

The Place of Relic Worship in Buddhism: An Unresolved Controversy?

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Abstract

Although worship of the relics of the Buddha—and its corollary, stūpa worship—is a widespread feature of Buddhist devotional practice, there is in some quarters a view that, while recommended to lay followers, it is forbidden to monks. This controversy started very early after the Buddha's parinibbāna and has reverberated throughout the centuries till the present time. Its source is in the Parinibbāna-sutta, and it stems from the ambiguity in the meaning of the compound sarīrapūjā in the Buddha's reply to Ānanda's two questions concerning the actions to be taken after the Master's death with respect to his body. The resolution of the controversy depends on the correct understanding of the nature of the Buddha's replies to the two questions. This paper analyses the relevant passages of the sutta and the way they have been translated, correctly or incorrectly, into Western languages and into Chinese, and finally arrives at a solution derived entirely from within the text of the Parinibbāna-sutta itself.

Key words: Sarīra, Kāya, Shēntī, Shèli, Quánshēn.

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International Journal of Buddhist Thought & Culture February 2009, vol. 12, pp. 7-28.

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I. The early spread of the relic worship

The Sanskrit expression which is usually translated as ‘relic worship’ is *śarīrapūjā* (in Pāli *sarīrapūjā*). It is a compound whose first component *śarīra* means ‘body’ which may refer to the body of a living person or after death to his corpse. But because the compound is frequently used in the context of the worship of the Buddha’s relics usually enshrined in a *stūpa*, its first component came to be understood as meaning ‘relics.’ This created an ambiguity in interpreting certain passages in the Pāli *Parinibbāna-sutta* and its Sanskrit versions (lost, but known from translations into Chinese and Tibetan) which resulted in a confusion with respect to the position of relic worship in the context of the Code of Discipline for monks (*Vinaya*).

Worship of the relics of the Buddha, by both his lay followers and monks, has been a widespread feature of Buddhist devotional practice since very early times if not right from the day on which the Buddha died and was cremated (possibly in 483 B.C.). When the great Emperor Aśoka (ca. 269-232 B.C.) embraced the Dharma, he built many *stūpas* all over his realm (the legend speaks of 84,000 of them) and enshrined in them splinters of relics from the original eight *stūpas* in which portions of the Buddha’s relics were supposedly placed after his cremation. Later, when relics were no longer available, manuscripts of *sūtras* were substituted indicating the presence of the Dharma and eventually *stūpas* came to be venerated as symbols of the presence of the Buddha or of the eternal Dharma even if they did not contain anything.

Almost every Buddhist monastery, at least in Theravāda countries, has a *stūpa* in its precinct. To begin with the worship of the Buddha’s relics by monks may not have been a permitted or recommended practice since, strictly speaking, their sole task was to aim for their individual liberation from rebirth by following the Buddha’s instructions; any attachment to external phenomena or special regard for some of them, even if they had a link to the personality of the Buddha while he was alive or after his death, would be regarded as an obstacle on the path to freedom. But the matter still appears to be not quite

resolved and different opinions have been expressed on the matter throughout the centuries.

With lay followers of the Buddha's teaching it was different. Reverence for anything which would have had some link to his person would have been regarded as a help on the spiritual path and the guarantee of a favourable rebirth. Many people would also expect from it worldly benefits such as health, well-being and prosperity and some ascribed to the Buddha's relics magic powers which they could use to their advantage if they were in possession of them. To own them was therefore an ambition particularly of kings and chiefs of communities so that they would not even shrink from a fight to acquire them. As reported in the Pāli *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, after the Buddha's cremation at Kusinārā, the king of Magadha, five aristocratic clans including the Sakyas (the Buddha's clansmen), a Brahminic settlement and two communities of the Malla tribe claimed the relics. The Malla community on whose territory the Buddha passed away initially refused to part with any portion of them, but eventually relented and agreed to their division. All the claimants promised to erect a stūpa over the relics and hold a festival honouring them.

As transpires from the words of the Brahmin Doṇa, a follower of the Buddha and himself a famous teacher who was also present, strife was indeed brewing over the custody of the Buddha's relics, with possible 'war and bloodshed.' So Doṇa suggested their partition into eight portions and his authority prevailed. Verses at the end of the *sutta* (probably a later interpolation) mention that apart from the distributed bones, four teeth of the Buddha were preserved separately. One is supposedly in *tāvatiṃsa* heaven brought there, according to a commentary, by the god Sakka (Indra) who took it from Doṇa as he tried to hide it in his turban, one became the object of worship in the city of Gandhāra, another is revered by Kings of the Nāgas and one was brought to the country of Kāliṅga from where, according to later accounts, it was sent in the fourth century A.D. for security reasons to Sri Lanka (where it is still worshipped in the specially built Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, although there are some doubts about its authenticity).

