

Explicating the Buddha's Final Illness in the Context of his Other Ailments: the Making and Unmaking of some *Jātaka* Tales

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ABSTRACT

The Buddha's final illness, brought on by his last meal prior to his death, was traditionally seen as one of a set of ailments suffered by him at various points during his lifetime. This paper looks at different Buddhist explications of the causes of these ailments and applies them to the episode of the Buddha's final illness. In both instances, three explanatory strategies are detected: the first stresses the causative importance of the Buddha's own negative karmic deeds in past lives; the second looks to the negative deeds and karma of others than the Buddha; the third offers non-karmic explanations. The first two engendered two rather different kinds of jātaka stories; the last did not involve any jātakas but highlighted various kinds of 'natural' explanations.

Keywords

Sūkaramaddava, Anavatapta, kammapiḷoti, negative karma, afflictions of the Buddha, jātakas

It is well known that, according to the Pali tradition, the Buddha suffered from a bout of dysentery or bloody diarrhea (*lohitaṭapakkhandikā*) prior to his death in Kusinārā. According to the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, this followed his consumption of his last meal at the house of Cunda, the smith, a meal which included a dish called 'pig's delight' (*sūkaramaddava*) (D II 126–128; Walshe 1987, 256–257). Other canonical accounts of this story are much less clear as to the nature and timing of the Buddha's illness as well as the kind of food eaten by the Buddha.¹ As a result, much scholarly ink — both ancient and modern — has been spilled

1. See Bareau 1971, 1: 251–77 for survey of all early sources.

on these topics.²

Much less attention has been paid to ideas on the karmic causes of the Buddha's final illness and to the *jātaka* stories that were composed to explain it. This diarrhea is just one of several physical afflictions which the Buddha is said to have suffered from at various points in his career. Elsewhere there is mention of: a headache, which he suffered at the time of the massacre of the Śākya;³ a backache, which forced him to ask one of his disciples to preach in his stead;⁴ a stomach-ache that had to be cured by the doctor Jivaka who gave him a special purgative made of ghee or of blue lotus flowers;⁵ an infected puncture wound caused by a stepping on a thorn;⁶ times of great hunger and thirst (including his six years of asceticism) or of inadequate food (such as rotten grain).⁷ These afflictions were in addition to other negativities suffered by the Buddha, such as the physical attacks on him by his jealous rival and cousin, Devadatta;⁸ the slander of him by various women, e.g., Cañcā and Sundarī who accused him of sexual offences;⁹ or the insults heaped on him by a Brahmin named Akrośa-Bhāradvāja (Bhāradvāja-the-abuser).¹⁰

Paul Harrison (1995, 12) has suggested that the biographical traditions that recount the Buddha's various mishaps may be very old, that they may reflect 'a memory of real accidents and setbacks in the founder's life'. Be this as it may, in time, many of these 'bad bits' of the Buddha's life story were extracted from his biographies and gathered together in lists that provided fodder for scholastic discussions.

In what follows, in Part One, I would like to examine some of these lists in order to see what they can tell us, in a general sense, about karmic explanations for the Buddha's sufferings. In doing so, I will limit myself to Mainstream sources, since Mahāyāna explanations for the Buddha's afflictions tend to be complicated by

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2. For discussions of the nature of the Buddha's illness, see most recently, Mettanando and Von Hinüber 2000 who suggest that he died of mesenteric infarction. On the nature of the food in the Buddha's last meal, see *inter alia*, Bareau 1970–'971, 1: 265–273; Waley 1931–1932, 343–354; and Wasson 1982.
 3. On this episode, see the sources listed in Lamotte 1949–1980, 508n.
 4. Waldschmidt 1950–51, 2: 286. See also M I 354 (Eng. trans. Horner 1954–1959, 2: 19–20); D III 209 (Eng. trans. Walshe 1987, 480); and S IV 184 (Eng. trans. Bodhi 2000, 1245). In S I: 174 (Eng. trans., Bodhi 2000, 269), the Buddha is said to suffer from an ailment cause by the wind element. According to some Chinese sources (see Lamotte 1949–80, 509n.1), this was also a backache and was cured by the Brahmin Devahita, but the Pali versions of the story and the remedy used (a concoction of hot water and molasses) suggest rather that it was an intestinal ailment. See also Dh-p-a IV 4 232 (Eng. trans. Burlingame 1921, 3: 339). For more on the Buddha's backache, see Anālayo 2011, 1: 35.
 5. For sources on this episode, see Demiéville 1937, 233. See also Dutt 1939–1959, 3, pt 2: 47, and Gnoli 1978, 2: 90–93.
 6. For sources on this episode, see Lamotte 1949–1980, 508n.1. In the *Upāyakaūsalya-sūtra*, the thorn is said to follow the Buddha around everywhere he goes — even up to the heavens and into the ocean, until he steps on it (see Tatz 1994, 74–76).
 7. For sources, see Lamotte 1949–1980, 124n.1 and 457n.3–58n.1; Bareau 1963, 45ff., and Cutler 1997, 70.
 8. For sources, see Lamotte 1949–1980, 508n.1 and 874n.2–3; and Mukherjee 1966, 63–74.
 9. For sources, see Lamotte 1949–1980, 507–08n.1, and 1572–73; Malalasekera 1960, 2: 1216–1217.
 10. For sources, see Lamotte 1949–1980, 1762–1764n.1 and Malalasekera 1960, 1: 4.

docetic views of the Buddha and the doctrine of expedient means (*upāya*).¹¹ Then, with this context in mind, in Part Two, I would like to look more specifically at some *jātaka* stories explaining the Buddha's final illness of bloody diarrhea.

