Buddhaghosa's View of the Buddha's Parinibbāna

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In his commentary on the *Mahāparinibbāna-suttanta* (MPS hereafter), Buddhaghosa provides his own unique interpretation of some accounts of the important events relating to the Buddha's *parinibbāna*. Some of his views go against or differ from the traditional understandings or our current interpretations. I introduce Buddhaghosa's view of the causes of the Buddha's death, and of the post-mortem existence of the Buddha

1). Ānanda is not to blame for the Buddha's giving up his life-span.

In MPS, Ānanda is responsible for the Buddha's premature death. While spending the day with Ānanda at the shrine, the Buddha declares his capacity to prolong his lifespan by *iddhi* (supernormal power). But Ānanda does not respond to this hint, but remains silent. Later on, Ānanda makes his appeal for the Buddha's prolongation of life-span, but the Buddha refuses it, saying, "Even though the Buddha's clear suggestion was made three times, you did not entreat the Buddha to remain. If you had done so, Ānanda, twice the Tathāgata would have declined, but the third time he would have consented. Therefore Ānanda the fault is yours." ¹⁾

Buddhaghosa comments that Ānanda is not to blame for the Buddha's giving up his lifespan; rather in order to lessen his grief at the Buddha's disappearance, the Buddha invents this story. In Buddhaghosa's interpretation, the Buddha knew Ānanda could not comprehend the clear suggestion, because he was possessed by Māra. To the question: even though he knows this, why does the Buddha address him up to three times? Buddhaghosa answers, "In order to lessen his sorrow by putting the blame on him saying: 'This is your misdeed, this is your fault,' when, later on, he was asked by the elder: Sir, let the Blessed One live on." ²⁾ People tend to be troubled less by a situation where they themselves are responsible for it. Ānanda

feels guilt rather than grief at the Buddha's *parinibbāna*.

On the Buddha's telling Ānanda about Māra's appeal followed by the series of eight sets, Buddhaghosa comments that the Buddha intentionally prevents Ānanda from asking him to prolong his life by not giving him a chance to speak. On the Buddha's making his cleat suggestion which has been made in many places before, Buddhaghosa claims that the Buddha relates this story in order to ascribe the fault to the elder alone in many ways so as to dispel the elder's sorrow.³⁾

2). The last meal (*sūkaramaddava*) is not a cause of the Buddha's illness leading to his death.

In MPS, when the Buddha has eaten Cunda's meal, the deadly sickness arises in him. Readers are likely to think that the Buddha got sickness through eating Cunda's meal. However, Buddhaghosa clearly states that this food is not a cause of the Buddha's illness. He gives an opposite interpretation. Since Cunda had the food prepared and carefully cooked, the Buddha did not get sickness because of Cunda's meal. "It (the sickness) happened to him when he had eaten, but not because he had eaten. If it had happened when he had not eaten, it would have been too painful; but because he had eaten the succulent food, his pain was slight, which is why he was able to walk on foot."⁴⁾ Buddhaghosa interprets that the food is not a cause of the sickness, but on the contrary helps the Buddha to lessen his pains. Buddhaghosa earlier in his comments on the Buddha's overcoming sickness at Beluva states that the Buddha let no illness arise in ten months. "The Buddha achieved that attainment, thinking: 'Let it not arise for ten months.' The pains which were suppressed by the attainment did not indeed occur for ten months."⁵⁾ This illness is due to the completion of the period the Buddha himself set up ten months ago, not to the meal itself. The food looks like a cause of the illness.

3). The Buddha enters the immortal city called *Parinibbāna*.

The general mood which MPS conveys at the Buddha's death is sad and hopeless. People's and deities' grief is vividly described.⁶⁾ This despair of ordinary people results from their understanding of the Buddha's *parinibbāna*: the Buddha is gone, leaving people alone in this world.

Let us ask Buddhaghosa what happens to the Buddha after he finishes his lifespan here. His reply is found in the following remarks : “On the day of his *parinibbāna*, the Buddha became happy when he reflected : ‘Now today I will enter the city called immortal (undying) *mahāparinibbāna* where many hundred thousand Buddhas have entered.’”⁷⁾ Buddhaghosa's usage of the simile of the city for *nibbāna* is not at random. The same simile is employed when Buddhaghosa interprets the way in which the Buddha attains the attainments. “When entering the city of *nibbāna*, the Blessed One, Lord of *dharmā*, first attains all the attainments, numbering twenty-four hundred thousand koṭis, and experiences all the bliss of attainment (*samāpatti*), just as one going to a foreign country first embraces all his relations.”⁸⁾ He describes the Buddha's entering into *nibbāna* as a happy event, by stating that the Buddha goes to the immortal city of *nibbāna*.

From the point of view of Buddhology, we could best understand Buddhaghosa's views. By reinterpreting that Ānanda is not to blame for the Buddha's giving up his life-span, Buddhaghosa shows the Buddha's kind consideration and compassion towards Ānanda. By holding that the last meal is not a cause of the Buddha's fatal illness, Buddhaghosa could say that the Buddha is not a victim of food poisoning ; Rather he has power to control his life-span at his will. By interpreting the Buddha's *parinibbāna* as a great happy event like his enlightenment, Buddhaghosa prevents the nihilistic misunderstanding of the Buddha's *parinibbāna*.

*** Abbreviations ***

DA Dīghanikāyaṭṭhakathā

DN Dīgha Nikāya

Note : References to Pāli texts are to the Pali Text Society editions.

1) DN ii p.115. 2) DA ii p.555. 3) DA ii p.563. 4) DA ii p.568.

5) DA ii p.547. 6) DN ii p.140 ; p.159. 7) DA ii p.571. 8) DA ii p.594.

〈Key Words〉 Buddhaghosa, Parinibbāna, Sūkaramaddava, Life-span, Mahāparinibbāna-suttanta.
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