Title: Date of the Buddha

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Synonyms: Eras (Buddhism).

**Definition:** The year in which the Buddha died.

# Main Text: Introduction

The year of the death (Mahāparinibbāna) of the Buddha, who died at the age of 80, has remained perhaps the most controversial subject in the history of India till date. This controversy is primarily grounded in the fact as to which of the two chronologies, the so-called Long and Short, based on the Southern and Northern Buddhist legends respectively, be accepted as the correct one. Both these chronologies use the year of consecration of king Asoka as the base year. The Southern Buddhist legends contained in the Sri Lankan tradition place the consecration of Asoka 218 years after the death of the Buddha and, according to the Northern Buddhist legends this event took place only 100 or 110 years after the Buddha's death. On the basis of the dates of the various Greek kings mentioned in Asoka's 13th Rock Edict, the date of Asoka's accession may be calculated to within very arrow limits at c.268 BCE and the consecration (abhiseka), which took place in the fourth year of his reign (i.e. after 3 years), to c.265 BCE. On the basis of this information, the year of the death of the Buddha may be calculated to c.483 (265+218) BCE as per the Long Chronology and c.365 (265+100) BCE or c.375 (265+110) BCE as per the Short Chronology. Most of the controversies and discussions amongst scholars are largely centred on the merits of these two modes of calculation.

# Long Chronology

The best survey of the arguments which led scholars to believe that the calculation of the date of the Buddha should be based on the Long Chronology, was given by André Bareau (1) who used the information given in the *Dīpavaņsa* (vi.1) and the *Mahāvaņsa* (v.21) that Asoka was consecrated 218 years after the death of the Buddha. In fact, the Southern Buddhists had initially adopted 544-543 BCE as the date of the Buddha's death. But this was corrected by Geiger and others, who pointed out that 60 extra years had been interpolated into the chronology of the kings of Sri Lanka (8: xxv-xxvi; 13: 39-54). Those scholars who support this chronology point out that this chronology is supported by the events of contemporary political history. Ajātasattu (Sk: Ajātasatru) was on the throne until 24 years after the Buddha's death (12: iii.60) and then, it has been pointed out, at least 78 years elapsed between the foundation of the Nanda dynasty and the consecration of Asoka (Mhv.v.15-22) though Purānic sources mention much more than 78 years. The followers of the Long Chronology also point out that the lists of Magadhan kings in different sources, though showing discrepancies on many points, are nevertheless unanimous in placing several kings between Ajātasattu and Candagutta (Sk: Candragupta). Among them is Udāyin who shifted his capital from Rājagaha to Pātaliputta. They further point out that if the Short Chronology were adopted, the Nanda dynasty appears to have been founded just after the reign of Ajātasattu. But on the other hand, it may be pointed out that the *Purāṇa as* give false information at some places. Pradyotas who ruled from Avanti are placed at Magadha. But most historians agree that this Avanti line of dynasty has somehow or the other been inserted into the Magadhan line of dynasties.

One of the main arguments for the validity of Geiger's chronological calculations was a theory proposed by Wickremasinghe that a chronology starting from 483 BCE as the date of the Buddha's death was known and used in Sri Lanka until the beginning of the eleventh century and that the Buddhavarsa of 544 BCE was generally accepted at a later date (29: 153-161). However, Wickremasinghe's theory which was based on wrong presuppositions has been refuted repeatedly (9: 517-531; 13: 39-54; 20: 129-155). It is important to note that while the Corrected Long Chronology is quite reliable from king Dutthagāmanī onwards, information on the earlier period was derived from oral tradition, and the chronological calculations were based on rough estimates made by the authors of the earliest Sri Lankan historiography which forms the basis of the now existing sources. Hence, it has been suggested that there is no substantial evidence in favour of the Corrected Long Chronology (3: 34f). It may, therefore, be said that there is no trace of a chronology starting with 483 BCE or 486 BCE in any document of ancient Southern Tradition. These eras are the inventions of much later scholarship. V.A. Smith found the Sri Lankan chronology prior to 160 BCE as absolutely and completely rejected, as being not merely of doubtful authority but positively false in its principal propositions (25: 57). The tradition for the period from Vijaya to Devānampiyatissa, appears suspicious on the ground that Vijaya's arrival in Sri Lanka (12: ix.21-22; Mhv.vi.47) is dated on the same day as the death of the Buddha. Besides, there are the round numbers for the length of the simple reigns which have in themselves the appearance of a set scheme and a positive impossibility in respect of the last two kings of that period, Pandukābhaya and Mutasiva (Geiger, 1912: 12). Here the former is made to live 107 years and the latter despite his becoming king much past his prime, still reigns 60 years (8: 12). It appears that "certain names and events in the tradition may indeed be maintained, but the last reigns were lengthened in order to make Vijaya and the Buddha contemporaries" (8: 12). It may be noted that the Southern Tradition appears to have been built and completed by its authors with certain notions in mind. The figure '218' does not appear to have formed a part of the initial process i.e. of the original text on which the two chronicles are based. The Dipavamsa has gaps here and there, which are filled up in the Mahāvamsa through the addition and inflation of the periods of reign of various kings. For instance, at one place in the *Dīpavamsa*, the Buddha is quoted as saying that the Third Council shall take place 118 years after his death (12: i.24-26).

