

60.13**Kappâvasesa**

Its meanings and usages in terms of the Buddha's lifespan

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1 Significance of the problem

1.1 AN EARLY PROBLEM

1.1.1 Extra-Buddhist account of life-extension

1.1.1.1 The belief in the power to extend one's life or immeasurable lifespan, even of immortality, is not uncommon in Indian religions, which are well known for allowing their gods, heroes, even holy men to have such powers. Like any faith-based religion—outside of early Buddhism, any Indian religion is, as a rule, faith-based—we hear all kinds of wonders, about one of their gods, a sectarian teacher or some local (even foreign) figure. The more fantastic or bizarre, the more attractive for the palm-clasping, glassy-eyed believers who are elated and content to just recite the prayers and perform any kind of ritual for a being to whom such attributions are made.¹

What can be explained, it seems, is worldly and intellectual: the words of humans. The unexplainable, the impossible, that even the inhuman are what raise a person or being to become divine and worthy of total faith. Notice that at any Guru Darshan (a gathering of faithfuls around their guru), one hears wave after wave of words and sounds drowning us. We hear the Guru's words but understand not a sound. But look at the faithful, blissfully lost in the crowd. The guru is like an open blaze that draws them close to him in the darkness of the ignorant world.

1.1.1.2 The Hindu holy books—such as the Vedas, the epics, and the Puranas—immortalize their deities and heroes. The avatars (*avatāra*, “descent (by way of incarnation)”) of the Hindu Godhead, in spite of their earthly existence, were considered free from the laws of birth and death. Such incidents were spoken of as appearances or assumptions, and these beings were but devices of the immortal God to work among mortals.

This extraordinary power over the laws of nature was, in a rare or limited way, shared even by human beings. Certain great sages like Bhisma (the Mahabharata hero and leader of the Kauravas) were attributed powers known as *icchā-marāṇa* (willful death), that is, dying only when one chooses to do so. Why to not die at all, or how this was accomplished, is neither asked nor stated. It is God's will; it is ungodly to explain things.

In the case of Bhisma, we are told that his great renunciation and vow of celibacy won for him a boon of such powers from his father Shantanu. How such a boon could prevent death is nowhere explained, but it is suggested that the laws of nature could be controlled by sheer force of character or mere will power of the godly individual.

There is a very simple explanation for all these amazing feats. The power of belief cancels the flow of knowledge and wisdom. After all, our foolishness is wisdom in God's eyes. The reality is that what is in our minds is more real than what is out there.

1.1.2 The Buddhist case of life-extension

1.1.2.1 The early Buddhists do, however, attempt to explain how the Buddha's will power works over the phenomenon of death. Such power over death, that is, the ability to extend life, has been attributed to the Buddha in **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) in both Pali and Sanskrit. The post-Buddha Buddhists, however, refusing or unable to accept the Buddha's mortality, went a step further and advocated a doctrine of the Eternal Buddha, comparable to the avatars of the Hindu Gods or any God. The

¹ For an entertaining and informative study of how powerful men were seen as gods in history, see A Della Subin, *Accidental Gods*, NY: Metropolitan Books, 2021. (Thanks Matt Jenkins for suggesting this, 18 March 2024).

Buddhist texts, both Pali and Sanskrit, contain several controversies resulting from the criticism of such a belief in the nature of the Buddha.

1.1.2.2 A study of this controversy may help us better understand not only the development of such Buddhology but also the doctrine of karma which explains the phenomena of life and death. In this study, even though we will examine the problem of the Buddha's life extension with the Pali **Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) as our key text, we will also do a comparative study with other texts and sources that helps us to better understand or envision the problem here.

2 The Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta account

2.1 THE BUDDHA'S COUNSEL WITH ĀNANDA

2.1.1 The Buddha's life-extension and its conditions

2.1.1.1 The Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta, chapter 2, records that the Buddha, having entered his last (that is, the 45th) rains retreat in a forest hut outside the village of Beḷuva, near Vesālī, is afflicted with severe, painful and deadly illness (probably dysentery).² Realizing that it is not fitting to pass away without addressing his followers and taking leave of the sangha, he resolves: "Now let me make an effort to ward off this illness and dwell, having determined the life-force."³

Through his sheer determination, he withstands it and recovers.⁴ Three months later, at the beautiful Cāpāla *cetiya* (tree shrine),⁵ the Buddha is with the elder Ananda, to whom he says:

3.3 Ānanda, whoever has cultivated and developed **the 4 bases of success** [2.2.2], made them a vehicle, made them the basis, pursued them, built them up, made them well even,⁶ could, if he so wishes, remain for his (current) lifespan (*kappa*) or for the rest of the lifespan (*kappâvasesa*).⁷

² The "severe illness" here [as at D 16,4.20] shows symptoms of dysentery. Winternitz (1939:9) says that this section [D 16,2.23] is amongst those that "bear the stamp of the greatest antiquity." At D 16,3.10 the Buddha however relinquishes his lifespan. See also §§2.25 & 5.13 f.

³ *Yan nunâham imam ābādham viriyena paṭippanāmetvā jivita,saṅkhāram adhiṭṭhāya vihareyyan ti* (D 16,2.23/-2:99,9-11). It appears that Nāgasena (Miln 141) and the Sarvāstivādins take this episode to mean that the Buddha is actually at the point of dying, and so by sheer will power extended his life for at least 3 more months (to the end of the rains retreat). Note, however, that no duration is mentioned here. But see D 16,2.22 n where this incident is said to be 10 months before the parinirvana; cf D 16,3.9.

⁴ **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16,2.23 f), SD 9.

⁵ **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16,3.2-3.10), SD 9.

⁶ "Cultivated and developed ... made very well even," *bhāvitā bahulī, katā yāni, katā vatthu, katā anuṭṭhitā paricita susam-āraddhā* (D 2:104 x5, 115-118 x9, 3:248 f x5; S 1:116, 2:264 f x4, 4:200, 5:170, 259 f x4; **A 6.13/3:290-292 x5** (SD 55.18), A 4:300 x2, 309 3x; U 62 f x4). All the terms are defined at Pm 1:172, here paraphrased: cultivated (*bhāvitā*): perfected by way of embracing dhyana, insight and path; developed (*bahulī, katā*): thoughts (*dhammā*) do not arise in excess; made them a vehicle (*yani, katā*): his calm and insight is ever ready; made them the basis (*vatthu, katā*): mindfulness is well-established; pursued them (*anuṭṭhita*): able to guide his mind; built them up (*pari, citā*), lit, well-accumulated: able to conquer bad mental states; made them well even (*susam-āraddha*), lit, "making beauty arise": overcoming defilements and attaining the goal. (Pm 3.173 f/1:172).

⁷ "For (his) lifespan ... or for the rest of the lifespan," *kappam vā ... kappâvasesam vā* (D 16,3.3/2:103, 3:77,25 f/3:77; S 51.10/5:259,20; U 6.1/62,21; cf Kvu 11.5/45; Divy 201): the Buddha died at 80 (current lifespan); the possible lifespan then was 100 or a little more (around 120); hence, he could have lived a further 20 years or more. On

Ānanda, the Tathāgata is one who has cultivated and developed **the 4 bases of success**, made them a vehicle, made them the basis [the ground], pursued them, built them up, made them well even, could, if he so wishes, remain for (his) lifespan or for the rest of the lifespan.

Ānanda, if the Tathāgata so wishes, he could remain for (his) lifespan or the rest of the lifespan.”

3.4 But even though the venerable Ānanda was given such a clear sign by the Blessed One, though he was given such a broad hint, he was unable to understand it. He did not beseech the Blessed One,

“Bhante, let the Blessed One stay on through the lifespan, let the Sugata [Wellfarer] stay on through the lifespan for the benefit of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the benefit and happiness of gods and humans”—to that extent his mind was seized [possessed] by Māra.⁸ (D 16,3.3-3.6), SD 9

2.1.1.2 I have taken special care in translating the controversial Pali phrase, *kappam vā ... kappavasesam vā*,⁹ to bring out the intended sense, that is, the Buddha will live up to this point, so to speak (since he is already 80 and has been seriously ill). It should be noted that the Buddha has been seriously sick on these 2 following occasions:

- 1st attack of dysentery at Bejuva during the last rains retreat (D 16,2.21 f);
- 2nd attack of dysentery after the almsmeal of Cunda the smith (D 16,4.20 f).

On account of the Buddha's health and age, his life will end in the next 3 months' time. This is his **current lifespan** (*kappa*) or technically, *jīvita* (the lived life). However, using his powers, the Buddha may, if he wishes, live out his **full lifespan**, that is, for what remains of it: this would be 120 years or so, or technically *āyu* (the liveable life).¹⁰

This meeting between the frail Buddha and Ānanda in between the Buddha's 2 bouts of serious sickness is also problematic. **Ānanda**, it seems, despite being asked thrice by Buddha whether he (the Buddha) should live out his full lifespan, is unable to see the significance of the statement to give any proper answer. He remains silent, it is said, because “**his mind was seized by Māra**.” This vision distracts him so that he does not hear the Buddha. The Buddha then dismisses Ānanda.

