Origins 8: Burning (Ādittapariyāya Sutta)

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 55:30

So over past nights we've been going through the early days of the Buddha's career. We're looking at the months in which he basically invents Buddhism. Tonight we come to the Āditta Pariyāya Sutta, or simply "Burning." This is the third teaching, the third discourse, completing the trilogy that began with the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta—rolling the dharma wheel, his first discourse—then the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, the not-self characteristic. These two first discourses were taught at Isipatana, just north of Vārāṇasī. This third discourse is taught south of Gayā, about 255 kilometers to the east, on a hill called Gayāsīsa, or Gayā Head.

Before we get to the discourse, we have to understand how the Buddha got there and who his audience was. So tonight is partly story time.

The Buddha delivers his first two discourses, and at the end of it he's got five fully awakened students—these are the five bhikkhus. He and his students spend some time at Isipatana, which is just north of Vārāṇasī, a major commercial center. Over this time the Buddha teaches a number of people and converts them, and more importantly, they start to get enlightened. Lay people begin to hit the first stage of enlightenment. It's here, when he's working with the Vārāṇasī merchant class—they all seem to be basically the capitalists—that the Buddha develops the template that has become known as the gradual training. He works out a basic template for teaching in which he can lead people from the beginning all the way to awakening.

After some time there are sixty bhikkhus in the Saṅgha, and all of them are arahants. All of them are fully awakened—good standard. Then the Buddha decides it's time to move on, and he sends them out into the world to spread his message. He says, "Go wandering for the welfare and happiness of humanity, out of compassion for the world, for the benefit, welfare and happiness of devas and people." Notice the devas. Does he mean it? Maybe, probably. "Each of you travel by a different way. Teach the Dhamma, which is lovely at the beginning, lovely in the middle, lovely in the ending, in both its essence and its letter."

It's interesting that we began with the newly awakened Buddha thinking, "I won't teach because no one is going to get this." Really only a matter of months later, he's not only got sixty fully awakened students, he's sending them out into the world to convert the multitude. He's got such confidence in them that he sends them out alone, to operate and teach as they individually see fit. A tremendous amount of confidence.

But as for the Buddha himself, he's got his own plans. He says, "I shall go to Uruvelā, to Senānigama, to teach the Dhamma." He's got a specific destination in mind. Uruvelā is to the southwest, on the near side of the Nerañjarā River, while Gayā is on the far side. This is the Buddha's old stamping ground—this is

where he practiced asceticism. He knows this area, and he knows the people in it, particularly the ascetics. And of course the ascetics know him. But they know him as a kind of champion ascetic. They don't know him as a Buddha. So the Buddha is heading there on a missionary journey, and he's very clear in his target. He's got someone in mind whom he wants to convert.

The Buddha heads off there and enters into the territory of the three dreadlock wearers. These are the jaṭilas, dreadlock-wearing ascetics, and they're also brothers. They're all called Kassapa, which indicates they're Brahmin. There's Kassapa of Uruvelā, head of 500 ascetics; Kassapa of the River, head of 300 ascetics; and Kassapa of Gayā, head of 200 ascetics. Three brothers at different points on the river, each with their own community. Now the numbers are not to be taken literally.

In an oral culture, numbers are symbolic. Five hundred simply means a great many.

So the Buddha begins with Kasapa of Uruvela. He's geographically the closest, being on the same side of the Nairanjara River. He's also the most important, and this is marked by the fact that he's the eldest brother with the largest number of students—five hundred. His hermitage is located at Sena Nigama.

The Buddha arrives, approaches Kasapa, and says, "Kasapa, if you have no objection, I should like to spend one night in your fire chamber."

Now the fire chamber is the center of their rituals, and of course fire is very important to these people. This request would have created some surprise, but Kasapa keeps his equanimity. He replies, "I have no objection, great Samana, but there is a savage royal naga living there. He has supernormal powers. He is venomous, fearfully poisonous, and quite capable of killing you."

