

The *Parinirvāṇa* of Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī and Her Followers in the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*

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Here I study the *parinirvāṇa* of Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī and her five hundred *bhikṣuṇī* companions as transmitted in the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*(s).¹ This is the first part of a study, the second of which will take up the description in the same texts of the funeral of Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī and her following.²

The story is related in the *Kṣudrakavastu* extant in Tibetan and Chinese translation. The Tibetan translation (*'dul ba lung phran tshogs*, D/Tōhoku 6) is attributed to Vidyākaraprabha, Dharmasribhadra and dPal 'gyor, who were active in the early ninth century. The Chinese translation (根本說一切有部毘奈耶雜事, T 1451) was carried out by Yijing (義淨) in the early eighth century.

A direct Sanskrit source or parallel is not available, with the exception of a few words in three relatively small fragments from the Northern Silk Route site of Šorčuq (now in the Turfan-Fund) that contain lines of text belonging to this narrative. The provenance of this manuscript material makes it almost certain that the text is of Sarvāstivāda or Mūlasarvāstivāda affiliation. The fragments are datable, on palaeographic grounds, to a period from the ninth century onwards.³

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¹ For a study of the *Ekottarika-āgama* account of the same event cf. Anālayo (2015).

² Dhammadinnā (2016).

³ The fragments were identified by Peter Skilling (private communication to Jens-Uwe Hartmann and Klaus Wille, April 20, 1999; Skilling informed me

As recent progress in scholarship is increasingly indicating, the lines of transmission of the two Indic Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* traditions as preserved in the Tibetan and Chinese translations are closely connected but by no means identical.⁴ Reading the short translated excerpts from these two versions gives a direct sample of the overall similarity as well as of variations. It goes without saying that, in some cases, stylistic features and other choices may well pertain to the translation level rather than to the original texts themselves.

The story of the *parinirvāṇa* of Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī and her five hundred *bhikṣuṇī* companions was popular, widely transmitted, and existed in multiple versions.⁵ To assess the relationship between all the extant versions falls well beyond the scope of my present contribution. For this reason, in the footnotes,

of his identification on December 4, 2014) and are published as SHT III 994b–d, ed. Clawiter and Sander-Holzmann (1971: 255–256, with facsimiles in plate 96). The script is classified by the editors as North Turkestan Brāhmī (Nordturkestanische Brāhmī), sub-type b, alphabet u, on whose dating cf. Sander (1968: 186) and Sander (2005: 135 table 1). Fragment SHT III 994b, A1ult, (sam)yak(sa)mb(u)ddhāvand(i)[ta]vyā ta[th]ā, corresponds to an earlier part of the story that I do not translate in this article, cf. D 6, 'dul ba, tha 111a1ult [= Si-K 6, vol. 10, 'dul ba, tha 278,15ult] and Q 1035, 'dul ba, de 106a8ult: *yang dag par rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas la ni de ltar phyag mi bya ste*. Fragment SHT III 994c must belong to the same text, clearly to the section with the exchange between Gautamī and the Buddha, but I am unsure where to place it precisely vis-à-vis the Tibetan and Chinese versions.

⁴ For an up-to-date overview of the corpus of *Vinaya* texts identified as Mūlasarvāstivāda see Kishino (2013: 6–24) and the bibliographical survey of the extant Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* materials in the Gilgit manuscripts in Clarke (2014b: 16–45). On an at least twofold rather than single Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* tradition cf. also, e.g., Silk (2008: 113–114) note 44, Martini (2012a: 440–441), Emms (2012) and Clarke (2014a: 224–225 note 138).

⁵ On the various versions cf. Anālayo (2015: 8 with note 16). For a recent multilingual translation of the version in the Pali *Apadāna* including Thai, Mon, Burmese, Lao, Lanna etc. renderings see Peltier (2010). The story of Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī's *parinirvāṇa* does not seem to be represented in early Indian (nor Central Asian) Buddhist art, where she seems also not to be depicted at all as a figure. A possible but unconfirmed identification is published in Zwalf (1996: I.187–189 and II.126 figures 206 and 207); cf. also Anālayo (2014a: 75 figure 2.2). Occasionally one of the attendant figures in the series of the Buddha's birth has been identified as the Buddha's foster mother; e.g., Bawa (2013: 136 with note 82 on p. 196).

for the most part I record only substantial variations between the Tibetan and Chinese Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* versions.⁶

I conclude with a few observations on the specific characteristics, content-wise, of the narrative concerning the nuns' *parinirvāṇa* in the Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition taken on its own literary terms, attempting to understand what its contents may have intended to communicate. I will then complete the appraisal of the narrative by taking the *parinirvāṇa*'s aftermath into account in the second part of my study presently under preparation.

The *Parinirvāṇa* of Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī and Her Followers: Translation of the Tibetan Version⁷

Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī reflected: “The Blessed One praises a harmonious monastic community. I should enter *parinirvāṇa* while the Blessed One is still living and the community of *bhikṣus* is [still] harmonious.”⁸ With such a thought in mind, she rose from

⁶ A monograph including editions and translations of the two versions individually translated into Chinese (T 144 and T 145) is under preparation by Jan Nattier (according to her findings, T 145 is not a separate translation, but a free polished revision of the first; Nattier's personal communication, December 5, 2014).

⁷ The section translated here goes from D 6, 'dul ba, tha 111a6 to 113a1 [= Si-K 6, vol. 10, 'dul ba, tha 279,14 to 283,12] and P 1035, 'dul ba, de 106b6 to 108a7 (the references within square brackets in my translation are to the Derge edition). The entire narrative is found at D 6, 'dul ba, tha 110a6–113b5 [= Si-K 6, vol. 10, 'dul ba, tha 277,3–285,18, with notes on pp. 805–806] and P 1035, 'dul ba, de 105b8–109a1. For a summary see Panglung (1981: 175); for recent discussions and partial translations see Finnegan (2009: 233–236 and 240), Bass (2013: 89–93) and Karma (2013: 65–67).

⁸ Throughout, the Tibetan text alternates renderings of *parinirvāṇa* (*yongs su mya ngan las 'da' ba*) and *nirvāṇa* (*mya ngan las 'da' ba*) without suggesting any distinction in status; I maintain the variations in my translation. The Chinese version shows a similar pattern; cf. note 20 below. Notably, neither the Tibetan nor the Chinese say anything explicitly about Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī's not wishing to witness the *parinirvāṇa* of the Buddha (and of his disciples in some versions of the story), as related in the *Ekottarika-āgama* (EĀ 52.1 at T II 821c2) and in other traditions; cf. Anālayo (2015: 9 note 19) and my discussion below (Taking the Teacher's Leave, Taking the Saṅgha's Leave). Her wish to pass away, however, seems obviously related to the apprehension that the Buddha would pass away soon and then the harmony of the *saṅgha* would be over, without any difference in the basic implication.

her seat and approached the Blessed One. With folded hands raised in respectful salutation, she said to the Blessed One:^[11b]

“Venerable sir, my intention is to enter *parinirvāṇa*.”⁹ She spoke like that and the Blessed One remained completely silent. For a second and a third time Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī said to the Blessed One: “Venerable sir, my intention is to enter *parinirvāṇa*.” When for a second and a third time the Blessed One remained completely silent, Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī said again to the Blessed One: “Venerable sir, my intention is to enter *parinirvāṇa*.”

