddhism still tend to assume that a reasonably historical account of the life and personal teachings of Sākyamuni Buddha may be extracted from the earliest available canonical accounts. This quest of the historical Buddha began as a Western nineteenth-century interest, initiating both in its presuppositions and its methods of inquiry the parallel quest of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. The general principle of evolution is set forth succinctly by Hermann Olshausen in his impressio work, *Buddha, sein Leben, seine Lehre, seine Gemeinde,* Berlin, 1881, p. 22:

"Aber wissen wir nun von den Traditionen des bezeichneten Kategorien, welche sammlich unhistorisch oder doch des historischen Charakter verdächtig sind, so behalten wir als festen Kern der Erzählungen von Buddha eine Reihe positiver Tatsachen übrig, die wir als einen sehr sehenswerten, aber vollkommen geschätzten Bezug für die Geschichte in Anspruch nehmen dürfen." 

Within the terms of his enunciated principles, Olshausen's work is responsible and scholarly. He has created a figure of the historical Buddha, which has been now popularly accepted by Westerners and by Westernized Asians. However, cast as it is in the mold of European nineteenth-century liberal and rational thought, it might seem to bear on examination no relationship to the religious aspirations and conceptions relating to Sākyamuni Buddha, as revealed in the earliest Buddhist literature. Furthermore it can easily be shown that the whole process of deliberately abstracting everything of an apparent unhistorical and mythical character, all too often leads away from any semblance of historical truth. This is because the elements that are deliberately abstracted, usually these relating to religious faith and the cult of the Buddha as a higher being, may be older and thus nearer the origins of the religion, than the supposed historical element. This easily reveals itself as best as an honest but comparatively late attempt at producing out of floating traditions a coherent story, and at the worst as a tangle of tendentious fabrications produced to justify the pretensions of some later sectarian group.

In this short article I propose examining briefly the traditions relating to Sākyamuni’s final nirvāṇa, for it might be supposed that of all the events of his life, the final one would be the best remembered. It is well known that a complete “biography” was a late and extra-canonical operation. As early canonical material we have consecutive accounts of just two separate periods of his life, one describing his leaving home, his six years’ training, his enlightenment and the conversion of his first five disciples, and the other describing his last journey and decease. It is this last with which we are concerned here.
The best-known account is based upon the Pali version of the Theravādīna
seer, already examined in some detail by E. J. Thomas in his Life of the Buddha
as legend and history, third ed., London, 1949, 142-64. Fortunately a parallel
account with interesting variations is available in Sanskrit, Tibetan, and
Chinese, as published by Ernst Walpischmidt, Das Mahāparinirvānasehret, Berlin,
1906. This second version represents the traditions of the Mīlasarvāstivāda
sect, which was active in north-western India up to the time of the final
eclipse of Buddhism in its homeland.1

The description of the itinerary of the last journey and the accounts of
the various longstay sessions delivered, run generally parallel, in the two
versions. Śūkyamuni travelled with a company of monks from Rājagaha,
regarded traditionally as the centre of much of his teaching, to Vāțīśīli (Thb. dMar-brus-can) on the Ganges. Here he stayed by the caitya (Thb. mochod-
ren), where he was visited by Brahmans and householders, to whom he preached
a sermon. Later, when he became Vamsikara, the minister of the king of Magadha,
organizing the building of a fortress in preparation for their intended war
against the Vṛjīs to the north, he prophesied the future greatness of the place
as Ākōī’s capital city of Patalimātra. Then having crossed the Ganges
simianously, he travelled via Kosigrvā (Thb. sPyi-rje-can) and Nādīka
(sGa-can) to Vāțīśīli. Many people had died at Nādīka because of a plague,
and his monks asked him the reasons for this. He gave general teachings on
impermanence, said that all beings must die and there is no need to ask useless
questions, and repeated the teaching of the twofold ‘final means’ (prāthāpanāpattika). At Vāțīśīli he was visited by the Licchavi prince, and
entertained by the popular courtesan Āndalāli. Afterwards he went into
recess nearby at Belavāsiṅāka (Skt.: Venuvārika, Thb.: 'od-ma-can-gyi