2.1.2 Ānanda and Māra's intervention

2.1.2.1 Now we go on to examine the incident where Māra appears to the Buddha and reminds him that it is time for him to attain *parinirvana* (D 16,3.7 f). The Buddha reassures Māra that he (the Buddha) will pass away at the end of 3 months. After Māra has departed self-satisfied, the Buddha deliberately and consciously relinquishes the rest of his natural term of life, that is, the time beyond the 3 months.¹¹

the Buddha's lifespan, see SD 9 (9.1 + 2) & on the *kappa*, see SD 9 (9.3). This is the tr followed by most modern translators.

⁸ *Yathā taṃ mārena pariyuṭṭhita, citto*. Comys say that Māra is able to seize any mind that has not totally given up all mental perversions (*vipallāsa*), and Ānanda has not done so. Being a streamwinner, he is still subject to the perversions of perception (*saññā, vipallāsa*) and of mind (*citta, vipallāsa*), though not of views (*diṭṭhi, vipallāsa*). Māra seized his mind by displaying a terrifying form, and when the elder sees it, he is unable to catch the hint dropped by the Buddha (DA 2:555 = SA 3:252). On the perversions, see **Satipaṭṭhāna Ss**, SD 13.1 (4.1a) & **Vipallāsa S** (A 4.49/-2:52), SD 16.11; Vism 22.68.

⁹ The phrase *kappavasesa* in the same context recurs at D 2:103,4-7 f = S 5:259,20-24 f (discussed at Miln 140,20-142,12 = A 4:309,7-11 f = U 62,20-22 f).

¹⁰ This is, in fact, how Nāgasena explains *kappam vā ... kappavasesam* (Miln 140,20-142,12).

¹¹ *Atha kho bhagavā cāpāle cetiye sato sampajāno āyu, saṅkhāram osajji* (D 16:3.9). See **Māra**, SD 61.8

2.1.2.2 Chapter 3 of the **Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** gives the following detail:

Then, the Blessed One, at the Cāpāla shrine, mindfully and fully aware, relinquished his life-formation.¹² ...

The sage let go of the formation of existence, of life [the remaining lifespan], low and high. Delighting within and mentally concentrated, he broke the armour-like self-existence.

(D 16,3.10/2:106 f)

A thoughtful reader may wonder if the Buddha's relinquishment of his lifespan was actually an act of **suicide**. Further, it should be noted that the Buddha, already frail after an attack of dysentery, goes on to take a rich dish offered by Cunda the smith,¹³ not allowing anyone else to consume it, claiming that the dish is *not suitable for human consumption*, but only the Buddha may digest it properly, and the rest of the offering should be buried.¹⁴

2.1.2.3 The Milinda,pañha and the Commentaries add a fascinating mythical element [2.3.1.1] here. It is said that at every meal as the Buddha takes a morsel of food, a deva would sprinkle ambrosia or divine elixir (*dibbā ojā*) onto it. (Hence, no matter what food the Buddha takes, it is always nutritive, tasty and safe to eat.)¹⁵ However, for the Buddha's last meal, the Dīgha Subcommentary adds an interesting turn. Apparently, on account of the Buddha's frail, sick body, "that sprinkle of divine elixir worsened" the Buddha's condition.¹⁶

2.1.3 Ānanda is blameless (Buddhaghosa)

2.1.3.1 Both the commentators Buddhaghosa and Dhammapāla give what we would today consider a psychological explanation to the episode of Ānanda being "blamed" for not entreating the Buddha to live on for his full lifespan of 120 years.¹⁷ They see it as a skillful means (*upāya*) the Buddha uses that will take effect posthumously,¹⁸ on account of Ānanda's devotion to the Buddha and other elder arhats.¹⁹

Buddhaghosa sees the Cāpāla shrine episode [2.1.4.1] as part of the Buddha's **skillful means** to lessen Ānanda's grief when the Buddha enters parinirvana.

¹² See D 16,3.10 n (SD 9). See S:B 819 n366.

¹³ Cunda the smith is said to be a streamwinner at that time (DA 2:399,15), and those who read *sūkara,maddava* as "the tender pork from a pig that is neither too young nor too old," view that it is "available meat" (already available at that time, ie, not specially killed for the occasion) (DA 568,13 f). Dhammapāla says that this is the view of the Mahā Aṭṭhakathā (UA 399,24 f). Some say that it is a recipe for soft-boiled rice with the 5 cow-products (*go,rasa*): milk, curds, butter, ghee, cream of ghee, Others, esp Dhammapāla say, that either (1) it is bamboo shoots that pigs have trampled on; or (2) it is mushroom or truffles growing in ground trampled upon by pigs or hogs. Cunda prepares the meal hoping: "Let the Blessed One not pass into parinirvana but live on!" (UA 399,25-400,4).

¹⁴ D 16,4.18-19/2:127 (SD 9).

¹⁵ Miln 231,21-31.

¹⁶ *Tam pana tatthāpakkhita,dibb'ojatāya garutaram jātaraṃ* (DAṬ 2:218 @ 568,17).

¹⁷ See also SD 9 (9.2.3.7); SD 61.8 (2.1.4.7).

¹⁸ A well known posthumous skillful means is used by the Buddha on his ex-charioteer, Channa, for being arrogant towards the elders by placing the "supreme punishment" (*brahma,daṇḍa*), that of boycott, on him upon the Buddha's passing: Cv 1.18 (V 2:23 f); Cv 11.1.12-16 (V 2:290-292); SD 52.3 (1.3.5.4 f).

¹⁹ On Ānanda being emotionally troubled by Sāriputta's passing, see (**Sāriputta**) **Cunda S** (S 47.13/5:161-163), SD 110.5.

“Why does the Buddha address him up to three times?” Buddhaghosa asks and explains thus: “In order to lessen his sorrow by putting the blame on him, saying, ‘Yours is the wrongdoing; yours is the fault,’ [D 16,3.40] when, later on, he was asked by the elder, ‘Bhante, may the Blessed One live out the lifespan!’” (DA 2:555,25-28)

Dhammapāla, too, concurs with Buddhaghosa:

For the Blessed One sees thus, “This person has an extremely affectionate heart towards me. He will, later on, on hearing of the causes of an earth-tremor and my abandoning of my life-formation, ask me to live on for a long time. Then, I will put the blame on his head, saying, ‘Why did you not ask me before?’ For human beings are not so troubled by their own faults. Therefore, his sorrow will be assuaged.” (UA 325,22-28)²⁰

In other words, Ānanda is made to feel regret or guilt rather than sorrow at the Buddha's parinirvana, and in this manner, Ānanda's sorrow is assuaged by his mere regret!²¹ That is, for so long as Ānanda is still not yet an arhat.²²

We may, of course, dismiss this episode as being “cooked up” by some imaginative sutta reciter and leave it at that without any story left. There is also the problem that the Buddha would have known that Ānanda would by then (the time of the 1st council) have been an arhat—or would he not? A more useful question is, perhaps: how would such a question shape our quest for the path, if at all?

Furthermore, even if we take it as “religious fiction” (as a creative mental construct), the idea of compassion is a wholesome thought and feeling. It is certainly not against the Buddha's character to prevent another from suffering when he could do so. I think it's a story worth telling just to inspire kindness in others.

2.1.3.2 The problem of the Buddha's life prolongation seems to have another curious sequence of similar events. **The Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) records the Buddha asking Ānanda a total of **16 times** about the option of extending the Buddha's life, and Ānanda is silent each time. There is no mention that Māra has a hand in this series of curious silences. The most likely explanation for Ānanda's silence when the Buddha asked him about the option of life prolongation was because these were **rhetorical questions**.

That the same question asked 16 times is likely to be rhetorical is further confirmed by the Buddha consoling Ānanda when the latter beseeched the Buddha to extend his life to the full term of 120 or so years, but the Buddha states that he has already made his decision. He consoles Ānanda, saying:

²⁰ *Passati hi bhagavā “ayaṃ mayi ativiya siniddha,hadayo, so parato bhūmi,cāla,karaṇaṃ ca āyu,saṅkhār’ossajjanaṃ ca sutvā mama cira-ṭ,ṭhānaṃ yācissati, athāhaṃ ‘kissa tvaṃ puretaraṃ na yācasī ti tass’eva sīse dosaṃ pātes-sāmi, sattā ca attano aparādhena na tathā vihaññanti, ten’assa soko tanuko bhavissatī ti* (UA 325). On Ānanda's “extremely affectionate heart,” see eg D 16,5.13 (SD 9).

²¹ See An Yang-Gyu, “Buddhaghosa's view of the Buddha's lifespan,” 2000:140-142.

²² Comy explains that Māra possesses a person's mind who still has the 12 perversions (*vipallāsa*) [ie, perception (*saññā*), consciousness (*citta*) or view (*diṭṭhi*) as regarding (1) the impermanent as permanent, (2) the painful as pleasant, (3) what is nonself as a self, (4) what is impure as pure]. Ānanda has not given up a;; the 4 perversions [those of *perception* and *consciousness*, regarding what is painful as pleasant, and what is impure as pure (DAṬ 2:192,12-14)]. So Māra possesses his mind, ie, either he projects a fearful visible form or makes a fearsome sound. People, on hearing it or seeing it, then forget themselves and let their mouths open. “Māra then inserts his hand through the mouth and squeezes the heart.” (DA 2:555,12-28; UA 2:325,5-28). Reading between the lines of this commentarial narrative, we can easily imagine the psychological significance of such perversions. See **Vipallāsa S** (A 4.49/2:52), SD 16.11; Vism 22.53/683.