[When] she had spoken like that, the Blessed One replied to Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī in this way: “Gautamī, do you say this intending to enter *nirvāṇa*?” [She said]: “I am intending to enter *nirvāṇa*, Blessed One.” “Gautamī, do you say this intending to enter *nirvāṇa*?” “I am intending to enter *nirvāṇa*, Well-Gone One.” “Gautamī, now, you are saying this intending to enter *nirvāṇa*. All compounded things (*saṃskārāḥ*) have just such a nature [i.e., the nature of being bound for cessation], Gautamī – what more can I say?”¹⁰

The five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs* also paid homage with their heads at the feet of the Blessed One and said: “Venerable sir, our

⁹ Here and throughout, the construction with the gerundive *bsams bzhin* followed by the honorific future of *yongs su mya ngan las 'da' ba* constructed with the auxiliary *tshal* (in *bdag bsams bzhin du yongs su mya ngan las 'da' bar 'tshal lo* at D 6, 'dul ba, tha 111b1 [= Si-K 6, vol. 10, 'dul ba, tha 279,19] and P 1035, 'dul ba, de 106b8 (and passim)), may point to a statement similar to **saṃcintya* (= *bsams bzhin du parinirvāṣyāmi* (= *yongs su mya ngan las 'da' bar 'tshal*) in the Sanskrit original. *saṃcintya* is a loaded term usually meaning ‘consciously’, ‘deliberately’, ‘fully willingly’ etc. Thus, rather than understanding *bsams bzhin du* in the sense of “having reflected”, I am more inclined to understand the Tibetan phrase as meaning “my intention is”, expressing a clear resolve. On the Chinese parallel cf. note 21 below.

¹⁰ The proclamation of the impermanence of all compounded things made here to Gautamī and repeated below by the Buddha and again by the venerable Ānanda to the group of *bhikṣuṇīs* is also found in the Chinese version, but the order of her visits to the senior *bhikṣus* there is different; cf. note 24 below. A similar statement recurs in the ‘permission’ to pass away the Buddha gives to Subhadra in the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* as well as in the Buddha’s response to Dravya Mallaputra’s desire to pass away recorded in a discourse in the *Samyukta-āgama*, T 1451 at T XXIV 397a10 and SĀ 1076 at T II 280b29; cf. Anālayo (2012: 154 note 4). There is no such proclamation in the *Ekottarika-āgama* version, where the Buddha remains silent throughout the nuns’ questioning; cf. EĀ 52.1 at T II 821c10.

intention, too, is to enter *parinirvāṇa*.” The Blessed One replied: “Gautamīs (*gau ta mī dag*),¹¹ do you say this intending to enter *nirvāṇa*?” [They said:] “We are intending to enter *nirvāṇa*, Blessed One.” “Gautamīs, do you say this intending to enter *nirvāṇa*?” “We are intending to enter *nirvāṇa*, Well-Gone One.” “Gautamīs, now, you are saying this intending to enter *nirvāṇa*. All compounded things have just such a nature [i.e., the nature of being bound for cessation], Gautamīs – what more can I say?”¹²

Then Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī was delighted and rejoiced in what the Blessed One had said. She paid homage with her head at the feet of the Blessed One and departed.

[Gautamī and the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs*] approached the venerable Nanda,^[112a] Aniruddha, Rāhula, and the venerable Ānanda. Having arrived, they paid homage at the feet of the venerable Ānanda, and said to the venerable Ānanda: “Venerable sir, our intention is to enter *parinirvāṇa*.”

[The venerable Ānanda replied:] “Gautamīs, do you say this intending to enter *nirvāṇa*?” [They said:] “We are intending to enter *nirvāṇa*, Venerable Ānanda.” “Gautamīs, do you say this intending to enter *nirvāṇa*?” [They said:] “We are intending to enter *nirvāṇa*, Venerable Ānanda.” “Gautamīs, now, you are saying this intending to enter *nirvāṇa*. All compounded things have just such a nature [i.e., the nature of being bound for cessation], Gautamīs – what more can I say?”

Then Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī and her retinue of five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs* paid homage with their heads at the feet of the most senior *bhikṣu*s and went back to their residence.¹³

¹¹ The Chinese parallel does not employ a corresponding form, but has the normal vocative plural of the personal pronoun, cf. T 1451 at T XXIV 248b21. On the use of the vocative of proper names taking the plural form when employed to address a group see Muldoon-Hules (2011: 32–33) and Collett and Anālayo (2014). On the position of grammarians and ritual specialists on the use of the masculine gender to incorporate the feminine and its legal and ritual implications, see Jamison (1996) and McGee (2002: 36–38).

¹² Up to the present juncture, the narrative sequence is shared by the two versions, but from now on the two storylines diverge; cf. my discussion below (Group Narratives).

¹³ “Most senior” renders *gnas brtan gnas brtan* (D 6, *'dul ba, tha* 112a3 [= Si-K 6, vol. 10, *'dul ba, tha* 281,11] and P 1035, *'dul ba, de* 107b1); this epithet is common in the Tibetan translation of the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, cf.,

Afterwards, having brought to mind the various [mental inclinations of] the three assemblies, she taught the Dharma for seven days and nights so that any of those many diverse individuals who heard it would attain great distinction.¹⁴

Then, in a wide open space, [Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī] sat cross-legged in the midst of the community of *bhikṣuṇīs*. The [other] *bhikṣuṇīs* sat in that posture as well.

Then Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī entered meditative concentration (*samādhi*) in such a way that her mind was firmly established. She disappeared from her seat, rose up in the sky in the eastern direction and exhibited the four postures of walking, standing, sitting and lying down. She entered the meditative attainment of the fire element.

Once she had entered the meditative attainment of the fire element, Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī's body exhibited manifold different rays of light – blue, yellow, red, white, clear transparent, bright red and crystal colour – and she also displayed the *yamaka-*

e.g., D 3, 'dul ba, ja 50b7 [= Si-K 3, vol. 7, 'dul ba, ja 122,14] and P 1032, 'dul ba, nye 48b5 (and *passim*): *gnas brtan mo gnas brtan mo* (which I translated in Martini (2010: 379–380) as “senior elder”). On *dbyar khang* (“residence”), corresponding to Sanskrit *varṣaka*, urban nunneries in the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, see Schopen (2008, especially 242 note 19 and 256 note 24), Schopen (2009) and Schopen (2014: 101–104).

¹⁴ The three assemblies recur in both versions, 'khor gsum po dag at D 6, 'dul ba, tha 112a3 [= Si-K 6, vol. 10, 'dul ba, tha 281,13] and P 1035, 'dul ba, de 107b2, and 三眾 in T 1451 at T XXIV 248c6. According to Dash (2008: 147) these would be the “nuns under training, novice nuns and women lay followers” (i.e., *śikṣamāṇās*, *śrāmaṇerīs* and *upāsikās*), but I am not aware of such a grouping – which also does not account for fellow *bhikṣuṇīs* – anywhere else in early Buddhist texts. The translation in Finnegan (2009: 233) understands the reference to the three assemblies as I do. The rendering in Bass (2013: 89), “There, when the three part space was established, dharma was taught in such a way that many living beings reached great attainments by hearing it” seems faulty. I come back to this passage below (Teaching the Dharma to the Three Assemblies). As regards *khyad par chen po thob pa* at D 6, 'dul ba, tha 112a4 [= Si-K 6, vol. 10, 'dul ba, tha 281,14] and P 1035, 'dul ba, de 107b2, which I render as “they would attain great distinction”, I take this to refer to the attainment of distinction (*khyad par*, Sanskrit *viśeṣa*) in the sense of one of the stages of the path. The adjective ‘great’ (*chen po*, Sanskrit *mahā*), though unusual in this context, may be used to refer to the attainment of the higher stages of the path. The Chinese version has both Gautamī and the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs* doing the teaching; cf. note 27 and my discussion below (Group Narratives).

prātihārya, with flames ablaze from the lower part of her body, and cool water streaming from the upper part of her body, and [then] with flames ablaze from the upper part of her body and cool water streaming from the lower part of her body.^{15[112b]}

Just as in the eastern direction, so too she performed it in the southern, the western and the northern directions. Having so exhibited in the four directions the four kinds of supernormal transformation, she entered the first absorption.