1 Thomas the Mahāparinirvānasehret as it occurs in the śīlaśāstra. Another and very short
version occurs in the Āṣṭasahasrīṣa, as translated by E. J. Thomas in his Early Buddhist

2 As edited by Walschmidt, the Sanskrit version is taken from the edited text of J. Diet,
Ulpād makaraśīrv, vol. 1, Saṅgrah, (1847), and the Tibetan version from a manuscript copy
of the Kangyur in the former Probusan State Library in Berlin, and from the Nagarjuna
print, Dāarkha, xi, folio 220a-8. I have referred throughout to the Peking block-print as reported
conclusively in the Tibetan Tripitaka, Tokyo-Kyoto, 1938, xxiv, page 2010, leaf 1, line 5. Future
references to the text will appear in the form e.g., p. 2012:5.

Walschmidt provides a translation of the Chinese version from the Tripitaka Tripātikā, xxiv,
p. 1829:1-5.

One may note that for various reasons the Tibetan version refers to the Mahāparinirvānasehret,
but to later, Mahāyāna versions in the Śāky (or De) section, viz. Tripitaka Koryo ed., xxiii,
issues nos. 795, 796, and 797. I have referred to points of contact with these later works in the
footnotes. The corresponding Chinese versions of these later works occur in the Tripitaka Tripātikā,
xxiv.

A most detailed and brilliant analysis of these Pali and Sanskrit versions, as well as of four other
Chinese versions has been independently published by André Bareau, namely his Recherches sur la biographie
du Bouddha dans les śāstraṃ in les Vajrapādīya ascetics, vol. ii., Les divisions ascetics, le
1971. His conclusions have hardly any basis for a historical substantiation in the text, certainly
even less than my own account when first writing this short article.
Amaula, I do not have the idea that the order of monks is mine, that
I must leave to the order and lead it, so he should I have a last exhortation, even a slight one, with which to instruct the order. Whatever teachings I have had which were relevant to the order of monks, I have already taught them as the principles which must always be practiced, namely the four applications of mindfulness, the four proper efforts, the four magical proclamations, the five powers, and the seven factors of enlightenment, and the eightfold path. As Buddhists, I do not have the close-fistedness of a teacher who thinks he must conceal things as unsuitable for others.

From the beginning, Amaula, I have taught you that whatever things are delightful and desirable, joyful and pleasing, these are subject to separatation and destruction, to dissociation and dissolution. As Amaula, whether new or after my decease, whoever you are, you must remain as islands to yourselves, as defenses to yourselves with the Dhamma as your defense, remaining uncoerced with other islands and other defenses. If you ask the reason for this, then know that

14:18:30
HUI T'ai-k'uan: On the character of the dharmas and the dharmakaya, so that the dharmakaya is not different from the dharmas, but that it is the dharmakaya that is real, that the dharmas are not real. This is the teaching of the śramaṇa, who is known as the Dharmarāja, the king of dharma.

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whether now or after my decease, whoever remain as islands to themselves, as defences to themselves, with the Dharmas as their inner and the Dharmas as their defence, not concerning themselves with other islands and other defences, such ones are the foremost of my seeing disciples."

After this he returned to Vaiśālī, and having been on a begging round and finished his meal, he went, still accompanied by the faithful Ānanda, on a visit to a near-by shrine (cetiya) named Cāpāla. It is here that he said to have proclaimed: "Whoever, Ānanda, is versed, skilled, and much practiced in the four magical powers, can, if he wishes, remain for a world-age or even longer than a world-age. Since I as Buddha, Ānanda, am versed, skilled, and much practiced in the four magical powers, I too could, if I wished, remain for a world-age or even longer than a world-age." Since Ānanda said nothing in reply to this claim, Sākyamuni repeated it up to three times, and in some accounts up to six. Still greeted by silence, he sent his companion away with the harsh-sounding words: "Lost there should be contention between us, go and sit under another tree." Then Māra, the lord of death, who had attempted previously to persuade him to pass immediately into nirvāṇa at the time of his enlightenment, appeared again and extracted a promise from him that now at last since his rounds of teaching were complete, he would finally leave the world. Earthquakes greeted this decision, and Ānanda, who came to ask the reason for this, was given a lesson in the causes of earthquakes and was sternly advised for not having begged his master to remain in the world when the chances of making such a request had been repeatedly given him. Thus certain later traditions close to blame Ānanda for the normal limited human life-span of the Buddha of our present world-age.

