

## The Buddha as The Four Heavenly Messengers

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**November 07, 2021**

**Keywords:** Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, heavenly messengers, nibbāna, Dhamma, Four Foundations of Mindfulness, Eightfold Path, jhāna, Sāriputta, Moggallāna, Ānanda

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So what's been on in my heart, my mind lately, is the story of the last days of the Buddha's life. There is a text called the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, which is the longest sutta, the longest discourse. The longest in a text from this early tradition that is also unique in being kind of a travel log, because it describes the travels the Buddha did and lasts a period of his time. And it kind of also is set up to be maybe because it was. The Buddha knew he was dying. He was old to prepare his community for his departure and his absence there, and so giving his last teachings, his last instructions at this crucial point.

But also you get to see this man walking across India, and how he engages with his sickness, old age, and death, and dying. And it's, I think, it's quite inspiring to see the conscious, careful, considerate way in which he went about his last period of time. So I wanted to share that, and talk a bit about it, and this story of the last days of the Buddha's life, last days, last months. The text itself might span something like, we don't know exactly, somewhere between six and nine months of time, and it kind of bookends his path of practice. He refers to how he started in the text. He refers to how he started his practice more than fifty years before, when he was twenty-nine, and how he's about eighty.

And there's a kind of, I think, mostly probably most likely, a myth about the Buddha's beginning of his path. But you know, he started and was twenty-nine. It's, you know, what brought him at that age, ripe age, to engage in spiritual practice and set out for himself to seek for some solution to his suffering. The classic myth is that he was a kind of a prisoner of the palace until that age, that somehow his father wanted to protect him from the sufferings of the world, and so kept him kind of in this within the palace walls, and had different palaces that he moved between, but he was protected from seeing some of the challenges that people live under. And I can imagine that probably any of us, if we live that kind of way, kind of cooped up in a wealthy suburb growing up that way, and you know, it's the walls

around the compound and everything that there planned be some frustration, some challenge, some feeling like, This is not life, this is niyam, not connected, and there to be some kind of restlessness, and maybe even built up pressure.

And that takes the form of the Buddha then jumping over the wall, sneaking out and then I say he snuck out four times, and in each time he saw a different one of what's been called the heavenly messengers. And when I was ten or eleven, I was in Nepal, and Kathmandu and Kathmandu was a pretty simple city town. When I was there in nineteen sixty-five, I went back twenty years later. And I don't think there were any asphalted roads when I was there, and the dirt road in front of the palace the king lived. And it was the first time I saw a body of a child being carried down to the river to be burnt, and he died. And so that was like, So I can imagine a kind of So the Buddha saw these three heavenly messengers.

The first trip out, he saw someone who was sick. It says that he never knew anybody was sick before. Maybe was really sick, but something. And so he was shocked, and he was told, This is the nature of life. That's what happens to people. The next time he went out, he saw an old person that shocked him because he was to live such a protected life, right?

And he was told, This is what happens if you're lucky enough. You get old. And the next time he went out, he saw what I saw when I was eleven. He saw someone who was dead, and he was told, That's what happens. And the fourth time he went out, he saw an ascetic, a spiritual seeker, a renunciant. And the renunciant was somehow just walking through town very peacefully, and had never seen anybody who embodied such kind of peace.

It is something about them. And a renunciant got his attention, and just kind of indicated, All that's possible in this world of sickness, old age and death, world of turmoil, of restlessness, and this pressure, this probably this deep need that he had from being so cooped up that there was a solution, there was a way out, there was some other way, no other approach to life. So he saw these four heavenly messengers, and that sparked him then to actually leave his palace life, to jump over the wall a fifth time and to go off to become a renunciant himself, a contemplative, and which he did for the next of over fifty years of his life. And then at some point he had his solution to his suffering. He became enlightened, and then he taught, and then he comes to the end of his life.

Now, there's a kind of wonderful, a kind of parallel or something repeating of the same thing of sickness of these heavenly messengers. But this time he's the heavenly messenger. A story depicts him as being an old person, depicts him as being sick repeatedly, sick in these last days of his life, and depicts him as dying. And he's the renunciant, he's the peaceful one. He's a messenger of what's possible in this life, that we can resolve our suffering and somehow

become a peaceful, a messenger of peace, a teacher of peace, an embodiment of peace. So it's kind of like a wonderful completion to have that at the end of his life that he becomes these heavenly messengers.

