Nirvāṇa in Early Buddhist Inscriptions

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Nirvāṇa is often considered the quintessential goal of the Buddhist path. In this article, I focus on one aspect of the conceptualization of *nirvāṇa* that becomes apparent through an analysis of its occurrence in early Indian epigraphy. Surveying pre-Gupta inscriptions, it becomes clear that the aspiration for *nirvāṇa* has one recurring feature attached to it; the aspiration of the donor for the attainment of *nirvāṇa* — whether for themselves or others — occurs when the donation is connected in some way or another to the relics or figural or non-figural representations of the historical Buddha. This suggests that the idea of being in the Buddha's presence grew in importance in relation to the efficacy of religious practice in this period. The same ideas can be seen emerging in the later canonical Pāli *Apadāna*, and connect to developments in the emergence of Mahāyāna.

The word *nirvāṇa* does not appear with great frequency in early Indian inscriptions, and when it does, it most often occurs as either an aspiration by the donor to attain it or the hope that, as a result of the donation, others might.[1] This article is about one key way in which the conceptualization of *nirvāṇa* in early Indian inscriptions differs from primary conceptualizations of it understood from the textual sources.[2] In the epigraphy, whenever the practitioner-donor expresses an aspiration to attain *nirvāṇa*, either for themselves or others, the aspiration is always connected to the relics or figural or non-figural representations of the historical Buddha.[3] If the Buddha is considered to be somehow 'present' in the relics and representations — which is by no means a straightforward assertion — this points to an (emerging) belief that to contemplate the possibility of *nirvāṇa*, for oneself or others, and to articulate a real ambition for it, it is beneficial to be in the presence of the Buddha to do so.

In this article, I first discuss the relevant inscriptions, and note their relationship to relics and representations of the Buddha. I then discuss the idea of the Buddha's

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1. I have found just one exception to this, which is the two occurrences of the term in the Senavarma inscription, see below no. 3 on p.223.
2. See Cook 1975 (134) for a very brief summary of conceptualizations of *nirvāṇa* in Indian texts.
3. In this article, when I use the term 'relics' I am referring to the physical remains of the Buddha (or others). See Strong 2004 (8–20) on types of relics in Buddhism.

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presence in the relics and representations. In the final part of the article, I turn to the texts, focusing initially on the *Apadāna*, the content of which bears most resemblance to the conceptualization of *nirvāṇa* in the epigraphy. Finally, I draw some parallels between the inscriptional evidence and key ideas and praxis out of which Mahāyāna grew.[4]

Nirvāṇa in inscriptions and the relics

Gandhāra

A recent book — *Gandharan Buddhist Reliquaries* — published in 2012 (Jongeward *et al.*) is a catalogue of 406 Buddhist reliquaries from Gandhāra. This volume includes a survey of materials from Gandhāra that relate to relics and fresh translations of inscriptions that demonstrate this relationship between a donor's aspiration to attain *nirvāṇa* and the relics of the Buddha. David Jongeward notes that only 10% of the reliquaries are engraved with inscriptions, but nonetheless the inscriptions that do exist highlight several aspects of such a relationship. The book also contains both a descriptive and photographic catalogue of Gāndhāran Buddhist reliquaries and in the final chapter Stefan Baums provides new translations and editions of the inscriptions found on the reliquaries surveyed. Nine of the fifty-seven inscriptions detailed contain the word *nirvāṇa*.[5] The donations are in each case reliquaries containing relics that are (considered to be) relics of the Buddha.[6] All of these can

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4. In this article, I survey inscriptions that date prior to the Gupta period. After that time (the Gupta empire begins *c.* 319 CE), as well as the word *nirvāṇa* occurring with less frequency, the aspiration of the donors change to a desire to attain supreme knowledge (*anuttara-jñāna*) or Buddhahood (*buddhattvā*), in what appears to be continuation of what came before, but with a change to the conceptualization of the goal. See page 239 below for a brief discussion of this. The few times the word *nirvāṇa* potentially appears (or does appear) in inscriptions likely dated to the Gupta period, these are not donor inscriptions nor expressions of aspirations to attain it. For example, the Kasia copperplate inscription, which itself includes the aspiration that the donor attain supreme knowledge (*anuttara-jñāna*) appears to contain a reference to a *parinirvāṇa caitya* (*. . . rvāṇa caitye*). Pargiter dates this to the fifth century, on the basis that it was found with coins of Kumāragupta (Pargiter 1913, 152), but excavations at Kasia revealed activity at the site both potentially prior to and after the fifth century (Vogel 1908, continuing the work of Carlleyle, in Cunningham 1871).

5. One anonymous reviewer of this paper proposed that a better question to ask, in relation to the presence of the word *nirvāṇa* on certain of these inscriptions is — why does it appear on so few (given its importance in Buddhist texts), and not on the rest? Such a question, however, privileges textual evidence over the epigraphic, by assuming that the doctrine and practice pre-scribed in texts reflects social reality such we should expect the inscriptions to mirror the texts. The privileging of texts over other evidence is, of course, a pattern highlighted by Schopen which has shaped the trajectory of Buddhist studies scholarship, and in my own recent work I attempt to advance this debate. In an article published in 2018 I argue that the privileging of texts over other evidence has occluded from view the importance of an early Sātavāhana queen, and in an earlier article (2015) I note how epigraphic evidence challenges our perception of (gendered) teacher-disciple relationships as envisioned and prescribed in texts.

6. When *dhātu* is used for 'relics' an accompanying word to signify they are that of the Buddha is used (e.g. *bhagavato*). When *śarīra* is used it is not specified whose *śarīra* it is. In his chapter of this same book, in which he discusses certain features of the inscriptions, Salomon understands that, in this context, 'in the fifteen instances where the relics are not specifically identified, they are intended to be his [the Buddha's]' (2012, 180). Also see Rienjang (2013) who discusses the human

be dated to the first or second centuries CE (Baums 2012, 200–252).[7]

1. The first one of these inscriptions was made by Ajidaseṇa, a king of Oḍi, and was found on gold leaf inside a standard spherical reliquary, along with other objects including jewellery and beads, and four smaller reliquary caskets (Jongeward *et al.* 2012, 57, Pl. 3.10). In the inscription, the king records that here he establishes the relics (*dhadu*) of the Buddha in a great *stūpa* (*mahathuba*) and submits:

     May this now be conducive to the elimination of all suffering, to *nirvāṇa.* [8]

2. The second inscription is on the inside of a lid of a spherical reliquary made of grey schist and engraved with a lotus pattern. The inscription was dedicated by a woman, Ariaśrava, together with her children and establishes a relic of the Buddha (*bhagavato dhadu*). In making the donation, Ariaśrava hopes:

     May it be for the attainment of nirvana for her who thus establishes (it), who thus donates it. (tr. Baums 2012, 227)[9]

3. Next is the well-known Senavarma inscription, on gold plate found inside a miniature gilded *stūpa* reliquary. As noted above, this is the one inscription I have found that includes the word *nirvāṇa* but not as practitioner aspiration. The long inscription, which is essentially a eulogy of the Buddha, demonstrates a good understanding of some core Buddhist doctrine by the authors of the inscription, however there is scholarly disagreement about exactly what is being said about *nirvāṇa* in this inscription, and this part of the inscription has been called the most problematic (von Hinüber 2003, 24 citing Schmithausen 2000). *Nirvāṇa* appears in the inscription twice, once as (a verbal form of) *parinirvāṇa* (*pariṇivudasa* Skt. *parinirvṛtasya*) and once as part of a compound:

     ... gone to the realm of *nirvāṇa*, the best region of the *tathāgata*.[10]

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remains within these and other reliquaries. Her study includes reliquaries that contain bone relics but are not engraved.

7. Baums provides in his chapter a comprehensive bibliography relating to each inscription going back to Konow (1929), who himself provided an extensive bibliography of publications on the inscriptions prior to his own. All edition references are therefore to Baums (2012), where further information on other publication of editions can be found. The exception to this are times at which I discuss issues with readings or with edits. Since publication of the book in 2012, Baums has updated one reading and identified six new reliquary inscriptions from Gandhāra to be added to the total (2018). Online editions of all inscriptions in this section can be found in the searchable database at https://gandhari.org/a_inscriptions.php.

8. *ayam edaṇi sabadukhovachedae nivaṇae sabatadu* (Baums 2012, 210). In this article I am reproducing inscriptions from various sources, however, all editors have followed the same editorial conventions of square brackets [ ] to indicate uncertain readings and round brackets ( ) editorial restoration. Other conventions present in one or two inscriptions are single angle brackets with or without an asterisk < > or <*> from restoration of text omitted by the scribe and double angle brackets ⟪ ⟫ for scribal insertion. For ease of reading, I have removed line numbers from some editions, as well as symbols indicating free-standing vowels, and have updates some of the orthography of older editions.

9. *pariṭhaveataya eva paricaaṃtaya ṇivaṇaprati[e] bhotu* (Baums 2012, 225).