PART I

KARMIC EXPLANATIONS FOR THE BUDDHA'S AFFLICTIONS

There are basically three stances taken with regard to the karmic explanations of the Buddha's afflictions:

(1) the Buddha presents his afflictions as the results of his own past bad karma. This is usually found in those texts in which the Buddha, in an assembly at Lake Anavatapta (Pali, Anotatta), recalls for his disciples a series of mishaps which he explains as the karmic fruits of his own misdeeds in previous lives.¹² Prime examples of such texts include the Pali *Apadāna*, in which the Buddha presents twelve mishaps as the karmic remnants (*kammaṭṭhi*) of misdeeds, which he then recalls;¹³ the 'Buddhāvadāna' section of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*, in which the Buddha, at Lake Anavatapta, relates to his disciples the karmic causes for eleven of his mishaps;¹⁴ the fiftieth chapter of Kṣemendra's *Avadānakalpalatā* entitled 'Daśakarmapluti-avadāna', in which the Buddha accounts for ten of his karmic bonds;¹⁵ T. 199, the *Fo wu bai di zi shuo ben qi jing* ['The Sūtra on the Buddha and his five hundred disciples narrating their *avadānas*'] said to have been translated by Dharmarakṣa in 303 C.E.;¹⁶ and T. 197, the *Xing qi xing jing* ['The Sūtra on the (Buddha's) previous deeds'], said to have been translated by Kang Mengxiang at the end of the second century C.E.¹⁷

(2) Secondly, there are those sources in which the Buddha's mishaps are seen as the results of the deeds of others, in repetition of their past karmic patterns. Examples of such explanations may be found in the *Dhammapada Commentary*, and the *Jātaka Commentary*.¹⁸

(3) Finally, there are sources in which no one is ascribed responsibility for the Buddha's mishaps, in which other-than-karmic explanations are found. Examples

11. For Mahāyāna lists of the Buddha's afflictions and discussions of them, see Harrison 1995; Tatz 1994, 71–89; Chang 1983, 456–464; and Lamotte 1949–1980, 507–511.

12. For studies and presentations of this scenario, see Bechert 1961, 204–259; Cutler 1997; Harrison 1995; Hofinger 1990; Lamotte 1976, 294–298; and Walters (1990). For a further bibliography, see Matsumura 1988, 128–129, 150–154.

13. Ap I 299f. The same verses are also quoted in Ud-a 263–266 (Eng. trans. Masefield 1995, 2: 632–635). See also Ap-a., 119ff (partial Eng. trans. Masefield 1995, 2: 713–722n.768–836).

14. T. 1448 94a–97a. See also Hofinger 1990, 19–54 (for editions of the Tibetan text and of Sanskrit fragments found in Dutt 1939–1959, 3, pt1: 211–219); and Hofinger 1990, 85–123 (for a French translation based on all versions).

15. Vaidya 1959, 2: 305–315. For a newer edition of the Sanskrit and Tibetan text (with Japanese translation) see Okano 2007. For an Eng. trans. of the Tibetan, see Black 1997: 246–253. It is likely that 'pluti' (in 'Daśakarmapluti') is just another word for 'ploti' (Pali, *piloti*), meaning strand or thread-not-yet-cut (see Harrison 1995, 11–12). See, however, the suggestion in Cutler (1997, 75) as to how the meaning of *pluti* as 'leap' might also be retainable here.

16. T 199 IV 201b–202a (Ger. trans. Bechert 1961, 208–239).

17. T 197 IV 165c–174a (Ger. trans. Bechert 1961: 208–239). However, Jan Nattier (2008, 102) does not include the text among Kang's translations.

18. For specific references, see below.

of such sources include the *Questions of King Milinda*, and several of Buddhaghosa's Commentaries on the *Nikāyas*.¹⁹

(1) In the various versions of the assembly held at Lake Anavatapta, the Buddha accepts karmic responsibility for his own sufferings, which are each said to be the final result, the last working out, of a demeritorious act done by the Buddha in one of his past lives — a demeritorious act which is then recounted in some detail.

Gautama, in fact, was not the only Buddha to have recalled his bad karma in this way; the elucidation 'of the thread of (negative) past karma' (*pūrvikā karma-ploti*) at Lake Anavatapta is said to be one of the ten indispensable actions of all Buddhas (Cowell and Neil 1886, 150; Eng. trans., Rotman 2008, 264). In complying with this biographical prescription, however, Gautama reveals some rather disturbing points about his own past, which tend to clash with the dominant, if not exceptionless,²⁰ picture of the heroic, righteous bodhisattva. Here we learn that, in a previous life, the Buddha once committed fratricide so as to be able to inherit the entirety of his family's fortune. Egged on by his wife, he invited his brother to go gathering flowers in the woods and then hit him with a stone. As a final result of this, in his life as Gautama, he had to suffer injury from the rock launched at him by his cousin Devadatta. Elsewhere, we learn that his backache was due to his having, in a past life as a wrestling champion, broken the back of a rival wrestler; that his puncture wound from a thorn was due to his having killed a rival merchant with a spear; that his having to eat coarse grain fit only for horses was the result of his having, as a Brahmin, once badmouthed a previous Buddha and told him he deserved only rotten grain to eat; and that the false accusations made against him by Sundarī were due to his having, as a monk in a past life, been jealous of his brother, an *arhat*, and instigated a servant girl to spread rumors about him.²¹

In all of these stories, it may be said, we can find a pattern of crossover or boomerang karma, in which the perpetrator of a bad deed in a past life becomes the victim of that same kind of bad deed in the present. In this way, the karmic 'punishment' fits the crime: the bodhisattva who hit his brother with a stone in a past life, gets hit in turn by his cousin Devadatta in this life; or the puncture wound that he gives to a merchant with a spear in a past life results in a puncture wound (by a thorn) in this life.