Sākyamuni then announced his decision of continuing to Kusaghārā (Tib. Ru-čta), not mentioned in the Pāli version, and on the way he looked back to the town of Vaiśālī and announced his imminent nirvāṇa in the realm of the Mallas under two asle trees. From Kusaghārā, they passed on to Skāyamunī (Tib. Long-nyid gymag), where Skāyamunī gave more discourses, on the causes of earthquakes, on the various grand assemblies human and divine in which he had taught, and on how to distinguish true from false scripture. Except for the last these are repetitions of previous sessions.

At Pārīkṣhita, the place of rest, Sākyamuni accepted a meal in the presence of the metal-worker Čumaṇa. Afterwards he fell ill, possibly from dysentery, and he had to rest by the wayside while Ānanda fetched water which had become

1 Weiswurth, op. cit., 266-7.

The Pāli version mentions a dish described as ariṣṭa-maddhā, which is interpreted by Sinhabhadra commentators, at least from the fifth century A.D. onwards, as spiced, prepared pork. However, the term is so general that others were able to explain it as a kind of mushroom.

See E. F. Thompson, Life of the Buddha, p. 159, n. 2, and see especially Arthur Waley, "Did Buddha die of eating pork?", Mind and Matter at Buddhaicau, 1, 1942-2, (pont) 1943, 343-352. The possibility of Skāyamunī having actually died of dysentery as a result of eating pork has led the imagination of Western commentators from the nineteenth century onwards. Even a careful and reliable scholar as Alfred Schušer qualifies: "Quelle dégustation pour l'Es
clear quite miraculously, although 500 cars had just passed through the near-by stream. While Śākyamuni was resting and recovering, a wealthy layman named Pukkus, who was the follower of a rival teacher, came and boasted of the powers of concentration of his religious master, who was not disturbed in his meditation when 500 cars passed by. In reply Śākyamuni told how on a certain occasion he himself had remained undisturbed by a thunderstorm and the noise of the villagers, which he had not even heard. Pukkus was so impressed by this that he sent for two garments of golden hue which he presented to the Buddha in token of his faith and devotion. When Śākyamuni put them on, their splendour was eclipsed by the brilliance of his own corporeal form, and he explained to the astonished Ananda that this bodily brilliance was the sign of a Buddha's approaching enlightenment or, as in the present case, of his imminent passing into final nirvana.1

They continued slowly on their way, for the master was still sick, and at last they reached the outskirts of Kusinagāra, where he lay down, head to the north, between two sīla trees, which let fall their blossoms out of season in order to cover him. It was here that he finally expired.

Just as with his final journey, so too with the death scene, a large number of later additions may be easily identified, and especially noteworthy are the later attempts to demagragh Ananda, who from being once the favourite and most trusted disciple, comes to be presented as a blunderer who lays well behind others in the spiritual quest. A good analysis of the last rites of the Buddha was made by Jean Przyworski in a series of articles published just over 50 years ago, and despite subsequent publications many of his theories would seem to remain valid.2 Since the verses are less liable to tampering than prose, he concentrates first upon the series of verses pronounced by various monastics.

1 Le pari matérielle et le renoncement du Buddha”, *Journal Asiatique*, **2r** année, tit. nov.-déc. 1919, 433-426, **24** année, tit. nov.-déc. 1919, 363-430; **25** année, tit. 1920, 5-54.
over the dying Buddha. (Of several similar versions I quote from the Tibetan
Fingers version,9

8. Waddesdon, op. cit., 209-401: "sne yoy ren bu 'du snyas apar lha 'dzin rtsi phyi'i
shing sng ngal gi 'byung gnas kyi 'byung.