### Short Chronology

The Short Chronology is based on the testimony of all the recensions of the *Vinaya Piţaka* and their Chinese and Tibetan translations, where it is pointed out that the Buddha died 100 or 110 years before the consecration of Asoka, thus, implying that the *Mahāparinibbāna* should be dated in the year c.368 BCE or c.378 BCE. The Northern Tradition does not mention the Third Council for the fact that it had occurred after the schism and hence the other sects do not mention it as they were unaware of it. Those scholars who do not accept the Northern Tradition say that it is a contradiction to place Dhammāsoka's consecration and the Council of Vesālī in the same year (1: 27-29). But those following this tradition say that such a thing could not be out of place considering the importance of such an occasion (3: 35). But numeral 100 is often used in the sense of a large number, without any precise value and mostly as a rounded off number. But it may be pointed out that though 218 is not a rounded off number, it may not be acceptable on various other grounds. For instance, as pointed out earlier, it may have been inflated through additions to an originally much smaller number so

that credence could be given to various personalities as well as events. Rock Edict XIII of Asoka mentions Sri Lanka (Tambapanni) as one of the countries to which he dispatched missionaries. Since this edict belongs to the 13<sup>th</sup> year of Asoka's reign, there appears to be an error in the Southern Tradition which puts the conversion as late as the 18<sup>th</sup> year. The Sri Lankan historiography actually may be seen as politically motivated "in order to serve for the legitimation of the claim of the Sinhalese to be the Buddha's elected people... which has misled scholars into the belief that it represents reliable historical information... (which actually)... is a purely mythological construction without any historical foundation" (3: 35). Therefore, the Long Chronology must have been developed in an attempt to adjust the traditional Short Chronology to the particular needs of the Sri Lankan historiography. Matters are made further difficult for the Long Chronology by the fact that the Sri Lankan sources are not in complete harmony amongst themselves. Actually if one were to look at the whole issue dispassionately, it appears that the adherents of the Corrected Long Chronology made "use of very complicated and artificial arguments in their attempt to work out a coherent chronological system" (3: 35).

The theory of 100 years is widespread throughout the world. The Tibetan sources place Asoka 100-160 years after the Buddha's death (8: lxi). Tāranātha says that the Tibetan Vinava gives 110 AB as one of the dates for Asoka (8: lxi). Similarly, the Chinese Tripitaka gives 116, 118, 130 and 218 AB as the dates for Asoka (8: lxi). The last mentioned date, however, is found apparently only in the Chinese Sudaśana-vibhāsā Vinaya, which is a translation of Buddhaghosa's Samantapāsādikā (8: 1xi). In Vasumitra's account also Asoka is placed about 100 year after the death of the Buddha (quoted at 8: lxi). According to Xuanzang, "In the one hundredth year after the Nirvāna of the Śākya Tathāgata, King Aśoka... removed his capital from the city of Rājagrha to Pātaliputra" (15: 223). Furthermore, we are told that king Asoka had a half-brother called Mahinda (15: 227) who is known as a relative of Asoka Moriya. At another place Asoka is given as the great-grandson of Bimbisāra (15: 223) i.e. grandson of Ajātasattu. But as Asoka was actually Candagutta's grandson, the picture appears somewhat contradictory. But there is no reason to believe that the king in that case was Kālāsoka as the description of Asoka matches in so many ways with Asoka Moriva. Still at another place, Xuanzang points out that "The different schools calculate variously from the death of the Buddha. Some say it is 1200 years and more since then. Others say, 1300 or more. Others say, 1500 or more. Others say that 900 years have passed, but not 1000 since the nirvāna" (15: 186).