Clearly these, and other stories like them, clash with the stereotypical *jātaka* picture of the heroic, righteous bodhisattva, but they are different for other reasons, too. At first glance, it may be thought that the karmic fruits here are sometimes disproportionately light in comparison to the gravity of the karmic deeds — that stepping on a thorn, for instance, is but slight 'punishment' for killing a man with a spear, or that having a backache is a small consequence for breaking a man's back. It could be argued that the negative effects of the Buddha's bad karma are here being mitigated by the overwhelming mass of his good karma. However,

19. For specific references, see below.

20. While the bodhisattva is often presented in the *jātakas* as righteous and heroic, this is by no means always the case. There are numerous stories in which he acts badly, or makes mistakes, or has to suffer the consequences of his own bad past karma. For a discussion of such instances, see Appleton 2010, 26–27.

21. For a convenient listing of all of these karmic connections, together with a bibliography on each, see Matsumura 1988, 128–129.

it should be noted that these afflictions are not the only karmic results of the Buddha's negative actions; they are but the tail ends of negative karmic strands. In addition, the texts are careful to specify that for each deed, prior to his final birth as Gautama, he suffered many years in hell. This in itself is unusual since it appears to contradict the tradition (Appleton 2010, 93–94) that bodhisattvas, after their initial vows for enlightenment are never again reborn in hell.²²

The notion that the Buddha, even after his enlightenment, had still to experience the fruits of some bits of old karma (even though he no longer generated any new karma), was, in fact, widely accepted in a number of different Buddhist traditions. The *Divyāvadāna*, for instance, heralds it as orthodoxy: 'Have you not heard', it proclaims, 'the saying of the Sage that even *jinas* and *pratyekabuddhas* are not free from tenacious karma?' (Cowell and Neil 1886, 416). Similarly, in his declarations at Lake Anavatapta, the Buddha himself, prior to narrating his own past deeds, makes it clear that 'even a Tathāgata cannot be free from the fruit of evil deeds which he made in former lives' (Matsumura 1988, 128).

Even so, to go from such a theoretical view to having the Buddha himself tell tales of the terrible acts he committed in various previous lives is quite a leap. It can be said, perhaps, that this served a didactic purpose. Not only did these stories drive home the doctrine of the universality of the laws of karma and the notion of the Buddha's common humanity (by showing that he too was subject to sickness and injury), but they encouraged others by showing that bad karma can be overcome. If Gautama was a murderer or a maligner in a past life, and still became the Buddha, then there obviously is hope for all murderers and maligners. As Naomi Appleton (2010, 28) has put it: 'Being on the path to awakening does not require perfection at all times'. The *Apadāna Commentary* (the *Visuddhajanavilāsini*), in fact, makes this explicit. It speaks of two roads to buddhahood – a right one which is shorter and marked solely by good deeds, and a left one which is longer because it involves and needs to overcome demeritorious actions. Both paths, however, eventually lead to the goal (Ap-a 114). Thus, as Jonathan Walters (1980, 88) puts it, the stories of the Buddha's negative karma are 'paradigmatic of every person's ability to get onto the right road, even if he or she be the doer of bad karma'.

Finally, there is one more feature of these unusual *jātakas* that deserves our attention. By focusing only on the Buddha's past actions, many of the stories we have just looked at give the impression that he was the only karmic actor in them. Generally speaking, in the tales he recounts at Lake Anavatapta, when he proceeds to identify the actors of the past with the actors of the present, he makes mention only of himself. This is completely unlike the stories in the Pali *Jātaka Commentary* in which most of the karmic players are identified.²³ It is as though no one else can be responsible for the Buddha's afflictions.

22. It could be argued that these hell-births of the bodhisattva took place *prior* to his initial vow for buddhahood under the Buddha Dīpamkara. This is somewhat belied, however, by the texts in which he recounts (at Lake Anavatapta) maligning the past Buddhas Vipaśyi and Phussa, both of whom came after Dīpamkara (see Bechert 1961, 233). In Ap-a (114f) the Buddha admits having insulted (in his life as Jotipāla) the past Buddha Kassapa, and to have suffered rebirth in hell as a consequence, but the text seems to imply that Jotipāla did so in part as a result of a karmic remnant of Kassapa (see Masefield 1994–1995, 721–722). Other versions of the story, however, omit any mention of rebirth in the hells as a result of this particular action. (see Hofinger 1990, 101).

23. Perhaps the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* draws attention to this by labeling one of the Anavatapta

(2) Not everyone, however, was willing to go along with this notion that the Buddha's afflictions could be due entirely to his own past actions. Sources that were reluctant to do so were sometimes happy to focus instead on the actions of others.

Apart from the Lake Anavatapta stories we have focused on thus far, we find *jātaka* tales that explain the Buddha's afflictions only in terms of the actions of others. Typically, in stories of this type, when a negative situation arises (for example, Devadatta seeks to harm the Buddha, or Cañcā or Sundarī seeks to malign him), the Buddha declares to his disciples that 'this is not the first time' that such a thing has happened, and he proceeds to recount a previous life in which the basic karmic relationships were identical. In this perspective, then, there is no crossover or boomerang pattern; instead we find 'parallel karma' or what Naomi Appleton calls 'the karma of repetition' (Appleton 2010, 38). Good guys in this life were good guys in past lives, and bad guys in this life were bad guys in the past as well. In other words, in birth after birth, perpetrators of evil remain perpetrators of evil (though they may eventually reap the results thereof), and victims consistently play the role of victims.²⁴