Ānanda, have I not told you before:

All those things that are dear and pleasant to us must suffer difference, separation and change [becoming other]?²³

What else do you expect? **Whatever is born, become, formed [compounded] is liable to decay; that it should not decay is impossible.**²⁴ (D 16,3.48), SD 9²⁵

Now that we have established (or at least examined the circumstances) that Ānanda is actually blame-free regarding the incident of the Buddha and his prolongation of life, we will go on to examine more closely how the Buddha actually relinquished his potential life, or technically his “lifespan-force” or simply, life-force. [3.1.1]

2.2 THE BUDDHA’S POWERS

2.2.1 The Buddha’s infirmity

2.2.1.1 The Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta, which records the events of the Buddha’s last days, is preserved both in Pali and in Sanskrit. Both accounts agree that the Buddha is advanced in age, that is, 80 years old at that time, and physically frail, worsened by bouts of dysentery. The Sutta records the Buddha as saying:

I have reached the sum of my days; I am turning 80.²⁶ Ānanda, just as an old cart is kept going by being held together with straps, even so, the Tathāgata’s body is kept going by being strapped up.²⁷ (D 16,2.25.3), SD 9

In this connection, it is also reported that after Cunda’s meal, the Buddha falls seriously ill again with dysentery, but he bears it with great composure. Cunda’s meal may have worsened the Buddha’s condition, but it certainly was not the cause of his death.²⁸

2.2.1.2 It is natural that the Buddha, like any human, would grow old, suffer sickness, and in the end die, that is, the body fails to support all the 5 aggregates and keep him alive. However, unlike others, streamwinners, once-returners, non-returners and ordinary worldlings, an arhat (including the Buddha) will not be reborn after death. In other words, arhats (and only arhats) are not reborn because they have attained nirvana.

²³ This famous sentence is stock: **D 16:** 5.14/2:144 = 3.48/2:118 = 6.11/2:158 = 6.20/2:163; **Mahā Sudassana S** (D 2:192=194); **(Sāriputta) Cunda S** (S 47.13/5:163); Nm 1:123 qu D 16,5.14/2:144. Cf **Abhiṇṇa,paccavekhittaba S** (A 5.57/3:74), SD 5.12.

²⁴ *Na nu evaṃ Ānanda mayā paṭigacc’eva akkhātāṃ, sabbehi’ eva piyehi manāpehi nānā,bhāvo vinā,bhāvo aññā-thā,bhāvo? Taṃ kut’ ettha Ānanda labbhā? Yaṃ taṃ jātaṃ bhūtaṃ saṅkhātāṃ paloka,dhammaṃ taṃ vata mā palujjīti n’etaṃ thānaṃ vijjati.* This quote is stock: **D 16,**3.48/2:118 = 5.14/2:144 = 6.11.1/2:158 = 6.20/2:163. The sentence, *Taṃ kut’ ettha Ānanda labbhā?* lit tr “What can you get here, Ānanda?” As at D 16,5.6 + 6.11.

²⁵ Further see SD 61.8 (2.1.4.4), and on why Ānanda is blamed, see (2.1.4.5).

²⁶ *Ahaṃ kho paṇ’ānanda, etarahi jīṇṇo vuddho mahallako addha’gato vayo anuppatto, āsītiko me vayo vattati.* Traditionally, it is said that the Buddha passes away on his 80th birthday. However, if we accept that the Buddha passes away on Vesak day, then he would be 81. See “**Did the Buddha die on Vesak day?**” SD 9 (9.4). See this n at D 16 ad loc (SD 9).

²⁷ “By being strapped,” *veṭṭha,missakena*, following Norman and Bodhi. This seems to be like some kind of what we today call a “body-brace.” See Tha:N 143 n & S:B 1920 n141.

²⁸ On whether the Buddha was *poisoned*, see SD 9 (13.1).

A young ordinary person, says **the Mahā Sīha, nāda Sutta** (M 12), may have “the most lucid wisdom,” but when he grows old, “he loses that lucidity of wisdom.” In the case of the Buddha, as long as he lives—even when the body is incapacitated in some way, “like an old cart ... kept going by being strapped up” [2.2.1.1]—his mind is as *calm and clear* as the day he awakened until he passes away.

62.2 ... I am now old, aged, burdened with years, advanced in life, and come to the last stage—my years have turned 80.²⁹

Now, Sāriputta, suppose that here I had 4 disciples,³⁰ each with a hundred years' lifespan, perfect in mindfulness, in assimilation, in memory and in lucidity of wisdom.³¹

62.3 Sāriputta, suppose that a **strong-bowed archer**, trained, tested and true master of archery,³² could easily shoot a light arrow through the shadow of a palm tree.³³

Even so, to that extent, they are perfect in mindfulness, assimilation, **[83]** memory and lucidity of wisdom.

62.4 Suppose that they continuously asked me about the 4 focuses of mindfulness, and that I kept answering them when asked, and that they remembered each answer of mine, and neither asked a secondary question nor paused except to eat, drink, chew and taste,³⁴ to urinate and defecate, and to rest in order to dispel sleepiness and tiredness.

62.5 Still, Sāriputta, the Tathagata's exposition of the Dharma, his explanations of words and phrases of the Dharma,³⁵ and his replies to questions would not yet come to an end before those 4 disciples of mine, each with a hundred years' lifespan, living out a hundred years, would have died at the end of those hundred years.

62.6 Sāriputta, even if you have to carry me about on a litter,³⁶ still there will be no change in the Tathagata's clarity of wisdom.³⁷ (M 12,62/1:82 f), SD 49.1

²⁹ Comy says that the Buddha gave this discourse during the year of his parinirvana (MA 2:51). **Mahā, parinibbāna S** (D 16,1.16) records Sāriputta's lion-roar before the Buddha that the latter is the wisest of all beings. Sāriputta dies a week later—on the fullmoon day of Kattikā (Oct-Nov)—in his home village of Nālaka (or Nālandā, Mvst 2:56) (SD 9). **Mahā Sīha, nādā S** records events before this period in Vesālī [§1]. This Vesālī visit by the Buddha is not the one at D 16,2.11, when Sāriputta has already passed away, but just before the events of D 16. On the problem of chronology, see D 16,16 n (SD 9).

³⁰ This appears to be a synecdoche for the 4 kinds of disciples—monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen—who are streamwinners, once-returners, non-returners and arhats.

³¹ The Pali for the 4 terms respectively are *sati, gati, dhiti, pañña, veyyattiya*. Comy explains *sati* as the ability to hold in mind a hundred or a thousand phrases as they are being spoken; *gati*, the ability to bind and grasp them; *dhiti*, the ability to recite them back; and *pañña, veyyattiya*, the ability to discern their meaning and logic. Ānanda is declared to be the foremost amongst monks with *sati, gati* and *dhiti* (A 1:24 f). The last quality—*pañña, veyyattiya*—is perhaps synonymous with *mahā, paññā*, in which Sāriputta is declared foremost (A 1:23).

³² “Strong-bowed archer, trained, tested and true master of archery” (*daḷha, dhammo dhanuggaho sikkhito kata, -hattho kat'upāsano*) is stock: see **Dhanu-g, gahā S** (S 20.6,2), SD 52.7.

³³ As at S 1:62, 2:265 f; A 2:48, 4:429; J 4:211. AA says that the “shadow” is a span and 4 fingers (about 8 ins or 20 cm) wide and so would be passed quickly. See A:H 4:288 n3.

³⁴ *Asita, pīta, khāyita, sāyitā*. These are the 4 modes of consuming food, namely: *eat* food; *drink* liquids; *chew* solid food, a toothstick, betel-nut, chewing gum; *taste* (or lick) sweets, ice-cream.

³⁵ “Words and phrases of the Dharma,” *dhamma, pada, vyañjana*.

³⁶ “Litter,” *mañcaka*, lit “small bed” (from *mañca*, “bed”).

³⁷ “Clarity of wisdom,” *paññā, veyyatiyaṃ*, alt tr “lucidity of wisdom”; as at **Cūḷa Hatthi, padōpama S** (M 27), where the brahmin Jāṇussoṇi questions the wanderer Pilotikā (who has great faith in the Buddha) what he thinks of the Buddha's “clarity of wisdom” (M 27,2.3/1:175), SD 40a.5.