10. *tadagadapravadiśaṇivaṇadhatugade* (Baums 2012, 228). Salomon translates the compound, with hesitation, as that the relics have 'with the body, gone to the root of *nirvāṇa* proclaimed (?) by the Tathāgata', wondering if *pravadiśa* might be a scribal error for *pravadita* or *pravedita* (1986, 270 & 278). von Hinüber has, for the compound, *pravadiśa* as equivalent to *diśa* 'region' and *prava* as either an irregular of Old Indo-Aryan *prāpya* or as *pravara*, i.e. 'the best region' (2003, 27). Baums leaves *pravadiśa* untranslated, noting in a footnote the problems with the term, and

4. Next is the inscription of Indravarma II and his wife, on a recycled metal reliquary. The six inscriptions on the vessel show that it was sequentially owned by first King Kharaosta then Prince Indravarman, who made it into a reliquary, although Salomon wonders whether the lower part was originally a silver goblet (1996, 433–435). The inscription appears twice, once on the lid and once on the base. It records the establishing of the relics (*śarīra*) in a *stūpa*, in a hope that:

   All beings are caused to attain *nirvāṇa*.[11]

5. Next is the inscription of one Helaüta, on copper sheets, the provenance and location of which are unknown, in which relics (*dhadue*) of the Buddha are established with the aim that the donor profits:

   ... for benefit and happiness, for the necessary conditions for *nirvāṇa* ...[12]

6. Next is the inscription of the lay-follower Cadrabhi, found on copper-plate in a beautiful miniature *stūpa* reliquary covered with gold-leaf. Relics (*śarīra*) are established, and one hoped for outcome is:

   ... may it be for the attainment of *nirvāṇa*.[13]

7. Next, in an inscription from Taxila, Urasaka, son of a Bactrian, after establishing the relics (*bhagavato dhatu*[*o*]) expresses his aspiration:

   May this giving of a religious gift be for his own benefit of health and *nirvāṇa*.[14]

8. Next, a monk Saṃghamitra deposits relics (*śarīra*) and hopes:

   May it be for the necessary conditions for *nirvāṇa* ...[15]

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has the other part as saying that the relic has 'bodily gone to the nirvana element ... of the Tathāgata' (2012, 231 and n. 71), but in a more recent co-authored paper (Baums *et al.* 2016) chose von Hinüber's second option, which does seem the most likely. See Collins 1998 (224–229) then Habata 2016 for discussions of *nirvāṇa* as a place in Pāli and Tocharian texts, respectively. Collins' discussion is based on only limited evidence from the Pāli, but Habata's Tocharian manuscript of a *Mahāparinirvāṇa* text (the *Udānālaṅkāra*, a Tocharian commentary on the *Udānavarga*) provides an interesting example of the conceptualization of a 'city of *nirvāṇa*'.

11. *savasatva patiṇivaïto* (lid), *sarvasatva pariṇivaïto* (base) (Baums 2012, 233–234).

12. *hidasuhadaye nivaṇasabharadae* (Baums 2012, 234). *Saṃbhāra* (*sabhara*) appears in four of these inscriptions, compounded with *nirvāṇa* in each case — in this one (with a -*tā* suffix), in no. 8 below and in two of the inscriptions on page 234. The word has a long history of usage in religious contexts, beginning with its use in Vedic Sanskrit to refer to 'sacrificial equipment' (see examples from the Black *Yajur Veda saṃhitā*s in Jamieson 1984, 614). Monier Williams describes it broadly as a 'collection of things required for any purpose', which does seem to be the basis for its use in these inscriptions.

13. *ṇivaṇasa pratiae hotu* (Baums 2012, 236). The word *sarvasattva* appears just before this occurrence of the word *nirvāṇa* (... *sarva[sva]tvaṇa puyae ṇivaṇasa pratiae hotu*). Konow (1931–1932, 259), with Salomon (1998, 270) and Seyfort Ruegg (2005) following him understands the *sarva[sva]tvaṇa* (which in his reading is *sarvas[v]atvaṇa*) to relate only to *puyae*, so he translates this last section as 'for the veneration of all beings; may it be for the obtainment of Nirvāṇa'. Baums (2012, 236) translates this part of the inscription differently, and instead reads the *sarva[sva]tvaṇa* to relate to *ṇivaṇasa*.

14. *atvaṇo arogadakṣiṇae ṇivaṇae hotu a[ya] desamaparicago* (Baums 2012, 237). There are several readings of the final part of this inscription. Konow's reading is: ... *a[ya] de samaparichago* (Skt. *ayaṃ te samyakparityāgaḥ*) (1929a, 76, 77), and Sircar has ... *hotu a[ya]de sam-paricago* (Skt. *bhavatu āyātaḥ samyak-parityāgaḥ*) (1965, 129–130). See Baums and Glass 2012 for forms of *deyadharma* (included under entries for both *deyadhaṃma* and *deyadhaṃmaparicaga*), and also Bhattacharya 1987.

15. *sarvasatvana nirvanasaṃbharae bhavatu* (Baums 2012, 243).

9. Lastly, the daughter of Vagamarega establishes relics, one of the aims of which is the attainment of *nirvāṇa.* The word (essentially) appears twice in the inscription:[16]

    ... and may it be for the best lot of all beings, for the final goal of *nirvāṇa* ... may it be for *nirvāṇa* for all ...[17]

The Ikṣvākus

The only other set of inscriptions that feature *nirvāṇa* so consistently are those of the Ikṣvākus, a royal dynasty that ruled parts of South India between the third and fourth centuries CE, with their capital at ancient Vijayapurī.[18] Most of these inscriptions that record an aspiration for *nirvāṇa*, and the donations they detail, were made by women, and in most cases by royal or noble women. These royal and noble women may have been Buddhist converts, although most can be identified to be members of either the ruling dynasty that patronised Brahmanism, or other important families. The women who aspire to attain *nirvāṇa* appear well schooled in Buddhist teachings.[19] They include Cāntisirī, the uterine sister (*sodarā*

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16. In the second occurrence of the word, the inscription reads *ṇirvaṇaeda nirvaṇadae naye* which Falk explains 'represents repeated attempts at writing /*nirvaṇadāe/*' (Falk 2008, 72) (eq. to Skt. *nirvāṇatā*).

17. *sarvasatvaṇa ca <*a>[gra]bhagadae bhavatu ṇ<*i>rvanaparayana ... sarviṇaṇa ṇirvaṇaeda nirvaṇadae naye bhavatu* (Baums 2012, 245).

     Worthy of note here is a separate set of reliquaries, from central India, many with accompanying label inscriptions that were published by Michael Willis in 2000. In contrast to the Gāndhāran examples, the word *nirvāṇa* does not appear on any of the inscriptions engraved onto these reliquaries. These inscriptions simply record the name of the person whose relics are contained within the *stūpa*, casket or box. The form of the label inscriptions is typically simply a name and title in the genitive, e.g. *sapurisasa koḍiniputasa, sapurisasa gotiputasa*, which Willis translates as '[Relics] of the worthy Koḍiniputa', '[Relics] of the worthy Gotiputa' (2000, 73, 74). The difference between the two types of seemingly similar artefacts is a crucial one: the Gāndhāran reliquaries on which are engraved inscriptions whereby the donor aspires to *nirvāṇa* are relic containers for relics of the Buddha. The central Indian reliquaries are for relics of other important teachers, but none contain relics of the Buddha. Willis, in this volume and in other publications (2001), discusses at some length the most prominent of these teachers, Gotiputa, who it seems had many disciples. But despite some of these teachers being renowned in their day, they are not the Buddha, and thus their human remains do not hold the same importance as the relics of the Buddha himself.

18. A new online project, with Arlo Griffiths as project director, entitled Early Inscriptions of Āndhradeśa (EIAD) (http://hisoma.huma-num.fr/exist/apps/EIAD/index2.html) has recently completed the first phase of re-editing and re-translating inscriptions of Āndhradeśa. All of my references to inscriptions covered by this online project are to EIAD references. The site contains a full bibliography relating to each inscription, and also often accompanying photographs.

19. Although we cannot be sure exactly which texts were being used by Buddhist communities in ancient Vijayapurī, the inscriptions do reveal that both the royal and noble women who had the inscriptions made, and the monks who resided in Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, did have a good, sometimes comprehensive, knowledge of Buddhism. For example, the inscription of Bapisiriṇṇikā describes one of the monks as: '... *paṁṇa-gāmavathavānaṁ dīghamajhimapaṁdamātukadesa<kava> cakānaṁ a<ca>rayāna ayirahaghāna aṁtevāsikena dīgha-ma<jhima>nigayadharena ...* '... preserver of the Long and Middle Divisions, pupil of the master, the noble Haṅgha, resident of the village Paṇṇa, the instructor and transmitter of the Long and Middle (Divisions) and the Five Matrices' (EIAD 5, this is a revision of Vogel's translation (1929–1930, 20), understanding the genitive plural as *pluralis majestatis.* This usage of the genitive plural could imply the teacher was deceased). Further, we also know that monks in Nāgārjunakoṇḍa came from far and wide, as this is noted on inscriptions that talk about monks coming from other countries (*nānādesasamanāgatānaṁ*

bhagini) of Cāntamūla, the first king of the Ikṣvākus. She is the main donor, with eleven of the donor inscriptions from the site likely to be hers.[20] Another sister of Cāntamūla, Culacāntisiriṇṇikā, is recorded to have made one donation (EIAD 8). There are also inscriptions of other women who are relatives of Cāntamūla; daughter, niece, daughter-in-law, such as Adavi-Cāntisirī (EIAD 15), Bapasirinikā (EIAD 5), and others whose names are not preserved, alongside other female relatives and non-relatives.[21] The words and phrases used on the inscriptions whereby the women express their desire to attain *nirvāṇa* are not always identical, but are similar. Even within the inscriptions of Cāntisirī, the aspiration is not always expressed in the same way. The following full translation of an inscription of Cāntisirī shows the context for the expressed aspiration, and as well demonstrates a good level of comprehension of Buddhism, which raises the possibility that these women received instruction from monks, or monks and nuns.[22]