The clan of Moriyas, the ancestors of the later powerful dynasty of Mauryas (324-187 B.C.) from which Aśoka emerged, were late-comers and received the ashes, while Doṇa, deprived of the tooth he had tried to spirit away, kept the urn. All the ten beneficiaries erected stūpas over their acquisitions and honoured them as promised. Only one of the ten stūpas has been identified in modern times—the one built by the Sakyas near their capital city Kapilavatthu (today at Piprahwa near the Nepalese border). There is a brick mound at Kusinārā which has never been opened and may be the original stūpa built by the Mallas. But the stūpa of the Sakyas was identified already in 1897. In January 1898 it was opened and a small casket was found with a Prākṛit inscription around it (*iyamṛi salilanidhane budhasa bhagavato sakiyanarṛi sukiti bhatinam sabhagiṇikanarṛi saputadalanaṛi* [This is the relic deposit of the Lord Buddha, endowment of Sakyas, brothers with sisters, sons and offspring.]). Inside it were some ashes. The inscription was interpreted, to begin with, as indicating that the ashes were the Sakyas' portion of the Buddha's relics, but this interpretation was soon discarded and there are doubts about the origin of the inscription. Controversies about the circumstances surrounding the find have never been fully resolved (Cf. Allan 2003, 274ff.).

Early in 1976 during wider excavations of the site by a team of the Archaeological Survey of India, an opening was dug out on the eastern side of the stūpa. The excavation reached into the virgin soil underneath and in the middle, under the foundations, was found a larger and clearly marked casket with the Buddha's relics. (To add a personal note: when visiting the site on 3 April 1976 I was, to my disappointment, told by the archaeologists working on the site that the casket had been sent to Nagpur the day before. But I was allowed to climb into the stūpa and inspect the spot from which the casket had been removed.) Further excavations were carried out in the area in subsequent decades, conferences held and doubts expressed so that the issue of the relics seems unresolved. But the identification of the stūpa as the one built by the Sakyas and perhaps rebuilt or embellished by Aśoka is not in doubt.

II. The beginning of the controversy

Whether monks should abstain from worshipping the relics of the Buddha or not depends on the interpretation of a passage in the *Parinibbāna-sutta* (*DN XVI, 5, 10ff*; Rhys Davids and Carpenter 1966, PTS II, 141ff). The passage describes a scene, shortly before the Buddha's demise, during which Ānanda asked:

katham mayaṃ bhante tathāgatassa sarīre paṭipajjāmaṃ
[How do we act, Sir, with respect to the Tathāgata's body?]

It is important to note the plural *mayam* (we); Ānanda obviously asked the question on behalf not only of himself, but of a wider community of the Buddha's followers — other monks and perhaps also lay people. But was he asking what would be the proper behaviour of monks and visitors towards the Buddha's body coming to view it prior to its disposal or did his question include also arrangements for his funeral? Ānanda had been the Buddha's attendant for many years and performed many acts of service for him which included safeguarding his privacy when he meditated or rested and instructing visitors as to the proper way of behaving towards him. But what was about to happen was a new situation and it is understandable that Ānanda would ask for instruction. If he also had in mind the way the funeral should be conducted, it would further strengthen the case for interpreting the question as being asked on behalf of the wider community of the Buddha's followers, not just monks, let alone only himself. Arranging for the Buddha's funeral would have been obviously a task beyond Ānanda's capacity as an individual and there is no evidence in the sources that monks were ever involved in funeral arrangements for deceased monks, not even in the case of *arahats*. So the assumption that it was regarded as a matter for laity is obvious.

The Buddha's answer was grammatically unequivocal, employing the second person plural throughout (which is clear in the Pāli original, but not equally obvious in translation, because the English imperative does not distinguish between singular and plural, unless the verb used is one with a

reflexive pronoun), thereby including in his admonition the wider community of monks (*bhikkhusaṅgha*) and possibly also committed lay disciples (*upāsakas*):

avyāvaṭā tumhe ānanda hotha tathāgatassa sarīrapūjāya, iṅgha tumhe ānanda sadatthe ghaṭatha, sadattham anuyuñjatha, sadatthe appamattā ātāpino pahitattā viharatha

[Do not concern yourselves, Ānanda, with honouring the Tathāgata's body; get on, Ānanda, exert yourselves with respect to the true goal, dedicate yourselves to the true goal, be heedful of the true goal, stay zealous and resolute.]

And he added that various wise nobles, Brahmins and householders would do honour to his body (or relics? [*tathāgatassa sarīrapūjāyā karissanti*]). It just is not credible that the Buddha would have directed this admonition solely to Ānanda, as some interpreters, eg. Schopen, would have it, and it is highly unlikely that it was meant for all monks (the *saṅgha* as a whole), which has been so far the majority view of scholars (see below). One possibility, the most likely one, to be considered is that the Buddha meant it for those who, like Ānanda, had not yet reached arahatship, and this could include also the committed lay practitioners of the Buddha's eightfold path. Concern with 'honouring the Tathāgata's body' would be for them only a distraction which would slow down their progress on the path.