The five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs* also entered the first absorption.

Rising from the first absorption, [Gautamī entered] the second absorption. From the second absorption to the third absorption, from the third absorption to the fourth absorption, from the fourth absorption to the sphere of infinite space, from the sphere of infinite space to the sphere of infinite consciousness, from the sphere of infinite consciousness to the sphere of nothingness, from the sphere of nothingness she entered the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. Rising from the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, once again she entered the sphere of nothingness. From the sphere of nothingness to the sphere of infinite consciousness, from the sphere of infinite consciousness to the sphere of infinite space, from the sphere of infinite space to the fourth absorption, from the fourth to the third, from the third to the second, from the second she entered the first absorption. After that, on the basis of the first absorption, she passed into *parinirvāṇa*.¹⁶

¹⁵ The colours of the lights emitted by Mahāprajāpatī's body vary between the Tibetan and Chinese versions, cf. D 6, '*dul ba, tha* 112a6 [= Si-K 6, vol. 10, '*dul ba, tha* 282,2] and Q 1035, '*dul ba, de* 107b5. As to the *yamaka prātihārya*, the wording of the second emanation is slightly different between the two versions in that the Tibetan version first mentions fire from the upper body and water from the lower body whereas the Chinese mentions the same in the opposite sequence, cf. D 6, '*dul ba, tha* 112a7 [= Si-K 6, vol. 10, '*dul ba, tha* 282,5] and Q 1035, '*dul ba, de* 107b6), and T 1451 at T XXIV 248c11.

¹⁶ Gautamī passes away on the basis of the first absorption in both the Tibetan and the Chinese version, cf. D 6, '*dul ba, tha* 112b5 [= Si-K 6, vol. 10, '*dul ba, tha* 283,2 with apparatus on p. 806] and P 1035, '*dul ba, de* 108a3: *bsam gtan dang po* (NH add: *de*) *nyid la brten* (P reads: *brtan*) *nas yongs su mya ngan las 'das so*), and T 1451 at T XXIV 248c20: 入至初靜慮，而般涅槃。The same happens afterwards in the case of the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs* (who, however, in the Tibetan version do not display the *yamakaprātihārya*); cf. note 28 below. In the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, the Buddha passes away on

The five hundred *bhikṣuṅīs*, having entered the absorptions in ascending and descending sequence, also passed into *parinirvāṇa* on the basis of the first absorption.¹⁷

As soon as Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī had passed into *nirvāṇa*, the great earth trembled, meteors fell, the sky turned red, and melodies of celestial music arose in the firmament.¹⁸

At that point *bhikṣus* who were on the terrace of Mount Sumeru, and others in town, in the market, in the country, in the king's palace, and others who were engaged in meditation in solitary and secluded places all noticed the great earthquake and wondered why the great earth had trembled.^[113a] They saw that Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī and her retinue of five hundred had passed into *parinirvāṇa*.

The *Parinirvāṇa* of Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī and Her Followers: Translation of the Chinese Version¹⁹

Then Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī thought: “The Buddha praises harmony in the monastic community. As long as the Great Teacher is still in the world, the community of *bhikṣus* is not in conflict. It would be proper for me to enter *nirvāṇa* now.”²⁰

She approached the Buddha, paid homage at his feet, and said: “World-Honoured One, I now wish to enter *nirvāṇa* at

the basis of the fourth absorption; cf. my discussion below (Meditative Attainments).

¹⁷ Similar to Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī, the *parinirvāṇa* of the five hundred *bhikṣuṅīs* takes place on the basis of the first absorption, D 6, 'dul ba, tha 112b6 [= Si-K 6, vol. 10, 'dul ba, tha 283,4 with apparatus on p. 806] and P 1035, 'dul ba, de 108a3: *bsam gtan dang po nyid la brten te* (C: *brten nas*; PY read: *brtan rte*) *yongs su mya ngan las 'das so*. The same is implied in the Chinese version, T 1451 at T XXIV 248c20. The five hundred *bhikṣuṅīs* had entered the first absorption at D 6, 'dul ba, tha 112b1 [= Si-K 6, vol. 10, 'dul ba, tha 282,11] and Q 1035, 'dul ba, de 107b7.

¹⁸ The description of the supernatural environmental events in the Chinese version in T 1451 at T XXIV 248c22 differs.

¹⁹ The section translated here goes from T 1451 at T XXIV 248b13 to 248c27. The entire narrative is found at T 1451 at T XXIV 248a18–249a21 and has been summarised in Dash (2008: 147–149).

²⁰ As in the Tibetan version, the Chinese text alternates renderings of *parinirvāṇa* (般涅槃) and *nirvāṇa* (涅槃), and my translation maintains these variations; cf. note 8 above.

once.”²¹ After she had said these words, the World-Honoured One remained silent. [She asked] three times in this way, and the Buddha remained silent all the while. Then Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī said again: “World-Honoured One, I now wish to enter *nirvāṇa* at once.”

The Buddha said: “Gautamī, are you saying this for the sake of *nirvāṇa*? [She] answered: “I say this for the sake of *nirvāṇa*.” The Buddha said: “Since you are saying this for the sake of *nirvāṇa*, what else could I say? All compounded things (*samskārah*) are impermanent.²² All without exception is like this.”

Then the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs* also said: “World-Honoured One,^[248c] we now wish to enter *nirvāṇa* at once.” The Buddha told the *bhikṣuṇīs*: “Are you saying this for the sake of *nirvāṇa*?” They replied: “It is so.” The Buddha said: “Since you are saying this for the sake of *nirvāṇa*, what else could I say? All compounded things are impermanent. All without exception is like this.”

Then Mahāprajāpatī and the *bhikṣuṇīs*, hearing what the Buddha said, greatly rejoiced in their hearts. They paid homage at the Buddha’s feet and went to pay a visit to Nanda.²³ They said: “Noble One, we now wish to enter *nirvāṇa* at once.”²⁴ Nanda said:

²¹ Here and in further occurrences below, the Chinese version consistently has the adverb ‘quickly’ (疾), T 1451 at T XXIV 48b16 (and *passim*), which I render with “at once”, and seems to point to an underlying **kṣipram* (*pari*)*nirvāṣyāmi*. This has no counterpart in the Tibetan version. The same pattern applies throughout to the corresponding sentences below expressed in the first person plural to include the group of *bhikṣuṇīs*; cf. note 9 above.

²² A statement on the impermanence of all compounded things is similarly expressed in the Tibetan version; cf. note 10 above.

²³ The phonetic rendering for the name Nanda (難陀) is the same as that used in the parallel to the *Nandakovāda-sutta* (MN 146) transmitted in the Chinese translation of the *Saṃyukta-āgama*, SĀ 276 at T II 74a5 and *passim*; cf. Anālayo (2010a: 336 note 17).