The Lord expired like a live at the foot of those two excellent sill trees
in the grove of twin sill trees which had lost their blossoms as soon as the Lord
Buddha passed from sorrow. Then some other monk recited those verses:

"Here in this grove of trees,

of this beautiful pair of minuings,

The Teacher as he passes from sorrow

is thoroughly scattered with flowers",10As soon as the Lord Buddha passed from sorrow, Indra, chief of the gods,
recited these verses:

"Impermanent, alas, are compounds.

for being born they are subject to destruction.

Having been born, they are then destroyed,

but their tranquillization is bliss ".

As soon as the Lord Buddha passed from sorrow, Brahmā, the lord of the
universe, recited these verses:

"All beings in the world cast off

the accumulated totality (of their own persons).

Thus he who is peerless in the world,

all-seeing Buddha, winner of special powers.

Even a teacher such as he,

has finally passed from sorrow ".

9. Waddesdon, op. cit., 209-401: "sne yoy ren bu 'du snyas apar lha 'dzin rtsi phyi'i
shing sng ngal gi 'byung gnas kyi 'byung gnas kyi 'byung sgags pa 'du 'byung gnas kyi 'byung 'byung gnas
'byung gnas kyi 'byung gnas kyi 'byung gnas kyi 'byung gnas kyi 'byung gnas kyi 'byung gnas kyi 'byung gnas kyi 'byung gnas kyi 'byung gnas kyi 'byung gnas kyi 'byung gnas kyi 'byung gnas kyi 'byung gnas kyi 'byung gnas kyi 'byung gnas kyi 'byung gnas kyi 'byung gnas kyi 'byung gnas kyi 'byung gnas kyi 'byung gnas

For the text of the Peking print, see Pt. F, xxv, p. 323.3-6.E. Once again it is interesting to

10. Idem, p. 136, where the Lord has done 'on a

turned to by Brahā (p. 137-1.5.E.), Indra (137-2.1.E.), Asvaghosa (137-3.1.), and Ananda (137-4.5.E.).
As soon as the Lori Buddha passed from sorrow, the Venerable Aniruddha recited these verses:

"He who bestowed protection firm-mindedly
and has won unshakeable tranquillity.
His in-breathing and out-breathing have stopped,
the all-seeing one has passed from sorrow."

Possessed of all forms of excellence,
when our Teacher made an end of life.
We were most terribly afraid
and our hairs stood up on end.
But with spirit undismayed,
extremely steady in his feelings,
Like the extinguishing of a lamp
his mind was liberated."

It is significant that in the two versions preserved in the Pali canon, the second set of verses suggesting fear and alarm are pronounced by Ananda instead of by Aniruddha, and Ananda’s set of verses, which now follow Aniruddha’s in certain other versions noted by Prayun, do not occur as all in Pali.10 The Visaya of the Mūlaarrovāvīśekīn canon, however, preserves them, as quoted below, but after several accounts of various happenings, all related in prose and corresponding more or less with the Pali, as retold by E. J. Thomas.11

After the verses just quoted, some monks were quite distraught, but others, remembering their master’s teaching that one must finally part with all things that cause pleasure in the world, reacted more in accordance with his doctrine of renunciation. Aniruddha consoled them with suitable words, but it is significant that in the Mūlaarrovāvīśekīn version, where he appears as by no means unshaken himself, he first asked Ananda to do the consoling. How shrewdful, he said, that monks should behave in such a way, when hundreds of shocked gods are all keeping on in amusement at such lack of restraint. Then he sent Ananda into Kusinagara to tell the inhabitants what had occurred.

Hearing the news, they too were distraught, and came out in throngs, both men and women (the Pali discreetly omits the reference to women) to honour and worship the corpse. Then they asked Ananda how they should prepare the corpse, and to replied that they should do things as for a universal monarch.