So we become the Dharma, a dharma's not just something to treat as, you know, as an external thing we tap into, touch into periodically. It's possible to become it in some very profound way. And so when he needed started off practicing this, you know, whatever it was he was feeling as a young man, when he was twenty-nine, that he felt he had to leave the palace, leave his marriage, his family, even what that pressure was like inside of him. We get a little more sense of this from this story, which was probably, you know, closer to probably what actually happened to him than the myth of going out and seeing the heavenly messengers. So he's talking about how he was, what he was feeling before he became enlightened, and his kindness is describing his distress. And so here he is, is not it not enlightened yet? He hasn't discovered his peace yet. So he's a distressed young man.

Violence gives birth to fear. Just look at people and their quarrels. I will speak of my dismay and the way that I was shaken seeing people thrashing about like fish in little water, and seeing them feuding with each other, I became afraid. The world is completely without a core. Everywhere things are changing, I felt discontent at seeing only conflict to the very end. Then I saw an arrow here hard to see, embedded in the heart. Pierced by this arrow, people dash about in all directions. When the arrow's pulled out, they don't run, and they don't sink.

Then he goes on a little bit, and there's one more verse I've read that maybe little captures what the results of pulling out the arrow is. Given the instruction he gives for others, what was before, let it wither away. What will be later, do nothing with it. Not grasping what's in between. You'll live at peace. So don't be too caught up in the past or the future. Live here. This is where the peace is to be found.

So in this text, then, that the story of his last days here is. Some of what he wrote there is still true, and you can't have to read a little bit into the text, and some of it's pretty explicit. But that taught his time as he was dying is changing. The world that he knew is radically changing. And you know, if you're old enough, that's what you see sometimes. But some of the challenges we have in our modern times were challenges that they had back then.

It isn't like our challenges just have a little bit different technology that goes with it. But the, you know, the human challenges are so similar back then. But the Buddha, his time, he had to live with this as well. And the text beginning opens with a king. He's in this town, living in the town for the time being where the king lives. And the king sends his messenger, his minister,

to the Buddha with the instructions that he wants to check in with the Buddha about how good ideas for him to attack his neighboring country. That's how it begins. Wars are afoot now.

The king who wants to go attack his neighboring country, he killed his own father, who was a friend of the Buddha, and they'd spent many decades kind of, you know, in contact with each other. So that represents, you know, that Buddha's, if things were changing, and not what they had been for the Buddha. The other king, who was even closer to, lived further to the north. He also had been usurped by his son just in the last year or so of the Buddha's life and was sent into exile and died in exile. And it's possible why the Buddha was way down near Rājagaha in India, but about a hundred and seventy, eighty miles from where he was going to die, from his home country. And so there was always a turmoil, political turmoil going on in his time, and war was afoot.

And there's other kind of legends that during that last year of the Buddha's life, there was even his own home country was attacked, and first attacked and repelled, and then attacked, and then many people killed. And so that's kind of the background that's kind of for the is the Buddha starting to walk from Rājagaha north towards his home country. He is an eighty year old man or so, and he's walking across the plains of India, and the distance in some ways is not so great. But he ends up walking about a hundred and eighty miles. But he takes about six to nine months to do that. He stops for the Rains Retreats along the way, and he stops many places along the way.

I think someone who is relatively fit could probably do that walk, you know, in three weeks. And so he's taking his time. He's not in a hurry. And I just love this idea that he's not in a hurry, maybe because he's old and tired and sick, and creaky that maybe he has to walk really slow and take his time and rest a lot. One of the repeated refrains in this last text is the Buddha telling his fellow monks who are travelling with him: I'm tired. Let's go sit down. I'm tired. I need to lay down.

You don't see that almost anywhere else in the suttas. But this happens repeatedly as a man who needs to rest. And so he starts heading north and comes across more evidence of war is about to happen between these two countries that he spent a good part of his adult life visiting in Tibet, travelling through and teaching. And he goes a little bit further, and he gets learned that he has two main, most senior disciples, Sāriputta and Moggallāna. And he learns that Sāriputta has died, you know? And then he learns that Moggallāna, his other senior disciple, had been killed. So things are changing, and you know, this is what he's living in.

So and the Buddha just seems like, since I get from the text, he is just walking peacefully,

calmly, steadily, he is not affected by this. He certainly knows it. But somehow his peace is more powerful than what's happening around. And kind of from some of the things he says, it's kind of like the life around him is different, and what can be expected. And so he's not like fighting it, or he's not surprised by it. He's just walking peacefully, living his life teaching, doing his final teaching he has to do as he goes along. But in it he's, you know, he's the heavenly messengers.

