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

KAREL WERNER

PROFESSORIAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATE, DEPARTMENT OF THE STUDY OF RELIGIONS, SCHOOL OF ORIENTAL AND AFRICAN STUDIES

kw19@soas.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

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

Keywords
Buddha-relics, Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, sarīra, kāya, shēntì, shèli, quánshēn

THE EARLY SPREAD OF RELIC WORSHIP

The Sanskrit expression which is usually translated as ‘relic worship’ is sarīrapūjā (in Pāli sarīrapūjā). It is a compound whose first component sarīra means ‘body’,¹

¹ Unlike the more general term for ‘body’, kāya, sarīra refers to the mortal body: the body in its
which may refer to the body of a living person or after death to his corpse. But because the compound is frequently used in the context of the worship of the Buddha’s relics usually enshrined in a stūpa, its first component came to be understood as meaning ‘relics’. This created an ambiguity in interpreting certain passages in the Pāli Mahāparinibbāna Sutta and in parallel passages in Sanskrit versions of Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra (lost, but known from translations into Chinese and Tibetan) which resulted in a confusion with respect to the position of relic worship in the context of the Code of Discipline for monks (Vināyaka).

Worship of the relics of the Buddha, by both his lay followers and monks, has been a widespread feature of Buddhist devotional practice since very early times, if not right from the day on which the Buddha died and was cremated (possibly in 483 BCE). When the great Emperor Aśoka (c. 269–232 BCE) embraced the Dharma, he built many stūpas all over his realm (the legends narrated in the Mahāvaṃsa and Aśokāvadāna speak of 84,000 of them — Strong 2004, 136–38) and enshrined in them splinters of relics from the original eight stūpas in which portions of the Buddha’s bone relics were supposedly placed after his cremation. Later, when the Buddha’s bone relics were no longer available, manuscripts of sūtras were substituted, indicating the presence of the Dharma, and eventually stūpas came to be venerated as symbols of the presence of the Buddha or of the eternal Dharma even if they did not contain anything. Almost every Buddhist monastery, at least in Theravāda countries, has a stūpa in its precinct and acts of reverence and ritualised worship are commonplace.

The gist of the Buddha’s message as preserved in the early texts is individual liberation from rebirth to be achieved by an inner spiritual discipline involving detachment from both internal and external phenomena. Worship by ritualised acts of the Buddha’s relics or of any other objects with a link to the personality of the Buddha while he was alive or after his death would probably involve emotional attachment. So, for monks and nuns such acts would undoubtedly have been regarded as a diversion or an obstacle on the path to freedom. We may therefore conclude that relic worship may not have been, in the early days, a permitted or recommended practice at all. But in view of current practice stretching over centuries, the matter still appears to be not quite resolved and different opinions have been expressed on the matter throughout the centuries.

With lay followers of the Buddha’s teaching it was different. Reverence for anything which would have had some link to his person, including by ritual worship, would have been regarded as a help on the spiritual path or at least to produce merit which would lead to a favourable rebirth (such as the four places linked to his life that the Buddha referred to as appropriate for pilgrimage, DN II 140–141). The Buddha’s relics were obviously particularly desirable as objects of worship for the benefits they would bring. For many people these benefits would include health, well-being and prosperity. Later history suggests that even magic powers were ascribed to the Buddha’s relics, which those who were in possession of them could use to their advantage. In any case, to own them was an ambition particularly of kings and chiefs of communities so that they would not even...

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shrink from a fight to acquire them. As reported in the Pāli Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (DN II 164–66), after the Buddha’s cremation at Kusinārā, the relics were claimed by Ajātasattu, the king of Magadha, the powerful clan of Licchavis, the Sakyas (the Buddha’s clansmen), two other warrior clans, the chief of a Brahminic settlement and two communities of the Malla tribe. The Malla community on whose territory the Buddha passed away initially refused to part with any portion of them, but eventually relented and agreed to their division. All the claimants promised to erect a stūpa over the relics and hold a festival honouring them.

As transpires from the words of the Brahmin Doṇa, a follower of the Buddha and himself a famous teacher (AN-a II 505ff.) who was also present, strife was indeed brewing over the custody of the Buddha’s relics, with possible ‘war and bloodshed’ (DN II 166). So Doṇa suggested their partition into eight portions and his authority prevailed, since according to a commentary (DN-a II 607ff; cf. Malalasekera 1974, I 1122) most rulers of Jambudīpa at some time listened to his sermons and had great regard for him. Verses at the end of the sutta (probably a later interpolation) mention that, apart from the distributed bones, four teeth of the Buddha were preserved separately. One is said to be in the Tāvatiṃsa heaven — brought there, according to a commentary (DN-a II 609), by the god Sakka (Indra) who took it from Doṇa as he tried to hide it in his turban; one became an object of worship in the city of Gandhāra; another is revered by Kings of the Nāgas; and one was brought to the country of Kāliṅga from where, according to later accounts, it was sent in the fourth century CE for security reasons to Sri Lanka (where it is still worshipped in the specially built Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, although there are some doubts about its authenticity).