The various dates here recorded would correspond with 552 BCE, 652 BCE, 852 BCE and a date between 252 BCE and 352 BCE. By the last date Xuanzang probably means to place the death of the Buddha a hundred years before Asoka. The Council of Vesālī's date as 100 years after the *Mahāparinibbāna* in the *Vinaya* of the Theravādins, the Mahīsāsakas, the Dharmaguptakas, and the Haimavatas and as 110 years in the Vinaya of the Mūlasarvāstivādins and the Sarvāstivādins had a common origin and "we may quite justifiably be sceptical about the precision of the two numbers thus given" (2: 212). But as there is always a tendency to exaggerate and give round numbers, the figgure 100 may be interpreted as a rough and round number, which is used to denote a rather lengthy period of time. šIn placing the council of Vaiśālī 100 or 110 years after the Parinirvāna, the authors of those accounts certainly did not make use of reliable and scrupulously preserved documents and traditions, a minute examination and critical consideration of which would have allowed them to fix such a date. Not only did they have but a very vague idea of the time that had passed between the passing of the Blessed One and the Second Council, but also they did not know as to how many decades separated the latter event from their period (2: 212-213). The Council of Vesālī took place in all probability about 62 years after the Mahāparinibbāna of the Buddha (see 24: Appendix 1). Because of this, in turn the fact that Sānavāsī, one of the great authorities of this convocation was a personal pupil of Ānanda, becomes credible. Invariably, the Buddhist texts appear to exaggerate numbers and in all Indian religions there is always a tendency to claim an antiquity for a religious leader. Of course, as a counter-argument one may say that the legend-teller monks of Madhurā fabricated the short period to bring Upagupta, a contemporary of Asoka, closer to the Buddha in time.

# **Dotted Record**

W. Geiger's discussion of the chronology of the Buddha appears to have been extremely influential in the acceptance of the Long Chronology as against the Short Chronology (14). However, the biggest justification for the Long Chronology came in the shape of the *Dotted Record*, contained in the *Li-tai san-pao chi* written by Fei-Chang-fang in 597 CE. In this text it has been pointed out that according to Samghabhadra

"there is a tradition which had been handed down from teacher to teacher for generations, viz., after the passing away of the Buddha, Upāli collected the Vinaya and observed the Pavāraṇā on the 15<sup>th</sup> of the 7<sup>th</sup> Moon of the same year. Having offered flowers and incense to the Vinaya on that occasion, he marked a dot (on a record) and placed it close to the Vinaya text. Thereafter this was repeated every year. When Upāli was about to depart from this world, he handed it over to his disciple Dāsaka... Dāsaka to Sonaka... to Siggava... to Moggalīputta Tissa... to Candavajjī. In this manner the teachers in turn handed it down to the present master of *Tripiţaka*. This Master brought the *Vinaya-piţaka* to Canton. When he... decided to return to his (native land)... (he)... handed over the *Vinaya-piţaka* to his disciple Saṃghabhadra... Having observed the *Pavāraṇā* and offered flowers and incense to the *Pavāraṇā* at midnight (on the 15<sup>th</sup>) of the 7th Moon, in the 7<sup>th</sup> year of Yung-ming (489 AD), he added a dot (to the Record) as a traditional practice. The total amounted to 975 dots in that year. A dot is counted as a year" (19: 342-345).

Hence, as per this record, the *Mahāparinibbāna* of the Buddha took place in the year 486 (489 CE- 975 years) BCE (19: 344-345). But Pachow was of the opinion that possibly three extra dots had been inadvertently added, the actual number of dots in the year 489 CE should have been 972 and not 975. Thus, the actual date of the *Mahāparinibbāna* should be 489 CE-972= 483 BCE (19: 342-345).