> Success! Homage to the Bhagavant, worshipped by the king of the gods, who completely realized Awakening, Omniscient One, who is compassionate to all beings, who has conquered and is freed from lust, hate and delusion, the bull and rut elephant among leaders, Perfectly Awakened Buddha, who is enclosed in the relic [*dhātuvaraparigahitasa*]. At the Mahāchaitya, Cāntisirī, uterine sister of Great King Vāsiṭhīputa Siri-Cāntamūla the Ikṣvāku, who is favored by Mahāsena having Virūpākṣa as his lord, giver of crores of gold, hundreds of thousands of cows and hundreds of thousands of plows (of land), whose purpose is unimpeded in all things; paternal aunt of king Māṭharīputa Siri-Vīrapurisadata; wife of the Great General, Great Talavara Vāsiṭhīputa Kandasiri of the Pūkīyas; giver of an unequalled and uninterrupted flow of velāmika gifts out of compassion for ascetics, brahmans, beggars, mendicants and the poor; affectionate to all good people; great lady donor; Great Talavara wife, mother of Khandasāgaraṇṇaka — having transferred (merit) to the past, future and present members of both her families, established this pillar for the sake of bringing about well-being and happiness in both worlds and for accomplishing the bliss of *nirvāṇa* for herself and for the sake of bringing about the well-being and happiness of all in this world. In the sixth year of King Siri-Vīrapurisadata, in the sixth fortnight of the rainy season, on the tenth day.[23]

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savasādhūnaṁ mahā[bhi]khusaghasa EIAD 28, also see for more examples EIAD 21 and 24), and one inscription even talks about the Theriya monks having converted others from other regions and countries — from Kashmir to Sri Lanka (EIAD 20).

20. For inscriptions of Cāntisirī see EIAD 4, 6 11, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 24, 28. In most cases her name appears on the extant inscriptions, but in some cases the name is only partially rendered.

21. See EIAD 5, 8, 9, 10, 12 and 15.

22. It is, of course, also possible that the woman who made the donations and sponsored the inscriptions did not control the content of what was written to this extent. For my reasons as to why I believe they did, see chapter four of my forthcoming monograph (Collett, forthcoming). In this chapter, I discuss Brahmanical religious aspirations in this set of inscriptions that suggest the women themselves specified the content they wanted, rather than, for instance, a monk dictating it to the scribe.

23. *sidhaṁ namo bhagavato devarājasakatasa supabudhabodhino savaṁñuno savasatānukaṁpakasa jitarāgadosamohavipamutasa mahāgaṇivasabhagaṁdhahathisa saṁmasaṁ[budh]asa dhātuvaraparigahitasa mah[ā]cetiye mahārajasa virūpakhapatimahāsenaparigahitasa hira ṇakoṭigosatasahasahalasatasaha<sa>pādāyisa savathesu apatihatasaṁkapasa vāsiṭhiputasa ikhākusa siricātamūlasa sodarā bhagini raṁño māḍharīputasa sirivirapurisadatasa pituchā*

In this inscription the hope is that making the offering will bring about 'well-being and happiness in both worlds' and 'the bliss of *nirvāṇa*' alongside 'the well-being and happiness of all in this world'. This is the most interesting part of the inscription for an assessment of *nirvāṇa* and this part varies very slightly, so is not entirely formulaic. Three other examples of it in inscriptions of Cāntisirī are as follows:

- '... and for accomplishing the bliss of *nirvāṇa* for herself and for the sake of bringing about well-being and happiness of all in this world.'[24] In this case there is no mention of a desire for well-being and happiness in 'both worlds' (*ubhayaloka*).

- '... for the sake of well-being, happiness and *nirvāṇa* in both worlds, and for accomplishing the bliss of *nirvāṇa* for herself [and] for the sake of bringing about well-being and happiness of all in this world.'[25] *Nirvāṇa* is included twice here, once in relation to Cāntisirī and also in a compound referring to consequences in both worlds.

- '... and for accomplishing the bliss of *nirvāṇa* for herself, and for the sake of the well-being, happiness and *nirvāṇa* of all in this world.'[26] Here the second occurrence appears in a compound relating to consequences in this world.

All the inscriptions that contain the word *nirvāṇa* are either pillar inscriptions from pillars that once adorned the Mahācaitya, the Great *Stūpa* in the Nāgārjunakoṇḍa valley, or are connected to the Mahācaitya in another way. The three inscriptions that are not pillar inscriptions are also donative in nature, two of them complete enough that the donation is recorded on what is extant, the other more incomplete. Two are donations of stone pavilions, one at a shrine hall (*cetiyaghara* EIAD 28) and the other too incomplete to know which stone pavilion it was (EIAD 24). The third, for which the actual donation is not known, was made in the great monastery (EIAD 21). In all three cases, a link is made between the inscription, donation, aspiration and the Mahācaitya. All three were, again, donations of Cāntisirī. In each case, again, she records her aspirations that, as a result of the donative act, she may attain *nirvāṇa* for herself. And in each case there is a clear link to the Mahācaitya. Two of the three (EIAD 21 and 28) contain the expression *mahācet[i]yapādam[ū]le* (EIAD 21), which it is also possible to reconstruct in the third. This expression underlines that the donations were made 'right at the foot of the Mahācaitya', with the doubling of *pāda* with *mūla* undoubtedly intended for emphasis.

All the pillar inscriptions that still bear a date record the same date — the tenth day, of the sixth fortnight of the rainy season, in year ten of the reign of King Siri-

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mahāsenāpatisa mahātalavarasa vāsiṭhīputasa pūkīyānaṁ kaṁdasiri[sa] bhariyā samaṇabam<h>aṇakavaṇavanijakadīnānugahavelāmikadānapaṭibhagavochiṁnadhārapad[ā]yini savasādhuvachalā mahādānapatini mahātalavari khaṁdasāgaraṁṇakamātā cātisiri apano ubhayakulasa atichita-m-anāgatavaṭamānakānaṁ parināmetunaṁ ubhayalokahitasukhāvahathanāya atano ca nivāṇasaṁpati-saṁpādake savalokahitasukhāvahathanāya ca imaṁ khaṁbhaṁ patithapitaṁ ti raṁño sirivīrapurisadatasa sava 6 <vāpa 6> diva 10 EIAD 4.

24. *atano ca nivāṇasaṁpatisaṁpādake ... savalokahitasukhāvahathanāya ca* EIAD 6.

25. *ubhayalokahitasukhanivāṇathanāya atano ca nivāṇasaṁpatisaṁpādake   ... savalokahitasukhāvahathanāya* EIAD 13.

26. *atano ca nivāṇasa⟨ṁ⟩patisaṁpādake ... savalokahitasukhanivāṇathanāya ca* EIAD 14.

Figure 1.   Reproduced from Longhurst 1938, Pl. XIII (d) © Archaeological Survey of India.

Vīrapurisadata, the second of the four known Ikṣvāku kings, who can be dated to the second half of the third century. Vogel advances that this may be a record of the time the Mahācaitya was completed and this date the day the monument was consecrated (1929–1930, 4). Longhurst, in his excavations of the site conducted between 1927 and 1931, found a relic casket in the *stūpa*, containing a bone relic, which he assumed was a relic of the Buddha (Figure 1).[27] Many of the inscriptions also mention a relic, or *dhātu* — as the long inscription quoted above of Cāntisirī — in the compound *dhātuvaraparigahitasa*. The exact meaning of *dhātuvaraparigahitasa* has been subjected to some lengthy scholarly debate. In 1998 Schopen devoted an entire article to the problematic term, which he translates as, with the Buddha as referent '… who is enclosed within the most excellent relic …' (1988/ 2004, 158). In a recent co-authored paper (Baums *et al.* 2016, 379–389), linked to the EIAD project, the authors present several problems with Schopen's translation of this section of the inscriptions, some of which is, in part, based on newly discovered inscriptions that contain the compound. The majority of their linguistic and theoretical analysis sheds new light on the old problem. In their final, though tentative, translation — 'who is embraced by the most excellent realm [of *nirvāṇa*]' — they return to Vogel's view (1929–1930, 4) that *dhātu* in this instance means 'realm'. They argue for a translation of *dhātu* as 'realm' citing an occurrence with this meaning in the first century North Indian Senavarma inscription. It is, however, far more common for the term *dhātu* in an inscription to be referring to an enclosed relic. And in this case, as well, there was an enclosed relic, enclosed in the Mahācaitya. All

27. Longhurst describes '… a fragment of bone placed in a small round gold reliquary three-quarters of an inch in diameter. This was placed in a little silver casket, shaped like a miniature *stūpa*, 2 ½ inches in height, together with a few gold flowers, pearls, garnets and crystals' (1938, 17).