²⁴ Elsewhere in the Chinese version, whenever Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī proceeds to the various *bhikṣus* in the company of her following of five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs*, she speaks of “us”, i.e., inclusive of her followers, 我等 in T 1451 at T XXIV at 248b22 and 248c1 (as against 我 at 248b16, 248b20, 248b24 and 248b26 when she is speaking just for herself). Although the present case has the singular form 我, the context suggests that this should rather be read as implying the plural “we”. In fact in the Tibetan version, where the first *bhikṣu* visited by the group is Ānanda, the form “we” is used,

“Are you saying this for the sake of *nirvāṇa*?”... *the same as what the Buddha said [above]...*

In the same way they also approached the elders Aniruddha, Rāhula, Ānanda and others, paid homage and said: “Noble Ones, we now wish to enter *nirvāṇa* at once.”

The *bhikṣu* Ānanda and the elders asked:²⁵ “Are you saying this for the sake of *nirvāṇa*?” They replied: “It is so.” [He] said: “Since you are saying this for the sake of *nirvāṇa*, what else could we say? All compounded things are impermanent. All without exception is like this.”²⁶

At that time Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī and the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs* paid homage to the elders, took leave and returned to their residence.

Having returned to their nunnery, for seven days they taught the Dharma to the three assemblies. The hearing of the Dharma made innumerable beings gain vast and extraordinary benefits.²⁷

Each of the *bhikṣuṇīs* left the nunnery and in a proper order went to sit in an open empty space, cross-legged and [with their back] upright, up to the point when all five hundred [had sat down] in this way.

At that time Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī right on the spot entered concentration. By virtue of her excellent concentrative power she disappeared at will and rose in the sky in the eastern direction and displayed the four postures of walking, standing, sitting and lying down. She entered concentration on [the] fire [element] and from within her body she emitted different kinds of

bdag cag, at D 6, 'dul ba, tha 112a1 [= Si-K 6, vol. 10, 'dul ba, tha 281,5] and P 1035, 'dul ba, de 107a8; cf. note 11 above.

²⁵ The text here has the *bhikṣu* Nanda (難陀苾芻), T 1451 at T XXIV 248c1, most likely a copy mistake for *bhikṣu* Ānanda (阿難陀苾芻), given that the exchange between Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī and Nanda is already concluded and that Ānanda is the last one mentioned by name among the *bhikṣus* in the preceding paragraph.

²⁶ The Tibetan version seems to differ significantly at this juncture; cf. the discussion below (Group Narratives).

²⁷ Unlike the Tibetan version, here not only Gautamī, but also the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs* are involved in the teaching; cf. note 14 and the discussion below (Group Narratives).

lights – blue, yellow, red, white as well as bright red lights appeared simultaneously. Her lower body emitted flames, from her upper [body] pure water flowed, [then] her lower body emitted water, from her upper [body] flames flared up. Just as in the eastern direction, in the same way also in the southern, western and northern directions.

The way the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs* displayed this phenomenon was not different from Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī.²⁸

Then Mahāprajāpatī entered the first absorption again. Rising from the first absorption, she entered the second absorption, rising from the second absorption, she entered the third absorption, rising from the third absorption, she entered the fourth absorption, rising from the fourth absorption, she entered the sphere of [infinite] space, rising from the sphere of [infinite] space, she entered the sphere of [infinite] consciousness, rising from the sphere of [infinite] consciousness, she entered the sphere of nothingness, rising from the sphere of nothingness, she entered the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, rising from the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, in the reverse sequence she entered [the different spheres] down to the first absorption and [passed into] *parinirvāṇa*.

All of the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs* in the same way as Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī entered the various absorptions in forward and reverse order and then passed into *parinirvāṇa*.

At that time the great earth trembled far and wide in the four directions, the zenith and nadir shone with bright lights, in the sky all the gods called out loud as if beating drums.

At that time all of the *bhikṣus* – whether [staying] on Mount Sumeru, or on other mountains, or even in towns, villages, in quiet places in the *āraṇyas* – having seen this phenomenon, and, having observed [it] by collecting their minds, saw that Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī and the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs* had all passed into *parinirvāṇa*.

²⁸ A major difference between the Tibetan and Chinese Mūlasarvāstivāda parallels is that, in the Tibetan version, the *yamakaprātihārya* is the sole domain of Gautamī, whereas here the *yamakaprātihārya* is performed also by the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs*, T 1451 at T XXIV 248c14: 五百苾芻尼與大世主喬答彌現相無異; cf. also note 15 above and my discussion below (Meditative Attainments).

Study

Group Narratives

As recorded in the footnotes to the translations, the details of the narrative sequence are shared by the Tibetan and Chinese versions only up to a certain juncture of the story.

To recapitulate the initial stages that are common to the two versions:

(a) Gautamī goes to the Buddha (no explicit mention of the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs*);

(b) Gautamī announces to the Buddha her intention to pass into *parinirvāṇa*;

(c) the Buddha acknowledges Gautamī's intention by remaining silent (or, more precisely, although the Buddha remains silent at first, he eventually gets Gautamī – and the nuns below – to positively confirm their intentions before they proceed);

(d) the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs* announce their wish to the Buddha (no mention made of their reaching the Buddha, though they seem to have arrived together with their leader);

(e) the Buddha accepts the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs*' wish by remaining silent (however, he gets them to positively confirm their intentions before they proceed).

Before converging again in the grand finale, the meditative climax leading to the nuns' *parinirvāṇa*, the Chinese and Tibetan versions diverge in the central part of the narrative. To sum up the differences, the Tibetan version continues in this way:

(f) Gautamī takes the Buddha's leave (with no explicit mention of the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs*, whose presence is however intended by the context);

(g) Gautamī and the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs* go to Nanda, Aniruddha, Rāhula and Ānanda (again, no explicit mention of the five hundred, but the context and the wording of (h) with the plural in the announcement implies they are together with their leader);

(h) Gautamī and the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs* make the announcement to Ānanda as a group;

(i) Ānanda acknowledges the wish expressed by Gautamī and the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs* as a group;

(j) Gautamī and the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs* take Ānanda's leave.

The Chinese parallel proceeds as follows:

(f) Gautamī and the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs* take the Buddha's leave (with explicit mention of the five hundred);

(g) Gautamī and the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs* go to Nanda;

(h) Gautamī makes the announcement to Nanda (the context makes it clear that the second plural, group-inclusive, is meant);

(i) an abbreviation presumably implying that Nanda accepts Gautamī's wish by remaining silent;

(j) possibly included in the same abbreviation is also Gautamī's leave-taking;

(k) Gautamī and the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs* go to Aniruddha, Rāhula, Ānanda and other elders;

(l) Gautamī and the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs* express their wish to them;

(m) Ānanda (on behalf of the elders) accepts the wish expressed by Gautamī and the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs* as a group;²⁹

(n) Gautamī and the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs* take Ānanda's leave.

In communal and group events and movements, ancient Indian texts tend to assume a collective plural agency headed by the group leader.³⁰ Thus, what at first sight may appear as a substantial discrepancy in the sequence of events in the two versions could also be due, at least in part, to different redactional choices at the translation level.

Divergences between the two Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* parallels probably due to the tendency to include members of the group in the action performed by the group leader are the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs* rather than only Gautamī teaching the Dharma for seven days and performing the *yamakaprātihārya* in the

²⁹ As for correcting Nanda to Ānanda, cf. note 25 above.

³⁰ As regards the *Ekottarika-āgama* version, it lists by name the nuns who approach the Buddha to announce their final extinction, EĀ 52.1 at T II 821c21.

Chinese version. I come back to such a group meditative feat in the next section.