There are two or maybe three problems connected with the Buddha's use of the expression *sarīrapūjā* in connection with the treatment of his body after death. The word *pūjā* generally refers to any kind of devotional ritual, usually directed to a deity, and means therefore 'worship,' but it can also mean 'doing homage,' 'showing respect' or 'honouring.' It certainly suggests that the Buddha expected his body to be treated with ceremonial respect (which would have gone without saying), but it is not obvious whether the expression *sarīrapūjā* included also the way in which his body was to be disposed of, in other words the funeral procedures. As indicated above, it is not entirely clear from the formulation of Ānanda's question whether he himself was asking for a hint as to how monks should show respect to the

Buddha's body in a ceremonial way when approaching it for a parting glimpse of their teacher, or whether he meant also the arrangements concerning his funeral.

Be that as it may, what is clear is that the Buddha, in his answer directed to still unliberated followers, referred neither to the way his body should be treated while awaiting disposal nor to the way it should be disposed of. He actually did not answer Ānanda's question at all, but was using it to make a special point, namely to remind him and others not yet liberated to get on with their personal practice on the path to salvation which would not be in any way enhanced by participating in ceremonial treatment of the Buddha's dead body (and in funeral procedures). One can even deduce from the formulation of the Buddha's answer that he did not regard it as a matter of course that accomplished monks would or should perform, or take part in, the ceremonial honouring of his body before cremation, since he mentioned in the context only 'wise nobles, Brahmins and householders' who would honour his body, but there obviously would not have been any harm in it for *arahats* if they joined with the laity in showing their respect to the Buddha's body or did it individually. However, it still remains unresolved whether the expression *sarīrapūjā* may also include funerary procedures, namely cremation of the Buddha's body and burying or enshrining and honouring his relics.

The word *śarīra* when used on its own in other Pāli and Sanskrit texts, both in the singular and in plural, invariably means 'body' as mentioned above, but in the plural it can refer, in connection with a deceased person, to the remnants of his body after cremation, mostly bones. In the compound *sarīrapūjā* it can mean either, since it can stand there for singular as well as for plural. The compound can therefore be translated as 'honouring the body' or 'honouring the relics.' The latter meaning is often worded as 'the worship of the relics' or 'relic worship.' This is where a kind of ambiguity originated concerning the meaning of *sarīrapūjā* which has reverberated throughout the centuries till the present time, causing a certain confusion about the meaning of the whole passage.

Ānanda, after the Buddha's admonition directed to himself and others to

see to their liberation rather than be bothered with honouring his body (or relics), asked another slightly modified question which was more to the point and can be understood as seeking instructions for the way in which his teacher's body should be dealt with after death, including preparations for its disposal and the treatment of the remains after the traditional cremation:

katham pana bhante tathāgatassa sarīre paṭipajjitabban
[How, then, Sir, should the Tathāgata's body be acted upon?]

Having made the special point reminding Ānanda and others of what should be their primary concern, the Buddha gave this time a clear and concrete answer to Ānanda's question, saying that as to his body (*sarīre*, in locative singular) it should be treated in the same way as the body of a universal monarch:

yathā kho ānanda rañño cakkavattissa sarīre paṭipajjanti evaṃ
tathāgatassa sarīre paṭipajjitabban

After a further question from Ānanda about how this is done, the Buddha described in detail how the body should be prepared and added that after the cremation a stūpa should be erected for the Tathāgata (*tathāgatassa thūpo kātabbo*).

The Buddha's use of the word Tathāgata instead of *sarīra*, which in this context would have to mean 'relics' and be in the plural, may be significant for the later development of buddhology, being perhaps a first hint of a trend which eventually culminated in the Trikāya doctrine, but it does not solve the dilemma as to the meaning of *sarīrapūjā* in his reply to Ānanda's first question. Ānanda does not help us either. When, on a previous occasion, he urged the Buddha not to pass away (*parinibbāyatu*) in an insignificant town in jungle like Kusināra, but to go near a big city where there were many propertied nobles, Brahmins and householders who would render him due honour after his demise, he used the same ambiguous compound (*tathāgatassa sarīrapūjajjāṃ karissanti*). Did he refer solely to honouring the Tathāgata's body before cremation or only to honouring his bones after the cremation, or both?

In any case the building of a stūpa for the Tathāgata would certainly involve lay followers of means who would be capable of such an undertaking. It is only in the request of eight groups of such followers for ‘a portion of the Lord’s relics’ (*bhagavato sarīrāṇaṃ bhāgaṃ*) that the unambiguous plural occurs; and they all also promised to erect a stūpa over the relics and hold a festival honouring them.