Thus the *Dhammapada Commentary*, for instance, recounts the story of Ciñcā's feigned pregnancy and her accusation of the Buddha, and 'explains' it by a *jātaka* tale in which Ciñcā long ago was a lewd woman who, having failed to seduce a virtuous young man (the bodhisattva) falsely accused him of rape and of beating her up.²⁵ There is no indication here that the bodhisattva ever did anything wrong in any of his lives. Elsewhere, the same text recounts the story of the famine in Verañja during which the Buddha and his 500 disciples had to eat coarse grain intended for horses, but nothing is said about the bodhisattva's past deed which occasioned this. Instead, the karmic 'explanation' rests on the fact that the 500 disciples had been 500 horses in a past life.²⁶ Similarly, the *Jātaka Commentary* recounts Devadatta's attacks on the Buddha and amplifies them with many stories of previous lives in which he also tried, in various ways, to harm the bodhisattva.²⁷ Again, in these tales, as Jonathan Walters (1990, 84) has put it, 'the position that the Buddha did not suffer because of [his own] bad karma is upheld'. *Jātakas* are not always about the karmic results of actions, they are sometimes about repeated patterns of actions. The subtext of all this, of course, is to shift attention from any consideration of the Buddha having any karmic responsibility for his own afflictions and to blame them on the deeds of others.

(3) Another way of making such a shift, and one that was adopted by a number of Pali texts, was to seek non-karmic 'natural' explanations for the Buddha's afflictions. There is sometimes a tendency, among students of Buddhism, to assume that 'everything is due to karma'. That, in fact, is hardly the case. A text found in

tales as exhibiting 'karma not done in common' (*asādhāraṇaṃ karma*). See Hofinger 1990, 96, and Dutt 1929–1959, 3, pt. 1: 213.

24. This of course does not preclude that the sufferings of the victims are not also the result of their own past bad karma. For an attempt to explain the complexities of the intersection of karmic strands in such situations, see Harvey 2007, 57–58.
25. Dh-p-a III 178–182 (Eng. trans. Burlingame 1921, 3: 19–23). See also Ja IV 187–196 (Eng. trans. Cowell 1895–1907, 4: 116–121).
26. Dh-p-a II 153–156 (Eng. trans. Burlingame 1921, 2: 193–194).
27. For references, see Malalasekera 1960, 1: 1110–1111.

both the *Samyutta* (S IV 230–31; Eng. trans. Bodhi 2000, 1279) and the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (A II 87; Eng. trans. Woodward and Hare 1932–1936, 2: 97), for example, lists eight possible causes of (unpleasant) feelings (*vedayitāni*²⁸), only one of which is karma. The former passage is translated by Bodhi as follows:

Some feelings, Sīvaka, arise here originating from bile disorders ... [or] originating from phlegm disorders ... originating from wind disorders ... originating from an imbalance (of the three) ... produced by a change of climate ... produced by careless behaviour [*visama-parihārajāni*] ... caused by assault [*opakkamikāni*] ... produced as the result of kamma.²⁹

The first four are all physiological and are based on theories of Indian medicine which declared that bodily ailments, at least, could be due either to karma or to natural causes, such as some imbalance in one of the three 'humors' of cold (phlegm), heat (bile), and wind, or some problem connected to all three of them.³⁰ The others may be classified as circumstantial (afflictions due, for instance, to changes in the weather, or from sitting or standing for too long, or from happening to be in a dangerous place), or inflicted by external agencies (such as being hit or imprisoned or tortured) (Mp III 114).

A number of later Pali texts were quick to use some of these non-karmic reasons to explain the Buddha's afflictions, especially his physical ailments. Thus Buddhaghosa, in his commentaries on the canonical passages that mention the Buddha's backaches, attributes them not to karma but to the great exertions he made during his six years of practicing asceticism.³¹ Similarly Nāgasena, in the *Questions of King Milinda*, declares that the boulder that Devadatta rolled down on the Buddha was an example of 'assault' (*opakkamika*).³² He does admit that this may have been the result of Devadatta's hatred of the Buddha nurtured over many lifetimes (Mil 136; Eng. trans. Davids 1890–1894, 1: 193), but when Milinda later questions him about the fragment that splintered off when the boulder was smashed — why did it hit the Buddha's toe? — he replies that that had nothing to do directly with Devadatta's action, but was purely the result of the random direction taken by the fragment (*animittakatadisa*) (Mil 181; Eng. trans. Davids 1890–1894, 1: 250). In other words, it was a freak accident for which there was no real reason at all. The fragment could just as easily have missed the Buddha.

This amounts to answering Milinda's persistent questions of 'Why? Why? Why?' with a simple 'Just because!' — a rather striking reply in a tradition that tended to give karmic reasons when dealing with the otherwise unanswerable. Clearly, Nāgasena is wary of getting involved in the complexities of karmic explanations in the case of the Buddha. In fact, there is a certain amount of polemic in his answers. At one point, for instance, he declares that those who exaggeratingly maintain that all is due to karma are 'fools' (Mil 135–136; Eng. trans. Davids

28. An exactly parallel passage at A V 110 concerns causes of illnesses (*ābhādhā*).

29. Bodhi 2000, 1279. The same list is also found in A V 110 (Eng. trans. Woodward and Hare 1932–1936, 5: 75) where it is used to explain the possible causes of illnesses (*ābhādhā*).

30. See Demiéville 1937, 233.

31. Spk III 52; Ps III 28; Sv III 974.

32. Davids (1890–1894, 1:193) renders this as 'external agency'. See also Horner (1963–1964, 1:190) who translates it as 'sudden'.

1890–1894, 1: 193) and, in what appears to be a direct refutation of the *Apadāna* list, he goes on to assert that in no circumstances can any of the Buddha's sufferings be attributed to his own karmic actions (Mil 137; Eng. trans. Davids 1890–1894, 1: 194). For Nāgasena, the Buddha has no more old karma — not even the tail ends thereof — to work out after his enlightenment. As he puts it: 'When the Blessed One attained omniscience, he had already burnt up (*jhāpetvā*) everything unwholesome (*akusala*)', i.e., all bad karma. Obviously such a view is not at all conducive to the telling of explanatory *jātakas*.