Hence, one of the hallmarks of being an arhat is that one would never have any symptoms of mental deterioration, such as dementia. However, we cannot say the same of streamwinners, once-returners, or even non-returners. They may, for example, have symptoms of dementia (for example), but this does not mean that they have not attained the path. Perhaps it simply means that they are certainly *not* arhats, and their mental karma has ripened, and we should not be any more judgemental than that.³⁸

2.2.2 The 4 bases of success

2.2.2.1 Although the Buddha may be physically frail due to his age and bouts of severe illness, his mind remains calm and clear as the day he awakened [2.2.1.2]. Hence, he can easily get into the 4th dhyana to work on the bases of success (or power), with which he would be able to prolong his life if he wishes to. **The 4 bases of success** (or power) (*iddhi,pāda*; Skt *ṛddhi,pāda*) are as follows applied to the prolongation of life:³⁹

- | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------|---|
| (1) will | (<i>chanda</i>) | the intention or desire to prolong his life; |
| (2) energy or effort | (<i>virīya</i>) | the meditative state attained and then directed to that intent; |
| (3) thought or mind | (<i>citta</i>) | the resultant consciousness of a prolonged life as it arises; and |
| (4) mental investigation | (<i>vīmaṃsa</i>) | one's unbroken mindfulness and awareness in effecting that state. |

Properly, we should not say that this life prolongation is effected by “psychic powers” since, in this application, there is nothing “psychic” in the above 4 bases. The Buddha, if he had extended his life would have used his yogic powers (“yogic” in the sense of meditation and mental abilities).

2.2.2.2 The *iddhi,pādas* are so called because, on a simple worldly (*lokiya*) level, they refer to utter determination to attain a certain state of wholesome success, such as putting in the meditation to this effect, called “concentration of the will” (*chanda,samādhi*).⁴⁰ Then, putting in the effort to do so, keeping the mind in that effort and state, and then being mindful and aware of one's wholesome application of that state.

On a spiritual (*lok'uttara*) level—when the *iddhi,pādas* are applied by a saint of the path—they are developed in deep concentration, that is, the 4th dhyana, with the mind free of the body, with the unification of all the other 4 aggregates: *feeling, perception, formations and consciousness* (Vbh 217).⁴¹ Such dhyana is the basis for the development of the 10 kinds of psychic powers (or any of them), as explained in the Paṭisambhidā,magga (Pm 2:205-214).⁴² These are various mental powers or success (*iddhi*) at their spiritual best, ranging from the reflection on impermanence to the attainment of the traditional psychic powers.⁴³

2.2.3 The Buddha relinquishes his life-formation

2.2.3.1 Now we move on to briefly examine how the Buddha lets go of his life-formation: was it done gradually or all at once? The Commentaries tell us that the Buddha did not let go of his life-formation like

³⁸ For mentions of 2 related cases (of a Myanmar meditation teacher and a Thai meditation master), see SD 60.1f (6.7.2).

³⁹ D 3:77, D 3:213 = M 1:103 = 2:11; D 3:221; Vbh 216. See SD 9 (9.2.3) & also Gethin, *The Buddha's Path to Awakening*, 2001:94-97.

⁴⁰ Pm 2:205; Vbh 217; Vism 12.50-53/384.

⁴¹ Also at Vism 12.52/385.

⁴² Explained in Vism 12.22-45/378-384.

⁴³ Explained in detail at Vism 12.46-13.129/384-435.

a ball of clay from his hand. For exactly 3 months, he entered into the fruition attainment (*phala,samāpatti*), thinking, "I will not remain in them for any longer than that."⁴⁴ It should be noted, however, that this life-extension is different from the one mentioned earlier at the Cāpāla shrine [2.1.1.1].

In simple terms, "**fruition attainment**" refers to a deep meditation consisting of an experience of nirvanic bliss the Buddha enters into. Thus, fruition attainment is the profound experience of nirvana itself. The consciousness here is said to be "supramundane" (*lok'uttara*), experienced only by those who have attained the path, in this case, only the Buddha and the arhats.

2.2.3.2 To understand the nature of fruition attainment, it helps to know what cessation attainment is. While fruition attainment is a conscious state (which means that the Buddha is able to communicate with and teach others), in cessation attainment (*nirodha,samāpatti*) there is no consciousness present at all.

The **Abhidhamm'attha,saṅgaha** describes cessation attainment as starting with the 1st dhyana right up to the 4th dhyana, then:

Having proceeded thus, up to the base of nothingness, one then attends to the preliminary duties, such as the resolution, etc, and enters the base of neither-perception-nor-nonperception. After two occasions of javana⁴⁵ in dhyana, the continuum of consciousness is suspended. Then, one is said to have attained **cessation** (*nirodha,samāpatti*). (Abhs 9.43)⁴⁶

Attainment of cessation is a meditative state where the stream of consciousness and mental factors are completely cut off temporarily. Cessation, however, can only be attained by non-returners or arhats. In special cases, even non-aryas, that is, ordinary people, who are able to go into deep meditation may experience suspension of consciousness, but these states are simply unconscious states during meditation; it is neither cessation nor fruition attainment.

The **Abhidhamm'attha,saṅgaha** describes **fruition attainment** thus:

The attainment of fruition (*phala,samāpatti*) is a meditative attainment by which a noble disciple enters into supramundane dhyana with nirvana as the object. It is attained for the purpose of experiencing the bliss of nirvana here and now. The cittas that occur in this attainment are the fruition cittas corresponding to the person's level of realization. Thus, each of the 4 types of noble individuals can enter their own respective fruition attainment—the streamwinner attaining the fruition attainment of streamwinning, and so on. The attainment is reached by first making the resolution to attain fruition and then developing in sequence the insight knowledges, beginning with knowledge of rise and fall (described in *Vism* 23.6-15/699-702).

A caveat about such awakening knowledge: such knowledge is to be deeply respected and best left to each person's provisional understanding and acceptance. Without awakening, it is not *valid* knowledge for us. As we progress in our practice and attainment, our growing wisdom will give us a better appreciation of such knowledges. For the moment, it is simply an amateur's admiration at best, and taken with a celebrative smile of open knowing.

⁴⁴ DA 556; SA 3:253; UA 327. For a different opinion, see Jaini 1958 (2001:193)

⁴⁵ *Jāvana* or "impulsion" is the active phase—that of full cognition—of the cognitive process. See SD 19.14 (2); SD 47.19 (3.2.2.3); SD 49.5b (1.0.4.6).

⁴⁶ See also Abhs 422.

2.2.3.3 This provisional knowledge may help us with a better understanding of the sutta phrase describing the Buddha relinquishing his **lifespan force** (*āyu,saṅkhāra*). Each section is followed by a brief commentary, as follows:

Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta (D 16)

(1) (The Buddha resolves to relinquish the remainder of his lifespan. Earth-tremors.)

Atha kho bhagavā cāpāle cetiye sato sampājano āyu,saṅkhāram ossaji, ossaṭṭhe ca bhagavatp āyu,saṅkhāre mahā,bhūmi,cālo ahosi

“Then, the Blessed One, at the Cāpāla shrine, mindfully and fully aware, **relinquished his life-formation**.⁴⁷ And when the Blessed One had relinquished his life-formation, there was a great earth-tremor, terrifying and hair-raising, and thunder-peals [the sky-drums bursting forth].”⁴⁸

(D 16,3.10/2:106,21 f), SD 9

Commentary:

“Then, the Blessed One, at the Cāpāla Shrine, the Tathagata **relinquished his life-formation**.

Therein (in the text), the Blessed One relinquished his life-formation, not in the way one throws away a clod of earth with the hand. He thought, ‘I will attain the fruition attainment for 3 months only, and from then on I will not attain it any more’.” (DA 2:556,33-37)

Comments:

According to the Sanskrit Mahāparinirvānasūtra and Divyāvadāna (p203), the Buddha determined (*adhiṣṭhāya*) the *jīvita-saṃskāra* but gave up the *āyu-saṃskāra*. Jaini reads this passage thus: the Buddha produced the forces of *jīvita* (“new prolonged life”) but rejected the forces of *āyu* (“the existing life-force”). He defines *āyuh-saṃskāra* as a result of some past karma, and *jīvita-saṃskāra* as the new life-force which is produced by the *ṛddhi* which is yogic potency (Jaini 1958:547-549). However, adds An, some Chinese versions say that the Buddha kept his *jīvita-saṃskāra* going but rejected his *āyu-saṃskāra*. But the Dīgha Subcommentary (DAPṬ 2:196) does not distinguish between the two.⁴⁹

(2) (Māra invites the Buddha to pass away into parinirvana, and the Buddha consents; Māra leaves.)

Idān’eva kho ānanda ajja cāpāle cetiye tathāgatena sato sampājano āyu,saṅkhāram ossaji tathā-gatena satena sampajānena āyu,saṅkhāro ossaṭṭho

“Then, Ānanda, the Blessed One, right here at the Cāpāla Shrine, mindfully and fully aware, relinquished his life-formation.”

(D 16,3.37/2:114,33), SD 9

Bhūmi,cālā Sutta (A 8.70)

(3) (Māra invites the Buddha to pass away into parinirvana, and the Buddha consents; Māra leaves.)

Atha kho bhagavā cāpāla,cetiye sato sampājano āyu,saṅkhāram ossaji. Ossaṭṭhe bhagavatā āyu,-saṅkhāre mahā,bhūmi,cālo ahosi bhimsanako sa,lomohaṃso deva,duṇḍubhiyo ca phalimsu.

“Then, the Blessed One, at the Cāpāla Shrine, mindful and fully aware, relinquished his life-formation. And when the Blessed One had relinquished his life-formation, a great earth-tremor occurred, frightening and terrifying, and peals of thunder split the sky.”