The treatment of the Buddha’s body after his *parinibbāna* followed the instructions given to Ānanda and was executed by members of the tribe of the Mallas on whose territory the Buddha passed away. Then they spent the day prior to his cremation paying homage to his body (*bhagavato sarīraṃ ... vāditehi*) with dance, song, music, flower-garlands and perfume and erecting canopies and pavilions. So all that the term *sarīrapūjā* may have involved before and after cremation was taken care of by laity and no monks needed to concern themselves with any of it. When the body of the Buddha was burnt (*daḍḍhe kho pana bhagavato sarīre*) and the pyre extinguished (presumably to preserve the bones), the Mallas brought the remains (*bhagavato sarīrāṇi*) into their council hall and performed for seven days the same ceremonies they had done around the funeral pyre before the cremation; this time there is no ambiguity in terminology.

Already quite early in the post-canonical Pāli texts the ambiguity of the Buddha’s reply to Ānanda’s original question created a confusion and different interpretations still occur. Thus T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids obviously regarded the first part of the compound as plural and translated the Buddha’s reply to Ānanda’s first question as follows: “Hinder not yourselves, Ānanda, by honouring the remains of the Tathāgata” etc. (Rhys Davids 1959, 154). Moreover, these scholars let themselves be unduly influenced by this interpretation and wrongly translated the expression *sarīre* (singular locative) in Ānanda’s first as well as second (modified) question as ‘remains’ instead of the correct ‘body’ and so also in the above quoted passage concerning the body of a universal monarch and also in the passage describing the Mallas’ homage to the body before cremation. This is, of course, grammatically inadmissible.

Contrary to this, the BPS translation of the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*

(1964) renders *sarīre* correctly as ‘body’ in all instances, possibly following Ernst Waldschmidt, a German scholar, whose work would have been known to the BPS editor Nyanaponika Thera, himself a German. When Waldschmidt summarised the relevant passage, he used the terms ‘body’ (*Körper*) and ‘corpse’ (*Leichnam*) and ‘festivities in connection with the corpse’ (*Leichenfeierlichkeiten*) when referring to Ānanda’s questions and the following passages so that he clearly understood that *sarīrapūjā* in the Buddha’s answer referred to his body and not relics (Waldschmidt 1944, 1948 and 1950, 1951). Yet in the passage referred to above in which Ānanda urged the Buddha to pass away near some big city, the BPS translation renders the phrase *tathāgatassa sarīrapūjāṃ karissanti* “they will render due honour to the remains of the Tathāgata,” thus regarding *sarīra* in the compound as plural (as does the PTS edition). This suggests the situation after the cremation and adds to the confusion.

The ambiguity in the meaning of the term *sarīrapūja* used in different contexts which creates uncertainty and confusion may have started with the early post-canonical but in Theravāda tradition highly regarded Pāli text of *Milindapañha* (*The Questions of Milinda*). In the time of Hellenistic kingdoms which arose in the aftermath of Alexander’s conquests there was a king of Bactria called Menander who is known from ancient Greek sources. He is also known in modern numismatics from coins (one of which mentions the epithet *dharmikasa*, ‘righteous’ which echoes Buddhist terminology). Menander ruled probably between 140 and 110 B.C. and his territory reached from Afghanistan into the North West of India. The text is presented in the form of a conversation between the king and a learned monk, Nāgasena, but this is most likely fictional. The framework of the book is generally regarded as a kind of ‘historical romance’ with a didactic purpose. It is a translation either from Sanskrit or, more likely, from a local Prākṛit original dated to between 100 B.C. to A.D. 200 (Hinüber 1996, 85 §179). The relevant passage is in the fourth book which is, however, viewed by some as a later addition but predating A.D. 500, since the whole book is known to Buddhaghosa (Schopen 1997, 108, 113 n. 29).

The king questions Nāgasena on various points of Buddhist doctrine and one of his questions is concerned with relic worship. He first quotes correctly the Buddha's answer to Ānanda's first question (Trenckner 1962, 177) and confronts it with another saying of the Buddha which is recorded in *Vimānavatthu* 82, verse 7 (with a minor difference in spelling: Jayawickrama 1977, 122):

*bhāsitam p'etan tathāgatena avyāvātā tumhe ānanda hotha
tathāgatassa sarīrapūjāyāti puna ca bhaṇitāṃ*

pūjetha naṃ pūjanīyassa dhātuṃ evaṅkarā saggam ito gamissathāti

[Thus it was said by the Tathāgata: "Do not concern yourselves, Ānanda, with honouring the Tathāgata's body." And again it was proclaimed [by him]:

"Honour the relic of one worthy of being honoured; acting thus you will go from here to heaven."]