Figure 2.   Reproduced from Longhurst 1938, Pl. XIII (b) © Archaeological Survey of India.
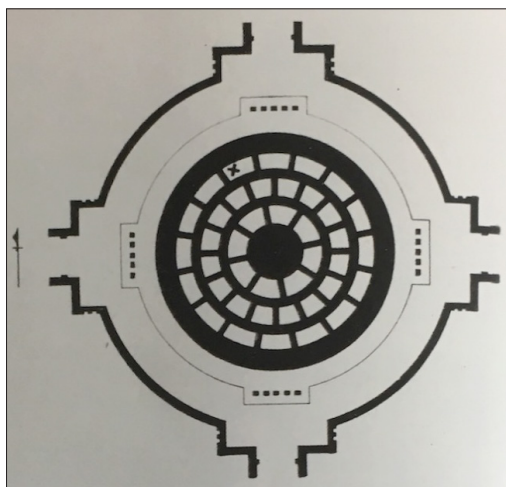

Figure 3.   Reproduced from Longhurst 1938, Pl. XII (b) © Archaeological Survey of India.

the inscriptions in which the compound *dhātuvaraparigahitasa* appears are either on the pillars adorning the Mahācaitya, or other structures that are stressed — again, as noted above — to be right next to the Mahācaitya. Figures 2 and 3, reproduced from Longhurst's volume, show the place the relic casket was discovered. In the photograph it is possible to see some of the remains of the pillars in situ, and Longhurst's drawing highlights the place the relic was found in relation to the entire Mahācaitya.[28] The relic was contained within the *stūpa*, behind the pillars, hence for the pillar and other inscriptions to be referring to a relic enclosed therein would make sense.

The Mahācaitya — as it is called on the inscriptions themselves — appears to have been the most significant of the Buddhist sites in the Nāgārjunakoṇḍa valley. It may well have also been the first, situated, as it was, on sacred ground.[29] Although the

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28. In Longhurst's drawing, an X marks the spot the casket was discovered.

29. Schopen has already noted that in the ASI report on Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, the authors of Volume I (on the Neolithic and Megalithic) report that they found it difficult to fully excavate the main

inscriptions suggest that the tenth day of the sixth fortnight of the rainy season in year ten of the reign of King Siri-Vīrapurisadata may have been the day of the consecration of the relics in the Mahācaitya, other material evidence hints that this day may have been a long time coming. Elizabeth Rosen Stone has identified one decorated stone slab that, from its donor inscription, can be identified as intended to be part of an ornamental frieze for the Mahācaitya. However, this one stone slab contradicts all of the other archaeological evidence as Rosen Stone, drawing on Longhurst's excavation report, notes that 'no sculpture whatsoever has been found within the proximity of [the Mahācaitya], and the *stūpa* was considered to be totally unadorned' (Rosen Stone 1994, 25–26). After analysis of the artistic style of the sculpture on the slab, Rosen Stone concludes that it must have been intended for the Mahācaitya. As the style suggests the sculpture was produced at the time of Cāntamūla, thus Rosen Stone raises the possibility that work was begun on the Mahācaitya many years prior when to the inscriptions of the royal and noble women were made. Nonetheless, it could conceivably remain the case that Cāntisirī was behind even the initial organization of the building of the Mahācaitya, but it would mean that her fundraising strategies changed.[30] The decorative stone slab suggests that during the time of Cāntamūla the fundraising project was one that involved — or at least envisioned — multiple donors, whilst during the reign of Vīrapurisadata it was the royal and noble women who are recorded as the only donors.

From the available evidence, there is no way of knowing at what juncture the relic was interred in the Mahācaitya, but the fact of the relic casket having been found that contains a bone relic, the relic of the Buddha being mentioned in the inscriptions, the repeating date on the pillar inscriptions, and all this combined with the beauty of the Ornate Brāhmī script in which the inscriptions were incised — some of the finest examples there are — point to the likelihood of a relic consecration ceremony. Further, two of the pillar inscriptions also happen to note that the Mahācaitya was complete (*imaṃ mahācetiyanavakamaṃ* EIAD 5, *imaṃ navakamaṃ mahācetiyaṃ* EIAD 6), which again suggests the likelihood of this day being the day of the ceremony. For the Ikṣvākus to acquire a relic to be deposited in their *stūpa* would have required some level of organization and effort, just as the building of the Mahācaitya would have.[31]

The Buddha and his relics

The idea of interring relics of the Buddha in a *stūpa* is depicted in the artwork of the period. Although depictions of the life — and past lives — of the Buddha are widespread in early stone sculpture and artwork at sites from ancient India, the death of the Buddha and *parinirvāṇa* are not amongst the most popular of episodes

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Megalithic burial site in the valley essentially because the Mahācaitya had been built right on top of it, utilizing some of the very megaliths for construction (Schopen 2004, 364, citing Subrahmanyam *et al.* 1975, 212).

30. See Dehejia 1992 on varieties of fundraising activities.

31. The process whereby relics of the Buddha were taken from one *stūpa* to another was not uncommon, even by the time of the Ikṣvākus. Willis notes that archaeological evidence shows this happened 'repeatedly' (2009, 44 and see also Willis 2001).

or narrative tropes to depict.[32] Nonetheless, narrative scenes relating to the death and *parinirvāṇa* do exist. They are arranged in sequences that variously depict the *parinirvāṇa* of the Buddha, his coffin, his cremation, the dividing up of the relics, transportation of the relics and worship at a *stūpa*. The sculptured sequences primarily encapsulate the death and *parinirvāṇa* and transportation of the relics to the *stūpa*. In the sequence there is an easy, fluid progression between *parinirvāṇa*–cremation–relics–*stūpa*, such that the artwork captures the idea that it is the Buddha existing in his *parinirvāṇa* that is somehow contained in the relics; and this is all that abides of the Buddha on earth. Long before research on narrative art at *stūpa* sites, André Bareau, in his seminal work on the construction and cult of *stūpa*s, already recognised that, by the first century CE, the *stūpa* had come to represent the *parinirvāṇa* of the Buddha (1960). Also relating to the narrative sequences on the artwork described above, Shimoda has noted similar in a variety of texts; a 'sequential process from *nirvāṇa* to cremation, and *stūpa* worship' (2003, 253). Discussing this, he provides quotes from a range of texts, including the Pāli *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, several Sanskrit Mahāyāna works and the *Buddhacarita*, which, he notes, has a concluding chapter entitled 'Praising the Buddha's *Parinirvāṇa*' but which is 'actually devoted not to the praising of the event of the Buddha's entry into *nirvāṇa* but to the virtues of the Buddha's bone relics' (2002, 250).

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32. Monika Zin has studied first century BCE reliefs from the Amarāvatī School that depict such scenes. She writes, 'With regard to the story revolving around the last days of the Buddha, some old reliefs from Amaravati have survived to provide testimony that in the earliest art (first century BCE or perhaps even earlier), the narratives were depicted extensively and with more detail than in other parts of India. Part of an old representation of the *parinirvāṇa* dealing with the war of relics has been preserved. In another relief, also only partially preserved, the war of relics has been represented again. And there is yet a third relief — the most valuable of them all — that shows episodes preceding the death of the Buddha and the *parinirvāṇa* itself. The episodes are labelled with inscriptions ..., which give the sequence illustrating the last journey of the Buddha, including the inscriptional reference to the Buddha's 'elephant look' upon the beautiful city of Vaiśālī, thereby providing evidence that the narrative similar to the one we know today from the *Mahāparinibbāṇasuttanta* ... or the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* ... was current in the region around 100 BCE. This early iconographic tradition was, however, not to continue; there is not even a single representation of the *parinirvāṇa* in the mature and later Amaravati School' (2016, 757–758). The latest of the narrative sequences Zin dates to around 130 CE and concludes that after this time the *stūpa* comes to represent the entire story (2016, 758). Rosen Stone has also previously commented on representations of these parts of the biography of the Buddha. She notes that the typical (Gāndhāran) representation of the *parinirvāṇa*, with the Buddha reclining on a couch, is 'conspicuous by its absence in Andhra Pradesh' (1994, 65). She does, however, highlight a non-figural representation of the *parinirvāṇa* (essentially the couch without the Buddha) and other examples at Nāgārjunakoṇḍa of the *stūpa* representing this part of the narrative.

Jongeward (2012) also surveys narrative scenes from Gandhāra displayed on schist and bas reliefs that depict episodes relating to the death, or *parinirvāṇa,* of the Buddha and the relics. In these narrative sequences, it is plain to see the recurring dynamic relationship depicted between the *parinirvāṇa* of the Buddha and the relics. According to Jongeward, although these narrative sequences are typical for Gandhāra, the clear relationship expressed by such friezes between the *parinirvāṇa* of the Buddha and his relics are not replicated in the art of other regions. He compares this to, for instance, narrative reliefs at Sāñcī, that depict — in contrast to the textual narratives — an actual war over the relics, so have a different focus. Recently, Gupta and Zin (2016) have published on a newly discovered relief of the *parinirvāṇa* from Mathurā, and argue that some of the common features of *parinirvāṇa* iconography were originally created in Mathurā, thus suggesting a possible Mathurā, rather than Gāndhāran, origin.