The fact that, unlike the case of the Buddha, who “was not followed into parinirvāṇa by any of his disciples”, “five hundred of Gotamī’s congregation of nuns ... accompanied her on her final journey” is in itself an expression of a group type of narrative.³¹ Furthermore, early Buddhist female monasticism seems to me to typically function on the basis of a coenobitic model, as reflected by varied institutional aspects impinging on admission into the community, co-habitation, mobility and disciplinary rules. This communal lifestyle, the closely intertwined lives of these saints, may also partly explain why their final passing away took place as a group, or at least why the narrative was especially represented in that way.

Meditative Attainments

A somewhat significant difference between the Tibetan and Chinese Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* parallels is that, in the Tibetan version, the *yamakaprātihārya* is only performed by Gautamī, whereas in the Chinese version this is performed also by the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs*.³² In the Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition the *yamakaprātihārya* – a dual display of the fire and water elemental emanation – is common to the Buddha as well as the disciples.³³ Thus, the absence of the *yamakaprātihārya* in the Tibetan version may be explained either by a gradual introduction of the *yamakaprātihārya* in the texts or by accidental textual loss.

The description of Gautamī and her nuns’ *yamakaprātihārya* otherwise conforms to the Buddha’s own prodigious display in a range of texts transmitted within the Mūlasarvāstivāda traditions. Similar expositions are, for instance, found in the Sanskrit fragments of the *Catuṣpariṣat-sūtra*, along with its counterpart in

³¹ Quoted from Shaw (2006: 151); cf. also Anālayo (2015: 15).

³² Cf. notes 16 and 27 above.

³³ Cf., e.g., the *Divyāvadāna*, ed. Cowell and Neil (1886: 161,13): *tathāgatasya sarvaśrāvakasādhāraṇā ṛddhiḥ*, and the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* in T 1451 at T XXIV 332a27: 此是諸佛及聲聞眾共有神通; cf. also, e.g., Lamotte (1976: IV.1769). On different traditions with regard to the display of the *yamakaprātihārya* cf. Skilling (1997: 315).

the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*,³⁴ and in a discourse in the *Samyukta-āgama*.³⁵ Another description of the *yamakaprātihārya* performed by a disciple can be found in the **Bimbisāra-pratyudgamana-nāma-mahāsūtra*, where Urubilvā Kāśyapa accomplishes it at the Buddha's request.³⁶

Two main elements differentiate the attainments of Gautamī and her group of *bhikṣuṇīs* from the corresponding achievement of the Buddha prior to his *parinirvāṇa* as recorded in the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*.

Firstly, after emerging from the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, the Buddha enters cessation of perception and knowing.³⁷ This attainment is not mentioned at all in the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinayas* versions. However, in the *Ekottarika-āgama* parallel to the above-translated episode, the meditative progression of Gautamī's and the nuns does include entering the cessation of perception and knowing.³⁸

Secondly, the Buddha passes away on the basis of the fourth rather than the first absorption as in the nuns' case.³⁹ In the *Ekottarika-āgama* version, Gautamī and the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs* all pass away based on having attained the fourth absorption.⁴⁰ Elsewhere in the same *Ekottarika-āgama*, other disciples such as

³⁴ Cf. Sanskrit in ed. Waldschmidt (1962: III.316 and 318) (§ 26.4–5), with the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* parallels in id. (III.317 and 319) for Tibetan, and in T 1450 at T XXIV 134b5, translated in Waldschmidt (1962: III.317 and 319) for Chinese.

³⁵ SĀ 197 at T II 50b17; the remainder of the description in this discourse is similar to the attainment displayed by Gautamī.

³⁶ For another Mūlasarvāstivāda parallel to the description of the *yamaka-prātihārya* performed by a disciple cf. **Bimbisāra-pratyudgamana-nāma-mahāsūtra* ed. Skilling (1994: I.74–79) (§§ A.2.12–17).

³⁷ Cf. the Sanskrit version in ed. Waldschmidt (1951: II.394) (§ 42.13), the Tibetan in ed. Waldschmidt (1951: II.395) (§ 42.13), and T 1451 at T XXIV 399b4.

³⁸ EĀ 52.1 at T II 822a15 (Gautamī) and 822a27 (the *bhikṣuṇīs*).

³⁹ Sanskrit and Tibetan in ed. Waldschmidt (1950: II.396 and 397 respectively) (§ 42.18) and Chinese in T 1451 at T XXIV 399b13, translated in Waldschmidt (1951: II.397); the same holds for the parallel versions, see the comparative study in Anālayo (2014b) (with references to earlier literature).

⁴⁰ EĀ 52.1 at T II 822a22: 已入四禪便取滅度 (Gautamī) and T II 822b3 (the *bhikṣuṇīs*).

Śāriputra and Mahāmaudgalyāyana also enter *parinirvāṇa* on the basis of the fourth absorption.⁴¹

The Buddha's passing away on the basis of the fourth absorption appears consistently across both early and later Buddhist texts. The Sarvāstivāda/Mūlasarvāstivāda scholastic tradition places a significant emphasis on the Buddhological significance of the fourth absorption. According to the **Mahāvibhāṣā*, this is the level of mental concentration with which all Buddhas without exception reach awakening.⁴²

An early canonical Abhidharma work of the Sarvāstivādins, the partial translation of the *Prajñaptiśāstra* (施設論) extant in Chinese, already states that all Buddhas enter *nirvāṇa* on the basis of the fourth absorption.⁴³ A similar position is discussed in the **Ārya-vasumitra-saṃgrhīta* (尊婆須蜜菩薩所集論), a post-canonical Sarvāstivāda treatise (probably affiliated to the early Dārṣṭāntika lineage) that antedates the **Mahāvibhāṣā*.⁴⁴

⁴¹ For Śāriputra see EĀ 26.9 at T II 640a26: 入第四禪。時，尊者舍利弗從四禪起已。More precisely, Śāriputra, who also passes away into *parinirvāṇa* because he could not face having to witness the Buddha's demise, concludes his pre-*parinirvāṇa* meditative tour with the fourth absorption, though his actual passing away does not take place immediately thereafter; cf. also Anālayo (2015: 17). Interestingly, Śāriputra compares this meditative tour to the vigour of a lion (*siṅhavijṛmbhita-samādhi*), EĀ 26.9 at T II 640a27: 告諸比丘: 「此名師子奮迅三昧」。In Mahāyāna works, this is commonly one of the great *samādhis* of a Buddha. In the **Antarabhāva-sūtra* (中陰經), whose translation or perhaps redaction is attributed to Zhu Fonian (竺佛念) (the translator of the *Ekottarika-āgama*), a description very similar to the present passage, including the declaration about the *siṅhavijṛmbhita-samādhi*, occurs in relation to the Buddha, T 385 at T XII 1069a3: 佛將欲現四禪功德，即於三聚眾生前，從初禪出入二禪、三禪、四禪，從四禪起入三禪、二禪、初禪，從初禪至三禪、從第四至第二禪，此名師子奮迅三昧； on T 385 in relation to Zhu Fonian's corpus cf. Nattier (2010: 234 and 254–255). The same *samādhi* is associated specifically with Śāriputra's *parinirvāṇa* in the *Mahāvibhāṣā*, T 1545 at T XXVII 821b27: 舍利子般涅槃時。入師子奮迅等至。On the *siṅhavijṛmbhita-samādhi* cf. also, e.g., T 220 at T VII 321c19. For Mahāmaudgalyāyana see EĀ 26.9 at T II 641c27: 入第四禪；從第四禪起，尋時取滅度。爾時，大目犍連已取滅度。

⁴² E.g., the **Mahāvibhāṣā*, T 1545 at T XXVII 479c25: 諸佛皆依第四靜慮得菩提故。

⁴³ T 1538 at T XXVI 520b29: 如其所說入涅槃者。諸佛世尊。於第四禪不動地中。

⁴⁴ Cf. T 1549 at T XXVIII 750a16.