The clan of Moriyas, the ancestors of the later powerful dynasty of Mauryas (324–187 BCE) from which Aśoka emerged, were late-comers and received the ashes, while Doṇa, deprived of the tooth he had tried to spirit away (as — jokingly? — told by the commentary), kept the urn in which the relics had been collected. All the ten beneficiaries erected stūpas over their acquisitions and honoured them as promised. These no doubt became subsequently places of pilgrimage and objects of veneration to gain long lasting benefit and happiness (dīgharattaṃ hitāya sukhāya), as foretold in the conversation of the Buddha with Ānanda with regard to the stūpa to be raised for the Tathāgata, not anticipating the partition of the relics and raising more than one stūpa. The Buddha thereafter explains that there are altogether four persons worthy of a stūpa, namely, besides the Tathāgata, also a pacceka buddha, a Buddha’s disciple (of at least the first degree of sanctity: tathāgatassa sāvako) and a universal monarch (‘wheel-turning king’, cakkavatti rāja). Even just a thought, presumably when visiting these stūpas, of those who are enshrined in them has the effect of purifying the mind (cittaṃ pasadeti) and securing rebirth in heaven (DN II 142–43). Veneration of the stūpa with flowers, perfumes and sandal powder would eventually turn into worship (pūjito) as transpires from the verses added at the end of the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (DN II 168).

Only one of the ten stūpas has been identified in modern times — the one built by the Sakyas in their territory at a place known today as Piprahwa near the Nepalese border. There is a large brick mound at Kusinārā which has never been opened and may be what is left of the original stūpa built by the Mallas for their portion of the relics. But the stūpa of the Sakyas was identified already in 1897.
In January 1898 it was opened and a small casket was found bearing around it a crude inscription in a difficult form of Prākrit, whose meaning was not immediately obvious and whose authenticity was at first doubted. Inside it were some ashes and jewels. After lengthy controversies involving English, French and German scholars, the inscription was accepted as genuine and stemming from post-Aśoka times but before the Maurya dynasty was ousted. There are still uncertainties about the exact meaning of the inscription, but it suggests some kind of dedication of relics and gifts put there by the Sakyas probably during the second opening of the stūpa (cf. Allen 2003, 274ff.); on the first opening, see below.

Early in 1976, during wider excavations of the site by a team of the Archaeological Survey of India, an opening was dug out on the eastern side of the stūpa. The excavation reached into the virgin soil and just under the foundations of the original stūpa were found two caskets with bone relics. It is now assumed that these are genuine Buddha-relics which were put back after a larger portion of them had been taken out for redistribution during the first opening of the stūpa under Aśoka; thereafter the original smaller stūpa was enlarged (cf. Allen 2008, throughout).

**THE BEGINNINGS OF THE CONTROVERSY**

Whether there is textual evidence that monks should abstain from worshipping the relics of the Buddha or not depends, in the first place, on the interpretation of a passage in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (DN II 141 ff). The passage describes a scene, shortly before the Buddha’s demise, during which Ānanda asked:

\[ \text{kathaṃ mayaṃ bhante tathāgatassa sarīre paṭipajjāmā} \]

*How do we act, Sir, with respect to the Tathāgata’s body?*

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

The Buddha’s answer was grammatically unequivocal, employing the second person plural throughout, thereby including in his admonition the wider community of monks (*bhikkhusaṅgha*) and no doubt also committed lay disciples (*upāsakas*):
avyāvaṭā tumhe ānanda hotha tathāgatassa sarīrapūjāya, inṛgha tumhe ānanda sadatthe
ghaṭatha, sadattham anuyuṇjatha, sadatthe appamattā ātāpino pahitattā viharatha/
santānanda khattiyapāṇḍitā pi brāhmaṇapāṇḍitā pi gahapatipāṇḍitā pi tathāgata
abhīppasannā, te tathāgatassā sarīrapūjaṃ karissanti

Do not concern yourselves, Ānanda, with honouring the Tathāgata’s body; get on, Ānanda, exert yourselves with respect to the true goal, dedicate yourselves to the true goal, be heedful of the true goal, stay zealous and resolute. There are, Ānanda, wise noblemen, wise Brahmins and wise householders devoted to the Tathāgata, they will do honour to the Tathāgata’s body (or relics?).

It is not credible that the Buddha would have directed this admonition solely to Ānanda, as some interpreters (eg. Schopen 1997, 100) would have it, and it is highly unlikely that it was meant for all monks and nuns (the saṅgha as a whole), which has been so far the majority view of scholars (see below). It was most likely meant for those who, like Ānanda, had not yet reached arahatship, and this would include also committed lay practitioners of the Buddha’s eightfold path. Concern with ‘honouring the Tathāgata’s body’ would be for them only a distraction which would slow down their progress on the path, as already suggested above.

There are two or maybe three problems resulting from the Buddha’s use of the expression sarīrapūjā in connection with the treatment of his body after death. The word pūjā generally refers to any kind of devotional ritual, usually directed to a deity, and in this context is readily translated as ‘worship’, but it can also mean ‘doing homage’, ‘showing respect’ or ‘honouring’. It certainly suggests that the Buddha expected his body to be treated with ceremonial respect, but it is not obvious whether the expression sarīrapūjā included also the way in which his body was to be disposed of, in other words the procedures for funeral. As indicated above, it is not entirely clear from the formulation of Ānanda’s question whether he himself was asking for a hint as to how monks should show respect to the Buddha’s body in a ceremonial way when approaching it for a parting glimpse of their teacher, or whether he meant also the arrangements concerning his funeral. If so, it would be the task for laymen since, as pointed out above, monks are never mentioned as making provisions for funerals of fellow monks, so it is highly unlikely that their involvement in the Buddha’s funeral would be a consideration. Walshe’s translation of the second sentence in the Buddha’s reply (‘Do not worry yourselves about the funeral arrangements, Ānanda’, Walshe, 1987, 264) limits here the meaning of sarīrapūjā to the funeral arrangements; this is unwarranted and unhelpfully evades the issue of whether the Buddha advised against the ceremonial honouring of his body or relics.