The naga is, of course, a serpent—a powerful serpent spirit who is in a sense the patron spirit of this community. So Kasapa is basically giving the Buddha a clear warning. You notice he calls him "Great Samana," so he knows him at least by reputation. But he doesn't know him as Buddha. He knows him as a fellow ascetic. Kasapa is giving a clear warning: mess with our patron spirit at your own risk.

And the Buddha says, "Suits me," and heads into the fire chamber, where he spends the night meditating.

Now the Naga Raja, the royal serpent whose residence this is—in other words, the Buddha is essentially a gatecrasher—is a powerful spirit associated with the elements of earth, fire, and water. He's also a shapeshifter. And the serpent is pissed off with having his living room invaded. He produces smoke and flame to show his irritation.

And the Buddha produces smoke and flame. The naga can produce smoke and flame; the Buddha can produce smoke and flame. But he does it very carefully in such a way that the naga is not harmed. In other words, the Buddha is again a powerful shaman, but he acts only out of metta and karuna—love and compassion.

The naga sees this as an escalation. So he escalates and angrily blazes up in flames. The Buddha enters

into the fire element and he too blazes up in flames. Our text says, "With both of them ablaze, it was like the fire chamber itself was in flames, burning and blazing."

So what's happening outside? Basically, all the dreadlocked ascetics are gathered around watching the show. Nothing so entertaining has happened for months. They say to each other, "The great Samana, who is so beautiful, is being destroyed by the naga."

Notice how the Buddha is perceived by others. Apparently he was very good looking. A number of different people commented on his good looks and also the shine of his skin, the color of his skin. There's a community in Nepal who are Shakyas, who claim to be descendants of the Shakya clan that was wiped out—the Buddha's clan that was destroyed after his death. The refugees fled upcountry, so in the Kathmandu Valley you find these people. They're known for the golden sheen of their skin. Apparently, if you go there and look at them, you get a sense of how the Buddha himself would have looked.

Anyway, the place is burning all night. Dawn comes. No more fire. The Buddha walks out with his bowl, approaches Kasapa, and seems perfectly fine. He lifts up the lid of the bowl. Kasapa looks in and there's this tiny little snake curled up inside. The Buddha explains how the naga's fire was exhausted by his own.

And so Kasapa is pretty impressed. He thinks, "Wow, this guy is really powerful." But he also thinks, "This fellow is not an Arahant. He's not awakened like I am."

So the Buddha is essentially displaying his shamanic power. He's showing his mastery over the fire element. He has challenged, quite deliberately challenged, the Naga to a battle and won it. And now he's challenging Kasapa. Kasapa's practice revolves around the elements, and the fire element in particular. Essentially what the Buddha is saying to him, without using the words, is: "I am more powerful than you, and therefore superior." In other words, he's showing himself to be a master of one-upmanship.

But Kasapa feels that power is one thing, awakening is another. So he respects the Buddha's power and apparently welcomes him into the community as a kind of distinguished visitor, because he lives in a grove just off the main area. But Kasapa does not take the demonstration of superior power as evidence of awakening, and therefore as evidence that he's got something to learn from this person.

Kasapa is showing a stubbornness in his attitude which is very similar to that of the Buddha before his awakening. But Kasapa also shows a very good instinct, because he's absolutely right that power and awakening are not the same thing. They are different. And many a cult member has come to grief not realizing that, thinking that power equals enlightenment. It's this insight, this understanding, which may give us a clue as to one reason why the Buddha was interested in Kasapa. He sees his potential. Yet Kasapa is deluded insofar as he's convinced that he is awakened when he isn't.

So the Buddha hangs around, basically, for about twenty-four days—almost a month. He's the guest that never leaves. And over this twenty-four-day period, he performs more spectacular miracles, each miracle more spectacular than the last. He's a real showman. And each time this happens, Kasapa admires his

power, but he comes back to the same thought: "There's no reason to assume this person is awakened."