So he stopped at some point for what's called the Rains Retreat, a three or four month period where monastics are staying put in one place, supposed to be during the monsoon season. And so he was doing that, and during the rains he was attacked by a severe sickness with sharp pains as if he were about to die. But he endured all this mindfully, clearly aware, and without complaining. He thought: It is not fitting that I should attain final *nibbāna* without addressing my followers and taking leave of the order of monks, I must hold this disease in check by energy and apply myself to the force of life. That's a powerful statement, you know. There's no way he couldn't go down to the local doctor and get some little medicine to pump him up or keep him going and not feel pain. There wasn't such things, so he had to kind of apply himself in practice and energy, and kind of keep his life force going, not to let it go out.

I've heard that. Or people come to a juncture, and when they get old or sick, where they, you know, they can almost feel the choice between still keeping the life energy going, and then letting it dissipate and move into death. So he decided to stay and stay alive. He had still more work to do, and then when he gets better from his sickness, his main attendant, a monk named Ānanda, came to him and said, I have seen the Buddha, I've seen you in comfort, and I've seen you patiently enduring when you are sick and when I saw you this way, sick, my body was like a drunkard's. I lost my bearings and things were unclear to me because of the Buddha's sickness. The only thing that was some comfort to me was the thought, The Buddha will not attain final *nibbāna* until he has made some statement about the order of monks, last instructions.

You know, and here, you know, again, everything's kind of falling apart here. You see, your disciple says he's kind of lost it when the Buddha was dying. So the Buddha says, You know, the Buddha then answers, says this about the final statement to the order of monks. But, Ānanda, what does the order of monastics expect of me? I have taught the *Dhamma*, making no inner or outer meaning, no inner esoteric teachings. That's secret and public teachings. I'd made no distinction between inner and outer, or secret or special teaching. And that I have no teacher's fist in respect to teachings. Teacher's fist, apparently, is that you hold things

inside, hidden in teacher's fist, and you only give to people if they do something. Do now. So apparently that was something people would do, for there was. There were other religions at a time of the Buddha where there were clearly secret doctrines, and they only taught to some people. You never could be shared with other people. So he didn't. That's not his way.

And then he says it interesting. And if there is anyone who thinks, I shall take charge of the order, the monastic order, or the monastic order should refer to me, let him make some statement about the order, let him do what he does. But if the Buddha doesn't think in that way, so why should I make a statement about the monastic order. I think we are saying he's not assigning anyone to be the successor. There's no one who is going to be the leader of it. And then he goes on. This is very touching, a detailed description of the Buddha being old. Ānanda, I am now old, worn out, venerable one who has traversed life's path. I've reached the term of life, which is eighty. Just as an old cart is made to go by being held together by straps, so my body is kept going by being strapped up.

It's only when I withdraw my attention from outward signs, from outward experiences of the world, and by the cessation of certain feelings, quieting down of certain feelings, and I enter into deep concentrated meditation called the signless that my body knows comfort. Remember, there's no pain meditation back then, right? So who knows what kind of physical pain he had? And so he had this powerful mind of meditation that he had ability to drop into, and so he was able to find his peace and comfort there, maybe refreshed there. Remember, he was trying, he kept his life force going. I suspect that this deep meditation is part of what helped that continue. And then he gave us one of the most important last teachings of his teaching career.

So therefore search it, therefore maybe, therefore getting or given that we're all, you know, going to get sick, old, and die. All of us some day or other will become at least one of the heavenly messengers, at least one. Some of you'll probably be two, some three, and hopefully some of you quickly. Now we'll be the last one, the last heavenly messenger, the person who walks peacefully in this world. So that, therefore, you should live as islands unto yourselves, being your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge. With a *Dhamma* as an island, with a *Dhamma* as your refuge, with no other refuge.

And how does one live as an island unto oneself, with no other refuge? Here a person abides contemplating the body as body, earnestly, clearly aware, mindful, and having put away all hankerings and fretting for the world. And likewise with regard to feelings, mind, and mind objects, this is how a person lives an island unto oneself, with oneself as one's only refuge. So this is what he gives his mindfulness practice. Four Foundations of Mindfulness. So the

last thing the Buddha, one of the last teachings the Buddha gives, is not a doctrine, but rather a teaching about practice. Instructions for Practice. And this he repeats in different ways as he goes along.