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

The word sarīra/śarīra when used on its own in other Pāli and Sanskrit texts, both in the singular and in the plural, invariably means ‘body’, whether the perishable living one or a dead one, but in the plural it can refer, in connection with deceased persons, to what is left of their bodies after cremation, mostly bones. In the compound sarīrapūjā it can mean either, since it can stand there for either the singular or plural. The compound can therefore be translated as ‘honouring the body’ or ‘honouring the relics’. The latter meaning is often worded as ‘the worship of the relics’ or ‘relic worship’. This is where a kind of ambiguity originated concerning the meaning of sarīrapūjā which has reverberated throughout the centuries till the present time, causing a certain confusion about the meaning of the whole passage.

Ānanda, after the Buddha’s admonition directed both to himself and to the wider community of dedicated followers to see to their liberation rather than be bothered with honouring his body (or relics), let alone with funeral arrangements, asked another slightly modified question which was more to the point. This question can be understood as seeking detailed instructions for the way in which his teacher’s body should be dealt with after death, including preparations for its disposal and the treatment of the relics after the traditional cremation which would, clearly, involve the wider community:

katham pana bhante tathāgatassa sarīre paṭipajjitabban

How, then, Sir, should the Tathāgata’s body be acted upon?

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

yathā kho ānanda rañño cakkavattissa sarīre paṭipajjanti evaṃ tathāgatassa sarīre paṭipajjitabban

After a further question from Ānanda about how this was done, the Buddha described in detail how the body should be prepared and added that after the cremation a stūpa should be erected for the Tathāgata (tathāgatassa thūpo kātabbo, DN II 142).

The Buddha’s use of the word Tathāgata instead of sarīra, which in this context would have had to mean ‘relics’ and be in the plural, may be significant for the later development of buddhology. It suggests that his relics were not the same as relics of ordinary persons, but represented him in his transcendental state. This may be perhaps a first hint of a developing trend which eventually culminated in the Trikāya doctrine. However, this does not solve the dilemma as to the full meaning of sarīrapūjā in the Buddha’s reply to Ānanda’s first question. Ānanda does not help us either. When, on another occasion (DN II 147), he urged the Buddha not to pass away (parinibbāyatu) in an insignificant town amidst jungle such as Kusināra, but to go near a big city where there were many proper-
tied noblemen, Brahmins and householders who would render him due honour after his demise, he used the same ambiguous compound (tathāgatassa sarīrapūjaṃ karissanti). Did he refer solely to honouring the Tathāgata's body before cremation or only to honouring his relics after the cremation, or both? In any case the building of a stūpa for the Tathāgata would certainly involve lay followers of means who would be capable of such an undertaking. It is only in the request of eight groups of such followers for ‘a portion of the Lord’s relics’ (bhagavato sarīrānam bhāgam, DN II 164ff.) that the unambiguous plural occurs; and they all also promised to erect a stūpa over the relics and hold a festival honouring them.

The treatment of the Buddha’s body after his parinibbāna followed the instructions given to Ānanda and was executed by members of the tribe of the Mallas on whose territory the Buddha passed away. Then they spent the days prior to his cremation paying homage to his body with dance, song, music, flower-garlands and perfume and erecting canopies and pavilions, honouring and worshipping it (bhagavato sarīrāṃ ... mānëntā pūjentā...). So all that the term sarīrapūjā may have involved before and after cremation was taken care of by laity and no monks needed to concern themselves with any of it. When the body of the Buddha was burnt (daddhe kho pana bhagavato sarīre) and the pyre extinguished (presumably to preserve the bones), the Mallas brought the relics (bhagavato sarīrāni) into their council hall and performed for seven days the same ceremonies they had done around the funeral pyre before the cremation; this time there is no ambiguity in terminology (DN II 164).

Already quite early in the post-canonical Pāli texts the ambiguity of the Buddha’s reply to Ānanda’s first question created confusion and different interpretations still occur. This confusion was added to by T. W. and C. A. F Rhys Davids’s translation of the term sarīra by the ambiguous plural term ‘remains’ instead of the univocal ‘body’ in all instances referred to above (T. W. & C. A. F. Rhys Davids, 1959, p.154ff.). Walshe followed suit and translated Ānanda’s first question ‘Lord, what are we to do with the Tathāgata’s remains?’ (Walshe, 1987, 264), thereby perpetuating the ambiguity for English readers till the present time. The Oxford Dictionary of Current English does allow the usage of ‘remains’ for ‘a person’s body after death’ (besides ‘historical or archaeological remains’) and it may be so used in an appropriate situation by English natives, but it is inappropriate in a scholarly translation of a text concerned with procedures applied to a deceased person and used by foreign speakers of English who would be almost invariably led to understand the plural term ‘remains’ as meaning ‘relics’ left after the cremation.