Finally, the Buddha changes tack. He thinks, and I quote, "This foolish fellow will continue thinking like this for a long time." So he's got to change direction. He decides to shock Kasapa into waking up to what's going on. And the Buddha says, "Kasapa, you are not an Arahant, and you are not on the way to becoming one. There is nothing in your practice by which you might ever become an Arahant, or enter into the way of becoming one." It's like—bing, pow, bang.

And Kasapa is convinced. Now why would he be convinced? Because over the past twenty-four days, the Buddha has made it perfectly clear that he knows and understands what Kasapa's practice is, and he's better at it. So if anybody knows where this practice leads, it's got to be this unwanted visitor. This also demonstrates that Kasapa must have been sincere in his aspiration. Because although he had convinced himself that he was awakened, he was ready to hear otherwise. He was still capable of learning.

So Kasapa surrenders and converts. But first he says, "Look, I need to consult with my students. I've got responsibilities." He consults with his five hundred ascetic followers who have been watching the show all this time. And they say, "We have long had faith in the great Samana. If you lead the highest life under him, we will do likewise." In other words, in this community, the last person to understand what was going on was Kasapa. And in this, I think, he demonstrates that he's a typical leader—the last to figure out what's going on.

And so then everybody converts. The text, which is by the way the Mahakhandaka of the Vinaya Pitaka, tells us that the ascetics, and I quote, "took their hair"—so they shaved their heads—"their dreadlocks, their belongings, and their implements for the fire sacrifice, and they dropped them into the water to be carried away." What they're doing is abandoning a way of practice which they see as incompatible with the Buddha's way of practice.

But why do they throw their implements into the river?

It's easy to think they're simply throwing them away—that now they're rubbish, so they just get rid of them. But I don't think so. I think what they're actually doing is making an offering to the devas. For them, the devas live in the river, in the water and in the fire. The river is sacred. Remember in the European tradition, we have King Arthur, who received his sword Excalibur from the Lady of the Lake. And when he died, he returned the sword to the lake. I think this is what's going on. In other words, the ascetics are not abandoning their gods. They're just changing the way they practice.

And this is very typical of the way Buddhism spreads. Buddhism does not simply reject. It absorbs. Whatever seems to be working in the community, it just takes on board.

Anyway, all this abandoned equipment flows downstream, and it's seen by Kassapa of the River, whose community is downstream. When he sees all this, he fears disaster has overtaken his older brother, and he hurries upstream with his followers, only to realize that they've all converted to this other thing. He says

to Kassapa a very sensible question: "Is this better, Kassapa?" And Kassapa says, "It is." So that group of ascetics converts.

Then at the bottom, further downstream, is Gayā Kassapa and his followers. They come up and do the same, and the same process occurs. So now the Buddha has a thousand converts, and they're ready for the teaching.

So what to do? He takes them away from the river and goes to the hill, Gayā Sīsa, where he teaches the Āditta Sutta, the discourse on burning. Gayā Sīsa is the only hill in the area—it's a flat plain and there's this one hill. They go to the top, and this is where it all happens.

So here's the discourse. The Buddha says: Everything is burning. And what is this everything that is burning? Eye sensitivity is burning. Visual forms are burning. Visual awareness is burning. Visual contact is burning. And whatever feeling arises dependent upon visual contact—whether pleasant or painful or neither painful nor pleasant—that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of obsession, with the fire of aversion, with the fire of delusion. Burning with birth, aging and death, with sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair.

Ear sensitivity is burning. Nose sensitivity is burning. Tongue sensitivity is burning. Body sensitivity is burning. Mind sensitivity is burning. Phenomena are burning. Mind awareness is burning. Mind contact is burning. And whatever feeling arises dependent upon mind contact—whether pleasant or painful or neither painful nor pleasant—that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of obsession, with the fire of aversion, with the fire of delusion. Burning with birth, aging and death, with sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair.