Bareau's work on *stūpa*s and relics was picked up by Schopen in the 1970s. Since Schopen's initial work on the relics, there have been numerous opinions expressed by a variety of scholars about the relationship between the relics and the historical Buddha. In 2004, John Strong, in his monograph on the relics of the Buddha, sums up what he sees as the primary ways scholars have attempted to interpret this ambiguous relationship (2004, 4–5). Strong sums up Schopen's view as:

> ... he appears to shy away from an *ontological equation* of the Buddha and his relics and to assert rather their ritual and *functional equivalence.* The relics are alive, own property, perform miracles, inspire devotees, are filled with various Buddha qualities, in exactly the same way the Buddha is. This does not mean that they *are* the Buddha, that they make him present. Rather they are themselves present in the same way he is, they can act like him, they are a substitute for him in his absence. (2004, 4)

Strong's own view is that the relics are 'expressions and extensions of the Buddha's biographical process' (2004, 5). Following not long after Strong's book, however, came Michael Radich's (2007) pioneering work on ideal embodiment in Buddhism, in which he sets the relic cult in a trajectory of doctrine and praxis that culminates in the Mahāyāna configurations of the immortal Buddha. Radich sees engagement with relics in the early period as the very first signs of any notion of ideal embodiment in Indian Buddhism. He argues that relics are 'veritable bodies' of the Buddha, and thereby are alive with his presence.

Adding to this discussion the evidence I am presenting here, the relationship between practitioners' aspirations for *nirvāṇa* and the relics reinforces much of the above. Certainly the relics appear to be invested with some sort of potency, with the power to affect the practitioner, and this does suggest they are more than an extension of the biographic process. The evidence presented here would support both the arguments of Schopen and Radich; that the relics contain a presence that can act as a substitute for the Buddha in his absence, or through which he is alive to his practitioners. However, the inclusion of this new evidence — that a practitioner's aspiration to *nirvāṇa* is more efficacious if made in the presence of the Buddha — does not bring more clarity to our understanding of the exact nature of the potency relics possess.

The Buddha image

The majority of the scholarship produced on early figural representations of the Buddha has focused almost exclusively on two issues — the question of whether Indian figural art is Indian in origin and the question of whether non-figural representations of the Buddha are symbolic. Both these questions have been subject to fierce debate, with a significant amount of scholarly attention given over to both sides. A question much less frequently discussed, however, is the question of whether the Buddha's presence is considered to be contained in the image, as it is in the relics. Jacob Kinnard's work on this (1999) — which focuses on a later period, but begins with analysis of the earliest evidence — has been followed more recently by DeCaroli's attempt at a more comprehensive analysis of the early tra-

dition (2015). Both agree that that the texts reveal a variety of positions in relation to this question. Kinnard notes the 'surprisingly' few instances in the earliest literature of discussions of figural representations of the Buddha, but skilfully draws out the evidence of Pāli and Sanskrit sources that highlight both the desire of the practitioner to be in the physical presence of the Buddha and the ways in which images can act as a substitute for the man himself.

Combining with the question of whether the Buddha is present in the image, is a practice that emerged during the period of depositing relics inside images. Steven Collins argues that statues of the Buddha '... are usually thought only to mediate his presence in a stronger sense if they contain relics ...' (1993, 237), though all his textual evidence for this is late.[33] Earlier textual evidence of this practice does nonetheless exist; Schopen (2004[1994], 296) translates a rule from the nuns' *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* that suggests the practice was commonplace — common enough for rules to be made about it — and Bentor cites evidence for the practice in three Sanskrit *sūtra*s.[34]

The only other extant pre-Gupta donor inscriptions that include the aspiration to attain *nirvāṇa* other than those already discussed are affixed to a Buddha image or non-figural symbol of the Buddha, such as his footprint. There are five such inscriptions. The first is from Mathurā. This inscription is on the base of a Buddha image, of which only the feet (and inscription) remain.[35] The inscription is recorded to have been made during the reign of the Kusāṇa king Huviṣka, so can be securely dated to the second century CE.

> In year 51 of Mahārāja Devaputra Huviṣka, in the first month of winter, on the ... day, on this date an image of the Bhagavant Śākyamuni was set up by the monk Buddhavarman for the worship of all Buddhas. Through this religious gift may his preceptor Saṅghadāsa attain *nirvāṇa*, for the cessation of all suffering of Buddhavarman's ... parents, for the welfare and happiness of all beings. In the monastery of Mahārāja Devaputra.[36]

The next one is on a sculptured stone panel from Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, that records the establishing of a stone image of the Buddha:

> ... established this stone image of the Buddha ... by the merit acquired together having made this religious gift, by this may this world attain *nirvāṇa*.[37]

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33. Collins cites Pāli commentaries and the *Mahāvaṃsa* (1993, 236–38).

34. Bentor translates one of these *sūtra*s in one publication (1998) and discusses a repeating passage in the three — the *Adbhutadharmaparyāya sūtra*, the *Kūṭāgāra sūtra* and the *Mahāraṇa sūtra* — in another (1995).

35. The artefact was, at the time Lüders consulted it, in the Lucknow Museum.

36. ... *mahār[ā]jasya d[a]vaputrasya huveṣkasya savatsare 50 1 hemantamāsa 1 d[i]vas[s] . . . . . [a]sya [p] u[rva]yā [bhi]kṣu[ṇā] [B]uddh[a]varmaṇā [bhagava]taḥ [Śāk]y[am]u . . pratimā pratiṣṭāpita sarva[p] uddhapūjārt[th]a[m] anana d[e]yadharmaparityāgen[a] upadhy[ā]yasya saghadāsasya [n]irvā[n]ā[va] ptaye//[s]t[u]mātāp[it]................Buddh[a]varmas[y]a sarvad(u)khopaśamāya sarvasatvahitasukh[ā] r[th]a mahārājad[a](v)a(putrav)ihāre* (Lüders 1961, 64–65).

37. *buddha[s]ya śailamayī pratimā pratiṣṭhāpit[ā] ...(de)[ya]dharmmam idaṅ kṛtv[ā] yat pu[ṇ]yaṁ samupārjjitaṁ te[na] puṇyeṇa loko yaṁ nir[vv]āṇam adhigacchatu* (EIAD 54). See Peter Harvey 2008

On the stone panel are four scenes depicting episodes from the life of the Buddha: the Buddha-to-be in his palace, the departure, temptation by Māra's daughters, and the Buddha with *deva*s after his Awakening (Rosen Stone 1997, Pls. 127 and 133–136). The inscription runs along the top of the slab.[38]

Originally published by H. W. Bailey (1982), this next inscription, on the broken halo of a Buddha, includes an aspiration by the donor, that all attain *nirvāṇa:*

> In the Dharmarājikā (*stūpa*) established by King Aśo(ka) at the capital city Trama, the religious gift of Momadattā, wife of Balasoma, the goldsmith. By this good root may all beings be caused to attain *nirvāṇa.*[39]

The final two are located on non-figural representations of the Buddha; a *buddhapāda* (footprint) and a *dharmacakra.* Both are from Phanigiri in Telangana. The first records the donation of the *buddhapāda.* It is a simple, short inscription that possibly dates to the Ikṣvāku period (on palaeographic grounds, EIAD 119) and reads:

> Success! The feet of the Bhagavant were caused to be made for the sake of the necessary conditions for his own *nirvāṇa ...*[40]

The second is a pillar inscription concerning the donation of a *dharmacakra,* that was made by a physician of the king. The inscription notes two actors, the physician who raised the wheel and a general who donated it. And it is the general, Ramanandinoka, the one who made the donation, whose religious path is impacted by the donation; it was done 'for the sake of necessary conditions for his own *nirvāṇa'* (*apaṇo nivāṇasambharathatāyā* EIAD 104). This aspiration comes at the end of a long inscription that is primarily in verse.[41]

Texts

Collins has identified two different types of discourse about *nirvāṇa* in Pāli literature, that he classifies as 'systematic thought' and 'narrative thought' (1988, 121–88). Expositions of *nirvāṇa* in the earliest strata of the Pāli canon most often come under his category of 'systematic thought', in that they are revelations of its

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(200–205) for a discussion of whether, according to Pāli sources, *puñña*-generating actions can, on their own, bring about the attainment of *nirvāṇa.*

38. That the inscription records a stone image of the Buddha has caused some to wonder if the image referred to in the inscription is a separate (now missing) image, rather than the stone slab with accompanying images itself. Rosen Stone (1994, 59) discussed the different views on this, of Sircar (1963–1964, 10–11) and Subrahmanyam (1985), and whilst the answer to the question remains unclear, it would certainly be unusual for the sculptured scenes on the extant panel to be referred to as a stone image (*śailamayī pratimā*).

39. *[Tra]matithaṇaṇagaraṃmi dhamaraïaṃmi aśorayapraïstavidami momadatae balasomabhayae suaṇakarabhayae daṇamukhe imiṇa kuśalamuleṇa ṣarvaṣatva ⟨⟨para⟩⟩ṇivaïti* (Salomon 2007, 273–76 and 279–82). The majority of the translation follows Salomon's revisions to Bailey.

40. *sidham bhagavato padāni apano nivāṇasambharātaṃ karapitam iti* (EIAD 119).