In contrast, the BPS translation of the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (Last Days of the Buddha 1964, 62) renders sarīra in the singular correctly as ‘body’ in all instances, possibly following Ernst Waldschmidt, a German scholar, whose work would have been known to the BPS editor Nyanaponika Thera, himself a German. When Waldschmidt summarised the relevant passage, he used the terms ‘body’ (Körper) and ‘corpse’ (Leichnam) and ‘festivities in connection with the corpse’ (Leichenfeierlichkeiten) when referring to Ānanda’s questions and the following passages, showing that he clearly understood that sarīrapūjā in the Buddha’s answer referred to his dead body and not relics (Waldschmidt 1944–1948, 210–214; 1950–1951, 358). Yet in the passage referred to above in which Ānanda urged the Buddha to pass away near some big city, the BPS translation (1964, 66) renders
the phrase tathāgatassa sarīrapūjaṃ karissanti ‘they will render due honour to the remains of the Tathāgata’, thus regarding sarīra in the compound as plural (as does the PTS translation). This again suggests the situation after the cremation and adds to the confusion.

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

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

> bhāsitam p’ etan tathāgatena avyāvatā tumhe ānanda hotha tathāgatassa sarīrapūjāyāti puna ca bhanitaṃ

> pūjetha naṃ pūjaniyassa dhātum evaṅkaraḥ saagam ito gamisathāti

Thus it was said by the Tathāgata: ‘Do not concern yourselves, Ānanda, with honouring the Tathāgata’s body [or relics]’. And again it was proclaimed [by him]: ‘Honour the relic of one worthy of being honoured; acting thus you will go from here to heaven’.

It appears that the king understands sarīra (body) in the compound as referring to relics (and therefore as plural) and as being the equivalent of dhātu (relic) in the second statement. T. W. Rhys Davids again translates the compound sarīrapūjā as ‘honouring the remain’ (this time, I suppose, also understanding correctly that it refers to actual ‘relics’ and not to ‘body’) and dhātu as ‘relic’ (Rhys Davids, T. W. 1963, 246). Nyanatiloka’s German translation renders both sarīra and dhātu as ‘bodily remnants’ (Körperreste, Nyāṇatiloka 1919, 273), no doubt meaning actual ‘relics’ in both cases. The one who wanted to know which one of these two seemingly contradictory statements was correct. Nāgasena replied:

> Taṇci pana na sabbesam jinaputtānaṃ yeva ārabha bhānitaṃ abhayāvatā tumhe ānanda hotha tathāgatassa sarīrapūjāyāti akammaṃ h’etam mahārāja jinaputtānaṃ yadidaṃ pūjā sammasanaṃ sankhāraṇāṃ yoniso manaskāro satipaṭṭhānānupassanaṃ ārammanāsāraagāho kilesayuddhaṃ sadatthanaṃ avasēṇaṃ devamanussanāṃ pūjā karānīyā.
It was not with reference to all, but only to Sons of the Victor\(^3\) when it was said: ‘Do not concern yourselves, Ānanda, with honouring the Tathāgata’s body [or relics].’ Veneration is not the activity for Sons of the Victor; insight into compounded things, profound attentive contemplation of the foundations of mindfulness (\textit{satipaṭṭhāna}), grasp of the true nature of sense objects, the fight against impurity and dedication to the true goal is what Sons of the Victor should practise, leaving to gods and men to do reverential acts.

This passage is clearly an expanded echo of the Buddha’s answer to Ānanda’s first question in the \textit{Mahāparinibbāna Sutta} meant for those of his disciples who had not yet been liberated, but were on the path. The unusual term \textit{jinaputtā} may be equated with the term \textit{sāvaka}, meaning a disciple who is at least a person firmly established on the path leading to realising stream-entry (\textit{sotāpatti-phala-sacchikiriyāya patiṭpanno}), but in this context the exclusion of relic-worship for \textit{jinaputtas} surely excludes \textit{arahats} who have reached the true goal and need not struggle any longer so that reverential acts would not be a diversion or loss of time for them. The admonition not to perform reverential acts did not of course apply to most lay followers of the Buddha and may not have applied to monks who had not yet become at least established on the path to stream-entry either, since it would be regarded as beneficial for their general frame of mind; besides, it transpires even from early sources that some monks did not undertake strict practices but instead pursued learning and rational discussion or specialised in memorising certain groups of the Buddha’s discourses. This is reflected in the twin concepts of \textit{sāvakasaṅgha} and \textit{bhikkhusaṅgha}, the latter being the community of ordained monks and nuns some of whom would be \textit{puthujjana}, ‘worldlings’, without any of the four degrees of spiritual achievement or the path certain to lead to these, and the former being the community of \textit{ariya puggalas}, ‘noble persons’, who had reached the path that is certain to result in stream-entry or higher stages of accomplishment and might include not only monks, but also dedicated lay practitioners with such achievements; this is the invisible community to which Buddhists take refuge when pronouncing the third refuge formula (\textit{MN I 37}; cf. Walpola Rahula 1978, 56ff.). However, T. W. Rhys Davids (1963, 246, note 3) favours the view that the term \textit{jinaputtā} refers to all members of the Order (\textit{bhikkhus}) which would include even monks who are \textit{puthujjanas}. This is manifestly wrong. Nyanatiloka (1919, 274), too, is wrong, translating the term as ‘disciples’ without further specification (\textit{die Jünger des Siegreichen}) so that it could include even lay \textit{puthujjanas}. Wrong understanding of the nature of the third refuge, as if it referred just to the ‘visible’ \textit{saṅgha}, i.e. all ordained monks, including those who are not noble persons but not including lay practitioners with such achievements, still occurs among Buddhist followers and some books on Buddhism.