PART TWO

THE BUDDHA'S DIARRHEA

We have seen so far that, in Mainstream Buddhist sources, the Buddha's afflictions were variously said to be due to repercussions from his own bad karma, to repetitions of the bad karmic tendencies of others, or to no karma at all. With this triple context in mind, I would now like to turn to examine the particular case of the Buddha's final illness, the dysentery or bloody diarrhea that occurred just prior to his death and *parinirvāna*. I will organize my presentation under the same three headings as in Part One, although we shall see how the particularities of the tradition led to certain interesting variations.

(1) The various accounts of the Buddha's sermon at Lake Anavatapta are unanimous in including the Buddha's final illness among the afflictions which he saw as due to his own bad karma. The *Apadāna* narrative is the briefest. In it, the Buddha merely recalls: 'I was a physician, and I treated the son of a merchant with a purgative; as a result of the maturation of that act, I got diarrhea' (Ap 301). This does not tell us very much about the Buddha's past action, but the commentary explains that this purgation was unnecessary but prescribed by the bodhisattva out of greed for charging his patient more (Ap-a 127). The basic scenario here, then, is one of boomerang karma: he who caused diarrhea in a past life must suffer it in the present.

The corresponding verse in T. 197 is less clear about the nature of the Buddha's illness, but more forthcoming as to the severity of the past misdeed. It specifies not only that, in a previous life as a physician, the Buddha gave his patient the wrong drug, but that he did it deliberately out of ill-will and that, as a result, the patient died. The immediate effect of this was suffering in hell, and the tail-end of it was a painful illness (presumably dysentery) in his final life:

Once, as a doctor, I treated the child of a householder.
 Out of ill-will, I gave him the wrong medicine, and so I caused his death.
 As a result of the effects of this deed, I suffered for a long time the torments of hell.
 As a result of the leftover karma from that time, I had the misfortune of suffering from a painful illness.³³

33. T 197 167b14–17 (Ger. trans. Bechert 1961, 235). See also T 199 202a5–8 (Ger. trans. Bechert 1961, 235):

Once I was a doctor and treated the son of a respectable person.
 By mixing for him the wrong prescription,
 I caused his illness to become more severe.
 As a result of this past offence,

The prose of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* expands on these verses and further clarifies the reasons for the bodhisattva's past life actions. In it the Buddha explains to his disciples at Lake Anavatapta that once long ago, there was a doctor who lived in a mountain hamlet (*karvaṭaka*). When the son of a householder in the area fell ill, he gave him some medicine and cured him, but received no doctor's fee (*abhisāra*). The same thing happened three times, and not once was the doctor paid. At that, the doctor became irate and reflected that if the son of the householder were to become sick again, he would give him a medicine such that his intestines would be rent into little bits (*antrāṇi khaṇḍakhaṇḍaṃ śīryante*). When the householder's son did fall ill once more, that is exactly what he did, and that is exactly what happened (Dutt 1939–1959, 3, pt. 1: 218). The Buddha then, in typical *jātaka* fashion, adds: 'What do you think, O monks? At that time, I was the one who was that doctor. It was I who, with an angry mind, gave some bad medicine to the son of that householder, thus causing his intestines to be flushed out in little bits. As a result of that act, I suffered in the hells during many years, many hundreds, many thousands, many hundreds of thousands of years. And it is by virtue of the remainder of that act that, at present, even though I am endowed with unsurpassed complete enlightenment, I have been afflicted by dysentery' (see Hofinger 1990, 116–117).

The *Avadānakalpalatā* tells essentially the same story in verse, but provides names for the protagonists and occasional comments on the events:

Once, in a poor village, there was a rich householder named Dhanavat who had a son named Śrīmāt who fell ill.

A doctor named Tiktamukha brought him back to health; he expected some material reward, but he was given nothing whatsoever by the father of the boy.

In time, the boy got sick again and again, and the doctor repeatedly made him well, but he never received anything from the father, nor was he given a doctor's fee. Burning with the flame of indignation, agitated by desire, consumed by dissatisfaction, that healer reflected:

'What a fool I am! I, who have an honest heart, have been taken by this swindler! What should I do now? The source of revenue that is a sick person is gone from my hands!

A doctor is like a bitter medicine: esteemed in the beginning, at the time of illness, but then unpalatable after the patient has been cured.

A doctor is as useful to one who has been totally freed from illness as a rich benefactor is to a person after he has attained his goal of wealth, or as a pilot is to one who has already crossed the river.

A doctor is utterly honored by those who are suffering — they fall at his feet. He is not celebrated but disdained by those who are well ...'

Just as the doctor's mind was utterly consumed by such thoughts, [the boy] fell ill again with a bodily disorder.

The doctor, who had concealed his indignation, now saw his chance for revenge: he mixed and gave the boy a medicine so caustic that it would destroy his intestines.

I fell into a very painful hell,
and as a consequence of its leftover karma,
I came down with dysentery.

[And indeed] his entrails were rent asunder by the destructive potion given to him

I was that doctor. After suffering the consequences of that evil deed during hundreds of myriads of rebirths, even at present, by virtue of the remains of that karma, I did suffer from dysentery. (Okano 2007, 281–288)

We can see in these different texts a gradual growth of the story, but all of them are agreed that the Buddha's final illness in this life was the tail-end of the karma resulting from a serious misdeed in a previous life, long ago. In this, it is akin to the other stories of bad karma that the Buddha recounts at Lake Anavatapta in that it asserts that the Buddha is the chief karmic contributor to his own afflictions.