So let's have a look at what the Buddha is saying. First of all, again, let's go back to context. The Buddha lives at the end of what is now called the Vedic period, which runs roughly from 1500 to 500 BCE. This is a time when the tradition of the Brahmins, the Brahmanists, the Vedic tradition, had not yet developed into what we call Hinduism. This is pre-Hindu. And Vedic orthodoxy did not include ideas like karma, reincarnation, personal enlightenment, and so on. Those were borrowed from the traditions of the Ganges Valley.

So the Vedic tradition begins in the northwest, what is now Pakistan. And as the Brahmin communities head southeast, down to the Ganges Valley, they start to settle and absorb the local indigenous traditions. What we've got there is an amalgam—a multicultural amalgam.

Vedic worship centered around the elements like fire and rivers, as well as other things: the worship of Vedic gods like Indra, chanting, sacrifices. All Brahmins kept three fires burning in their houses. One to cook food, one to receive the offerings that were sacrificed, and one to ward off evil spirits. It was believed that the gods lived in the fires. And in fact, fire itself was a god—Agni. So fire played a really important role.

The dreadlocked ascetics were focused on fire worship and sacrifice, both of which come from the Vedic tradition, but also shamanism. Like Gautama in his ascetic phase, they believed that the path to awakening lay through generating tapas, which literally means heat. They do this through ascetic practice, but also through rituals.

Now, when the Buddha started to invent Buddhism, when he started to develop his doctrine, he took the Vedic symbolic imagery and reversed it. He taught that what was central was coolness, not fire. This comes through the concept of Nirvana, which means extinction—meaning the extinction of a fire, the going out of a fire. The image of fire was inverted, where fire became the problem and the extinction of fire, the solution. So you have the three fires of greed, hatred, and delusion. Everything is burning. But this burning isn't good—it's bad. He's reversing the imagery. And this reversal would certainly have attracted the attention of his audience and pushed them to see the world in a different way.

Now, their practice revolved around a felt intimacy with the elements, which was a very powerful, direct practice, basically centered on the body. The labor of preparing for the sacrifice, ritual bathing, including the cold of mid-winter bathing—this is one of their major celebrations—and so on. But this practice, in the Buddha's perspective, is limited by, among other things, dependence upon certain specific conditions.

First of all, you had to have certain possessions. You had to have the correct implements for the sacrifice and the rituals. Secondly, you had to be in the right place—the sacred places of the river and the forest that were home to particular, specific spirits whom they worshipped and whose power they harnessed. And of course, more mundane things: if you're going to burn a lot of wood on the sacrificial fire, you need trees. If you need water for ceremonial bathing, you need a river. So they're limited to a particular area. This is where they can do it. They can't do it anywhere else.

The Buddha's approach to the practice is very different. First of all, no special equipment is necessary. Maximum simplicity. Now of course, when we come to a contemporary meditation retreat, the joint's full of equipment. Back in the day, it wasn't needed. People were raised on the ground. People didn't have furniture. So they didn't need special furniture for meditation. They just, at best, needed a mat. But even then, they often would simply create a mat out of leaves and shrubs that were available. So no special equipment.

But also, the practice is not limited to any particular place. One is free to move anywhere at all and do this practice. In other words, universalism. The tradition is portable. And in fact, what the Buddha was doing, without knowing it at the time, was inventing possibly the first world religion.

So the Buddha wants to shift these ascetics out of their normal ways of viewing the world and out of their normal practices. He takes them away from the area they're familiar with, the area that supports the practice they're doing, to somewhere completely different—pretty much as opposite as he could get to their sacred places. A hill far away from the river. What he's doing is telling them: you do not need your sacred spaces. You do not need your special equipment.