Waldschmidt’s correct rendering of \textit{sarīre} does not help to clarify the issue of honouring or worshipping the body or relics of the Buddha by monks, since he refers in his summary only to the treatment of the Buddha’s body (\textit{wie sie [ie. monks] mit dem Körper des Buddha verfahren sollten}) and to festivities (\textit{Leichenfeierlichkeiten}) surrounding his corpse which was a matter for the laymen (Waldschmidt 1950–51, 358).

\(^3\) The title ‘\textit{Jina}, Victor, is another title of the Buddha, although it has become more used for Vardhamana Mahāvīra and gave Jainism its name.
The problem was not long ago newly addressed by Schopen. He may or may not have known Waldschmidt’s comments, but in any case he understood that T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids’s rendering of the term *sarīra* by the ambiguous plural term ‘remains’, instead of by the univocal ‘body’, is open to misunderstanding; he was aware that their rendering was the ‘still-standard English translation’ and that it enabled the shifting of the meaning of *sarīra* at DN I 141 even to relics in *stūpas* (Schopen 1997, 100–01). He provided references showing that the confusion around the *stūpa* worship by monks — its acceptability or otherwise — has been perpetuated till the present day by quoting N. Dutt (‘advanced monks were not to occupy themselves with such worship of *stūpas*’ which ‘should be left to the laity alone’, Dutt, 1945, 250) and Hirakawa (... ‘śarīrapūjā, the worship of relics, is the concern of laity and not the *bhikṣusaṅgha*’, Hirakawa 1963, 102). Hirakawa reaffirmed his view by a later statement (containing an inaccurate quotation):

> During the early period of Buddhism offerings to the Buddha’s relics (*śarīra-pūjā*) were made by laymen. According to the Mahāparinibbāna Suttanta, the Buddha was asked by Ānanda what type of ceremony should be held for the Buddha’s remains. The Buddha replied ‘You should strive for the true goal (*sadattha*) of emancipation (*vimokṣa*)’. The Buddha thus prohibited monks from having any connection with his funeral ceremonies and instead called upon wise and pious lay believers to conduct the ceremonies. (Hirakawa 1987, 8796)

Schopen also assembled references to other scholars, earlier and contemporary, who drew a similar conclusion, such as H. Oldenberg, É. Lamotte, D. L. Snellgrove, A. Barea, and R. Gombrich, and pointed out the vacillation in the translation of the term *śarīrapūjā* in the works of even the ‘great’ L. de La Vallée-Poussin.

The problem with Schopen’s approach is that he concentrates on the issue of whether the Buddha’s answer to Ānanda’s first question was meant for Ānanda alone or for all monks in the sense of a rule of conduct for the whole *saṅgha*. He thus limits the possible interpretation to only two alternatives and does not consider the possibility that the Buddha’s answer to Ānanda’s first question was not a negative injunction to be incorporated into the code of discipline (which would be eventually codified in *Vinaya Piṭaka*, but in fact was not). It was rather the positive and urgent *advice* of a dying teacher to his serious disciples to get on with their spiritual practice leading to liberation. By choosing the first alternative, Schopen barks up the wrong tree. He writes: ‘The injunction, if it is an injunction, is addressed to Ānanda, not to all monks’ (Schopen 1997, 100). He then tries to deduce from other passages, in a convoluted and unconvincing way, that *mayaṃ*, ‘we’, (in Ānanda’s questions) excluded other monks (Schopen 1997, 100–101.). If he were right, it would have to be, on the part of Ānanda, a kind of ‘royal we’ (*pluralis maiestaticus*). Schopen does not attempt to explain away in a similar fashion the plural *avyāvaṭā tumhe ... hotha* etc. in the Buddha’s reply, which is grammatically plural and logically unequivocal in being meant for a wider community of monks and lay followers treading the path and not just for Ānanda. This alternative never occurred to Schopen.

In his second point — arguing that the meaning of *sarīra* in the compound in the Buddha’s answer can only be interpreted as singular — Schopen is of course right, although he is, so to speak, discovering America after Columbus in view of Waldschmidt’s remarks and the BPS translation of the text (as cited above). The clearly correct translation of the compound in the context does not really need
such lengthy and elaborate justification as is provided by Schopen. He is also right when he arrives at the obvious conclusion that ‘Ānanda, in his question, was not asking about his or anyone else’s participation in the relic cult’ and that ‘he was asking about how the body of the Buddha should be treated immediately after his death, about what we would call “the funeral arrangements”’ (Schopen 1997, 103).