But this tradition known from the Chinese sources is apparently not of an independent origin. It has been maintained by Bareau and Takakusu that this tradition initially originated in Sri Lanka and hence cannot be used reliably (1: 53; 26: 415-439). It appears thus, that the *dot* is a later invention to dignify the Vinaya. Moreover, as no written record of the *Vinaya* existed till the time of Dutthagāmaņī in the first century BCE, it is difficult to accept the authenticity of this tradition. Moreover, "the process of adding one dot at the end of every year during 975 years is extremely precarious" (16: 153).

Not only that the tradition of Long Chronology cannot be traced with confidence earlier than the middle of the eleventh century (30: 597), it is also incompatible with the chronology of the kings of Magadha. E.J. Thomas was of the view that the relevant passages in the  $D\bar{i}pavamsa$  (i.24-25 and v.55-59) actually point to the existence of the original Short Chronology which failed to be assimilated in the Long Chronology of the final version of the  $D\bar{i}pavamsa$  (28: 18-22). The first passage prophesies that the first council shall take place four months after the Mahāparinibbāna of the Buddha, and the second 100 years thereafter. In three of the four manuscripts of the  $D\bar{i}pavamsa$ , the term dve (two) has been inserted before *vassasate* (100 years) and in two of the three only subsequently. The second passage prophesies that "in the future, in 100 years (after the Buddha) at the time of Asoka in Pāțaliputta, Tissa would rout the heretics."

To sum up the argument thus far, it may be said that there is no special reason on the basis of which one of these two chronologies may be accepted in preference to the other. However, archaeological considerations and the lists of the patriarchs ( $\bar{a}cariyaparampar\bar{a}$ ) appear to favour a younger date for the Buddha. The archaeological records in the Gangā valley show that (perhaps with the exception of Kosambī) even by c.450 BCE, the new urban settlements were indeed not those cities which may be expected after reading early Buddhist literature. Extensive use of baked bricks for construction, well-developed sanitation system etc. are not found in the excavations till later times. In early Buddhist literature the existence of prosperous and fully developed urban centres is taken for granted. Though the roots of the Gangā Urbanization may be traced back to about 500 BCE or so, the archaeological records clearly suggest that the sort of urban centres that are talked about in the earliest Buddhist texts could not have come into existence before the end of the fifth century BCE. Critics of this argument may say that such references are later interpolations or that certain portions of the Canon are altogether late compositions. But such a criticism will appear to be of a superficial nature because the whole material milieu reflected in early Buddhist literature is urban. In fact, Buddhism undoubtedly had its origins in an urban milieu (see for details, 24: 31-33). Uncertain and unsatisfactory as archaeological data still is in this context, it appears to lean towards supporting a later rather than earlier date for the Mahāparinibbāna of the Buddha. In other words, there is at least a good case that can be made for the age of the Buddha being about a century later than generally accepted.

#### **Lists of Patriarchs**

In the chronological system on which the *Dīpavamsa* and the *Mahāvamsa* are based, the succession of the great teachers from Upāli down to Mahinda played an important part. This  $\bar{a}$  cariyaparampar $\bar{a}$  is of interest because in it there is a continuous synchronological connection between the histories of Sri Lanka and India. Here the system appears to have been carried out in detail and completed. As is clear in the accounts of the *Dīpavamsa* and the Mahāvamsa, there was a teacher/ pupil relationship between them and this continuity is of vital importance. The lists of *ācariyas* which occur in the Vinava, Sri Lankan chronicles and elsewhere as Vinayadharas, are more reliable and useful than any other form of information to determine the date of the Buddha. As most of the research was conducted in the light of number 218, it was given out that the number of Elders (Vin.v.2; Dlp.iv.27-46; Mhv.v.95, 153) as the Vinayapāmokkhas for the period between the Buddha and Asoka caused a problem. There were not enough number of Elders. Thus, it was pointed out that to bridge the gap of 218 years each of the elders had to be assigned such a lengthy period of time as guardian of the Vinaya that it seemed highly unlikely. The statement that the eight Elders who considered the Ten Extravagances (dasavatthūni) in the Second Council had all seen the Buddha (12: iv.54-56; Mhv.iv.59), was also seen as creating difficulties. These so-called contradictions, however, were regarded as faulty records on the part of the Theravādins. More weight was given to the chronology of the kings, even though this too posed difficulties. All these problems had come up because the number 218 was thought to be supreme.