According to the **Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa* (大智度論), all of the eighteen distinctive qualities of the Buddha are placed on the fourth level absorption since it is on that level that the Buddha attained both full awakening and *parinirvāṇa*.⁴⁵

Scholastic modes of thought and exposition cannot be imported *tout court* into narratives, nor vice versa, but the normative and the narrative do nonetheless live in mutual textual and ideological osmosis. Thus it is open to question whether the rather remarkable peculiarity of Gautamī (and her followers) passing away on the basis of the first in lieu of the fourth absorption might be explained by the need to preserve or enhance or preserve the uniqueness of the Buddha and his attainments vis-à-vis those of the disciples in a *Vinaya* such as that of the Mūlasarvāstivādins which went through an extended redactional history and was especially receptive to the doctrinal development that emerged throughout the Middle Period of Buddhism in India. This would be natural in view of the growing interest in the special attributes of the Buddha. And it comes combined with the fact that the Mūlasarvāstivādins no longer reckon the *yamakaprātihārya* to be the sole preserve of the Buddha, which in turn requires other meditative abilities specifically associated with the Buddha to be given more prominence.

Taking the Teacher's Leave, Taking the Saṅgha's Leave

Unlike the *Ekottarika-āgama* and other parallel versions, in the Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition the spectacular passing away of the *bhikṣuṇīs* is not explicitly related to the Buddha's own imminent *parinirvāṇa*.⁴⁶ The Buddha's impending death is, nonetheless, clearly in the air. Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī's own reflection is that

⁴⁵ T 1509 at T XXV 256a25: 皆在四禪中，佛四禪中得道得涅槃故，translated in Lamotte (1970: III.1702). The same **Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa* (大智度論) discusses Gautamī's funeral in connection to *śarirapūjā*, T 1509 at T XXV 132a2, translated in Lamotte (1949: I.587–588).

⁴⁶ The Mūlasarvāstivāda account of the *parinirvāṇa* of Gautamī and the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs* is inserted within a longer *Vinaya* narrative that takes its cue from a moment in which the Buddha sneezes; I discuss the significance of this *Vinaya* frame in the second part of my study, Dhammadinnā (2016).

with the Teacher still living and the *saṅgha* abiding in harmony,⁴⁷ it is appropriate for her to leave the world. The five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs* who decide to follow in her footsteps are represented as having just the same motivation as her, as is normal in group narrative.

The motivation for wishing to enter *parinirvāṇa* varies in the parallel versions. In the *Ekottarika-āgama* version, Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī hears the *bhikṣus* saying that the Buddha will soon attain final extinction, reflects that she does not wish to see this, and also includes Ānanda's passing in her reflection.⁴⁸ In one of the two discourse versions independently translated into Chinese, she simply reflects that she cannot bear to see the Buddha, Śāriputra and Mahāmaudgalyāyana pass away.⁴⁹ In the other individually transmitted discourse, she finds out about the imminent *parinirvāṇa* of the Buddha, Ānanda, Śāriputra and Mahāmaudgalyāyana by psychic means, while she is in meditative concentration.⁵⁰ In the *Therīgāthā* commentary and the *Apadāna*, Gotamī emerges from her path fruition attainment and, upon gladly recognising that her life faculty (*āyusāṅkhāra*) is coming to exhaustion, she considers approaching the Buddha and the elders to communicate her wish. The five hundred *bhikkhunīs* who form her entourage have the same thought.⁵¹ A version of the story included in the *Sūtrāṅkāra* (大莊嚴論經), which shows conspicuous similarities, overall, to the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* version(s),

⁴⁷ *dge slong gi dge 'dun mthun pa'i* in D 6, 'dul ba, tha111a7 [= Si-K 6, vol. 10, 'dul ba, tha 279,16] and P 1035, 'dul ba, de 106b7, and 苾芻僧眾復未乖離 in T 1451 at T XXIV 248b14.

⁴⁸ EĀ 52.1 at T II 821b29.

⁴⁹ T 144 at T II 867b1.

⁵⁰ T 145 at T II 869b11.

⁵¹ Thī-a 138,4, translated in Pruitt (1999: 185–186). At this point, the *Therīgāthā* commentary introduces a long citation from the *Apadāna*, according to which Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and her companions reflect in unison that they would not be able to endure the passing away of the Buddha's two foremost disciples (i.e., Śāriputta and Mahāmoggallāna) or of Rāhula, Ānanda or Nanda, cf. Thī-a 138,10 and Ap 17 at Ap 529,23, translated in Walters (1995: 118–119) and Pruitt (1999: 185–186). Here the *Therīgāthā* commentary, Thī-a 138,18, adds a further line with a reference to Mahākassapa; this is not found at the corresponding juncture in the *Apadāna*, Ap 17 at Ap 529,30.

agrees in reporting Gautamī's desire to enter *parinirvāṇa* before the Buddha and his direct disciples do so themselves.⁵²

Hierarchies and Pragmatics

In addition to the 'profile' of Gautamī as a (leading) disciple of the Buddha and her hierarchical positioning vis-à-vis her teacher, her portrayal and acts as a disciple also appear to impinge on other aspects of spiritual and institutional hierarchies and early Buddhist ideology.

Gautamī's narrative occurs within the context of the full ideological, experiential and practical acceptance of the notion of full liberation from the cycle of birth and death through the full realisation of awakening. This value system, which may at first jar with modern exegesis, forms in my opinion the background to her 'intentional death', that is, the depiction of her final entrance into the 'deathless'.⁵³ These notions are reflected by Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī's decision, which appears to be motivated most of all by the superiority of *nirvāṇa* (and *parinirvāṇa*) over any other existential value and personal relationship.

The way she approaches the Buddha (and, secondarily, the *saṅgha* elders) shows respect for and devotion to the Buddha's authority while basing one's decision on the highest refuge that is *nirvāṇa*, final *nirvāṇa* at this juncture. When the Buddha as the one who has disclosed the path is still alive, there remains a sense of duty towards him. His presence ensures the continuous harmony of the *saṅgha*. But now that he is about to pass away, and soon enough the harmony of the *saṅgha* will also start to increasingly deteriorate, to opt for the supreme harmony and peace which *is* final *nirvāṇa* comes as a natural consequence, fully within the parameters of the early Buddhist notion of liberation.

⁵² Section 68 in T 201 at T IV 333a23, translated in Huber (1908: 387).

⁵³ The sub-category of suicide would not be directly relevant to the present point. On suicide in early Buddhist texts see, e.g., Delhey (2009), Anālayo (2010b), Anālayo (2011), Anālayo (2012) and Anālayo (2014c) (all of these publications contain exhaustive references to earlier literature). Fasting to death as a result of the choice to withdraw from the intention to live would be another example of voluntary death, but my main concern here is just the portrayal of consciously and voluntarily entering *parinirvāṇa*, which includes a withdrawal from or relinquishment of the intention to continue to live.

Now, in the Tibetan version, when Gautamī approaches the Buddha to take leave and states her intention of passing away, she reiterates her statement three times, and the Buddha acknowledges it by remaining silent. Then, as if a climax is to be reached, the statement is made again, and for two times the Buddha requests confirmation about the intended meaning, with Gautamī reiterating it. Gautamī's reply is then repeated by the Buddha. The same structure is found in the Chinese version (with three initial statements, but followed only by one question and one reply).⁵⁴ Thus, the Buddha has Gautamī's intention clarified by verifying the meaning of her statement.