41. Concluding this analysis of the inscriptions, it may be worth noting, although an *argumentum ex silentio*, that the aspiration to attain *nirvāṇa* is not found in inscriptions relating to donations of a more mundane or practical nature, such as donations of water tanks at monastic sites, for instance.

ineffable, timeless, transcendent qualities.[42] Discourses on *nirvāṇa* that fall under this classification do not generally include examples of individuals who aspire to attain it. Such examples, however, can be found in the poetry collection of the *Thera-therīgāthā*, which are an example of Collins' category of *nirvāṇa* in 'narrative thought', in that this goal is seen as an end point. In these cases, although the poems often recount part of the trajectory of an individual monk or nun's religious career that might include, for instance, their initial aspiration or conversion, the conceptual language used is very different to that of the inscriptions. When a monk or nun decides they want to become a disciple of the Buddha, rather than expressing an aspiration to attain *nirvāṇa*, they might instead approach an elder monk or nun to seek instruction.[43] Similarly, when they attain *nirvāṇa* this attainment is, most often, expressed idiomatically, with such phrases as 'the Buddha's teaching has been done' (*kataṃ buddhassa sāsanaṃ*).[44] When the poems include use of the term *nirvāṇa* it is most often as an expression of something just attained, or soon to be; 'he attains *nirvāṇa*' (*parinibbāti* v.364), 'he will attain *nirvāṇa*' (*parinibbissati* v.369). This verbal usage from (*pari-*)*nir-√vā* is common, both in the monastic claims of *nirvāṇa* in the *Thera-therīgāthā* and expositions about *nirvāṇa* in other early Pāli canonical works, as Collins has previously identified (1998, 193–94).[45] In the inscriptions there are a few instances of this, with Bailey's *paraṇivaiti* and *patiṇivaïto / pariṇivaïto* in the Indravarman inscription (all equivalent to Skt. *parinirvāpita*), but on the whole the nominal form is used.

In the Pāli *Apadāna* — one text that Walters, many years ago, described as having some 'remarkable correspondence' to epigraphical and archaeological evidence related to the emerging *stūpa*-cult (1997, 164) — the notion of how a monk or nun might attain *nirvāṇa* changes, and comes more in line with the inscrip-

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42. For example, in a very brief exchange in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* Sāriputta explains to Ānanda that some will not attain *nirvāṇa* is this life due to lack of ability to correctly perceive the relevant kinds of perception as they really are (AN II 167), and later on in the same text he teaches the monastics a way in which *nirvāṇa* can be understood as happiness (AN IV 414).

43. See for example, the verses of Soṇā, which relate that she approached a nun ('*haṃ ... bhikkhuniṃ upasaṅkamiṃ* v.102) who taught her (*sā me dhammam adesesi* v.103), or those of Uttamā, in which we see similar (*sā bhikkhuniṃ upagacchiṃ yā me saddhāyikā ahu, sā me dhammaṃ adesesi ...* v.43).

44. See, as just a few examples amongst many, *Theragāthā* vv. 24, 55, 107, 108, 112, 117, 286, 302, 410, 465.

45. *Theragāthā* v.364 has *parinibbāti*, and v.369 *parinibbissati*, v.289 *nibbhuto*, v.162 *nibhāyissaṃ*, v.7, 8 *parinibbhuto*, v.948 *parinibbāyi*. In these texts there is once again no apparent distinction between *parinirvāṇa* and *nirvāṇa*. Collins further notes: 'Various verbs are used on occasion with the substantive *nibbāna* as their object: examples include forms derived from the roots *gam*, to go, and *adhi-gam*, to go to or reach. Both of these verbs can have the meaning "to understand" (i.e. to reach by knowledge) so no spatial metaphor need be implied; verbs of knowing (*jan*) and seeing (*dis*) are also used. Forms derived from *pa-āp* and *ā-rādh*, both meaning to reach or attain are found. The most common verb meaning to enter, *pa-vis*, is not found with *nibbāna* in the earlier texts ... however, both *okkamāna*, from *o-kam*, to descend, and *ogadha*, traditionally taken to be from *o-gāh*, to dive into, are used with a general sense of "entering"' (1998, 193–194). In the *Thera-therīgāthā* Norman translates the verbal forms with equivalent forms of the English verb 'to quench' (1969, e.g. 44, 45,47, 73, 103). Hallisey, in his more recent translation of the *Therīgāthā*, sometimes translates the term using either nominal or verbal forms of 'freedom/to be free' and at other times keeps 'nirvana' in the English translation (2015, e.g. 35, 47, 55).

tional evidence.[46] In this text, very often, when a practitioner makes an offering to a Buddha this results in them attaining *nirvāṇa*. The main thrust of many of the *Apadāna*s, especially the shorter ones, is simply to relate that the protagonist in question made an offering to a Buddha and as a result eventually attained *nirvāṇa*. An often-repeated pattern in the (auto-)biographies is that the practitioner makes the offering and as a result of that has many good rebirths — often over a period of innumerable aeons — that eventually result in birth in the time of Gotama Buddha. Becoming a disciple of Gotama provides the opportunity for the attainment of *nirvāṇa*. Each element of this trajectory, however, is not always repeated, but the offering that is the catalyst for the journey is generally at the heart of each narrative. So significant are the offerings made that many of the monastics' names, in their final life, derive directly from them. For example, Suvaṇṇapupphiya (3.115) offered four flowers made of gold to Buddha Vipassi, Sālapupphadāyaka (3.139) offered a *sal* branch with flowers and buds, Ambapiṇḍiya (3.299) offered mangoes to Buddha Vipassi and Kuṭidhūpaka (3.245) perfumed the hut of Siddhattha Buddha.[47]

Although *nirvāṇa* and *parinirvāṇa* are often used (interchangeably) to describe the state of Buddhas, they are not used with such frequency to describe the attainment of the monks and nuns.[48] Instead, practitioner attainment is more usually, again, expressed idiomatically:

> The four types of analytical insight and these eight stages of emancipation,
> the six special knowledges [all] realized, the Buddha's teaching has been done.[49]

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46. Ritual engagement with *stūpa*s, and the efficacy of such action, also feature prominently in other Buddhist narrative literature, both Sanskrit and Pāli, with scenes from *jātaka*s and comparable narratives depicted on early Buddhist monuments and at other important sites throughout the Indian subcontinent. Much of this extant literature, however, is potentially dated later than or towards the end of the time period under discussion here.

47. In Walters' newly published online translation, he inaugurates a numbering system for the four parts of the *Apadāna* that I follow: Part 1 is the *Buddhāpadāna*, Part 2 the *Paccekabuddhāpadāna*, Part 3 the monks' narratives and Part 4 the nuns.

48. *Nirvāṇa* is sometimes used to describe practitioner attainment, but the expression of religious achievement at the culmination of the narrative trajectories is almost invariably expressed idiomatically. When *nirvāṇa* is used to describe practitioner attainments, or potential future attainments it can, for instance, be found in descriptions of how Buddhas cause people to attain it (*nibbāpento* 3.166, *nibbāpayantam* 3.151), or sometimes to just simply describe how a monastic reached *nirvāṇa* (*nibbuto* 3.531). There is also one rare example of *parinirvāṇa* being used to describe practitioner attainment (*parinibbānaṃ* 3.23). The first two verses of 3.144 demonstrate how *parinirvāṇa* and *nirvāṇa* are used interchangeably. The first verse declares that Padumuttara Buddha has attained *parinirvāṇa* and the second that, following his *nirvāṇa*, a *stūpa* was made (*Padumuttara nāma jino lokajeṭṭho narāsabho jalitvā aggikkhandho va sambuddho parinibbuto. Nibbute ca mahāvīre thūpa vitthāriko ahu* PTS 172. Here we also see a semi-poetic play on the literal meaning of (*pari*)*nirvāṇa*.

49. *paṭisambhidā catasso vimokhā pi ca aṭṭh' ime, chaḍabhiññā sacchikatā kataṃ buddhassa sāsanan ti.* This verse appears numerous times in the text, as just a few examples see Ap. 31 v.232, 33 v.23, 35 v.22, 36 v. 13, 37 v.8, 50 v.17, 51 v. 15, 52 v.14, 152 v.9, 153 v.6, 153 v.10, 154 v.9, 155 v. 9, 156 v.15, 157 v.9, 158 v.6, 159 v.24, 160 v.10 (from page 160 onwards, Lilley changes to abbreviating the verse with *Paṭisambhidā ... pe ... pe ...*).

This verse contains a repeat of the refrain *kataṃ buddhassa sāsanaṃ,* that again appears to be an idiom for attainment of *nirvāṇa.*[50] A second verse found less often — but nonetheless replete in the text — is one that relates to the Buddha's presence:

> Very fortunate was I to be in the presence of the excellent Buddha,
>
> The three knowledges attained, the Buddha's teaching has been done.[51]

In the most common placement of this verse, it appears just prior to the *paṭisambhidā* verse, and, with the same concluding refrain, demarcates the attainment of *nirvāṇa* by the protagonist. This time, importantly, having been in the presence of the Buddha appears to be a catalyst for religious realization. But 'presence' here is not restricted to living Buddhas. At times, the only 'presence' of the Buddha experienced by the practitioner occurs *after his death.* That is, the narrative notes only that the practitioner made their offering to a Buddha who had already attained *nirvāṇa* or *parinirvāṇa* by performing an action at a *stūpa* or via some other means of commemorating the now deceased Buddha. In each of the ten examples listed below — that are comparable to the epigraphic evidence — the actions that eventually resulted in the attainment of *nirvāṇa* for the monk or nun were done for a Buddha who was already deceased:[52]

- Upavāna (3.22) made an offering to a *stūpa* that may have contained reliquaries.[53]
- Āyāgadāyaka (3.38) worshipped at the *stūpa* of Buddha Sikhi after his death and provided money for a hall to be built.
- Dhammacakkika (3.39) established a *dhammacakka* on the front of a lion-throne of Siddhattha Buddha.