It is clear that the king appears here to regard *sarīra* (body) in the compound as plural and therefore to be equivalent to *dhātu* (relic) in the second statement. Similarly T. W. Rhys Davids translates the compound *sarīrapūjā* as 'honouring the remains' and *dhātu* as 'relic' (Rhys Davids 1963, 246) and Nyāṇatiloka's German translation renders both *sarīra* and *dhātu* as 'bodily remains' (*Körperreste*, Nyāṇatiloka 1919, 273). The king wanted to know which one of these two seemingly contradictory statements was correct. Nāgasena replied:

*Taṅca pana na sabbesaṃ jinaputtānaṃ yeva ārabha bhaṇitāṃ
abhayāvaṭṭā tumhe ānanda hotha tathāgatassa sarīrapūjāyāti
akammaṃ h'etaṃ mahārāja jinaputtānaṃ yadidaṃ pūjā sammasanaṃ
saṅkhārānaṃ yoniso manasikāro satipaṭṭhānānupassanā
ārammaṇasāraggāho kilesayuddhaṃ sadatthamanuyūjanā etaṃ
jinaputtānaṃ karaṇīyaṃ avasesānaṃ devamanussaṃ pūjā karaṇīyā*

[It was not with reference to all but to Sons of the Victor when it was said: "Do not concern yourselves, Ānanda, with honouring the Tathāgata's body." Veneration is not the activity for Sons of the Victor; insight into compounded things, alertness, contemplation of the foundations of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*), grasp of the true nature of sense objects, the fight against impurity and dedication to

the true goal is what Sons of the Victor should practise, leaving to gods and men to do reverential acts.]

(The title ‘Jina,’ Victor, is another title of the Buddha, although it has become more used for Vardhamana Mahāvīra and gave Jainism its name.) This passage is clearly an expanded echo of the Buddha’s answer to Ānanda’s first question in the *Parinibbāna-sutta* meant for those of his disciples who had not yet been liberated, but were on the path. The unusual term *jinaputtā* may be equated with the term *sāvaka*, meaning a disciple who is at least a *sotāpanna* (stream-winner), but in this context it excludes *arahats* who have reached the true goal and need not struggle any longer so that reverential acts would not be a diversion or loss of time for them. The admonition not to perform reverential acts did not of course apply to lay followers of the Buddha and may not have applied to monks who had not yet reached at least stream-entry, either, since it would be regarded as beneficial for their general frame of mind; besides, it transpires even from early sources that some monks did not undertake strict practices but instead pursued learning and rational discussion or specialised in memorising certain groups of the Buddha’s discourses. (This is reflected in the twin concepts of *sāvakaśāṅgha* and *bhikkhusaṅgha*, the latter being the community of ordained monks some of whom would be *puṭhujjanas*, ‘worldlings,’ without any degree of spiritual achievement, and the former being the community of *ariya puṭhgalas*, ‘noble persons,’ who had reached stream-entry or higher stages of accomplishment and might include not only monks, but also dedicated lay practitioners with such achievements; this is the invisible community to which Buddhists take refuge when pronouncing the third refuge formula (*MN* I, 7; Trenckner 1964, 37; cf. Walpola Rahula 1978, 56ff.). However, T. W. Rhys Davids favours the view that the term *jinaputtā* refers to all members of the Order (*bhikkhus*; 1963, 246, note 3) which would include even monks who are *puṭhujjanas*. This is manifestly wrong. Nyāṇatiloka, too, is wrong, translating the term as ‘disciples’ (*die Jünger des Siegreichen*; 1919, 274) which could include even lay *puṭhujjanas*.

Waldschmidt’s correct rendering of *sarīre* does not help to clarify the issue of honouring or worshipping the body or relics of the Buddha by

monks, since he refers in his summary only to the treatment of the Buddha's body (*wie sie* [i.e. monks] *mit dem Körper des Buddha verfahren sollten*) and to festivities (*Leichenfeierlichkeiten*) surrounding it which was a matter for the laymen.

The problem was not long ago newly addressed by Schopen. He probably did not know Waldschmidt's comments, but he recognised the flaw in T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids' rendering which he described as the 'still-standard English translation.' He then provided references showing that the confusion around the acceptability of stūpa worship by monks has been perpetuated till the present day by quoting N. Dutt ("advanced monks were not to occupy themselves with such worship of stūpas" which "should be left to the laity alone," Dutt 1945) and Hirakawa ("*śarīrapūjā*, the worship of relics, is the concern of laity and not the *bhikṣusaṅgha*," Hirakawa 1963). He also assembled references to other scholars, older and contemporary, who drew a similar conclusion, such as H. Oldenberg, É. Lamotte, D. L. Snellgrove, A. Bareau, R. Gombrich and others, and pointed out the vacillation in the translation of the term *sarīrapūjā* in the works of even the 'great' L. de La Vallée-Poussin.