But as I explained above, the treatment of the Buddha’s body immediately after death or, better expressed, the behaviour of monks and others towards his body immediately after death and arrangements for its disposal are two different procedures, and it is not certain that sarīrapūjā includes both (which Schopen fails to appreciate). The third procedure would be the future honouring or saluting the stūpa containing the relics (or stūpas as symbols of his continued presence even if they are empty, since the Buddha says that a stūpa should be built for the Tathāgata and not for his relics). Schopen is of course right in maintaining that activities around the stūpa built later for the Tathāgata which the Buddha says would benefit those performing them ‘were not thought to form a part of sarīrapūjā’ (ibid.). Nevertheless, owing to the confusion reflected in the quoted passage in Milindapañha, a shift in the meaning of the term sarīrapūjā at DN I 141 did occur and went eventually as far as its usage for acts of relic and stūpa worship.

PŪJĀ AND VANDANĀ

The attitude of monks to the Buddha’s body prior to cremation as reflected in their behaviour in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta throws, if considered carefully, clear light on the whole problem. The passing away of the Buddha appears to have been observed by direct perception by the accomplished Anuruddha Thera, who corrected at a particular point of time Ānanda’s statement that the Buddha had passed away (parinibbuto) by saying that he was in the state of suspension of perception and feeling (saññāvedayitanirodhaṃ, DN II 156). The subsequent description of the Buddha’s passage down through the four arūpa jhāna and rūpa jhāna and then again up the rūpa jhāna and finally his passing away from the fourth rūpa jhāna was crowned by Anuruddha’s comment confirming the final release (nibbānaṃ). Thereupon Anuruddha admonished those monks who had started lamenting and reminded them of the basic teaching of transitoriness, and then he spent the night with Ānanda discussing the teaching (dhammiyā kathāya). In the morning Anuruddha sent Ānanda to the Mallas with the news. There is no mention whatsoever of any acts of veneration by either of them or by the previously lamenting monks which would be directed towards the Buddha’s body. It may well be that it was because the Buddha’s admonition not to be concerned with honouring his body was so recent and was therefore faithfully followed by Anuruddha and Ānanda as well as all the monks present.

Another foremost monk, Mahākassapa, was at the time on his way to Kusināra, accompanied by five hundred monks, and seeing an Ājīvaka wanderer asked him whether he knew of the Master. The wanderer replied that the ascetic Gotama had passed away a week before. A similar admonition as the one by Anuruddha to monks who had witnessed the Buddha’s passing was directed by Mahākassapa to those monks in his retinue who started lamenting on hearing the news (DN II 162–163). Meanwhile, after a week of paying homage to the body of the Buddha with song, dance and music, the Mallas prepared it, as advised, for cremation. At that point Mahākassapa arrived, still before the funeral pyre could be lit.
He bowed to the body of the Buddha with clasped hands, three times circumambulated the pyre, uncovered the Buddha’s feet and paid homage to them with his head (bhagavato pāde sirasā vandi). The monks in his retinue did the same. The use of the verb vandati does not suggest ceremonial ‘worship’ (pūjā), but a deep honouring, a reverential act on a par with reverential greetings of the Buddha during his lifetime, now of course strengthened in outward expression as it was for the last time.

How, then, is the question of whether or not ‘relic worship’ is ‘permitted’ to monks to be resolved? First of all it is necessary to use, as far as possible, the correct terminology. Performing a pūjā would mean ritual or ceremonial worship, perhaps as was done at some point by the Mallas (bhagavato sarīraṃ ... pūjentā...) in the week before setting the funeral pyre alight. But performing a vandanā or saluting a person or a departed person’s body, which may also be done ceremonially and in a traditional way, is a different matter. Second, it is advisable to go by the text of the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, which can be regarded as more reliable and older than any Vinaya texts mentioning relic worship which are presumably based on original Sanskrit or some Prākrit texts and are preserved mostly in Chinese translations. Pāli Vinaya does not contain any references to stūpa or relic worship; Schopen’s (1997, 86–94) tenuous arguments that they had been removed are implausible. The Buddha’s reply to Ānanda’s first question is not formulated as an injunction to be included in the code of discipline, but rather in the form of advice from an accomplished teacher. It makes perfect sense as such in the context of a practical teaching geared to final liberation from limited forms of existence whether in this world or in the heavens, let alone in lower worlds. But it can be reasonably assumed that the advice not to be concerned with the honouring of his body and/or relics (tathāgatassa sarīrapūjā) does not include ceremonial salutations (vandanā) as performed by Mahākassapa and after him by monks in his retinue. Various forms of honouring the Buddha’s relics (and stūpas and, in time, also images) have thereafter became a standard procedure both for monks and laity, in some cases turning into veritable acts of worship.

One can observe the difference even nowadays. Watching the procedures staged by monks and the observances followed by lay people when the tooth relic in the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy is on display, one is hardly in any doubt that worship is taking place so that the Buddha’s admonition or advice to his serious disciples is not being followed by the officiating monks, but this is of course a matter of individual inclination or choice. When accompanying a group of pilgrims in Mihintale who were placing lotus flowers in front of the main stūpa and circumambulating it while reciting the praises of the Triple Gem, there was no doubt in my mind that this was not a pūjā, but an enthusiastic vandanā which would not be an impediment on the path. However, the fact remains that neither Anuruddha and Ānanda nor the other monks present at the time in the place where the Buddha spoke his last words and died performed either a pūjā or even a vandanā as Mahākassapa did when he arrived later. Why? There is therefore room for further reflection.
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THE CHINESE INPUT