"Oh, most worthy Ananda, how should things be done for a universal monarch?"

"Townfolk, the body of a universal monarch should be wrapped in muslin. Having been wrapped in muslin, it should be wrapped in 500 pairs of

10 These other versions come in the Sanskrit original in the last story of the Ananda-vagga (ed. J. S. Speyer, St. Petersburg, 1908, ii, 198—200), and in Chinese translations of a Mūlaarrovāvīśekīn, Kusinagara-sūtra (Vinaya pa-bha. 564 and 564). See Prayun, art. cit., J.A. xii Oct., xii—xiii June 1918, 304—306.

clothes. Having been wrapped in 500 pairs of clothes, it should be placed in an iron coffer. When this has been filled with vegetable oil, it should be closed with a double iron lid. Then heaping up all kinds of scented woods and having burned it, one extinguishes the fire with milk, and having placed the bones in a golden vase, one constructs a tumulus for the bones at a crossroads, and honours it with parasols, banners of victory, flags, scents and garlands, perfumes, powders, and music. One has a great festival. Honouring, venerating, and worshiping it. 13 14

The townsfolk replied that it would take them quite seven days to do all this. Having prepared everything as detailed by the 300, they prepared to move off. According to the Vinaya of the Mahasanghikas, an elder instructed the women and maidens to hold up the processionary canopy over the bier which was to be carried by the men and youths. They were to pass through Kusinagara, entering by the west gate and leaving by the east. According to the Pali account, where no women are mentioned, they were to carry the bier to the south side of the town. In neither case could they lift the bier, for the gods prevented them, in the case of the Mahasanghika account because they wanted to have a full part in the worship of the bier themselves, and in the case of the Pali account because they wanted the corpse to be carried to the north side of the town, entering at the west and going out at the east. Once they accorded to the gods' wishes, as interpreted by Aniruddha, the procession was able to move off. 15

When everything was ready on the funeral pyre, the gods again interfered, this time to prevent it from taking light, because the Venerable Mahākāyāya was on his way to salute the Buddha's corpse. Mahākāyāya was arrested afterwards as the first patriarch, who presided over the first council, supposedly held at Rājagaha immediately after the Buddha's death, and so later tradition considered it desirable that he should be given a place of honour at the funerals, and be shown to establish his authority over Ānanda. He duly arrived, took off all the 500 sets of garments, worshipped the corpse, and then replaced them all. Then he placed the corpse in its iron coffer, filled it with oil, closed it with a double lid, all the details being repeated just as before. Only then did the pyre ignite of its own accord by the power of the buddhas and the power

13 Wallisænæedi, op. cit., 441: 30. 14 F. P. 88: 5, p. 233-2: Jassu wa ita dago be 'kibor to atoror be'rr be'rr enbe'rr enba'rr. 15 Wallisænæedi, op. cit., 415-17. In the Sakrāk and Tibetan versions the gods object in a similar way to the women of Kusinagara surrounding the bier. The Chinese version has removed all reference to women, and in this respect comes into line with the Pali account. For detailed comparison see Pernelas: op. cit., 34, 35-35.
of the gods’. Finally Ananda, coming to the fore again, pronounced his final verses over the ashes, which do not appear in the Pali canon.14

“The leader with his jeweled body, the great, worker of miracles, has gone to the Brahma-world.

His Buddha-body was wrapped with five hundred pairs of garments and with a thousand religious costumes. By its own splendor this corpse has been consumed although so well wrapped.

But the two religious garments were not burned.

Those two, the inner and the outer.