The problem with Schopen's approach is that he concentrates on the issue of whether the Buddha's answer to Ānanda's first question was meant for Ānanda alone or for all monks in the sense of a rule of conduct for the whole *saṅgha*. He thus limits the possible interpretation to only two alternatives and does not consider the possibility that the Buddha's answer to Ānanda's first question may not have been a negative injunction to be incorporated into the code of discipline (eventually codified in *Vinaya Piṭaka*), but may have been a positive and urgent *advice* of a dying teacher to his disciples to get on with their spiritual practice leading to liberation. Schopen writes: "The injunction, if it is an injunction, is addressed to Ānanda, not to all monks." He then tries to deduce from other passages, in a somewhat convoluted and unconvincing way, that *mayamī*, 'we,' (in Ānanda's questions) excluded other monks (Schopen 1997, 103ff). If he were right, it would have to be, on the part of Ānanda, a kind of 'royal we' (*pluralis maiestaticus*).

Schopen does not attempt to explain away in similar fashion the plural *avyāvaṭā tumhe ... hotha* etc. in the Buddha's reply, which is grammatically plural and logically unequivocal in being meant for a wider community and not just for Ānanda.

In his second point — arguing that the meaning of *sarīra* in the compound in the Buddha's answer can only be interpreted as singular— Schopen is of course right, although he is, so to speak, discovering America after Columbus in view of Waldschmidt's remarks and the BPS translation of the text (as cited above). The clearly correct translation of the compound in the context does not really need such lengthy and elaborate justification as is provided by Schopen. He is also right to conclude the obvious that “Ānanda, in his question, was not asking about his or anyone else's participation in the relic cult” and that “he was asking about how the *body* of the Buddha should be treated *immediately* after his death, about what we would call 'the funeral arrangements.’” But as I explained above, the treatment of the Buddha's body immediately after death or, better expressed, the behaviour of monks and others towards his body immediately after death and arrangements for its disposal are two different procedures and it is not certain that *sarīrapūjā* includes both (which Schopen fails to appreciate). The third procedure would be the future honouring or saluting the stūpa containing the relics (or stūpas as symbols of his continued presence even if they are empty, since the Buddha says that a stūpa should be built for the Tathāgata and not for his relics). Schopen is of course right in maintaining that activities around the stūpa which the Buddha says would benefit those performing them “were not thought to form a part of *sarīrapūjā*.” Nevertheless, owing to the confusion reflected in the quoted passage in *Milindapañha* a shift in the meaning of the term *sarīrapūjā* did occur and went eventually as far as its usage for acts of relic and stūpa worship.

III. Pūjā and vandanā

The attitude of monks to the Buddha's body prior to cremation as reflected by their behaviour in the *Parinibbāna-sutta* may, if considered carefully, throw clear light on the whole problem. The passing away of the Buddha appears to have been observed by direct perception by the accomplished Anurudha Thera, who corrected at a particular point of time Ānanda's statement that the Buddha had passed away (*parinibbuto*) by saying that he was in the state of suspension of perception (*saññāvedayitanirodhāṃ*). The subsequent description of Buddha's passage down and up through the four *rūpa jhānas* and finally his passing away from the fourth one was crowned by Anuruddha's comment confirming the final release (*nibbānaṃ*). Thereupon Anuruddha admonished those monks who had started lamenting and reminded them of the basic teaching of transitoriness, and then he spent the night with Ānanda discussing the teaching (*dhammiyā kathāya*). In the morning Anuruddha sent Ānanda to the Mallas with the news. There is no mention of any act of monks' veneration directed towards the Buddha's body. It may well be that it was because the Buddha's admonition not to be concerned with honouring his body was faithfully followed by all the monks present.

Another foremost monk, Mahākassapa, was at the time on his way to Kusināra, accompanied by five hundred monks, and seeing an Ājīvaka wanderer asked him whether he knew of the Master. The wanderer replied that the ascetic Gotama had passed away a week before. A similar admonition as the one by Anurudha to monks who had witnessed the Buddha's passing was directed by Mahākassapa to those monks in his retinue who started lamenting on hearing the news. Meanwhile, after a week of paying homage to the body of the Buddha with song, dance and music, the Mallas prepared it, as advised, for cremation. At that point Mahākassapa arrived, still before the funeral pyre could be lit. He bowed to the body of the Buddha with clasped hands, three times circumambulated the pyre, uncovered the Buddha's feet and paid homage to them with his head (*bhagavato pāde sirasā vandī*). The monks in his retinue did the same. The use of the verb *vandati* does not

suggest a ceremonial ‘honouring’ or ‘worship,’ but a reverential act on a par with reverential greeting of the Buddha during his lifetime, this time of course strengthened in outward expression as it was for the last time.