And then he teaches them a practice, again centering around the elements, but based on intimacy with the elements, here and now, through the relationship with the six sense fields. So in other words, he's saying the elements are already available. There's no need for special circumstances. You don't need special devas and spirits. You don't need special sacred places. You don't need particular seasons. All you need to do is become intimate with the elemental qualities of your own experience, here and now, wherever you are.

And this connection, this intimacy, is cultivated through vedanā, the realm of affect. And this intimacy comes via the body.

If you look at the two basic schemas of the human condition that the Buddha developed—the five aggregates, which we've looked at briefly, and the six sense fields—you notice something interesting. Looking at the five aggregates: body, feeling, perception, choices, awareness. Out of the five, four of them are psychological. One is physical. Now look at the six sense fields. Five of them are physical. One is psychological. So it's a different emphasis. This second schema is more body-oriented. And the emphasis in each sense—and five of the six senses are body—the emphasis is on the immediacy of experience.

We've mentioned this before in the retreat. Phassa, usually translated as contact, literally means touch. The touch of the world on a sensitivity in the body. And with touch comes affect or influence—vedanā, feelings. This link between touch and affect, contact and feeling, is centrally important. And of course, where is contact most clear? Through the world of the body, through physicality. So if we want to get in touch with the world of affect, which vehicle would be suitable? The body, in the form of the five physical senses. This approach has a strong physicality to it.

So the Buddha says, eye sensitivity is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of obsession, with the fire of aversion, with the fire of delusion. The three fires, the three roots of the unwholesome, are fires. Burning with birth, age, and death, with sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair. Dukkha itself is a fire. And it goes through the other senses in the same way.

The teaching involves intimacy with the elements. And this intimacy is always available. It's available right now. This teaching is designed to bring us back to the feel of here and now, rather than getting lost in concepts. It centers around contact and feeling, touch and response. And these are already happening. I don't have to do anything to make it happen. We are already responding. We are already feeling. We don't have to do anything extra to respond. It's already happening right now.

In this discourse, the aspect of experience, of contact, that the Buddha focuses on is dukkha. He's saying that at the heart of things there's a restless dissatisfaction, a sense of dis-ease, but it can be so subtle, so omnipresent, that we no longer notice it. We notice our thoughts and our feelings blowing about in the wind, but we don't notice the restless, dissatisfied quality deep within the citta, which is the source of this restless movement, where it's all coming from.

So this practice revolves around intimacy with dukkha. It's about feeling our way into whatever is happening now. The emphasis is on receptivity—especially a receptivity to what normally we would overlook because it's too close to us, or reject because it's disturbing.

Now as a practice style, this would suggest a more receptive approach rather than an active approach. In an active approach to meditation, we deliberately direct awareness to a meditation object.

But in a receptive approach, we allow the meditation object to come to us. We allow the experience to come to us.

So in the active approach, if I'm using breathing as meditation object, I send the awareness to some particular part of the body where the feeling is clear—could be the rising and falling of the abdomen, could be the nostrils, could be something else. In a receptive approach, if breathing is my meditation object, I begin with the obvious: I'm already breathing. And then I let the breathing come to me, rather than me going out to it.

The emphasis here is on the five physical senses. Mind also plays a crucial role—mind creates a sensual unity. If you consider where seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching take place, where do they take place? They take place here. This mind is here. So the practice really emphasises the here-ness of experience.

Thought and narrative take us away from the here-ness of the sentient body. Mind and concept take us to other places and to other times. But the sense fields bring us back to here—even the here-ness of mind. Where am I conceiving myself? Where am I constructing a self? Here. The mind creates worlds that are far distant from here, but where are these worlds being created and sustained? Here, in this mind.

Tracking the sense fields is not about narrative. Tracking self, as we're seeing, can include narrative—it can include the river of stories. Because when the Buddha talks about the construction of self—"this is mine, I am this, this is my self"—view is at the end, which we notice largely through the stories we tell ourselves. About me, of course.