It is remarkable that the confusion around the meaning of sarīrapūjā at DN I 141 which started with Milindapañha and was added to by its less than thoughtful rendering by T. W. and C. A. F Rhys Davids (described by Schopen as the ‘still-standard English translation’ and admissible in the context by The Oxford Dictionary of Current English as pointed out above) lingers on. (It is unfortunately perpetuated by Walshe, 1987). That this can be so even in Japan is all the more remarkable in the light of research by Jonathan A. Silk. He was prompted by Schopen’s work to reinvestigate the problem and drew on the evidence which can be deduced from Chinese translations parallel to the Pāli passage, although these are based on different versions of the Sanskrit Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra or possibly even on Gandhāri or some other Prākrit texts. Their wording therefore differs to some extent from the neatly redacted Pāli text produced when the whole Pāli Canon was committed to writing in the first century BCE (cf. Waldschmidt 1944–1948, 214–16), but the differences do not actually influence the issue discussed.

Silk endorsed Schopen’s interpretation of sarīrapūjā at DN I 141 as pūjā directed at the Buddha’s body, while also being aware of Waldschmidt’s remarks (although unaware of the clear BPS translation of the relevant passage), and says that ‘it will be very interesting to note that this interpretation is also comprehensively and quite unambiguously supported by the Chinese translations of the sūtra’ (Silk 2006, 11).

The term used in Chinese translations for the body is shēn or tǐ, or the compound shēntǐ. The term for relics is shèli. Silk provides four translations of the relevant passage, an anonymous one (dated 317–420 or possibly even 220–252 if it can be attributed to Zhi Qian), one by Bo Fazu (290–306), one by Buddhayaśas and helpers (413) and the last one by Faxian, the famous pilgrim to India (417) (Silk 2006, 16–18). In each instance a clear distinction is made by the use of the terms which designate body (shēn or tǐ, or shēntǐ) before cremation and the term shèli for the remains after cremation. The translators clearly understood the difference before and after the cremation and their terminology does not contain any ambiguity which would create or perpetuate any confusion. Three translations have different formulations of Ānanda’s questions, making him ask how the Buddha’s funeral should be performed. Only Faxian’s translation makes him ask about the procedure for worshipping the Buddha after his demise. But no ambiguous compound comparable to śarīrapūjā appears in the Chinese texts.

The Buddha’s answer, after reminding Ānanda not to concern himself with ‘these things’ and to uphold the True Teaching, is that gods, Brahmins, kings and householders will worship his body (shēn). After cremation his relics (shèli) should be collected and a stūpa built; reverence paid to it will bring benefit. But then comes a somewhat obscure addition saying that in future ‘others will erect great stūpas and worship its body (their bodies) (shēn)’. Here is an ambiguity and a shift from the events contemporary with the Buddha’s demise and funeral to the future cult of stūpas. This may be one reason for the perpetuation of confusion about relic worship even among some modern scholars acquainted with Chinese materials (cf. Hirakawa, 1963, 102, and the critical stance by Silk, 2002, 16–18). But we may have here, in the use of the term ‘body’ (shēn, Sanskrit kāya) present in newly built stūpas, another hint of the developing Trikāya doctrine.
Silk (2006) investigates the Chinese terminology for the ‘body’ and ‘relics’ in several other texts, but the results do not have any bearing on the problem discussed here. However, a passage from Saddharmapundarika (Lotus) Sūtra is of interest, because it appears to represent a further step towards the emergence of the Trikāya doctrine. Silk chose it to illustrate how clearly the Sanskrit text of the Lotus Sūtra distinguishes the difference between the singular and plural use of śarīra. But the important passage is the one in which the Buddha says that wherever an exposition of his Dharma will be presented, a precious shrine should be built for the Tathāgata, but ‘Tathāgata’s relics (tathāgataśarīrāṇi) need not necessarily be installed there. Why? [Because] the Tathāgata’s body is truly placed there [already] as one compact substance (ekaghanam eva tasmiṃs tathāgataśarīram upaniṣiptam bhavati)’ (Wogihara and Tsuchida 1935, 201; Kern 1963, 220). Kumārajīva’s translation is equally grammatically accurate (shēlī for śarīrāni and shēn for śarīrā). The assertion, put in the Lotus Sūtra into the mouth of the cosmic Buddha Śākyamuni, that no relics need be placed in stūpas since the Tathāgata was already present in them with his full substance may have been a further elaboration of the Buddha’s instruction in the Pāli Canon, referred to above, that after his cremation a stūpa should be built for the Tathāgata. The Chinese translation of the phrase Tathāgata’s ‘body ... as one compact substance’ is made with a simple compound quánshēn meaning ‘whole body’ and is thus an even clearer indication of the process towards the theory of three ‘bodies’. Even Silk recognised that the ‘issue’ in this text was ‘less one of philology than of doctrine’ (Silk 2006, 61–63). The notion that the Tathāgata was present ‘with his whole body’ or his ‘body ... as one compact substance’ in stūpas which did not contain relics of his earthly body strengthened the stūpa cult in the Mahāyāna, but it had a strong effect also on the Śrāvakayāna, including Theravāda after Aśoka’s time when splinters from original Buddha relics for new stūpa were in short supply or unobtainable.