How, then, is the question whether ‘relic worship’ is ‘permitted’ to monks or not to be resolved? First of all it is necessary to use, as far as possible, the correct terminology. Performing a *pūjā* would mean ritual or ceremonial worship, perhaps like in the case of the Mallas during the week before erecting the funeral pyre, but performing a *vandanā* or saluting a person or a departed person’s body, which may also be done ceremonially and in a traditional way, is a different matter. Second, it is advisable to go by the text of the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, which is more reliable and older than any *Vinaya* texts. The Buddha’s reply to Ānanda’s first question is not formulated as an injunction, but rather in the form of advice from an accomplished teacher. It makes perfect sense as such in the context of a practical teaching geared to final liberation from limited forms of existence whether in this world or in the heavens, let alone in lower worlds. But the context does not suggest that this advice not to be concerned with the *tathāgatassa sarīrapūjā* (honouring his body and/or relics) includes also ceremonial salutations (*vandanā*) as performed by Mahākassapa and after him by monks in his retinue and since then by many ordained and lay followers of the Buddha throughout the centuries.

One can observe the difference even nowadays. Watching the procedures staged by monks and the observances followed by lay people when the tooth relic in the Temple in Kandy is on display, one is hardly in any doubt that worship is taking place. In this respect the Buddha’s admonition or advice is not exactly followed, but this is of course a matter of individual inclination or choice. When accompanying a group of pilgrims in Mihintale placing lotus flowers in front of the main stūpa and circumambulating it while reciting the praises of the Triple Gem, there was no doubt in my mind that this was not a *pūjā*, but an enthusiastic *vandanā*. However, the fact remains that Anuruddha and Ānanda and other monks present at the time around the place where the Buddha spoke his last words and died are not reported to have performed a

vandanā as Mahākassapa did when he arrived later. Why? There is therefore room for further reflexion.

IV. The Chinese input

It is remarkable that the confusion which, as it appears, started with *Milindapañha* led to the wrong rendering in the ‘still-standard English translation’ by T. W. and C. A. F Rhys Davids and may still linger in some quarters. That this can be so even in Japan is all the more remarkable in the light of research findings by Jonathan A. Silk. He was prompted by Schopen’s work to reinvestigate the problem and drew on the evidence which can be deduced from Chinese translations parallel to the Pāli passage, although these are based on different versions of the Sanskrit *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* or possibly even on Gandhāri or some other Prākṛit texts. Their wording therefore differs to some extent from the neatly redacted Pāli text produced when the whole Pāli Canon was committed to writing in the first century B.C. (Cf. Waldschmidt 1944, 1948), but the differences do not influence the issue discussed.

Silk endorsed Schopen’s interpretation of *sarīrapījā*, while being aware also of Waldschmidt’s remarks (although unaware of the correct BPS translation of the relevant passage), and says that “it will be very interesting to note that this interpretation is also comprehensively and quite unambiguously supported by the Chinese translations of the sūtra” (Silk 2006, 11).

The term used in Chinese translations for the body is *shēn* or *tǐ*, or the compound *shēntǐ*. The term for relics is *shèli*. The author provides four translations of the relevant passage, an anonymous one (dated 317-420 or possibly even 220-252 if it can be attributed to Zhi Qian), one by Bo Fazuo (290-306), one by Buddhayaśas and helpers (413) and the last one by Faxian, the famous pilgrim to India (417) (Silk 2006, 16-18). In each instance a clear distinction is made by the use of the terms which designate body (*shēn* or *tǐ*, or *shēntǐ*) before cremation and the term *shèli* for the remains after cremation.

The translators clearly understood the difference before and after the cremation and their terminology does not contain any ambiguity which would create or perpetuate any confusion. Three translations have different formulations of Ānanda's questions, making him ask how the Buddha's funeral should be performed. Only Faxian's translation makes him ask about the procedure for worshipping the Buddha after his demise. But no ambiguous compound comparable to *śarīrapūjā* appears in the Chinese text.

The Buddha's answer, after reminding Ānanda not to concern himself with 'these things' and to uphold the True Teaching, is that gods, Brahmins, kings and householders will worship his body (*shēn*). After cremation his relics (*shèli*) should be collected and a stūpa built; reverence paid to it will bring benefit. But then comes a somewhat obscure addition saying that in future "others will erect great stūpa(s) and worship its body (their bodies) (*shēn*)." Here is an ambiguity which somehow got shifted from the events contemporary with the Buddha's demise and funeral to the future cult of stūpas. This may be one reason for perpetuating the confusion about relic worship even among some modern scholars acquainted with Chinese materials (Cf. Hirakawa 1963 and the critical stance by Silk 2002). But we may have here, in the use of the term 'body' (*shēn*, Sanskrit *kāya*) present in newly built stūpas, another hint of the developing Trikāya doctrine.