These verses were clearly pronounced by Ananda in the role of master of ceremonies, and their absence from the Pali canon, where he is given a verse to say which expresses fear and alarm and which is elsewhere attributed to Anuruddha, may reasonably be connected with the early tendency to designate Ananda, which is one of the most significant features of early Buddhist ‘history’, or at least of some of its interpreters. His real designation takes place at the supposed first council at Rājagaha, and it is interesting to note that one of the accusations made against him on that occasion was that he allowed women to see the Buddha’s naked body.15 As Psyllou has observed, there may be preserved here a reference to women attending upon the corpse of Śākyamuni immediately after his death, possibly wishing it as would have been the normal course of events; whereas such a suggestion was later removed from the accounts of the last rites as something unworthy, it may have been well enough remembered to be included in the later concocted charges against Ananda.16

The comparative antiquity of the pair of verses spoken by him in the Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese versions, is indicated not only by such a term as Brahma-world, used as equivalent for the more negative term monarch, but also by the specific reference to religious garb (cītra), whereas the previous prose account refers only to muslin and to the 500 pairs of garments. If one assumes that Śākyamuni was cremated, if indeed he was ever cremated, in simple religious garb, one must clearly treat the number 500, which occurs in Ananda’s verses, as a readjudgment in the text in order to bring it more into line with the previous prose account. Once, however, one embarks upon this

14 Waldschmidt, op. cit., 431; Ts. 3, 183, p. 314.4-5;


kind of speculation, it becomes difficult to set any limit, and the whole story begins to disintegrate, 

Sakyamuni’s death at Kusinagara may well be historical fact. Old and sagacious, he was possibly travelling from Rajagaha, which had been probably the centre of his years of wandering and teaching, on a last visit to Kusinagara to see what remained of his homeland. The route lay through Pataliputra (Pataliputra), Vaishali, Kusinagara, and Pava. Taking extremely ill as he travelled, he could go no further than Kusinagara, and he died in a grove just outside this magnificent village, attended by Ananda and Aniruddha, whose verses of lament must represent the earliest account of his death that is ever likely to be traced. The gods Indra and Brahavi would have been associated very early on with this last scene, and their lament was joined with that of the two disciples. The inclusion of verses by some ‘other monk’ suggests already a certain vagueness about who was present, and is in marked contrast with the precision, however fantastic, of names, attributes, and so on of all the other vision ranging in importance from Kadakkaluva down towards, when later traditions felt bound to associate with these last scenes. It is possible that Sakyamuni died attended by a very few followers in a remote place, where he was little if at all well known. The memory of the actual place of his death may have represented a firm and so inviolable tradition, but later devout apologists found the death of their lord and teacher in such a remote place insufficiently edifying. The words are put into Ananda’s mouth: ‘O holy one, why have you avoided the six great towns of Śravasti, Saketa, Candiya, Vārānasi, Vaishali and Rajagaha, which are distinguished in the world, and resolved on passing from sorrow by this wretched village, so remote and so vile, the appendage of a village, the mere remnant of a village?’ 10 In reply Sakyamuni is made to explain that this place was once one of the greatest cities of the world, and so eminently suitable for the ‘passing from sorrow’ of a Buddha. This insertion may suggest a firm historical tradition, for otherwise stock tales would have preferred, if they could have devised, to transfer the death scenes to a more glorious place, but perhaps it was known that he had indeed died at Kusinagara which was a wrecked little place. 10

Apart from these for reasonable assumptions, one is free to make up the rest of the story in accordance with one’s own inclinations. It is likely that the villages visited the corpse of this renowned holy man, waiting in accordance with conventional mourning rites. It is not impossible that the womanfolk—

10 Videlegendae, op. cit. 305; CT, xvi, p. 212-3-8; kawi po ni akad de jay akan the deit po gang leyher thi po deef de pso dyg dey winra podde/gi jha bordening/kem pga deef/la ni on es deef/dee po deef/yepil po kti/ki noi s po deef/gang po deef kerer po deef po gti/dee he orde wea/gang po deef nyen paya deef/ajin deef deenj/ni deef deenj/posh nyen pa deef/gang leyher jia jay deef/gang deyter jia the deef winra/tat pso dyg dey winra kauj the deef kauj the deef.