To approach the Buddha indicating one's wish to pass away is also found elsewhere in the early Buddhist discourses, as a polite statement of intention that entails also an aspect of asking for permission or approval. A similar proclamation recurs in the 'permission' to pass away requested by Subhadra who wishes to enter final *nirvāṇa* before his teacher does so in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* and Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*,⁵⁵ as well as in Dravya Mallaputra's desire to pass away as recorded in a discourse in the *Samyukta-āgama*.⁵⁶

As already indicated by Anālayo (2015: 16), the *parinirvāṇa* of Gautamī and the *bhikṣuṇīs* seems to have a textual model in the episode of Subhadra's passing away at the Buddha's own death bed. However, the antecedent of Subhadra covers only the declaration of intention made to the Buddha, who is *the* Teacher. The same wish that Gautamī (and the other *bhikṣuṇīs* too) express to and get acknowledged by the *bhikṣu* elders appears to be yet another instance of expansion due to group narrative dynamics, while also increasing the dramatic pathos.

⁵⁴ In the *Ekottarika-āgama* parallel, there is only one statement by Gautamī and a silent approval on the part of the Buddha; cf. above note 10.

⁵⁵ Ed. Waldschmidt 1951: 382 (§ 40.47–49), Tibetan in ed. Waldschmidt (1951: 383) and Chinese in T 1451 at T XXIV 397a4 (translation in Waldschmidt 1951: 383). For Subhadra's passing away before the Buddha in materials of Mūlasarvāstivāda affiliation cf. SĀ 979 at T II 254b29 and the *Avadānaśataka*, ed. Speyer (1902–1906: I.234,6); cf. also Anālayo (2014b: 9–11).

⁵⁶ Cf. SĀ 1076 at T II 280b27, discussed in Anālayo (2012: 154 note 4); cf. also Anālayo (2015: 9 note 21).

Perhaps the close personal and spiritual ties that existed among the early generation of disciples of the Buddha explain the nuns' multiple farewells. Subhadra, on his part, had just been converted and ordained, and he simply did not have a relationship to anyone apart from the Buddha himself. Be that as it may, the extended round of leave-taking also conforms to the etiquette that derives from the junior/senior aspect of monastic hierarchy, whereby *bhikṣuṇīs* as individuals or as a group are legally and socially subordinate to individual monks and to the *bhikṣu-saṅgha* as a whole. This would be an institutional rather than a spiritual dimension of hierarchy.

To summarise, the specific weight and gravity of the deeper spiritual hierarchies at stake – being a *śrāvaka*, the Buddha, *nirvāṇa*, *parinirvāṇa* – as well as the ancient Indian protocols of communication may offer an interpretive key of Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī and her companions leave-taking which may bring us a little closer to the world view that informs the narrative. These seem to me crucial aspects to take into account when evaluating Gautamī's act of speech from the viewpoint of its pragmatics, that is, the ways in which context contributes to language meaning.

Teaching the Dharma to the Three Assemblies

An important detail found in both versions of the Mūla sarvāstivāda *Vinaya* is that, before her wish for final *nirvāṇa* comes to be realised, Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī takes care to teach the Dharma to the three assemblies for seven days, almost up to her very last moments. In the Chinese version, the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs* are shown to do the same.

The “three assemblies” seem to refer to fellow *bhikṣuṇīs* as well as *upāsakas* and *upāsikās*, in contrast to the four assemblies.⁵⁷ The four assemblies include the *bhikṣus*, the male monastics. Since the *bhikṣuṇīs* are not allowed formally to teach *bhikṣus*, their own ‘assembly’ is omitted here.⁵⁸ With regard to the mutual relationships between the two communities, one may recall here two of the eight

⁵⁷ Cf. note 14 above.

⁵⁸ At least in the Pali commentarial tradition, it seems they are allowed to teach the Dharma to monks, but not the *Vinaya*, as in Mp IV 135,26 apud AN 8.51 at AN IV 277,30: *evaṃ pana paveṇivasena kathetum vaṭṭati*; cf. Ānandajoti (2014: 28 note 121).

gurudharmas for *bhikṣuṇīs* which explicitly prohibit them from reproaching *bhikṣus* or pointing out their faults, which points, in my understanding, to more direct or personal, and unsolicited, forms of admonishment and rebuke.⁵⁹ Yet these do not imply a ban on mere teaching activity.

⁵⁹ These are, in texts of Mūlasarvāstivāda affiliation: (a) the fifth *gurudharma* in the same Tibetan translation of the *Kṣudrakavastu* of the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, D 6, 'dul ba, da 102b5 [= Si-K 6, vol. 11, 'dul ba, da 246,16] and P 1035, 'dul ba, ne 99b6 ("A *bhikṣuṇī* who sees there is a breach in relation to a *bhikṣu*'s morality, a breach in relation to a *bhikṣu*'s view, a breach in relation to a *bhikṣu*'s conduct, or a breach in relation to a *bhikṣu*'s livelihood, shall refrain from reporting it and reminding him of it. A *bhikṣu* who sees there is a breach in relation to a *bhikṣuṇī*'s morality, a breach in relation to a *bhikṣuṇī*'s view, a breach in relation to a *bhikṣuṇī*'s conduct or a breach in relation to a *bhikṣuṇī*'s livelihood, shall not be prohibited from reporting it and reminding her of it. Ānanda, I declare this as the fifth principle to be respected so that women may restrain their faults and that is not to be transgressed. Women should observe it for their whole life"), corresponding to the fifth *gurudharma* in the *Bhikṣuṇī-karmavācanā*, ed. Schmidt (1993: 245,8), as well in the listing of the eight *gurudharmas* in a discourse quotation in Śamathadeva's *Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā*, Up 4024, D 4094, mngon pa, ju 213a7 [= Si-T 3323, vol. 82, mngon pa ju519,21] or P 5595, mngon pa, tu 243a8, and to the fourth *gurudharma* in the Chinese translation of the *Kṣudrakavastu*, T 1451 at T XXIV 351a8; and (b) the sixth *gurudharma* in D 6, 'dulba, da 102b7 [= Si-K 6, vol. 11, 'dul ba, da 247,5] and P 1035, 'dul ba, ne 100a1 ("Ānanda, a *bhikṣuṇī* shall not rebuke, show anger towards or threaten a *bhikṣu*. Ānanda, it is not allowed that a *bhikṣuṇī* rebukes, shows anger towards or threatens a *bhikṣu*. Ānanda, I declare this as the sixth principle to be respected so that women may restrain their faults and that is not to be transgressed. Women should observe it for their whole life"), corresponding to the sixth *gurudharma* in the *Bhikṣuṇī-karmavācanā*, ed. Schmidt (1993: 245,20) as well as in Up 4024, D 4094, mngon pa, ju 213b3 [= Si-T 3323, vol. 82, mngon pa, ju 521,1] or P 5595, mngon pa, tu 243b3 (following the readings *spyod pa'i skyon* in P 5595 mngon pa tu 243a8 and 243b1, instead of *dpyod pa'i skyon* in D 4094 mngon pa, ju 213b1+2 [= Si-T 3323, vol. 82, mngon pa, ju 520,14+16]) and to the fifth in T 1451 at T XXIV 351a12. On the Mūlasarvāstivāda affiliation of the fragmentary Sanskrit *Bhikṣuṇī-karmavācanā* (Oxford Sanskrit Ms. 1442) in ed. Schmidt (1993) (first edited by Ridding and de La Vallée Poussin (1920)), see Roth (1970: 5 note 3b), Yuyama (1979: 6), Schmidt (1994), Chung (1998: 420), Oberlies (2003: 62) and Finnegan (2009: 310, note 591). On the Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition represented by the *Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā* especially in relation to the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* see Honjō (1987), Clarke (2001: 88–89) and Martini (2012b: 63 note 45). Cf. also the survey on *gurudharmas* in Chung (1999).