(2) As has been noted, however, not everyone was willing to go along with this kind of karmic scenario. Thus, as we saw in the instances of the Buddha suffering the injuries dealt him by Devadatta or the insults heaped on him by Ciñcā and Sundarī, alternative stories developed that talked of these afflictions only in terms of their being due to the once more repeated action of these people. The tale of the Buddha's final illness would also seem ripe for such an explanation given the fact that a potential villain — Cunda — was instrumental in bringing it about. As the *Mahāparinibbāna sutta* puts it at one point:

Having eaten Cunda's meal ...,
He suffered a grave illness, painful, deathly;
From eating a meal of 'pig's delight'
Grave sickness assailed the Teacher.³⁴

In light of this, one might expect those seeking to free the Buddha from any karmic responsibility for his own last illness to make up a *jātaka* featuring Cunda doing some past evil deed. Interestingly, we find none, for reasons that I shall soon try to explain. We do, however, find, I think, at least one story that appears to speculate about the possibility of blaming Cunda: the *Dhammapada Commentary* (Dhp-a I 125–129; Eng. trans. Burlingame 1931, 1: 225–228) recalls an interesting tale about another Cunda who is called 'Cunda the Pork-Butcher' (Cunda Sūkarika). This story is used to explicate *Dhammapada* verse 15: 'Here he suffers; after death he suffers: the evildoer suffers in both places. He suffers, he is afflicted, seeing the impurity of his own past deeds' (Burlingame 1931, 1: 225–228). The story goes as follows:

For fifty-five years Cunda raised pigs in a pen near his house. Whenever he wanted to feast on a pig, he would tie it to a stake and pound it with a club to make its flesh tender. Then 'forcing open the pig's jaws and inserting a little wedge in [its] mouth, he would pour down its throat boiling hot water The hot water would penetrate the pig's belly, loosening the excrement, and would pass out through the anus, carrying boiling hot excrement with it. So long as there was even a little excrement left in the pig's belly, the water would come out stained and turbid; but as soon as the pig's belly was clean, the water would come out pure and clear.

(Burlingame 1931, 1: 226).

34. Walshe, 257 (text in D II 128). Much the same verse may be found in Ud 82 (Eng. trans. Woodward 1985, 101).

As a result of this action and others like it, Cunda suffered late in life: he took to acting like a grunting pig, after which he died in pain and was reborn in the Avīci Hell.

It seems to me that this tale has some interesting resonances with the story of the Buddha's last illness and its *jātaka* precedents, for not only does it involve the preparation of a meal of pork by someone named Cunda, but it features a scenario of death and purgation (of a sort). Cunda-the-butcher does to the pig pretty much the same thing that the bodhisattva-as-a-doctor did to the son of the rich man in the *jātakas* we considered above. Moreover, rebirth in Avīci hell was generally reserved for those who had committed grievous crimes, such as assaults on the Buddha or one's parents, or raping nuns, or insulting enlightened beings.³⁵ It is curious that killing a pig, even in the rather gruesome way described, was thought to be karmically on a par with these acts, and that Cunda, by his heavy karmic result, should be equated with such persons as Devadatta and Ciñcā.

It is worth asking why this tale or one like it never got connected to the Buddha's last meal and illness. The answer seems to be that, for reasons that are not altogether clear, fairly early on, in the text of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* itself, Cunda was explicitly exonerated from any blame for the Buddha's illness. In the Pali version of the story, sometime after the Buddha has recovered sufficiently from his bout of diarrhea to be able to proceed on his way towards Kusinārā, he suddenly tells Ānanda that Cunda-the-smith might be inclined to blame himself for the death of the Tathāgata, but he should in no ways do so. Rather than think of the meal he gave to the Buddha as a misdeed, he should think of it as a positive meritorious action, akin to the meal of milk-rice given to the Buddha by the maid Sujātā just prior to his own enlightenment. For just as Sujātā's milk-rice ushered in the Buddha's *nirvāṇa*, so Cunda's 'pig's delight' ushered in his *parinirvāṇa*.³⁶ As Bareau (1970–1971, 1: 301–302) points out, this episode appears to be rather out of place in the narrative, and actually interrupts the story line. Moreover, the explanation for why Cunda is innocent directly contradicts the text's earlier implication that he was to blame, and seems rather makeshift. Bareau speculates that it was introduced here because of some confusion between Cunda-the-smith and his namesake Cunda-the-monk, also sometimes called Mahācunda or Cundaka. For in the Pali narrative, the exoneration of Cunda-the-smith occurs right after a scene in which Cunda-the-monk (a man who clearly deserves no blame) is suddenly brought in and said to help the sick Buddha lie down, thus momentarily and rather mysteriously replacing Ānanda in the role of personal attendant to the Buddha.³⁷ If there was real confusion here, it may be that the tradition did not want to suggest that a prominent member of the *saṃgha* might have been responsible for the Buddha's death. The plot thickens, however, in one Chinese version of the story, where this second Cunda (who in the Chinese is not explicitly distinguished from the first), after helping the Buddha lie down following the onset of his sickness, suddenly requests permission to enter *parinirvāṇa* on the spot. He gives no reason for this, but the Buddha grants him permission right

35. For references, see Malalasekera 1960, 1: 199.

36. D II 135–36 (Eng. trans. Walshe, 261). See also Waldschmidt 1950–1951, 2: 282–284. The same episode is found in Ud 84–85 (Eng. trans. Woodward 1985, 104).

37. D II 134–35 (Eng. trans. Walshe 260–261). See also Ud 84 (Eng. trans. Woodward 1985, 103). On this confusion, see also Bareau 1970–1971, 1: 310.

away and that is the last we hear of Cunda in the text: he extinguishes himself without remainder.³⁸ The passage is too terse to allow for any definitive interpretation, but it would seem that this Cunda, at least, was viewed with some ambiguity. His *parinirvāṇa* proves that he was enlightened, but the manner of his attaining it suggests that he had a particular reason to wish to leave the world behind. In any case, in this one text, he is conveniently disposed of, and Ānanda immediately returns as the Buddha's attendant.