But this practice that the Buddha is teaching here is centered on feeling, not story. It's concerned with the world defined by affect. So it's more intimate than the world defined by narrative, by story, and fundamentally more real in the sense of its felt power to move us, to define our response. Paradoxically, it's very powerful, but also can be much more difficult to notice because we take it for granted.

To track the senses, we need to get out of the river of stories endlessly produced by the mind into something more intimate—where the stories are coming from. And why are thoughts so attractive? In large part, it's because we are naturally attracted to stories, particularly when the stories we're telling ourselves are busily creating my sense of me. And the stories have the additional advantage that they allow us to try and travel through the past, present and future.

We tend to get sucked into these stories. We listen to the language of the mind, and the language of the mind is the language of stories. But in this practice, what we're aiming to do is learn to listen to the body. Because the body does have a language, but it's much easier to overlook because the body does not tell stories. The language of the body is sensation.

And of course, one thing which is interesting about this is that while the stories the mind tells us are often, if not normally, if not always, false—the body never lies. Everything it says is entirely, directly, and immediately true. Whereas the mind is lying to us all the time, the body never does. Yet we tend not to listen to the body until it shouts at us, such as when we fall sick after a long period of working too hard.

The language of the mind tells us stories that involve the reality of time, of past and future. The language of the body is always about the present. The language of the mind tells us stories about places far, far away from here. The language of the body is always about here, this place.

So this practice of the senses involves staying close, staying home to the senses themselves, and along with the senses, of course, the response.

Because sense experience is a touch, and when we are touched, we respond. So the Buddha talks about this: "Whatever feeling arises dependent upon contact, whether pleasant or painful, or neither painful nor pleasant, that too is burning."

A sensitivity is touched by a sense object. And when the sentient body is touched, it responds. This response is motivated by feeling, by vedana. And vedana is intimately involved in this. Feeling is not something that comes to the party. Feeling *is* the party.

So we're moved by the touch of the world. And the Buddha talks about the basic categories: we're moved to hold on if we register the feeling as pleasant, to resist or reject if we register it as painful, or to ignore or be confused by whatever we experience as being neither painful nor pleasant. And this is not something we have any choice about. It's just how it is.

So the discourse is directing our attention to these fundamental movements of the heart. We are already entangled in the world of the senses. We are already moved. We are responding. But the question is: what are we responding to? Are we responding to the fantasies that we create with our minds? Or are we responding to the actuality of experience, right here and now?

The aim of this teaching is to allow us to cool down. And this is the experience of nirvana. When we become intimate with the senses—but especially with emphasis on the physical senses—we recognize that the layers of meaning we construct on top of the immediacy of our experience are just that: layers of meaning added on. What we've learned to do is to live on the top levels of our conceptual skyscrapers, while this discourse on burning is inviting us to move down to the ground floor, as close as possible to what is actually happening here and now.

The discourse concludes: "As this explanation was being given, the hearts of the thousand bhikkhus were liberated from the influences by not clinging." A thousand people awakened—fully awakened. Pretty good for someone who thought, "I can't teach this to anybody." It's only been a few months since his awakening. And this is actually the largest number of people recorded to have attained awakening in one hit, which is an indication of how the tradition venerates this discourse.

So Buddhism is getting bigger. The Buddha now has a large community, much bigger than the sixty disciples he had back at Varanasi. And these are well-known and respected ascetics. What does he do with them once they're awakened? He marches them down the hill to Rajagaha, the capital of the kingdom of Magadha, the kingdom where all of this is happening. And then, basically, the Buddha engages in a bit of theatre to demonstrate to the public that he's converted all these people.

The story is that everybody recognizes the Kassapa brothers. "The Kassapa brothers and all of their followers—they've come to town! Wow, this is a big deal. We didn't expect this. Not normally, not even this time of year. And who's this fellow with them? Is he a new student or something?"

When Kassapa—the senior Kassapa—realizes that this is the gossip spreading through the crowd, he very ostentatiously bows to the Buddha. "No, no—I'm the student. He's the teacher."