Here, in the calculation of the date of the Buddha based upon the lists of patriarchs, the beginning of the reign of Candagutta has been used as the base year as against the year of Asoka's coronation. This shortens the gap between the date of the Buddha and the base year, thus reducing the margin of error. It is more or less certain that Candagutta started to rule in the year c.317 BCE, though some scholars have put it a few years earlier (see 24: 21).

The *Southern Sources* relate that five patriarchs transmitted the Vinaya from the time of the Buddha's death till the days of Asoka (12: v.55-107; *Mhv*.v.95-153). These five Elders

were Upāli, Dāsaka, Soņaka, Siggava, Moggaliputta Tissa (12: v.95-96).

Seventy-four (years) of Upāli, sixty-four of Dāsaka, sixty-six of Thera Soņaka, seventy-six of Siggava, eighty of Moggaliputta: this is the *Upasampadā* of them all (*12:* v.95).

Though this verse mentions the years of  $Upasampad\bar{a}$ , but in reality they are the years at which these Elders died. This fact is borne by the verses preceding as well as following this verse. E.g. 12: v.103 mentions that Upāli died at the age of 74.

Learned Upāli was all the years chief of the Vinaya, Thera Dāsaka (became chief at the age of) fifty, Sonaka forty-four, Siggava fifty-five, the (Thera) called Moggaliputta sixty-eight (*12:* v.96).

It may be interesting to note that 12: V.96 has been taken to imply the number of years for which the five Elders were the custodians of the *Vinaya*. This is difficult to accept not only because it would have been impossible for any Elder to keep the *Vinaya* for such a long time, but also because the verse itself does not mean as much as it has been taken to. Rationally speaking, the numbers mentioned in this verse appear to be the ages of the Elders at which they became the custodians of the *Vinaya*. The expression *sabbakālamhi* (i.e., *all the years*) in the case of Upāli means that he was the custodian of the *Vinaya* all the years from the death of the Buddha till his own death. Furthermore, in the case of Dāsaka, Soṇaka, Siggava and Moggaliputta, it is not the total number of years that is given, but the respective ages at which each of them became the custodian of the *Vinaya*. That means they became custodians respectively at the ages of 50<sup>th</sup>, 44<sup>th</sup>, 55<sup>th</sup>, and 68<sup>th</sup> years of their ages. In other words, they became custodians respectively when they were 49, 43, 54 and 67 years old. Following this argument, Upāli, Dāsaka, Soṇaka, and Siggava were custodians for 30 (74-44), 15 (64-49), 23 (66-23), and 22 (76-54) years respectively.

As the custodianship of these four *Vinaya pāmokkhas* is mentioned only in years and no months and days are mentioned, one year per *pāmokkha* may be added to make-up for the margin of error. This would put the total period of guardianship of these four *pāmokkhas* i.e. the time span between the death of the Buddha and the death of Siggava at approximately 90+4=94 years. As shall be seen in the following pages, Siggava died in the year c.303 BCE. This would mean that the Buddha's death may approximately be placed in the year 303+94= c.397 BCE.

When 16 years had elapsed after the death of the Buddha, at that time Upāli was 60 years old (12: iv.33, v.76). This means he was 44 (60-16) years old when the Buddha died i.e. when he became the *Vinayapāmokkha*. But as mentioned above, he actually lived to be 74. Thus, Upāli was the custodian of the *Vinaya* for 30 (74-44) years. This is also supported by a direct statement in the *Dīpavaṃsa* that Upāli guarded the *Vinaya* for 30 years (*12:* iv.34, v.89).

Dāsaka, who died at the age of 64, was a learned brāhmaņa from Vesālī and appears to have been fairly matured in years at the time of joining the Samgha to study the Dhamma (12: v.95; Vin.v.2; VA.i.32, 62, 235, vii.1304 etc.). When Upāli died, Udaya had completed 6 years of his 16-year reign (12: v.97). This means during the last 10 (16-6) years of Udaya's reign, Dāsaka was the custodian of the Vinaya. But Dāsaka died when 8 years of the 10-year reign of Susunāga had elapsed (12: v.97). As Anuruddhaka/ Muṇḍa ruled for 8 years between Udaya and Susunāga, Dāsaka appears to have been the custodian for a total of 10+8+8= 26 years.