10 Our next note, however, this Sakyamuni’s reply represents an insertion of traditional material in the form of the Videlegendae, or, as it is termed in the present text, a fragment of Javanese, L. Leemans, 1955: 153-6.
washed the body, for this would have been normal practice, and wound it in a piece of kāmpūp cloth, as usual for shrouds in those times. The corpse was probably buried and perhaps the remains were somewhere embalmed. Because of the persistent reference to the coffin filled with oil, in which the corpse was said to be immersed, and references to a shrine containing the Buddha’s relics which was said to be looked after by water spirits (sīyāpa), mentioned in many later legends, Pzyjaké has evolved the ingenious theory that Śākyamuni’s body was preserved in oil so that it could be transported to the banks of a river, probably the Ganges, and either cast in the stream, or interred on the bank. This is certainly one way in which one might have disposed of a revered ascetic. If the bones were indeed enshrined in any particular place, especially in the vicinity of Kāśī, it is strange that tradition preserved no memory of a single original stūpa (tusala) for Akṣoka’s benefit. The land of the Śākyas had long since been had waste, but tradition was able to identify for him the birthplace at Lumbini.

This brief analysis should be sufficient to indicate how unsatisfactory a proceeding it is to produce a plausible biography from these materials by simply accepting the parts which seem humanly possible and rejecting the miraculous elements as obvious fictions. In fact most of the materials which make up the stories, whether miraculous or not, are later accretions, and thus very little indeed can be established with historical certainty. The earliest account was probably very brief, consisting of the verses of lament and already introducing Indra and Brahmā. A factual account of Śākyamuni’s passing probably never existed as traditional oral material burned and recited, but verses of lament might well have been composed, and it would have been around such a kind of ritual core that stories were woven to satisfy later theological requirements. They need not be regarded as pure invention, for many of the concerns now appearing in the account of Śākyamuni, such as that about earthquakes or the eight kinds of auspicious assemblies, could well have existed as a kind of floating material. On the other hand Mahākāśyapa’s instruction with his 500 monies was presumably a deliberate fabrication of those later who could not allow that the supposed organiser of the sacred canon, assuming there was such an early canon, was not also present at the funeral ceremony in a primary position of importance.

The cult of the stūpa.

Despite Śākyamuni’s supposed instructions that a stūpa should be built over his remains at a cross-roads, the canonical accounts insist that his relics were shared at the very start between eight contestants: the Nāgas of Kūsimantra, who were under attack by the other seven, the Mallas of Pāpa, the Bulayars of Cakrālpura (or Alakapura), the Unmanas of Vīrmaksyāra.

18  Dr. J. Przyjaké, "Le partage des reliques du Bouddha",『FahngupChovio et Bouddhisme』, iv, 1935-4, (pub.) 1936, 244-51.
(Vahalipa), the Kavaliya (Kalinga) or Xamagka, the Loechana of Yvasti, and the Sākyas of Kapilavastu. Then the Malas of Kusinagara gave the vase which had contained the relics. to the Malistaggeya Brahman who had divided them, and he took it back to his homeland. Vamsa and built the ninth stupa.

"Then a Brahman youth from Piplalaya said to the Malas of Kusinagara:

"Listen, O noble ones. For a long time the Lord Gautama was brooded and dear to us. He has gained residence in your village, but we deserve a shrine in the reliefs. So give us now the burning ashes as our share, and we will build a stupa for the ashes of the Lord Gautama in Pipaliya.

"He was given the ashes, and a tenth stupa was built."

This is a serious story, and the little-known place included in this list of 10 stupas gives it a semblance of veracity. But the more one can safely deduce from it is that in pre-Ashokan times there were in existence 10 special Buddhist stamis, situated in the area between Rajagriha and Kapilavastu, where Sākyamuni had lived, taught, and died. Tombs, sometimes in the shape of semi-spherical mounds, may have been common in pre-Buddhist India, as in many other parts of the world at that time, and tombs of the great would have presumably enjoyed a special distinction in the richness of the offerings to the dead that might be periodically placed by them. This may be conjecture, but what is absolutely certain as far as the earliest pre-Ashokan testimony is concerned, is that these early Buddhist stamis, usually known as stupa, were believed to contain relics of past Buddhas, and especially of the latest Buddha, Sākyamuni. Historically it would seem to be impossible to date according to the earliest traceable Buddhist traditions, Sākyamuni's physical remains, through the extraordinary story of the burning coffins, discovered into a cult of relics and mixed in these special stamis.