Whatever the identity of this Cunda, his exoneration did not stop the tradition from looking to attribute the karmic cause of the Buddha's last illness somewhere else than on his own actions. Some years ago, Ginette Martini (1972) drew attention to a Pali story featuring a different karmic tale seeking to explain the Buddha's diarrhea. This is the last *jātaka* found in a relatively late but very difficult to date anthology of tales known as the *Paṃsukuladānānisaṃsakathā*. The text is but a few paragraphs long and may be summarized as follows: The Buddha is served a meal in the home of Cunda of Pāvā consisting of 'delightful pig's meat' (*sukaramaduva-maṃsa*).³⁹ As soon as he finishes the meal, blood flows forth from his bowels. Seeing this, the monks immediately think 'it was the meat!' Wishing to enlighten them, the Buddha then explains that, long ago, in a previous life, he was born into a very poor family. Soon, his father died, and he went about supporting his widowed mother by gathering firewood in the forest. At the time, the pig was reborn as a demon (*yakkha*) who oppressed the people of the region. The king, wishing to rid his realm of this monster, offered a handsome reward to whoever managed to subdue him. The bodhisattva's mother, wanting to get out of poverty, volunteered her son, knowing how strong he was. Obeying his mother, the bodhisattva sought out the *yakkha* and killed it, and the king properly recompensed his mother. But the story does not end there: the dead *yakkha*, seeks revenge, and over the course of his future rebirths, apparently due to his hatred, his flesh becomes poisonous. He is then finally reborn as the pig which Cunda serves to the Buddha, thereby occasioning his death (Martini 1972, 254–255)

Such tales of multi-life intrigue and revenge are by no means rare among *jātakas*.⁴⁰ This tale is noteworthy, however, for a number of reasons. First of all, it makes no mention of Cunda whatsoever; apparently aware of his exoneration by the tradition, it seeks instead to blame a *yakkha*-now-reborn-as-the-pig. The text is rather terse in this regard but it seems to imply that, motivated by the desire for revenge stemming from the wrong done to it in a past life, the *yakkha* engineered its rebirth in Cunda's pigsty so it could poison the Buddha as his last meal. At the same time, of course, the Buddha is not altogether karmically uninvolved: he killed the pig to begin with when it was a *yakkha* — a responsibility that the story recognizes, but then seeks to mitigate by pointing out that he did it only out of filial piety, and that the *yakkha* was an oppressive monster who probably deserved to die. In the end, then, we have here, a karmically complex *jātaka* which seems to be responding to the parameters imposed on it, and to be arguing that the Buddha's last illness was *both* his fault and the fault of another.

38. T 1 20a10–21 (Ger. trans. Weller 1939–1940, 432–433). See also Bareau 1970–1971, 1: 310–311 on this perplexing episode.

39. Martini takes the addition of the word '*maṃsa*' (meat) here as proof that, at least in Southeast Asia at a certain period, the Buddha's last meal was considered to have consisted of pork.

40. For an interesting example, see Obeyesekere and Obeyesekere 1990.

(3) Within the Pali tradition, this story of the *yakkha*/pig, as well as the stories of the vengeful doctor-bodhisattva recounted above, were not the only stances taken on the issue of the causes of the Buddha's diarrhea. A third and final stance may be seen in the concerted effort by Buddhaghosa and others to assign no blame at all for the Buddha's sickness and death.

Interestingly, Buddhaghosa wants not only to free Cunda from blame (he hardly needs to do this, in light of the tradition's inclination in this direction), he wants also to exonerate the pig. In his commentary on the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, he points out that the pig's meat was fresh (*pavatta*),⁴¹ that it was carefully cooked, and that the Buddha's diarrhea happened 'when he had eaten, not because he had eaten'.⁴² In other words, neither Cunda nor the meal he prepared was responsible for the Buddha's demise. Quite to the contrary, Buddhaghosa claims that the 'pig's delight', rather than making the Buddha sick, must have restored him somewhat, or he would not have been able to walk and proceed on his way to Kusinārā.⁴³ This claim is coupled with several other traditions regarding the Buddha's last meal: that (as we have already seen) it was effective in sustaining the Buddha up to his *parinirvāṇa* (just as Sujāta's milk-rice had sustained him up to his *nirvāṇa*);⁴⁴ that the gods added to the meal a nutritive elixir (which is why Cunda was asked to serve it to the Buddha alone since it would have been indigestible by others);⁴⁵ and that special dishes prepared with pork were intended to be medicinal.⁴⁶ Buddhaghosa further points out that the Buddha's final illness at Pāvā was a recurrence of the disease that had first manifested itself at Beluva ten months earlier, and that *that* bout (which the Buddha suppressed by the force of concentration) had not been brought on by any meal of pork.⁴⁷ Finally, Buddhaghosa seeks to dismiss the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* verse quoted above that suggests that the food was the cause of the Buddha's illness as a late addition to the text made by the elders at the first council (see An 2006, 49).

It should be said that Buddhaghosa's view here seems to be confirmed by other versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*. In the *Dirghāgama*, where the Buddha's last meal is portrayed as consisting not of pork but of the 'fruit of the sandalwood tree' (perhaps a kind of mushroom or tree fungus), no correlation is made between the Buddha's consumption of it and his illness (T. 1 18b5–6; Ger. trans. Weller 1939–1940: 420). In fact, it is stated that 'even though he had eaten the fruit of the sandalwood tree, his pain got worse'.⁴⁸ In other words, Cunda's meal might have helped him, but it did not.