(A 8.70/4:311,28 f)

⁴⁷ “Life-formation” (*āyu,saṅkhāra*; elsewhere *jīvita,saṅkhāra*) (M 1:295, 296; S 2:266; J 4:215). Cf §2.23 where the Buddha willfully extends his life. See S:B 819 n366. See SD 9 (9.2) on the Buddha’s life-span, SD 9 (9.3) on *kappa*, & SD 9 (9.6): Did the Buddha commit suicide?

⁴⁸ A similar phenomenon (*dhamma,niyāma*) follows immediately after the Buddha passes into parinirvana SD 9 [§6.10].

⁴⁹ Based on AN Yang Gyu 2003 95 n1.

Commentary:

"Having well set up mindfulness, having limited it by knowledge, he discarded, abandoned, his vital force. The Blessed One did not relinquish his vital force in the way one drops a clod of earth with one's hand, but he resolved, 'I will enter fruition attainment for only 3 more months but not beyond that'." (AA 4:152,12-18)

Āyu,saṅkhār'ossajjana Sutta (U 6.1)

(4) (The Buddha relinquishes his life-formation. Earth-tremors.)

Atha kho bhagavā cāpāle cetiye sato sampajāno āyu,saṅkhāraṃ ossajji, osaṭṭhe ca bhagavatā āyu,-saṅkhāre mahā,bhūmi,cālo ahosi bhimsanako sa,lomahaṃso deva,duṇḍubhiyo ca phalimsu.

Then, the Blessed One, at the Cāpāla Shrine, mindful and fully aware, relinquished his life-formation. And when the Blessed One had relinquished his life-formation, a great earth-tremor occurred, frightening and terrifying, and peals of thunder split the sky. (U 6.1/64,24 f)

Commentary:

"Having well set up mindfulness, having limited it by knowledge, he discarded, abandoned, his life-formation. Herein, the Blessed One did not relinquish his life-formation in the way one drops a clod of earth with one's hand, but he let the thought arise: 'I will enter fruition attainment **for only 3 more months** but not beyond that'.

But why did the Blessed One, who was capable of remaining for the *kappa* or *what remains of the kappa*, remain for so short a time and then, as a result of Māra's entreaty that he attain parinirvana, relinquish his life-formation? It is not the case that the Blessed One relinquished his life-formation as a result of Māra's entreaty, nor is it the case that, as a result of the elder's entreaty, he would fail to relinquish his life-formation.

Rather, he relinquished his life-formation due to **the absence, beyond the 3 months, of those capable of being guided**. For the Blessed One remains only insofar as there is a need of guiding those capable of being guided. For what reason, indeed, should they remain? For had he attained parinirvana as a result of Māra's entreaty, he would have attained parinirvana much earlier.

For the fact has already been stated that his being entreated by Māra at the Bodhi,maṇḍa, and his giving that sign and making that hint both had the aim of **diminishing the elder's grief** [2.1.3.1]. His giving that sign and making that hint also had the aim of demonstrating **the power of buddhas**. For these same blessed Buddhas, who are of such great majesty, in remaining, remain solely in accordance with their own inclinations, just as they also, in attaining parinirvana, attain parinirvana solely in accordance with their own inclination."

(UA 2:327,18-328,10)

While all the other commentarial passages say about the same things regarding the Buddha's relinquishing his life-formation, the last passage (UA 327 f) adds an interesting but rather deterministic detail. Dhammapāla (the author of UA) states that the Buddha decided to pass away because he knew that there would be no more of "those capable of being guided (*veneyyaka*)," in other words, no more likelihood, even possibility, of attaining arhathood. This is begging the question: if the Buddha had lived on, he would be able to inspire many to be guided! Or is Dhammapāla suggesting that the Buddha would teach them only if they are guidable—that the Buddha lacked the ability to convince or convert others if he tried?

3 Comparative study: Pali and Sanskrit sources

3.1 THE MAHĀPARINIRVĀNA SŪTRA (SKT)

3.1.1 Āyu, jīvita and saṅkhāra

3.1.1.1 AN Yang Gyu (2005:88 passim) has rendered *āyu,kappa* as “lifespan” and *āyu,saṅkhāra* as “life-impetus” (2005:94 f); however, I have retained the rendering of *āyu,saṅkhāra* as “life-formation,” which I have used in my older translations. *Jīvita* is “life,” that is, the duration lived or liveable. What we usually mean by “life” here is *jīvita,saṅkhāra*, the “life-force,” by which life is propelled which, when interrupted (such as during sleep or unconsciousness), is stabilised by making a link. The Abhidhamma says that this link is established by the surfacing of the latent life-continuum (*bhav’āṅga*) during the lapse of consciousness.⁵⁰

Saṅkhāra (Skt *saṃskāra*), “formation, force or volition” (including plurals), acts as fuel for the individual’s continuing existence. Formations are embedded in the psychological nature of beings, in their desire for survival and continued existence. In its broadest sense, *jīvita,saṅkhāra* comprises both the life lived so far plus the life-potential yet to be lived. This is how the *saṅkhāra* is used with *āyu,saṅkhāra* (lifespan force) and *jīvita,saṅkhāra* (life-force) [above]. A rule of thumb is that *āyu,saṅkhāra* is the dynamics of life; *jīvita,saṅkhāra* is the mechanics of life.⁵¹

The terminology here is far from perfect. However, the main word we will be using is actually life-formation (*āyu,saṅkhāra*); the other terms, however they are rendered, will work naturally according to their respective contexts.

3.1.1.2 The account of the Buddha’s rejection of his life-formation (*āyu,saṅkhāra*) is preserved in almost identical terms in both the Pali and Sanskrit versions of the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta. **The Sanskrit version**, however, has a few points of interest not found in the Pali. There it is said that before rejecting his life-formation (*āyuh-saṃskāra*),⁵² the Buddha thought that there were only two persons, namely, Supriya the King of the Gandharvas and Subhadra the wanderer,⁵³ who would be taught by the Buddha himself at their attaining maturity of insight within a period of 3 months. Thinking thus, the Buddha attained *samādhi*, by which he mastered the life (*jīvita*) and rejected the predetermined forces of ageing (*āyuh*) that is, the existing life-force.⁵⁴ We can find no support for this novel story in any of the Pali texts.

3.1.2 Controversies

The Sarvāstivādins, on the basis of this passage, hold that the life of **3 months** was indeed to be an extension of life. The Buddha prolonged his life for only this short period: there was no purpose in

⁵⁰ On *bhavāṅga*, see SD 17.8a (6.1); SD 32.1 (3.8); SD 48.1 (9.2.1.3).

⁵¹ See Sue Hamilton, *Identity and Experience*, London 1996:78. Cf Divy 203.

⁵² On the Māhāyāna view of karma, esp the role of *jīvita* or *āyu,saṃskārah*, see (3.1.3.1).

⁵³ The Pali does not mention Supriya (Suppiya) but does mention Subhadra (ie, Subhadda) at D 16,5.23-32 + SD 9 (9.5).

⁵⁴ *Yannv ahaṃ tadrūpān ṛddhyabhisamkārān abhisamkuryām yathā samāhite citte jīvitasamkārān adhiṣṭhāyāyuh-samkārān utsrjeyam*. Waldschmidt, *Mahāparinirvāna-sūtra* 16.13, 1950:210. Also Divy 203. There’s no Pali parallel of this passage. [Archive] Note: Such Skt passages are from Jaini 1958, with a minor editing and updating of sources.

prolonging it, as the two new converts mentioned above would have become his disciples by that time. Moreover, the Buddha must have done this to show his control over the forces of life and death.⁵⁵

Thus, **the life-extension episode** of the Buddha in the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta and the Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra became a source for several controversies among the Buddhists. The Sthaviravādins (mainstream “elders,” Skt *sthavira*, P *thera*; early ancestors of the Theravāda) and the Sarvāstivādins agreed on the various powers of the Buddha. The prolongation of the lifespan was indeed a splendid miracle, which they would gladly have attributed to him.

When the Pali Commentators (*aṭṭhakathācariya*) and the Sanskrit Abhidharma masters (*vibhāṣā-saṣṭrī*) set about explaining this text-passage, they were confronted with various doctrinal difficulties. The main question was: how to account for the Buddha's new life and how to reconcile it with the accepted teachings on karma?

3.1.3 Karma

3.1.3.1 According to the Mahāyāna teaching on **karma**, the lifespan of any single existence (*nikāya-sabhāga*) is determined by the individual's karma at the moment of his conception (*pratisam̐dhi*, “relinking”). This is illustrated by the analogy of an arrow. The destiny of an arrow and the time it will take to reach its destination are determined at the moment of its shooting. Similarly, karma determines the lifespan of the individual (that is, by way of the 5 aggregates) at the moment of his conception.

Further, in Māhāyāna, *jīvita* or *āyu,saṁskārah* is described as “a force which at the time of birth forecasts the moment of death, just as the force with which an arrow is discharged forecasts the moment when it will fall down.”⁵⁶ This seems deterministic, unless we accept the possibility of some force or condition (like rain hitting the arrow, or another arrow shot at it) changing its course.