Sonaka joined the Samgha at the age of 15 at Rājagaha (Vin.v.2; VA.1.32, 62, 235,

vii.1304 etc.). Susunnga ruled for 10 years and Dāsaka died 8 years after the end of Susunāga's reign (12: v.98). After the death of Susunāga, the Ten Brothers reigned for 22 years and Sonaka died when 6 years of their reign were over (12: v.99). This means So‡aka kept the *Vinaya* during the last two years of the reign of Susunāga and first 6 years of the reign of the Ten Brothers, making it 8 (2+6) years.

Siggava, joined the Samgha at the age of 18. Siggava was the custodian during the remaining 16 (22-6) years of the reign of the Ten Brothers. Siggava died when 14 years of the reign of Candagutta had elapsed (12: v.73, 100). In other words, Siggava was the custodian for a total period of 30 (16+14) years. But as shall be seen in the following paragraphs, Candagutta did not succeed the Ten Brothers who began their reign not at Pātaliputta but elsewhere because it has been pointed out that Susunāga had a son called Kālāsoka who held power at Pāțaliputta (12: v.25) for a period of 28 years (Mhv.iv.7). It appears after his governorship for ten years during Susunāga's reign, Kāļāsoka reigned for 28-10=18 years as a king at Pātaliputta and the Ten Brothers continued to rule from the same place as Susunāga after the possible split of the kingdom. In other words, it appears that Candagutta succeeded Kālāsoka at Pātaliputta and the Ten Brothers (possibly the Nandas) at Rājagaha. Siggava was 64 years old when Candagutta had completed 2 years of his reign (12: v.81). Candagutta's reign began in the year c.317 BCE. This means that in the year c.315 (317-2) BCE Siggava was 64 years old. But as Siggava died at the age of 76, that means, he lived for another 12 (76-64) years after 315 BCE. This would put the death of Siggava in the year c.303 (315-12) BCE. This statement is also supported by another reference where it has been pointed out that Siggava died 14 years after the beginning of the reign of Candagutta (12: v.73, 100) i.e., c.303 (317-14) BCE.

### Conclusion

The upshot of the calculation made above is as follows:

The death of Siggava took place in the year c.303 BCE. Sonaka died 30 years before Siggava. Dāsaka died 8 years before Sonaka. Upāli died 26 years before Dāsaka. The Buddha died 30 years before Upāli. In other words, between c.303 BCE and the death of the Buddha 94 (30+8+26+30) years had elapsed. This would mean that the Buddha died in the year c.397 (303+94) BCE.

It must finally be emphasized that the sources are not always exact in their calculation of time supposing a deviation by one year has not been accepted. Numbers of years for which a particular king reigned or an Elder kept the *Vinaya* are given as rounded off numbers in the records. Months and days are not mentioned. A deviation of a couple of years one way or another cannot be denied in a calculation involving about 100 years or so. Thus, the 397 BCE may only be taken as a rough approximation to the year in which the Buddha expired.

Some scholars strongly support the Long Chronology on the basis of three Asokan edicts of Sāhasārām, Rūpanāth and Bairāt which refer to the figure 256. This figure has been interpreted by these scholars to mean a time span of 256 years between the installation of these inscriptions and the *Mahāparinibbāna* (6: 149-160; 17). An attempt has also been made by scholars to present a date akin to Short Chronology on the basis of these inscriptions. E.g., T.W. Rhys Davids provided "426 BCE, or perhaps a few years later> as the date of the *Mahāparinibbāna* by pointing out that the number 256 represents the time-span between the installation of these inscriptions and the abandonment of home by the Buddha (22: 37). However, there are scholars who have not even accepted these inscriptions as those of Asoka (21: 145). There are others who point out that these inscriptions do not say as much as it has

been made out. E.g. Hermann Oldenberg pointed out that not only that the inscriptions contain no word for 'years', they also do not refer to the Buddha but to 256 beings (18: 472-476). In other words, the date of the Buddha continues to remain one of the most disputed controversies in the history of India.

**Cross-References**: Ajātasattu, Buddha, Buddhaghosa, Mahāparinibbāna, Tipiṭaka, Vasumitra, Vesālī, Vinaya Piṭaka.

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