41. Perhaps also meaning 'already available meat', i.e., meat that was not killed expressly for the Buddha (thus observing the *Vinaya* rule). On this, see Masefield 1994–95, 1083n.173.

42. Sv II 568 (Eng. trans. An 2003: 121–122). See also An 2006: 48–49.

43. Sv II 568 (Eng. trans. An 2003: 122). The same point is made by Dhammapala in Ud-a 401 (Eng. trans. Masefield 1994–1995, 1027).

44. Sv II 570 (Eng. trans. An 2003, 127).

45. Sv II 570 (Eng. trans. An 2003, 127). On the gods adding elixirs to the Buddha's food, see Bareau 1971.

46. See Masefield 1994–1995, 1083n.174. For a list of such medicines, see Waley 1931–1932, 345–346.

47. D II 99 (Eng. trans. Walshe 1987, 244). See on this An 2006, 51. Buddhaghosa fails to point out, however, that on that occasion, the sickness was not accompanied by bloody diarrhea.

48. T 1 18c26–29 (Ger. trans. Weller 1939–1940, 424–435; Fr. Trans. Bareau 1971–1972, 1: 309).

But if neither Cunda nor the meal he served is to blame, what caused the Buddha's illness? It is clear that Buddhaghosa would prefer a natural non-karmic reason rather than entertain any *jātaka*-like explanation. The same is true of the *Milindapañha*. We have already noted its view that the Buddha, at his enlightenment, had already burned up all his bad karma. In its twenty-fourth dilemma, the text specifically addresses the question of the Buddha's last illness. King Milinda notes that there appears to be a contradiction in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*: on the one hand, the Buddha's meal of pig's delight is blamed for his illness and death; on the other hand, it is said to have been a meritorious offering. Nāgasena does not exactly explain away this contradiction, but he resolves it in favor of the latter position: for him, the Buddha's illness was not due to Cunda's pork but simply to his old age and the extreme weakness of his condition (Mil.175; Eng. tr. Davids, 1890–1894, 1: 244). In other words, the Buddha passed away not because of his own bad karma, nor because of the actions of others; he simply died of old age.

CONCLUSION

I have looked, in this article, at various stances taken to explicate the Buddha's fatal illness at the end of his life. Two of these were conducive to the telling of *jātaka* stories, but of rather different types: the one emphasized the Buddha's own negative karma (and is associated with similar tales recounted at the so-called council of Lake Anavatapta); the second stressed the negative deeds and karma of others-than-the Buddha. In the latter case, we also saw the complicating factor of the early exoneration, by the tradition, of the prime potential suspect in the case, Cunda, and argued that this might have resulted in the development of an unusual late *jātaka* explaining the illness as due not to Cunda but most immediately to the pig. In addition, there was a third stance which viewed the Buddha's illness as neither caused by himself or others, and so eschewed *jātaka* stories to explain it.

I have not tried to trace a chronological development between these three stances, largely because each one of them seems to have been enduring over time. The Buddha's bad karma is invoked as early as the *Apadāna*, one of the last books to be added to the Pali canon (Von Hinüber 1996, 61), and is still found as late as Kṣemendra's *Avadānakalpalatā* (eleventh century). The attribution of the karmic cause primarily to the deeds of others seems to have been already present when the *Mahāparinibbāna* and the *Udāna* sought to counter it by exonerating Cunda, and seems to occur as late as the very late *Paṃsukuladānānisamsakathā*. The refusal to assign a karmic reason is already there in the same canonical texts, and developed further by the commentarial tradition.

As suggested in Part One of this paper, each of these stances appears to be governed by a particular ideological view of the nature and status of the Buddha, and whether or not he was still subject to karmic results or subject to the negative actions of others. And the debate over these issues, of course, was not limited to the positions presented in this paper. Within the Mahāyāna, other explanations for the Buddha's afflictions continued to be developed. Thus Vimalakīrti reprimands Ānanda for searching for milk to cure one of the Buddha's ailments because the Buddha's body, his transcendental (*lokottara*) body is 'not a body that can be cured'

Similar exoneration may be found in other Chinese translations of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* (T. 5–7). See An 2006, 52–54.

(Lamotte 1976, 83). The Buddha's physical body that gets sick, and indeed the very ailments that he 'suffers' from, have no ultimate reality but are merely part of his good expedient means (*upāya*).⁴⁹ Interestingly, however, in this context, the *jātaka* stories we have been looking at are not neglected. They are still told, and their very telling is also seen as part of *upāya*. As the *Upāyakauśalya Sūtra* puts it: 'The [Buddha] has no habit-patterns at all that are yet to be eliminated. There is no possibility at all of a fault ... caused by past deeds. Nevertheless, the [Buddha] demonstrates the maturation of deeds to sentient beings who taste the fruition of deeds, and to sentient beings who do not believe in karmic fruition' (Tatz 1994, 71).

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ABBREVIATIONS

A	<i>Aṅguttara-nikāya</i>	Mil	<i>Milindapañha</i>
Ap	<i>Apadāna</i>	Ps	<i>Papañcasūdanī</i>
Ap-a	<i>Apadāna-aṭṭhakathā</i>	S	<i>Samyutta-nikāya</i>
D	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>	Spk	<i>Sāratthappakāsinī</i>
Dhp-a	<i>Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā</i>	Sv	<i>Sumaṅgalavilāsinī</i>
Ja	<i>Jātaka-aṭṭhavaṇṇanā</i>	Ud	<i>Udāna</i>
M	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>	Ud-a	<i>Udāna-aṭṭhakathā</i>
Mp	<i>Manorathapūrāṇī</i>	T	<i>Taishō shinshū daizōkyō</i>

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49. See the survey of various Mahāyāna texts on this topic in Lamotte 1976, 296–298.

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