**SOLUTION AND CONCLUSION**

Returning to the question of the meaning of the Buddha’s reply to Ānanda’s first question and to whom it was directed, it actually seems that when all the considered interpretations are taken into account, it is pointless to make any distinction between sāvakabhikkhus or ‘sons of the Victor’, puthujjanabhikkhus or ordinary monks not yet advanced on the path and lay people of whatever degree of accomplishment or none when pondering the problem of who supposedly is and who is not allowed to worship the Buddha’s relics. The question is best understood as having been directed to all earnest practitioners of the path — lay, ordained, advanced or not. There is one passage in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (DN II 138) which solves the issue in a fully comprehensive way:

When the Buddha rested on his final day in the Sāla Grove of the Mallas, flow- ers showered down on him from the trees and other signs of reverence are said to have supernaturally occurred. This may be viewed as the elaboration of the compiler of the sutta, but the Buddha’s sober words have a ring of a genuine pronouncement made by him:

Na kho ānanda ettāvatā tathāgato sakkato vā hoti garukato vā mānito vā pūjito vā apacito vā yo kho ānanda bhikkhu vā bhikkhuni vā upāsako vā upāsikā vā dhammānudhamma-
paṭipanno viharati samīci paṭipanno anudhamma cārī so tathāgatam sakkaroti garukaroti māneti pūjeto paramāya pūjāya tasmāt ihānanda dhammānudhamma paṭipannā viharissāma samīci paṭipannā anudhamma cārino ti evaṃhi vo ṣaṃhita vo ṣaṃhita
ti

Not really thus, Ānanda, is the Tathāgata fully honoured, revered, highly regarded, venerated, esteemed. Whichever monk or nun or lay male or female follower who, practising Dhamma in accordance with Dhamma, practising properly, lives in accordance with Dhamma, [such a one] truly honours, reveres, highly regards, venerates Tathāgata with the highest homage. Therefore, Ānanda, practise Dhamma in accordance with Dhamma, practise properly, live in accordance with Dhamma. Thus, Ānanda, should it be taught.

This is surely the ultimate word. This is, the Buddha clearly says, how the message should be taught to anybody who aims at final liberation, regardless of formal status or realised stage of accomplishment, which also includes total but determined beginners. Embark on the path to freedom and persevere until the goal is reached. But directed as it is to all, this is not an injunction which would lend itself to becoming a formal vinaya rule for the bhikkhusaṅgha. It is purely and simply ardent advice for serious practice on the path.

By its nature this passage also solves the problem of worship of relics and stūpas by monks. It neither expressly excludes nor forbids worship or salutation (pūjā or vandanā) of the Buddha’s body or relics to anybody. But it goes without saying that these acts do not by themselves lead to stages on the path to liberation, let alone to liberation itself. They may, of course, secure a favourable rebirth within the confines of saṃsāra (as at DN II 142–143), albeit with its intrinsic danger of straying away from the true path if at least the first stage on the path (practising for the realisation of stream-entry) has not been reached.

One practising for stream-entry must have the four factors for stream-entry (sotāpattiyaṅgas), which ‘when developed and cultivated lead to the realisation of the fruit that is stream-entry’, or to the other three noble fruits, or the growth of wisdom. These four factors are: association with genuine persons (sappurisās); hearing the true Dhamma (sadhamma); profound attention (yoniso-manasikāra), i.e. meditative practice or mindful reflection; practice of Dhamma in accordance with Dhamma (dhammānudhamma-paṭipatti) (as in the above passage). It 81–2 explains a dhammānudhamma-paṭipanna person as one who speaks only of Dhamma when he speaks, and thinks only of Dhamma when he thinks (vitakketi), so as to have equanimity and be mindful and with clear comprehension. Hence he is delighting in Dhamma (Dhammārāmo) and one who ponders (anuvicintayaṃ) and recollects (anussaraṃ) Dhamma. Whatever he is doing, he causes his citta to settle internally.

To attain the level described in the last paragraph, an individual must realise the limitations of anything still within saṃsāra, and so aim beyond this. This is the point at which, when it is understood, individual choice is made as to the direction to take in life. This is also the point which, it appears, both the king Milinda and the monk Nāgasena (or the compiler of the book) missed and which many subsequent interpreters failed to appreciate. The reason for it is the stance, which possibly set in quite early after the Buddha’s departure, according to which

4. DN III 227 makes clear that the four ‘factors of stream-entry’, also sotāpattiyaṅgas, mean factors of the stream-enterer (sotāpannassa aṅgāni). This paragraph of explanation has been supplied by the editor

almost everything that the Buddha supposedly said concerning the behaviour of monks came to be regarded as an injunction or rule and was incorporated into the Vinaya Piṭaka or Code of Discipline which acquired utmost importance for the monks so that it overshadowed the most urgent advice of the teacher to all and its true meaning could be overlooked. That is when an originally pragmatic teaching of liberation offered by one who himself had reached it to individuals who truly felt the need to escape from the unsatisfactory conditions of life as we know it was gradually transformed into a formalised religious system.

ABBREVIATIONS

AN   Anguttara Nikāya
AN-a Commentary on AN
BPS Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka
Dhp Dhammapada
DN Dīgha Nikāya
DN-a Commentary on DN
It Itivuttaka
Miln. Milindapañha
MN Majjhima Nikāya
PTS Pāli Text Society
Sn Sutta-nipāta
SN Saṁyutta Nikāya

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