The mention of teaching the Dharma to the three assemblies in the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* version(s) highlights the centrality of the theme of teaching and, specifically, Gautamī's identity as a teacher of the Dharma. Teaching the Dharma to the three assemblies is not mentioned in the *Ekottarika-āgama* or in any of the other parallels. However, a motif related to the preservation of the Dharma surfaces in the *Sūtrāṅkāra* (大莊嚴論經), which presents a long poetic overview of Gautamī and the five hundred *bhikṣuṇīs*' own spiritual path, given in the form of a first person account by Gautamī. Towards the conclusion of this ode, the other *bhikṣuṇīs* and *upāsikās* are exhorted to protect the Dharma diligently so as to cause the Dharma to remain long. This is reckoned to amount to remembering Gautamī (properly). The *Sūtrāṅkāra* (大莊嚴論經) reports that in this way Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī consoled the other *bhikṣuṇīs* and the *upāsikās*.⁶⁰

In the *Ekottarika-āgama* version, Mahāprajāpatī requests the Buddha to permit the *bhikṣuṇīs* to recite the rules without her, exactly as he had originally promulgated them, without any deviation. The Buddha consents. Gautamī comes forward to pay her final respects, and declares that this will be the last time that she will see the Tathāgata's face, and she will also not see future Buddhas nor take birth in a womb, but forever abide in the un-compounded element. In addition, in this version Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī circumambulates the Buddha, Ānanda and the community of *bhikṣus* seven times. The nuns are recorded as only circumambulating the Buddha (not the other monks), and only three times.⁶¹

A seven-round circumambulation is rather unusual, but it may be called for or meant to highlight the extraordinary circumstances of the situation. Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī then announces to the *bhikṣuṇīs* that she wishes to enter the element of *nirvāṇa* and that they should each act as they see fit for themselves at this time. None of this is found in the Mūlasarvāstivāda version(s).

⁶⁰ T 201 at T IV 333b24, translated in Huber (1908: 388–390), though Huber's rendering, on p. 389, of 應當勤護法 (333c15) as “Efforcez-vous de propager la Loi” seems to me to read a slightly excessive ‘missionary’ nuance in the verb 勤護, which I prefer to read in the sense of protecting, or upholding (the Dharma).

⁶¹ EĀ 52.1 at T II 821c10 (Gautamī) and 822a2 (the five hundred nuns).

The act of establishing the proper procedure for the recitation of the monastic code in her monastic community after her demise, doing so with the Buddha's permission, i.e., in dependence on the founder and teacher of the *śāsana*, clearly suits Gautamī's role as the eldest in the *bhikṣuṇī-saṅgha*. In this way, her instructing the three assemblies continuously for seven days in the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* and the monastic preoccupation in the *Ekottarika-āgama* point to the dual role of Gautamī as a teacher of the Dharma and as the leader of the female *saṅgha*. To the best of my knowledge, the episode related to the establishment of the procedure of the *bhikṣuṇī-prātimokṣa* recital is unique to the *Ekottarika-āgama*. As the prelude to the grand finale of her life, honouring such a high duty for seven days is to an extent tantamount to circumambulating the Buddha and the Saṅgha seven times, a detail which, as mentioned above, is given only in the *Ekottarika-āgama* version. This detail, probably not of deeper significance given the recurrent use of the number seven whenever a particular period or set to symbolise a complete unit is needed, is however poignant from a dramatic point of view.

To conclude: according to tradition, the Buddha himself declared he would enter *parinirvāṇa* only when members of his four assemblies were firmly established in the Dharma. In the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, the Buddha states emphatically that he will not pass away until he has accomplished the task of establishing in his teachings competent, disciplined, self-confident and learned disciples from each of the four assemblies.⁶² The same concern is already apparent in a much earlier dialogue between the Buddha and Māra that reportedly took place not long after his awakening.⁶³

⁶² To remain within texts transmitted within Mūlasarvāstivāda communities, cf. *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, ed. Waldschmidt (1950: II.208) (§ 16.2), with a parallel in the Tibetan and Chinese versions, respectively ed. Waldschmidt (1951: II.209,23) and T 1451 at T XXIV 387c27, translated in Waldschmidt (1951: II.209); cf. also *Dīvyāvadāna*, ed. Cowell and Neil (1886: 202,10). For an overview of the importance of the four assemblies in early Buddhist texts see Anālayo (2013); a recent discussion is also found in Engelmajer (2015: 96–99).

⁶³ *Saṅghabhedavastu* ed. Gnoli (1977: I.125,4), with the Tibetan translation in D 1, 'dul ba, nga 37a4 [= Si-K 1, vol. 4, 'dul ba, nga 88,5] and P 1030, 'dul ba, ce 35a7 and the Chinese version in T 1450 at T XXIV 125c13; cf. also *Lalitavistara* ed. Lefmann (1902: 377,9), translated in Foucaux (1884: 314), with its Tibetan version in D 95, mdo sde, kha 180a5 [= Si-K 112, vol. 46, mdo sde, kha 439,7] and P 763, mdo sna tshogs, ku 204a4.

Conclusion

Remarkably, in a way, Gautamī herself, by wholeheartedly proceeding towards final, supreme peace, by taking the harmony of the *saṅgha* (or lack thereof) into account in her decision-making, and by taking care to teach the three assemblies before passing away, epitomises at one and the same time an ethical model where final liberation is paramount together with concern for the Teacher's *śāsana*. All these values are parallel to those expressed by the life and passing away of the Teacher himself. In this respect, Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī, as an arhatī disciple, conforms to the Teacher's example up to her very last hours.

Her five hundred arhatī *bhikṣuṇīs* act in a way largely identical to that of Gautamī by participating in the narrative events as a group. It is open to question whether this amplification might reflect not only an increasing miraculism but also the more communal structure and life-style of the *bhikṣuṇī-saṅgha* as against the male monastic community, as if the close lives of these saints may also partly explain why their final passing away took place as a group, or at least was represented in that way.

The last moments of the life and the death (or *parinirvāṇa*) of the eminent disciple Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī – surrounded by her close community of fully liberated *bhikṣuṇīs* – in the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* are modelled on that of their exemplary teacher. At the same time, as is evident from narrative, meditative and role portrayal, they display their own specificities as Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī's role and the spiritual, institutional and biographic hierarchies command.⁶⁴

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⁶⁴ On the basis of the version of the story I have studied in the foregoing pages, I would concur with Anālayo's (2015) critical appraisal of the readings of Gautamī's *parinirvāṇa* proposed by Walters (1994) and Wilson (2011).

Abbreviations

Ap	<i>Apadāna</i>
C	Cone edition
D	Derge edition
EĀ	<i>Ekottarika-āgama</i> (T 125)
H	Lhasa edition
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i> (T 26)
Mp	<i>Manorathapūraṇī</i>
N	Narthing edition
P	Peking edition
SĀ	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 99)
SHT	<i>Sanskrihandschriften aus den Turfanfunden</i>
Si-K	Sichuan (= <i>dpe bsdur ma</i>) collated Kanjur
Si-T	Sichuan (= <i>dpe bsdur ma</i>) collated Tanjur
T	Taishō edition (CBETA, 2014)
Thī-a	<i>Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā</i>
Up	<i>Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā</i>
Vin	(Pali) <i>Vinaya</i>
Y	Yongle edition

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