3.1.3.2 Karma, in Mahāyāna, generates a force (*saṁskāra*) known as *āyu*, which keeps the series of the 5 aggregates intact for a certain period. When this particular force is exhausted, we call it *āyuh-kṣaya*, “life-termination” or death. It is therefore maintained that *āyuh* is a karmic fruit (*vipāka*), a result of some past karma. If the phenomenon of life-prolongation is accepted, we have to account for a new life-force. This, as suggested by the Buddha's declaration, is possible by assuming that the yogic powers (*ṛddhi*) (mastery of the will through meditation) produce such a *new* life-force. Thus, it seems, we find 2 kinds of life, the original one generated by the karma and the other by yogic powers!

There is thus a significant difference between the Mahāyāna view of karma—as deterministic (such as suggested by the common Chinese term 缘分 *yuán fèn* (chance, fate, predestination)—and the early Buddhist teaching and Dharma-based view as “volition or formative action” that can or must occur even now, as in the case of right effort. This present force, properly, wholesomely and habitually generated, can change our situation, even our destiny.

3.2 THE DEFENCES OF THE STHAVIRAS

3.2.1 Āyu,kappa

3.2.1.1 The Sthaviravādins not only rejected the Mahāyāna interpretations of *kappa*, *āyu* and so on, but were careful to interpret the Buddha's statement in D 16 [2.1.2.1] without violating his teaching on

⁵⁵ *Marana,vaśitva,jñāpanārtham ... traimāsyam eva nordhvam vineyakāryābhāvāt ...* . Yaśomitra, *Abhidharma-kośa-vyākhyā* (Dwarikadas 1998:44.14-16; Wogihara & Karshim 1932-36:105; Tib 96a).

⁵⁶ Stcherbatsky, *The Central Conception of Buddhism*, London: Royal Asiatic Soc, 1923:105.

karma. If we accept the idea that meditative (or any kind of) power is able to generate *new life* or extend it to the whole *world-period*, it would go against the textual teaching on karma.

Hence, the Sthaviravadins took *kappa* in the Sutta passage not to mean a *mahā,kappa* or aeon but as *āyu,kappa*, that is, the “lifespan or age” of human life (how old we *are*). The possible length of normal human life, that is, the liveable duration, is called *jīvita,kappa* or the average “life” of a human; this includes the current life lived plus the possible liveable life to come (how old we *can be*). [3.1.1]

The Pali texts, as a rule, take *āyu* (“age”) and *jīvita* (“life”) as synonyms; hence, it does not distinguish between *āyu,kappa* and *jīvita,kappa*. The two terms are used interchangeably, or *āyu,saṅkhāra* is used or meant as a rule. As a rule, we often see very little technical discrimination over such worldly terminology which tends to be more elaborate in the Commentaries and in the later writings. [3.1.1.1]

3.2.1.2 Now the *āyu,kappa* [3.1.1] is considered as the average lifespan of a human being here. It is, as the Buddha himself said (in a different context), “a hundred years, more or less.”⁵⁷ Since the Buddha had reached his normal limit (80 years), he did live for a *kappa* but renounced the rest of the *jīvita,kappa* (that is, his possible lifespan up to 120 or so years). The matter of the world-period (*mahā,kappa*) naturally does not factor here at all.

3.2.1.3 The Sthaviravādins were aware of the doctrinal difficulties involved in this belief. Indeed, in **the Kathā,vatthu**, where for the first time we see this controversy, the Sthaviravādins argue against the Mahāsaṅghika’s claim that the Buddha could have lived for a *mahā,kappa*. The main argument is that the new lifespan (*āyu*), the new destiny (*gati*), the acquisition of a new individuality is a result of yogic power.⁵⁸ The Mahāsaṅghika cannot affirm this, for it is committed to the theory that the *āyu* is a *kamma,vipāka*, not a result of yogic power.

Buddhaghosa, in his commentary on this controversial passage in the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta (D 16), maintains that the *kappa* here means only “lifespan” (*āyu,kappa*).⁵⁹ He further explains that a person like the Buddha, or anyone having mastery over the bases of success (*iddhipāda*), can avert any obstructions to life, whereas others are not able to do so. When, therefore, the Buddha claims that he can live for a *kappa*, what this really means is that he has the power to avert any premature or untimely death.⁶⁰

3.2.2 Commentarial explanations

3.2.2.1 The Pali texts, however, make no suggestion at all that the Buddha extended his life even for a short period of 3 months; this was a novel belief of the Sarvāstivādins. The Milinda,pañha, too, notes that the “3 months’ limit”—the Buddha simply lived this period; it is not an extension—and that *āyu*,

⁵⁷ *Ettha ca kappan ti āyukappam, tasmim tasmim kale yam manussānam āyu-p,pamānam hoti tam paripuṇṇam karonto tiṭṭheyya, kappāvasesan ti: ‘appam vā hiyyo ti vutta,vassa,satato atirekam vā* (DA2:554).

⁵⁸ *Iddhi,balena samannāgato kappam tiṭṭheyyā ‘ti? āmantā. Iddhi,mayiko so ayu, ... sā gati ... so atta,bhava,paṭi-lābho ti? na h’evam vattabbe ...* . Kathā,vatthu 11.5.

⁵⁹ The current human lifespan (during the Buddha’s time) is said to be 120 years. According to Buddhist cosmology, the human lifespan evolves between a minimum of 10 years to as long as 80,000 years: **Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda S** (D 26,14-23), SD 36.10; **Mahā’padāna S** (D 14,1.7-1.16/2:3-11), SD 49.8. Mythical humans (such as Makha,deva and his lineage down to Nimi) lived over 3 x 84,000 years); **Makha,deva S** (M 83,6+9+11+19), SD 60.8.

⁶⁰ “But what here distinguishes one who has psychic power? Is it not that even one who has no such power might live on for a world cycle?” This is the distinction: one who has this power, can, by it ... avert ... an untimely death. One without psychic power cannot so avert.” (*Ko pan’ettha iddhimato viseso, nanu aniddhimā pi āyu,kappam tiṭṭheyyā ti? ayam viseso, iddhimā hi ... akāla,marañam nivāretum sakhoti, aniddhimato etam balaṃ n’atthi.* KvuA 11.5/131 f).

kappa is simply his “lived” life⁶¹ [2.1.2.1]. There may, however, be exceptions, where even the Theravādins come up with a bizarre view, as noted by Buddhaghosa.

In the commentary on the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, **Buddhaghosa** mentions the view of an elder, Mahāsiva Thera.⁶² This elder maintained that the Buddha does not utter “the impossible” (*aṭṭhāne*): since the Buddha had suppressed the deadly pains for 10 months at Bejuva, “so he should be able to continue to live on in this fortunate (or auspicious) aeon⁶³” (*imam bhadda, kappam eva tiṭṭheyya*) by his psychic powers.

But he did not live on because the physical body is subject to the laws of decay (like the teeth decaying), and the Buddhas pass away without showing any severe effects of it. Moreover, all his chief disciples would have attained parinirvana by that time, and the Buddha living to the end of the *kappa* would have been left with a poor following of novices! (DA 554 f)

3.2.2.2 This remark sounds sadly modern. It sounds almost like a morally virtuous version of Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray* (1891)! The reality is that throughout human history, no human is historically known to have lived for a world-period (one who's still alive today). Buddhaghosa rightly dismisses this view without any comment and simply states that according to the Commentaries, the *kappa* here means only the *āyu, kappa*, not the *mahā, kappa*. (DA 2:554 f)

3.2.3 The Vinaya Culla, vagga account

3.2.3.1 These commentarial explanations do not seem to take notice of a Vinaya passage. In **the Culla, vagga** ch 9, the section dealing with the 1st council presided over by Mahā Kassapa, who censured Ānanda for his failure to request the Buddha to live on for the world-period (*kappa*) (the 4th sangha-act against Ānanda), it is recorded:

*Idam pi te āvuso ānanda dukkaṭaṃ
yaṃ tvaṃ bhagavatā oḷārike nimitte
kayiramāne oḷārike obhāse kayiramāne
na bhagavantam yāci: tiṭṭhatu bhagavā
kappam tiṭṭhatu sugato kappam*

“This too is an offence of wrong-doing for you,⁶⁴ avuso Ānanda, in that you, (although) a broad hint was given, a clear sign being made, did not ask the Blessed One to remain for the *kappa*,⁶⁵ **let the well-farer remain for the lifespan** for the welfare of the

⁶¹ “... or for the remainder of the lifespan. And the limit of 3 months was spoken of. But this *kappa* is said to be the lived (*āyu*) lifespan. And maharajah that psychic power of the Blessed One exists ... The Blessed One, maharajah, has no desire for all becomings.” (*kappâvasesam vā ti. te. māsa, paricchedo ca bhāṇito. so ca pana kappo āyu, kappo vuccati. vijjati ca taṃ mahārāja iddhi, balam bhagavato anattiko mahārāja bhagavā sabba, bhāvehi ...*, Miln 141 f). Jaini, in his “Buddha's prolongation of life,” 1958:549, seems to have misread this passage, prob due to accepting Horner's mistr of *kappa* there as “full lifespan” instead of “(lived) lifespan.”