Silk investigates the Chinese terminology for the 'body' and 'relics' in several other texts, but the results do not have any bearing on the problem discussed here. However, a passage from *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra* is of interest, because it appears to represent a further step towards the emergence of the Trikāya doctrine. Silk chose it to illustrate how clearly the Sanskrit text of the *Lotus-sūtra* distinguishes the difference between the singular and plural use of *śarīra*. In this passage the Buddha says that wherever an exposition of his Dharma will be presented, a precious shrine should be built for the Tathāgata, but "Tathāgata's relics (*tathāgataśarīrāṇi*) need not necessarily be installed there. Why? [Because] the Tathāgata's body is truly placed there [already] as one compact substance (*ekaghanam eva tasmīṅś tathāgataśarīram upanikṣāptaṁ bhavati*)." Kumārajīva's translation is equally grammatically

accurate (*shèli* for *śarīrāṇi* and *shēn* for *śarīrā*). The assertion, put in the *Lotus-sūtra* into the mouth of the cosmic Buddha Śākyamuni, that no relic need be placed in stūpas since the Tathāgata was already present in them with his full substance may have been a further elaboration of the Buddha's instruction in the Pāli Canon, referred to above, that after his cremation a stūpa should be built for the Tathāgata. The Chinese translation of the phrase Tathāgata's 'body ... as one compact substance' is made with a simple compound *quánshēn* meaning 'whole body' and is thus an even clearer indication of the process towards the theory of three 'bodies.' Even Silk recognised that the 'issue' in this text was "less one of philology than of doctrine" (Silk 2006, 61-63). The notion that the Tathāgata was present 'with his whole body' or his 'body ... as one compact substance' in stūpas which did not contain relics of his earthly body strengthened the stūpa cult in Mahāyāna. But this developing notion probably had a strong effect also on Hīnayāna soon after Aśoka's time when relics for new stūpas were in short supply or unobtainable.

V. Suggested solution

Returning to the problem of the meaning of the Buddha's reply to Ānanda's first question and to whom it was directed, it seems that when all the considered interpretations are taken into account, it is pointless to make any distinction between *sāvakaḥikkhus* or 'sons of the Victor,' *puṭhujjanabhikkhus* or ordinary monks not yet advanced on the path, and lay people of whatever degree of accomplishment or none. There is one passage in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* (Rhys Davids and Carpenter 1966, PTS II, 138) which seems to solve the problem in a fully comprehensive way. When the Buddha rested on his final day in the Sāla Grove of the Mallas, flowers showered down on him from the trees and other signs of reverence are said to have supernaturally occurred. This may be the elaboration of the compiler of the *sutta*, but the Buddha's sober words have a ring of genuine comment:

Na kho ānanda ettāvata tathāgato sakkato vā hoti garukato vā mānito vā pūjito vā apacito vā yo kho ānanda bhikkhu vā bhikkhunī vā upāsako vā upāsikā vā dhammānudhamma paṭipanno viharati samīci paṭipanno anudhamma cārī so tathāgataṃ sakkaroti garukaroti māneti pūjeti paramāya pūjāya tasmāt ih'ānanda dhammānudhamma paṭipannā viharissāma samīci paṭipannā anudhamma cārino ti evaṃ hi vo ānanda sikkhitabban ti

[Not really thus, Ananda, is the Tathāgata fully honoured, revered, highly regarded, venerated, esteemed. Whichever monk or nun or lay male or female follower who, having embarked on the path to truth, lives in conformity with truth, has entered upon the proper course, walks in harmony with truth, [such a one] truly honours, reveres, highly regards, venerates Tathāgata with the highest homage. Therefore, Ānanda, live in conformity with truth, follow the proper course, walk in harmony with truth. Thus, Ānanda, should it be taught.]

This is surely the ultimate word. This is, the Buddha clearly says, how the message should be taught to all regardless of status. Embark on the path to freedom and persevere until the goal is reached. But since this is not an injunction or formal setting of a *vinaya* rule, it neither excludes nor forbids worship or salutation (*pūjā* or *vandanā*) of the Buddha's body or relics. But it goes without saying that these acts do not lead to liberation, although they may secure a favourable rebirth within the confines of *sarīsāra*, albeit with its intrinsic danger of straying away from the true path. This is the point at which, when it is understood, a choice is made. This is also the point which, it appears, both the king Milinda and the monk Nāgasena (or the compiler of the book) missed and which many subsequent interpreters failed to appreciate. The reason for it is the stance, which possibly set in quite early after the Buddha's departure, according to which everything that the Buddha supposedly said concerning the behaviour of monks came to be regarded as an injunction or rule and was incorporated into the *Vinaya Piṭaka* or Code of Discipline. That is when an originally pragmatic teaching of liberation offered by one who himself had reached it to individuals who truly felt the need to escape from unsatisfactory conditions of life as we know it was gradually transformed into a formalised religious system.

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