Here that practice is what he is interested in, and he has another place where he teaches. Those matters which I have discovered and proclaimed should be thoroughly learnt by you, practiced, developed and cultivated, so that this holy life may endure for a long time, that it may be for the benefit and happiness of many people living out of care for the world, for the benefit and happiness of gods and humans. So this is a powerful statement, I think, where he is talking about this is what he discovered. And to tell you what I discovered, and you should take this in and learn this well, but not only for your own sake, but for the welfare and happiness of others, just going of you kind of a universal benefit for the world. What a wonderful thing to be dedicated to. So here is going to tell you what he discovered. And what he says it are practices. And he gives a list of practices that he discovered.

- the four foundations of mindfulness
- the four right efforts
- the four roads to power
- the five spiritual faculties
- the five mental powers
- the seven factors of enlightenment
- the noble eightfold path

So that's quite, you know, a list. But you know that what I want to emphasize here at the end of his life, he's emphasizing practice. And you'll see. He comes back to that again a little bit later as he goes along here. So he's going along, walking north, slowly resting along the way, and at some point he is invited to a meal by a local blacksmith who provides him with some local food that we don't know exactly what it was. There's a lot of you can't believe all the scholarship around trying to figure out what food this is. But it's either some kind of mushroom. It's called pigs delight. So it's either the mushrooms that pigs like, or it's some pork dish. But we, you know, we don't know. But probably the most likely thing it's some kind of mushroom, and that apparently is maybe even poisonous or something.

So after having a meal with a blacksmith, the Buddha was attacked by a severe sickness, with bloody diarrhoea and with sharp pains as if he were about to die. But he endured all this mindfully and clearly aware and without complaint. So again, here we have, sometimes we go, the image we have on the altar here of the Buddha which is quite common, is you know, the Buddha is always well poised, and healthy, and young, and embodiment of the

ideal. And sometimes we kind of project this ideal spiritual perfection to the Buddha, like certainly he just kind of floated on a cloud, and was easy, and light, and nice, and comfortable, and, you know, all the way to his death. But you know, his description, you know, old, his body creaking and held together with straps, and he had a bad back. And somewhere else he described himself as hunched over, you know. We think it's upright and dignified, but he himself described himself as hunched over in his old age. And so it's very human, you know. It's kind of like idea. Almost we can feel ourselves, see ourselves in here, and the world's falling around. His disciples are dying. He's sick and old. And he's the heavenly messenger for peace. He's calm. He's mindful. He's steady. He has a practice. He's still teaching. He's still motivated. And he keeps walking on his pilgrimage, going north.

And he keeps going, and then at some point he crosses a river and comes to a sal grove. The sal trees are kind of majestic trees of northern India. They are kind of like the redwood trees of India, apparently quite beautiful and tall. And he came to this grove, and he said, Prepare a bed between two sal trees with my head to the north. I am saying one more time. He's saying I'm tired and want to lie down. So they did, and he lay down there, placing one foot on the other. And then he lay down mindful and clearly aware, always self-possessed, is always present in a nice way for what is doing. And then that's kind of like the last time he got he lay down. Then you think he was there enough for a day or two. And this story goes, and different people came to visit him, and he had final teachings for people, and the very last person who came to the Buddha, asking questions, wanting to be taught, came to the Buddha and said, No, as lots of people, lots of spiritual teachers around all teaching the truth. Who's teaching the real truth? How do we know what the real truth is? It's a reasonable question. And as he does other times, people ask that kind of point of question. He doesn't answer it directly. What he answers is he says, I'm not going to answer that. But wherever the eightfold path is, that's where you find people who become free. So wherever there's a practice, this is what I'm interested in. Not truth is not so important. What of interest is the practice. And here he's pointing to the eightfold path as the practice. And so that's the last thing he said to is a term of someone who came to him for teaching.

And then he gathered his monks around him, this monastic community, and asked them, You know, about to die, this is it. And you have any last questions, this is your chance. And I think he asked them three times, and that no one had any questions for him. Which I think maybe was very satisfying right me. He was very concerned about setting this, leaving behind a legacy of people who were enough people who had tasted the fruit of the Dharma, both monastic and lay, so that somehow the momentum could keep going. And he was he



ascertained in his own mind that, in fact, now in his old age, there were enough people who had tasted the fruit of the practice that he was not needed any more. And he gave the monks till one last chance to get clarified something. And when none of them answered any asked a question, then he said, Now I'll tell you this: All conditioned things are of a nature to decay. Practice tirelessly, so all things will pass, all things will change, disappear. And in the last words, he said, was practice tirelessly. So again, practice, practice, practice. That's what he was most about. Keep practising.