⁶² There are a number of elders named Mahāsiva [DPPN sv], such as Gāmanta, pabbha, vāsī Mahāsiva Thera who lived in Sri Lanka during King Duṭṭhagāmanī Abhaya's reign (161-137 BCE) and Dīgha, bhāṇaka Tipiṭaka Mahāsiva, Thera (also called Dīgha, bhāṇaka Mahāsiva Thera, Tipiṭaka Mahāsiva Thera, or simply Mahāsiva Thera), who lived during King Vasabha's time (CE 65-109) (Sodo MORI, “Mahāsivatthera as seen in the Aṭṭhakathas,” *Sri Lanka J of Buddhist Studies* 1, 1987:124). Prob the 2nd is meant here (AN Y G 2003:89 n7). Although Buddhaghosa quotes him, sometimes he prefers the Aṭṭhakathā views than that of the Thera (eg DA 2:543; DhsA 266).

⁶³ “Fortunate aeon” (*bhadda, kappam*) refers to our world-cycle, one of 5 “filled aeons” (ie, not empty,” *asuñña, kappas*), and during which one or more buddhas arise (BA 191; DA 2:411). The 5 buddhas of this aeon are Kakusan-dha, Konāgamana, Kassapa, Gotama (our Buddha), and Metteyya (the next buddha). On the 5 buddhas, see SD 36.2 (3.1.2.1).

⁶⁴ Cf A 8.70/4:309 f; D 16,3-4-3.6/2:103, 113, 115; S 51.10/5:259; U 6.1/62.

⁶⁵ Comys call it “lifespan” (*ayu, kappa*), and say whatever is the length of human life at this and that time, bringing that to the full, let him remain (AA 4:149= SA 3:251 = UA 323).

*bahu.jana,hitāya bahu.jana,sukhāya
lokānukampāya atthāya hitāya sukhāya
deva,manussān ti. desehi taṃ dukkaṭan ti.*

many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, the welfare, the happiness of devas and humans. Confess to [Show] that offence of wrong-doing.”

Cv 11.1.10 (V 2:289,16-21)

Ānanda’s response was, “Bhante, at that time, my mind was so possessed by Māra that I did not beseech the Blessed One ... “ (*ahaṃ kho bhante pariyuṭṭhita,citto na bhagavantam yācim*). I do not see that as an offence of wrong-doing (*dukkata*), yet out of faith in the venerable ones, I confess to that as an offence of wrong-doing.” (*nāhaṃ tam dukkaṭam passāmi, api cāyasmantānam saddhāya desemi taṃ dukkaṭan ti*).

The commentary on the Culla,vagga, however, makes no mention of this incident at all.

3.2.3.2 The above legalistic passage has been reproduced to show the significance of sangha act (*saṅgha,kamma*). In an important way, the matter has to be brought up so that the decision of the sangha elders is clear on it. Ānanda could not have given a better answer, considering that while sitting with the Buddha, Māra appeared to Ānanda. Hence, it was not Ānanda’s mistake, but, in his deep humility and faith in the sangha, he accepted it as a “wrong-doing” (that is, he could have done it rightly, given a choice). This serves as a very good example for the monastics to “keep faith in the sangha,” even on issues of mere technicalities, so that their **faith** will keep the sangha strong and the community, ordained and lay as a whole, united in faith.⁶⁶

Technically, it may be argued that surely if *kappa* meant only an *āyu,kappa* (a lifespan), and if the power of the Buddha was only limited to avert any premature death, there was no point in censuring Ānanda for his lapse in the first place. Still, it is clear from the records of early Buddhism that there is no reference made by the Buddha regarding extending his life for the whole world-period. Common-sense-wise, it goes without saying!

4 The views of some Sanskrit masters

4.1 VAIBHĀṢIKA VIEWS

4.1.1 The Buddha’s prolongation of his lifespan

4.1.1.1 The Pali commentaries are silent on the manner in which the life-force is rejected or is prolonged. This topic is only fully discussed in the works of **the Sarvāstivāda**. Vasubandhu, in his *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣyā* (ch 2, the indriyas), gives several Vaibhāṣika views on this topic.⁶⁷ He tells us that according to the *Vibhāṣā-śāstra*, karma is of 2 kinds, that is:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| (1) <i>āyur-vipāka-karma</i> | the karma which at the moment of conception determines the <i>āyuh</i> ; |
| (2) <i>bhoga-vipāka-karma</i> | a sum total of all past karmas in the series of consciousness, which continuously yields its fruits (other than <i>āyuh</i>) during samsaric existence. |

⁶⁶ During the early 21st-century socially engaged forest monk, Brahmavamso, was excommunicated by the sangha of the head monastery, Wat Pah Pong, NE Thailand. It would have been for our happiness and welfare if he had followed Ānanda’s example of humility and faith in the sangha: SD 1.9 (8-10).

⁶⁷ L de la Vallée Poussin, *L’Abhidharma-kośa de Vasubandhu*, ch 2, kā 10; Eng tr Abhk:Pr 1:167 f.

According to the Vaibhāsikas, the human arhat, having full mastery over the *rddhipādas*, can, by his strong resolution, transform the *bhoga-vipāka* karma into an *āyur-vipāka-karma*. This transformed karma then produces the new *āyu*. If he wishes to reject his already established lifespan (*āyuh-saṁskāra*), he transforms his *āyur-vipāka-karma* into the *bhoga-vipāka-karma*.

4.1.1.2 This explanation is unsatisfactory because, at the time when the *āyu* is rejected, the *āyur-vipāka-karma* is no longer potentially existent since it has already fruited. Therefore, some teachers held different views, that is, the karmas of the past birth, as yet unripe, are ripened and made to yield their fruit by the power of meditation. The difficulty here is that in the case of an arhat, there is no possibility of any new potential *āyur-vipāka-karma* since, at the attainment of arhathood, he has ceased rebirth. In all these explanations, we can see a sustained but unsuccessful attempt to relate the new (that is, the prolonged *āyu* to some form of karma).

4.1.2 Ghoṣaka

Vasubandhu further says that the Tocharian **Ghoṣaka** (2nd cent CE), a Vaibhāsika master, goes a step further. He holds that an altogether new body consisting of the material elements (*mahā-bhūtāni*) of the form world (*rūpa-loka*) is produced by the yogic powers and can live for a *kalpa*. We can see here an allusion to the Buddha's Assumed (or Projected) Body (*nirmāṇa-kāya*, a Mahāyāna notion). We are, however, not told here how such a body can continue to exist when the original body has ceased at the end of the *āyu*.

4.2 VASUBANDHU CRITICIZED

Vasubandhu, after giving the above views on the Vaibhāsikas and on Ghoṣaka, gives his own. He says that such an arhat has yogic powers with which he can cut short or put aside the lifespan cast by past karma and produce a new lifespan by the sole power of his meditation. Consequently, this new life-force would be a result of samadhi and not of karma. This view takes us back to the controversy raised in the Kathāvatthu. Vasubandhu's view is identical with the Mahāsaṅghika view condemned by the Sthaviravādins as contrary to the laws of karma.

This unorthodox view of Vasubandhu is severely criticised in a 5th century CE work known as **the Abhidharma-dīpa**,⁶⁸ representing the orthodox Vaibhāsika school. The work's autocommentary labels this view unbuddhistic, reaffirms the doctrine of karma, and accuses the Kośakāra⁶⁹ of entering the portals of Mahāyāna Buddhism:

"For surely, if the Blessed One, by the powers of meditation, could at will produce a new living personality or could create a new lifespan independent of karma, then indeed, the Buddha would be turned into a Nārāyaṇa.⁷⁰ Moreover, he would never attain parinirvāna, such being his compassion for worldly

⁶⁸ The urtext of this work was discovered in Tibet by Pandit Rahula Sankrtyayana in 1937; ed P S Jain, *Abhidharma-dīpa with Vibhāṣāprabhāvṛtti*, Patna: Tibetan Sanskrit Works 4, K P Jayaswal Research Institute, 2nd ed 1977. [JainFoundation]

⁶⁹ *Kośa, kāra*, "the Kośa creator," ie, the author/s of the Abhidharmakośa and its related works; it has been theorized that there are 2 Vasubandhus. See M Kapstein, "Who wrote the Trisvabhāvanirdeśa?" *J of Indian Philosophy* 46,2 2018:3 f. <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02503277/document>.

⁷⁰ One of the forms and epithets of Vishnu (the Hindu God of preservation) in the triumvirate of Brahmā (creator), Viṣṇu and Śiva (destroyer).

beings. Therefore, this view deserves no consideration (as the Kośakāra here is) following the Vaitulikaśāstra⁷¹ [*vaitulya*].⁷² (Abhdī:Jaini 101)

5 Mahāyāna developments

5.1 DOCETIC BUDDHISM

5.1.1 Buddha Avatars

The Abhidharma-dīpa autocommentator's critical remark [4.2] is vitally significant. It anticipates the development of **the *avatāravāda***—the docetic doctrine of “descents” or emanations of *nirmāṇa-kāya* Buddhas from some kind of Ādi-buddha, Original Buddha—in Mahāyāna Buddhism and reasserts the orthodox theory of the human Buddha. It also points to the Mahāyānist origins of the belief in the Buddha's power of prolonging his lifespan [5.2.1]. We have already seen that the Kathāvatthu [3.2.1.3] attributes this belief to the Mahāsaṅghikas, the forerunners of the Mahāyāna, who were the first to fall away from the orthodox stream.