What the Buddha has just done is announce himself in the most public way possible. "Boys and girls, I've arrived. It's a new era." And we start to see the Buddha as a very skillful politician and organizer. He's not just hanging out getting people enlightened. He's building something.

And the contrast again between that and just a few months ago when he didn't want to teach at all because he thought it would be too difficult. The contrast is very stark.

Any questions?

And he gives them a way in. I think that's very typical of the way he operates. You notice with the sixty—the first sixty disciples—how long has he known these characters? Not long. But he just sends them out. "You just go, everybody by themselves. You just do whatever you think you need to do." And so you can see that there's a kind of creativity here. Because again, you've got this vibrant multicultural society, and you've got the Buddha converting people from all sorts of different traditions. What do they bring with them? They bring their own way of doing things and their own way of understanding. And he gives them a different framework, but there's a lot of leeway to do things their way.

There are some things he really insists upon. You get discourses where the Buddha gets really upset because someone is misrepresenting his teaching. And the teaching that gives him the greatest trouble is the teaching of not-self. Because it's the most easily misunderstood, even by his own students—especially the learned ones.

But he's created this very open structure based on a complete faith in the awakening of his own students.

There's this genuine sense of respect for them. "You just go off and you do what you think you should do, because it'll be the right thing to do." And you also get a number of discourses that are actually given by students, and the Buddha's either there, or someone reports back to him, and he says, "Yep, I would have said exactly the same thing under those circumstances." So it gets added to the canon.

But again, he's got this sense of Buddhism absorbing, not rejecting.

I was struck by what you were saying—the fact that Buddhism relies on... I mean, the way you presented it, it sounds like you feel it's confrontational and sort of dismissive of people's beliefs. But probably practically, in what you've said and how it's expressed today, it's amazing how Buddhism seems to coexist with other religions, and other religions can sort of tolerate it and take it on board.

I didn't think I was explaining the Buddha's teaching as rejecting other stuff, but what can you do? I must have misspoken. But yeah, his basic concern is what is kusala or what is akusala? What is wholesome, what is unwholesome? It's an ethical concern. And you get the practical concern: what works? If he thinks something doesn't work, he'll just come out and say so.

There's one discourse where he comes across a youth who's praying by a river. Again, water is important. And the Buddha comes up and says, "What are you doing?" And the fellow says, "Well, my father died recently and I'm performing these prayers and rituals by the river so that his soul can ascend to heaven." And the Buddha says, "Wow, that's really interesting. You see that rock over there?" The fellow says, "Yeah." "Just throw it in the water for me." The fellow says, "Okay." He throws the rock in the water. "Now, can you give a chant or a ritual which will make that rock ascend to heaven?" And of course he says, "No, it's heavy. It falls to the bottom." And the Buddha says, "Depending on your father's karma, he's either going up or he's going down. There's nothing you can do that can make the slightest difference."

So that's an example of him going biff, pow, bang. Because he's absolutely convinced: no, this isn't going to work for you.

This is going to create more dukkha. But if he's got an entry point, if he can see something in their practice that is, in his view, wholesome, then yes, why not adapt it? Why not work with it?

It seems to me like a really unique, defining quality of Buddhism among the pantheon of religions. When Buddhists live up to their own traditions, of course. They're perfectly capable of behaving just as badly as everybody else. But that's the idea. That was his skill as a teacher.

And he also had a talent for picking the right people. He obviously knew, "I've got to get Kassapa. He's important." Personally, Kassapa had the potential, but he was also in such a strategic position. If the Buddha got him on board, there would be a significant advantage.

These are the sides of the Buddha we tend not to look at. Buddha as shaman—which he didn't use much. He never does anything again like what he did with the Kassapa brothers. Buddha as politician—two of

the major kings in the Ganges Valley were his personal students. Buddha as organizer, as legislator, who created the sanghas of monks and nuns. These are the sides of the Buddha that we kind of gloss over. But without those, there would be no Buddhism. There would be no retreat happening here.