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50. As noted in the previous footnote, this verse occurs many times in the text. Whilst this verse has elements to it that mirror the *Thera-therīgāthā*, upon which the *Apadāna* is in part based, the verse sits slightly at odds with the religious hue of the *Apadāna* overall; in that it is more technical and less devotional. The four types of analytical insight (*paṭisambhidā*s) and the eight stages of emancipation (*vimokha*s) are not mentioned in any other places in the text, and the six special knowledges only a few other times (3.1 Sāriputta , 3. 10 Ananda, 3.137 Atthasandassaka, 3. 386 Sonakotivisa and 3. 389/392 Sela).

51. *sāgataṃ vata me āsi buddhaseṭṭhassa santike, tisso vijjā anuppatto kataṃ buddhassa sāsanaṃ.* This verse appears in Ap. nos. 3.1–4, 3.6–8, 3.10, then from 3.371 (PTS) 3.374 (BJTS) it appears in every narrative until the end of the monks' and nuns' sections. There are some slight variations to it (e.g. 3.373/3.376).

52. In neither case, not with the *paṭisambhidā* verse nor the one on the Buddha's presence, do the verses always sit comfortably in the longer narratives of the accounts of the monks' and nuns' lives, or episodes from them. For example, the Upāli narrative (3. 6) concentrates on recounting the story of how Upāli came to be a master of *vinaya*; nowhere prior to these two verses that conclude his (auto-)biography does the account even hint that Upāli attained *nirvāṇa*. Therefore, it may be that these verses are additions to the extant text, added in at some point in the progress of the text through the oral or manuscript tradition. If this is the case, here within the Pāli corpus we have the best example of the developing idea that it is better (if not a prerequisite) to be in the presence of the Buddha in order to advance on the path.

53. This long narrative begins with the entering into *parinirvāṇa* of Padumuttara. Following his death, a funeral pyre (*citaka*) was made, his relics gathered and a *stūpa* built. Walters reads these verses as saying the *stūpa* had relic caskets inside it made of gold, gemstones, silver and crystals, but it should be noted the verse is a little ambiguous and does not specify exactly what it is that is has been created from these precious metals and stones (Walters 2018, PTS 71 vv. 4–5).

- Citakapūjaka (3.116) had music played and offered a garland of flowers at a funeral mound (*citaka*) built for Sikhi Buddha
- Paccupaṭṭhānasaññaka (3.119) built a *stūpa* for Atthadassa's relics (*dhātu*).
- Thambhāropaka (3.142) raised a pillar (*thambha*) at the *stūpa* of Buddha Dhammadassi.
- Dhātupūjaka (3.247) worshipped a relic (*dhātu*) of Siddhattha Buddha
- Paṭṭipupphiya (PTS 3.371/BJTS 3.374) offered a red *lobh* flower to the body (*sarīra*) of the Buddha Padumuttara.
- Mekhalādāyikā (4.2) had a *stūpa* built and offered her waist ornament.
- Abhirūpanandā (4.36) offered a gold umbrella to a relic-*stūpa* (*dhatu-thūpa*).

One set of verses in the text even explicitly states that making an offering to bone relics after the death of a Buddha is just as efficacious as honouring a living Buddha. In Paccupaṭṭhānasaññaka's biography, he laments that he was born only after Atthadassa Buddha died. A disciple then tells him:

> Who would have worshipped the Sambuddha, Siddhattha, Leader of the World, can worship even after *nibbāna*, even a relic (*dhātu*) the size of a mustard seed.[54]

And the disciple goes on to say that if this is done with the same faith in one's heart it creates the same great merit (*same cittappasādamhi samaṃ puññaṃ mahaggataṃ* PTS 153 vv. 6).

In certain of the narratives, the link between the offering and attainment of *nirvāṇa* is more explicit than in others. Continuing Paccupaṭṭhānasaññaka's biography, next come the following verses:

> After hearing Sāgara's words, I built a *stūpa* for the Buddha. For five years I attended to the sage's supreme *stūpa*.
>
> From that action for the Biped-Lord, the Best in the World, the Bull of Men, having experienced happiness, I attained arahantship.[55]

In other examples, however, the consequence of the act of giving is tied more closely to other parts of the resultant trajectory, such as good rebirths. Nonetheless, *nirvāṇa* is almost always attained as the eventual result of the merit gained through making an offering /donation to a Buddha and in the presence of that Buddha, be he alive or dead. Although the path to *nirvāṇa* in the *Apadāna* is a long one, from the moment of the initial act of giving to realization, nonetheless it remains conceptually closest to the understanding of this religious goal elucidated by an analysis of the inscriptions in that it is the offering/donation that sets them on the path to the goal. The exact nature of the path to *nirvāṇa* as envisioned by the donors, however, is not clear from the epigraphic evidence, nor the length of time they imagined it might take. Also, the inscriptions reveals only that the *aspiration* to attain *nirvāṇa*

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54. *Yo ca pūjeyya sambuddhaṃ siddhatthaṃ lokanāyakaṃ dhātuṃ sāsapamattam hi nibbhutassāpi pūjaye* (PTS 153 vv. 5).

55. *Sāgarassa vaco sutvā buddhathūpaṃ akās' ahaṃ pañcavasse paricariṃ munino thūpam uttamaṃ. Tena kammena dipadinda lokajeṭṭha narāsabha sampattiṃ anubhotvāna arahattaṃ apāpuṇiṃ* (PTS 153 vv. 7–8).

is made in the presence of the Buddha, while in the *Apadāna* being in a Buddha's presence aided the *achievement* of the goal, and this aid is twofold, manifesting both in relation to the Buddha of the past to whom the offering is made, and Gotama in the present who provides instruction and guidance.

Towards Mahāyāna

In the *Apadāna*, this achievement is always individual, and in that it differs from some of the inscriptions that contain an aspiration that others — either one or many — may attain *nirvāṇa*. The question of whether such bidding for others — transference of merit — should be considered an indication of Mahāyāna tradition, is a subject that has already been addressed by a variety of scholars over the last fifty years or so but never, to my knowledge, in relation to expressions that include an aspiration that all beings attain — specifically — *nirvāṇa*. In 1962 Masao Shituzani published a paper entitled 'Mahayana Inscriptions in the Gupta Period', in which he essentially listed various possible expressions and phrases in inscriptions that could be evidence for Mahāyāna: a transfer of merit 'prayer' through which all may attain supreme knowledge (*anuttara-jñāna*) or Buddhahood (*buddhattvā*),[56] monastic titles that he considered may indicate Mahāyāna affiliation — *śākyabhikṣu/ṇī* — and also the appearance of the term Mahāyāna itself. Schopen took up these questions, in an important article published in 1979, in which he discussed the topic more fully. The simplest version of the transference of merit formula, in Schopen's revision of his original work, is: *yad atra puṇyaṃ tad bhavatu sarvvasatvānām anuttarajñānāvāptaye* (Schopen 1985, 45 n. 88). Schopen's view was that this formula appears, in the majority of its occurrences, in inscriptions that also include either the titles *śākyabhikṣu/ṇī* or the lay equivalent *paramopāsaka/ikā* and that these two titles indicate followers of Mahāyāna.[57] Around the same time as Schopen's original article, however, publications began appearing that demonstrated that transference of merit is not the sole preserve of Mahāyāna (McDermott 1974, Keyes 1983), which has since become established. Schopen's formula is similar to — but not the same as — some of the donor aspirations I am concerned with here, especially those with a transference of merit dimension. Only one of the inscriptions discussed above specifically mentions merit (*puṇya*, see page 233), although the idea of merit-transference is implied and inferred in others. Therefore, whilst the inscriptions I am discussing here may well be precursors to a developing trend to explicitly express merit-transference, this

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56. As noted above, the aspiration to attain supreme knowledge (*anuttara-jñāna*) or Buddhahood (*buddhattvā*) seems to have begun — at some point — to replace the aspiration to attain *nirvāṇa*. They appear as a continuation of expressions to attain the highest goal, but represent a reconfiguration of conceptualization of the goal, one that might be expected, in fact, in the shift towards Mahāyāna. There has not, as yet, to my knowledge, been a detailed study that attempts to document and assess of all of these various religious intentions and aspirations expressed in this epigraphic corpus.

57. Lance Cousins (2003) has challenged Schopen's theory, both with regards the terms *śākyabhikṣu/ṇī* and *paramopāsaka/ikā* being distinctly Mahāyāna, and in relation to the transference of merit formula, and Schopen composed a reply (2005, 244–246), in which he provided a thoroughgoing rebuttal to the arguments of Cousins in relation to *śākyabhikṣu/ṇī* and *paramopāsaka/ikā*.

in itself is no indication of Mahāyāna.[58] Also, the epigraphs I am concerned with all date prior to the fourth century and whilst some aspects of Schopen's work have been criticised, despite new finds since, it is generally accepted that there is little epigraphic or archaeological evidence for early Mahāyāna prior to the fourth century (see Drewes 2009, 58; Allon and Salomon 2010, 17–19).