There is no reference in the earliest known traditions to such philosophically-mixed divinities, simply honoring the tomb of a revered religious master, who has left the world for ever. There is certainly reference to all the complex last rites as the proper responsibility of the laity rather than the monks, but we know from the evidence of inscriptions and scriptures that even in the earliest period the cult of the relic-containing stupa was by no means left to the laity, and all the accounts of the extraordinary cult were recorded, edited, and jointly written down by monks. There is no over-accord of Sākyamuni's final nirvāna which is not heavy with psychical significance. Apart from this cult, which identified him effectively as a Buddha, we see his Buddhas of former times Sākyamuni would probably remain quite unknown to us. It was precisely because of the faith that was instilled, that subsequent efforts were made to reconstruct important parts of his life. But these attempts were not made before the actual events were forgotten or were so interpreted in accordance with mythical beliefs as to submerge almost entirely the historical person.

*Waddell, op. cit., 407-8; Jt. 7, xxv, p. 425-63 E.
*For discussion of these points see Louis de La Vieille Poumon, Kirishna, Paris, 1891, 77.
It is true that his subsequent followers included a number, certainly a minority, of philosophizing contemplatives, who were suspicious of excessive religious enthusiasm, but it is significant that they have preserved no tradition of a plausible historical figure. Their Buddha remains still the great miracle-working and omniscient sage. They may argue that since he has passed into final nirvana, he can no longer give help to his followers in the realm of samsara, and many of the more rational philosophical sayings that they attribute to him, may well represent a reliable tradition of some of his actual teachings. But of the events of his life they record nothing which does not correspond with the reasonably earlier mythological and legendary conceptions.

This may seem to be much ado about very little, but the recognition of the primacy of mythology and legend over factual storytelling in the canonical presentation of Sakyamuni affects radically any history that we may produce of the Buddhist religion. Having produced a kind of Socratic sage by ignoring the earlier mythological elements, and taking carelessly from the legendary elements those references that do not offend rational thought, one assumes that one has discovered an historical figure, who was the founder of a small rationally and philosophically minded community, and that this movement represents ‘original Buddhism’. One then goes on to assume that this originally pure doctrine was distorted by later mythical and popular beliefs. There were certainly pure philosophical doctrines propounded during the early history of Buddhism, just as there have been ever since, but there is no such thing as pure Buddhist per se except perhaps the cult of Sakyamuni as a supermundane being and the cult of the relic strips. These ideas are not new. They were propounded long ago by Louis de La Vallette Poussin, probably the most keen-minded of Western scholars of Buddhism. In his Notes, Paris, 1925, he writes: ‘Il est utile de distinguer dans le Bouddhisme, comme dans d’autres religions, la foi et les systèmes, celle-ci essentielle et stable, ceux-ci secondaires et variables. L’indienisme officiel ignore la foi bouddhique au profit d’un des systèmes que la communauté a patronnes, et fait sortir le Bouddhisme de ces systèmes’ (p. 26).

With direct reference to the main thesis of this article, one might also quote from The Buddhist religion of Richard H. Robinson, who died tragically in 1976: ‘The quest for the objective Gautama, like that of the historical Jesus, is foredoomed to a measure of failure. We cannot get behind the portrait that the early communities synthesized for their founders; their reports are all we have. But though the Community (Sangha) created the image of the Buddha, the Buddha created the Community and in so doing impressed upon it his personality. The master exhorted his disciples to imitate him, and they formulated and transmitted an image of him, along with his teachings, as a model for later generations to imitate’ (Richmond, Berkeley, California, 1970, 13).

It is not for us to distort this total image, in order to fit it into an invented historical framework, mistake perhaps to other times and other places, but entirely remove from the religious life of India in the fifth century B.C.