Someone asked how long it took for the legal framework around monastic life to develop. It developed as people did various things over time—people did crappier and crappier things. There's one rather plaintive discourse in which someone says to the Buddha, "Why is it that when we started, we had no rules and lots of awakened people, and now after all this time we've got lots of rules and fewer awakened people?" And the Buddha says, "That's just the way it is."

The monastics were wanderers who cycled around particular routes. They would have traveled down major trading routes because that's where the people were. If you're going to engage people, you go to certain places. If you want to be fed, you go to certain places. Then some would head off into the forest, into the jungle to do their own particular practices. They had forest-dwelling practitioners who just disappeared for months or years at a time and then emerged.

So the Buddha sets up in Rājagaha initially, but then after a few months, he shifts to Sāvatthī. Sāvatthī is the biggest city, and he moves his headquarters there. There's a period of about twenty-five years during which basically the word is spread: if you need to find me, I will be at Sāvatthī doing the rains retreat during the rainy season. That becomes his headquarters.

He's got this loose structure with people wandering around. There would have been monks and nuns who had never seen him personally. But if they wanted to see him, they knew they could find him at one of the two monasteries at Sāvatthī during that three-month period. So that becomes the command and control center. That's how he keeps track of things.

But you have discourses where, at one time, he's traveling alone and needs shelter for the night. A potter says, "Look, I've got a shed out back and there's room in there. You can bunk down there. And by the way, there's another ascetic staying there as well." So the Buddha goes in and there's this other ascetic who is also a bhikkhu. But the two of them look the same. There's this interesting interplay between them until the bhikkhu finally realizes who this stranger is.

The young man is a bhikkhu—he's got the robes—but it would have been difficult to tell the difference between various ascetics. Some did not shave their heads. Some had hair, some didn't.

The bhikkhus and bhikkhunis shaved their heads. There might have been slight differences in the style of robes, but there would probably have been more variety in the early days than there was later on, where it became very standardized. It may not have been that easy to distinguish at sight which group a particular person belonged to.

There was such variety in those times. People travelled only by foot, and the methods of communication were similarly limited. And of course, the learning was done through memorization. You chant and

memorize, and that teaching would spread out.

Even there, we know that there were variations. When the Buddha died, Mahakassapa gathered, according to legend, five hundred awakened bhikkhus to the First Council, where they chanted everything that they remembered of the Buddha's teaching to fix it, to establish the teaching definitively.

After the council, a major teacher from out west turned up. Because they were walking, by the time news of the Buddha's death reached them, by the time they heard of this council, by the time they got there, it was already over. So they arrived, and I think it was Mahakassapa who said, "Don't worry, we can recite it to you and you can memorize it." And the senior teacher said, "Don't bother about it. We've got our own recitation." And he left.

What is interesting is there's no hint of criticism in the tradition. They simply tell the story—this is what happened. So they're acknowledging that even then there were variations. Especially with an oral tradition. Because where does an oral tradition reside? It resides in a community, in human memories, and it appears when the people get together and chant. Dharma talks. Teaching. Interpreting what it all meant. And then the different meditation practices built around that.

Debate was really important in that tradition. It's like in Tibetan Buddhism today, where debate is central. Debate was central to all of the traditions. Questioning and interruptions and debate—that was all part of the deal.

Among the original five ascetics, Assaji we hear about, because he later composed a famous verse which converted Sariputta, and therefore Mahamoggallana. But the others I can't think of offhand, though they may well be mentioned elsewhere. Malalasekera's Dictionary of Pali Proper Names would tell you—he's got the names, and he gives you all the stories. It's online now.

I do enjoy telling stories myself. But remember the fundamental Irish principle of telling stories: if it's a good story, never question whether it's true. That would be incredibly disrespectful.

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