And then we come to the very end. Then the Buddha entered meditation, entered the first *jhāna*. Leaving that, he entered the second, the third, and the fourth. Then leaving the fourth *jhāna*, he entered the sphere of infinite space, then the sphere of infinite consciousness, then the sphere of nothingness, then the sphere of neither perception or non-perception, and then into the cessation of feeling and perception. It's kind of like this was his meditation life, going through these states of meditation. And here, just as he was dying, he went on one last tour, visiting them one last pilgrimage, going through these deep states of meditation. And then and then we reached this very high state called cessation of feeling and perception. Ānanda asked another monk named Anuruddha, Has the Buddha passed away? And Anuruddha, who was a highly skilled meditator himself, could read or see that Buddha. No, not yet. And so on. Then the Buddha left the attainment of the cessation of feeling perception and goes backwards through them, and to the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception, then into the sphere known nothingness, the sphere of infinite consciousness, the sphere of infinite space, and then back to the fourth *jhāna*, the third, the second, and the first. So he's gone up and down the ladder, and then he goes up again to the fourth *jhāna*. And the fourth *jhāna* is considered to be the place where it's easiest to let go fully, either to let go into enlightenment or let go into passing away.

So here's some person who, so this is not, this is a he was fully a master of himself. These last time, last period of his life, he was he knew how to die. He engaged in a practice that brought him into a very wonderful space where the mind is very peaceful, very autonomous, very still, where it just in that state. It just feels like the most wonderful thing you can do is to just continue that process of letting go. To enter those deep states of meditation, you have to do a lot of letting go to get there, and things become very thin. There's very little left to hold on to. And whatever is left to hold on to may be life force or something. It just feels so good to let go of that as well. So rather than death being like this, drag member. He said earlier, Don't concern yourself with what's in the future. Don't concern yourself in the past. Just practice. And here he was practising as he was dying, and it's a practice that involves letting go that

feels so healthy and so good, like one of the best things it feels you can do. He was ready to die. He died an old sick man. It was his time, and he died with one of the most wonderful things, the most peaceful, most wondrous, most luminous things you can do it: letting go, final letting go. So he knew that he died.

So this is a story of a man, an old man, who had found his peace. The world was falling around, falling apart around him, the world that he knew, and he was at peace anyway. He was calm, he was wise, he was caring for his the world around him. He stopped and talked to people, and lots of people came to see him, and he would continue to talk and teach, and he did this slow, unhurried walk. Some people think he was trying to walk back to his home country. And if that's the case, the world was falling around, falling apart. And one form of that was he wasn't able to reach his home, and he went back to his home country, and he died in a kind of the woods with his people around him. But you know, nothing too ceremonious, nothing too nothing really special about the place. In fact, Ānanda can complain kind like, What are you doing dying here? This is like not a special place. It's Middle Nowhere. And then the heavenly messenger, the messenger, it's possible to live in this world with a profound peace and to die with a profound peace. And what a fantastically positive, helpful message it is possible to be in this world and find our peace to have pulled at that.

The Story Pull Out the Arrow in the Heart. The metaphor of an arrow in a heart means that some of the deepest sufferings and wounds that we carry with us is something that's been, doesn't belong in there. It's external. It can be pulled out. Our suffering is not inherent. It's not innate, like it's just there and always there and has to always be there. It's, in some ways, a foreign object. And so to practice to pull that arrow out. And when you do, then you are at peace.

So the Buddha's life, the Buddha end of his life, and so we live in a time of change. We live in a time of strife. We live in a time when families are ripped apart. We don't have sons yet. I think, you know, killing their parents to take over the throne. But we have all kinds of challenges. And I think the Buddha's main message from the Buddha is, Yes, this is what happens in this life. Don't let that distract you from your ability to practise. Keep your confidence in your courage and your dedication to practice no matter what in all this, so that you can be a person who is at peace with it. Not at peace in a kind of naïve acceptance of it, but the kind of peace where you're at peace so that you can make a difference in this world, so you could be a messenger for the happiness and welfare of this world. You can be a peacemaker in this world, wherever you go, to whatever degree that you can do this. Maybe you can be a heavenly messenger. You will be, as I said, but maybe you can be the heavenly messenger that

demonstrates peace.

And I knew, I knew, I knew one person. I've known a few people, actually, but one person particular who probably became the heavenly messenger when she was dying, and more so. And if you practice, then you can know that's when you need to practise. You're preparing to die, and the practice to support you. So take out, take out your arrow, and then you can live unhurriedly, peacefully in this life, taking care of your life, that you should live, and what you need to take care of. Like the Buddha was taking care of everything before he died. Don't die too soon, but do practice soon. So thank you and be well and take care of yourselves and remember to practice. Thank you.