5.1.2 Buddha as God

The Mahāvastu, a Vinaya text of the Lokottaravādins, a branch of the Mahāsaṅghika, contains the earliest reference to the doctrine of the supermundane (*lokottara*) Buddha. It is said there that the Buddhas are not subject to the effects of old age. Nor are they subject to the laws of karma. The following verse (Mvst 1:169) seems to refer to the belief in the Buddha's power of life prolongation and yet his passing away as a human being :

*prabhūś ca karma vārayitum karmaṃ deśayanti ca jinā
aiśvaryaṃ vinigūhanti eṣā lokānuvartanā.*⁷³

The Pali commentators and the Sanskrit Abhidharmikas had to account for the laws of karma, which even the Buddhas could not escape. Hence their argument that the Buddha wished to pass away while his body was still unaffected by old age. The Lokottaravadins placed the Buddha above the laws of karma and thus paved the way for the Mahāyānist doctrine of a Transcendent Buddha, Buddha as God.

5.2 THE ONE BUDDHA AND THE ALMIGHTY BUDDHAS

5.2.1 The Buddha of Immeasurable Life

⁷¹ A name used in **Abhidharma, dīpa** (“lamp of Abhidharma,” 450-550 CE) to allude to a Mahāyāna devotee or sympathizer. A Skt Abhidharma treatise written anonymously, by one Dīpa, kāra (“writer of the Dīpa,” prob Vimalamitra). The work itself is in verse (*kārikā*) with an autocommentary (prob by the same author) who borrows freely from Abhidharmakośa but criticizes Vasubandhu (whom he calls *kośa, kāra*) for his Sautrāntika tendencies. Its concern is a systematic Abhidharma and a strong polemic defence of Sarvāstivāda.

⁷² *tathāpi tu yuktimaduttaramucyate | yadi bhagavān samādhībalena svecchayāpūrvam sattvaṃ savijñānakam sendriyamutpādayet, svātmano vā jīvitamanākṣiptam prākkarmabhīryogabalenākṣipet, tato buddho bhagavān-nārāyaṇīkṛtaḥ syāt apūrvasattvanirmāṇāt | sa ca kāruṇikatvānneva parinirvāyāt, śāsanasambhedasamdehaṃśca cchindyāt | tasmādvaitulikaśāstrapraveśadvāramārabdham tenabhadantenetyadhyupekṣametāt |*

⁷³ “Although they could suppress the working of karma, the Conquerors let it become manifest and conceal their sovereign power. This is mere conformity with the world” (tr J J Jones, Mvst 1:133). For other similar doctrines of the Lokottaravādins, see J Masuda, “Origin and doctrines of early Indian Buddhist schools,” Leipzig: Verlag der Asia Major, 1925.

5.2.1.1 Once the supremacy of the Buddha over the laws of karma was accepted, there remained no great difficulty in assuming a limitless life, even immortality, and limitless power, even almightiness (omnipotence), for the Buddha. The best known amongst such Sutras are three that form a triad, all called Sukhāvati Sūtra, that is, the Longer (or Larger) Sukhāvati-vyūha Sūtra, the Shorter Sukhāvati-vyūha Sūtra (better known as the Amitābha Sūtra) and the Guan Wuliangshou Jing (*Amitāyurdhyāna Sutra).⁷⁴ These 3 sutras are the key devotional texts of the Pure Land traditions that started and flourished in East Asia.

Both the Longer and the Shorter Sukhāvati-vyūha Sūtras were written around the 3rd century CE. Considering their popularity in East Asia, it is likely that they were composed in China or Central Asia. The Longer Sutra is extant in Sanskrit, Tibetan, Khotanese, Uighur and Xixia, and is likely to have been composed in Central Asia.

5.2.1.2 The Larger Sukhāvati-vyūha opens with a familiar but far more dramatized claim of the Buddha.⁷⁵ “If the Tathagata wished, O Ananda, he could live for a whole kalpa on one [morsel of] alms-gift, or for a hundred kalpas, or for a thousand kalpas, or for a hundred thousand kalpas, to a hundred thousand nayutas of kotis of kalpas, nay, he could live beyond, and yet the faculties of the Tathagata would not perish, the color of his face would not be altered, nor would the color of his skin be injured.”⁷⁶

5.2.1.3 The Larger Sukhāvati-vyūha Sūtra is indeed devoted solely to highlight this one aspect, clearly evident in the glorified conception of the Buddha **Amitāyus** (無量壽 *wú liàng shòu*), the Buddha (or Bodhisattva) of Immeasurable Life, that is, the Eternal Buddha. Originally identical with Amitābha, he evolved into his own, especially with Tantric Buddhists. He is often depicted as a Bodhisattva, decked in princely finery, holding a vial (*kalāśa*) of ambrosia (representing eternal life). His colour is red, signifying the west (the setting sun). We see here the rise in symbolism and magic as this form of Buddhism becomes more ritualised and externalised.

As **Amitābha**, he has his own Paradise or Buddha-field (*buddha-kṣetra*), Sukhāvati, located in the West, that is, west of China, from where India is regarded as the “holy land,” and pilgrims famously “go west” to gather scriptures or to visit the holy places. Sukhāvati is visualized in the form of a *maṇḍala*, a meditative psychocosmogram. Merely but habitually reciting the name “Amitābha” (in any language) promises one rebirth in Sukhāvati for eternal bliss. Nirvana is now reachable by a mere word.

5.2.2 Philosophy of Emptiness

5.2.2.1 The rise of the absolutist schools like **the Śūnyavāda** brought an even greater revolution. Here, the Buddha was considered not only a supermundane Person, but the very essence of phenomena, comparable to the Godhead of the Hindu religion. The theological conception of the **trikāya** (“three bodies”) of the Buddha is explained on the basis of this doctrine. It led to the doctrine of the identity of samsara and nirvana.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Briefly *Guan Jing* (“Visualization Scripture”); it has neither Skt nor Tib recension; Uighur versions exist but are trs of Chin version. It shows specific Chin influences, such as refs to earlier Chin trs of Pure Land materials and other visualization sutras. All this suggests that it is likely to be an indigenous Chin composition.

⁷⁵ *Akaṁkṣann ānanda, tathāgata eka-piṇḍapātena kalpaṁ va tiṣṭhet, kalpaśatam vā, ... tato vottari tiṣṭhet, na ca tathāgatasendriyāṇy upanaśyeyur na mukhavarnānyānyathātvaṁ bhaven nāpi chavivarṇa upahanyeta. Sukhāvati-vyūha* (ed Müller & Nanjio, Anecdota Oxoniensia, Aryan ser 1,2), 1883:4; Vaidya 1961:222.

⁷⁶ <https://huntingtonarchive.org/resources/downloads/sutras/04amitabhaPureland/SV%20Long.doc.pdf>.

⁷⁷ For a close study, see T R V Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, London, 1955:284 ff.

Theologically, this is a very inviting idea—to imagine that Buddha and Māra are one and the same! It is a good place to start a discussion on Māra: “I” is Māra, “me” is Māra, “mine” is Māra. This makes good sense in terms of early Buddhism: the primary defilement and fetter is that of self-identity view. The danger comes when we philosophize it all and end up with bad spiritual grammar, saying, “I *am* Māra.” True as this may be, it is only virtual reality.

5.2.2.2 The statements in the Prājñāpāramitā texts or the Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra,⁷⁸ such as that “the Buddha never attained nirvana,” are to be understood in the background of this philosophical development. The historical or human Buddha of the Hīnayāna was considered by the Emptiness masters and their followers here, as one of the many incarnations of the Absolute (Eternal) Buddha, his descent on earth in the *nirmāṇa-kāya* or Assumed body. It’s for our benefit, of course, whether we like it or not. Dharma has become Theology.

5.2.2.3 In this amazing inner journey of words and thoughts, we started by examining the belief in the Buddha’s power of **prolongation of his lifespan**. Gradually, this belief led some Buddhists to attribute to him powers that he had himself neither spoken of nor suggested. In time, such imaginings and hopings led to a more theistic conception of the Buddha with immeasurable life and to further apotheosis until we have the Transcendent and Immanent Buddhas.⁷⁹

— end —

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⁷⁸ *Nirvāṇabhūmiṃ cupadarśayāmi vinayārthasattvāmi vadamy upāyarn na cāpi nirvāmy ahu tasmi kāle ihaiva co dharmu prākāśayāmi*. Ch 15.3 (*Tathāgatāyuspramāṇaparivartaḥ*), p 323; Vaidya 193. Also cf *Na buddhaḥ parinirvāti dharmo'ntarhiyate na ca, sattvānam paripākāya nirvāṇam tūpadarśayet*. (Qu in *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* [Haribhadra’s comy on Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra], p 132.) For several views on this topic, see (tr) E Obermiller, *History of Buddhism by Bu-ston* 2:67 ff.

⁷⁹ See “Cosmic Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and Buddhist theism,” see SD 36.2 (7).