There is, however, one way in which this inscriptional evidence does relate to Mahāyāna — and that is with regards the presence of the Buddha. It could be argued that many of the innovations that are the foundation of what came to be the various Mahāyāna schools and traditions are a response to a religious yearning for the Buddha's continued presence in the world and, of course, his continued presence has long since been considered to be a defining feature of Mahāyāna tradition (Williams 1989, 20–32). As noted above, Radich (2007) has traced the development of views about embodiment in Buddhist tradition that culminates with the idea of the immortal Buddha in Mahāyāna, and a further Mahāyāna pre-occupation is with the notion that the teachings of the Buddha and his body can be considered one and the same thing. In the archaeological record, we see this notion formulating in the practice of depositing teachings — as short phrases and passages or fuller scriptures — in *stūpa*s, sometimes in place of relics, or accompanying them.[59]

Natalie Gummer, in her innovative reinterpretation of Mahāyāna *sūtra*s, argues that certain Mahāyāna texts claim themselves to be the very body of the Buddha, who comes alive when the *sūtra*s are performed. Gummer highlights that Mahāyāna *sūtra*s declare themselves to be the actual relics of the Buddha, in some instances, and she understands the focus on the eternal body in Mahāyāna to be a ritual-poetic manifestation of the physical body and/or relics of the Buddha. In the introduction to her unpublished book, *Performing the Buddha's Body*, she cites a verse from the *Suvarṇabhāsottama Sūtra* that conveys this message:

> The Fully Awakened One has a body of dharma (*dharmakāya*);
> The Tathāgata has a relic/realm/essence of dharma (*dharmadhātu*);
> Just as is the dharma-teaching, so is the body of the Lord.[60]

On this verse she writes:

> This verse directly identifies the buddha's body with the *sūtra* itself, by its own account the ultimate dharma body and dharma teaching. But the multivalent term

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58. As well as research that demonstrates merit-transference is not the sole preserve of Mahāyāna as it is found in other Buddhist traditions, further, a few Mahāyāna texts themselves conceptualise the impact of the act of giving differently. Jason McCombs (2014, 34–35) has noted brief extracts from two Mahāyāna *sūtra*s which appear to suggest the simple act of giving in itself is what causes the consequences for the giver, rather than any explicitly mentioned idea of transference of merit.

59. Strong (2004, 10) notes there was an established practice of making 'dharma-relics' so as to embody the Buddha; however, his evidence for this is dated to later than the time of the inscriptions under discussion here. See Konow 1929b for an early example of an inscribed relic casket from the Kurram Valley. The relic casket dates to the time of Kaniṣka, although the exact provenance of the miniature *stūpa* on which the inscription is written is unknown. This inscription is a long version of a *pratītya-samutpāda* formula. See Boucher 1991 on this formula in inscriptions.

60. Tr. Gummer, *dharmakāyo hi sambuddho dharmadhātustathāgataḥ, idṛśo bhagavatkāya īdṛśī dharmadeśanā.* *Suvarṇabhāsottama Sūtra* chapter 2, verse 28.

dharmadhātu also points to other ways of understanding how the sūtra embodies the Buddha. The verse occurs in the second chapter of the sūtra, in which the Buddha's eternality and consequent lack of relics from a fleshly body constitute the central theme; his true relic is his body of teachings, of which this sūtra is (by its own account) the highest instantiation. So the [*Suvarṇabhāsottama Sūtra*] is the eternal body of the Buddha, but it is (paradoxically) also his only relic.

(Gummer, forthcoming b, 5–6).

For Gummer, the Buddha's body is made manifest by more than an engagement with the remains of the 'fleshly body' — the bone relics — by recitation of the *sūtra* itself. Recitation of the *sūtra* enables the presence contained within the relics to come alive once more. Thus, what we have here with the Mahāyāna, in Gummer's view, is an innovation in relation to ritual engagement with the relics of the Buddha. A superficial reading of Gummer might conjure an idea that she is presenting an either/or — that the texts are advocating a *dharma* body over and above the physical body and relics — but her argument is more subtle than that. She is instead, in my view, arguing that the eternal body is both born from and simultaneously the same as the (remains of the) physical body, enlivened once more by the speech acts that are the *sūtras*.[61] She argues that the texts are (ritual):

... acts that make a buddha's power to transform audiences present and potent in his speech, whether that speech is conceived of as his eternal bodily essence or his living relic, and whether its sound resonates in the world anew or asserts its own "textualized" material presence in the face of the absence of buddhas.

(Gummer, forthcoming a)

She continues, citing an example:

The story of the Buddha Prabhūtaratna in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* (*Lotus Sutra*) vividly encapsulates this conflation of written text, oral performance, living bodily presence, and reliquary monument to absence ... Because of a vow he made in a past life, the sutra tells us, the colossal stupa of Prabhūtaratna emerges from the ground whenever the sutra is preached. Although he long ago passed into final nirvana, his body, interred in the stupa, seems very much alive, praising the Buddha Shakyamuni for teaching the sutra. And indeed, every time the sutra is performed, every time a preacher voices Prabhūtaratna's past vows and their fulfilment in the present moment of preaching, his elaborately described stupa *does* emerge in the minds of auditors; his voice *is* heard again in the present. (Gummer, forthcoming a)

The conceptualization of *nirvāṇa* in the inscriptions suggests that it is beneficial to be in the presence of the Buddha's body for his body of teachings to take effect; hence advancing this conceptualization of the path to *nirvāṇa* can be seen as part of the backdrop out of which these fresh innovations of Mahāyāna grew, as part of a continued desire to have the Buddha come alive within the lives of the practitioners, and to be brought to life at the very places, the very monuments, that commemorate his death. If we accept that the presence of the Buddha was reconfigured

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61. For a similar idea see Apple 2014. Although not the main thrust of the argument, one point Apple makes is that Mahāyāna *dharma*-texts (*dharmaparyāya*) can contain 'qualities of Buddhahood that the reciter or auditor many come to embody' (2014, 28).

in Mahāyāna tradition in this way, that in the Mahāyāna we find a pre-occupation with attempts to reify the texts as essentially the body of the Buddha, the term *caitya-bhūta*, previously identified by Schopen as important (1975) — for reasons even he now no longer supports — and the text passages within which it is used become of interest again.[62] The text passages that Schopen discusses — from the *Vajracchedikā* and *Aṣṭsāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* — claim that the very spot on earth on which the *sūtra* is recited 'becomes a *caitya*' (*caitya-bhūta*). If the authors and composers of Mahāyāna texts are attempting to relocate the body of the Buddha from monument to book, evoking the idea that the place of recitation of the text becomes (or becomes like) a *caitya* can be seen as part of such an attempted repositioning.

Using Gummer's rereading of Mahāyāna *sūtra*s, we can understand that the shift occurring here is the gentle reconfiguring of the Buddha's presence — from the relics and material representations to the book, the *sūtra*. Another development, a similar shift, appears to be the basis for the development of another aspect of Mahāyāna, the *Tathāgata-garbha* doctrine. This time, we find a repositioning of the Buddha's presence from containment within relic and representation to containment within the practitioner's body. Shimoda and then Radich have presented similar arguments on the origin of the *Tathāgata-garbha* doctrine. Initially, Shimoda, with Radich augmenting his work, identified and argued that such a shift in praxis occurred, which they term 'the internalization of the *stūpa*'. This is a process whereby the 'presence' of the Buddha is essentially shifted from inside the *stūpa* to inside the practitioner; from the monument to the human person. As Radich puts it:

> Thus, by what Shimoda has called the 'internalisation of the stūpa', the funerary monument of a lamented dead Buddha is transformed instead into a seedbed of new Buddhahood for the future. Tomb becomes womb. Sentient beings become the mothers of the Buddhas ... (2015, 165)

For both Shimoda and Radich, this is how the *Tathāgata-garbha* doctrine is born. That prior to this, or complimenting it, an aspiration to attain *nirvāṇa* is understood to be aided by the practitioner being in the presence of the Buddha makes this shift to internalization more natural and more probable.

Conclusion

In this article, I have surveyed examples of *nirvāṇa* as it appears in early Indian inscriptions. Assessing these examples, I have found that the conceptualization of *nirvāṇa* in pre-Gupta inscriptions differs from that found in the majority of Buddhist texts. The inscriptions reveal a conceptualization that includes a view that the aspiration to attain *nirvāṇa* is more beneficial if made in the presence of a Buddha. This adds a new dimension to our understanding of the concept of *nirvāṇa* in early Buddhism. The inscriptions, however, are not alone in providing the only evidence for such a view. A similar, implicit view can be revealed through an analysis of devotional discourse and practice evinced in certain narrative literature; the

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62. It is in this publication that Schopen makes his first sustained argument for the 'cult of the book' in Buddhism; that books themselves become ritual objects.

Apadāna being the earliest example and conceptually closest to the inscriptions. This increased centrality of a need for the Buddha's continued presence in the world as a component of the early Buddhist worldview can also be seen as part of the backdrop out of which certain innovations in Mahāyāna emerged.

Acknowledgements

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