

Encounters with Enlightenment

By Saddhaloka

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Saddhaloka's first encounters with the Buddha; Nanamoli's Life of the Buddha; Bringing the Buddha alive in stories

When I was in my teens, a cousin of my grandfather came to live with us in Jersey where I grew up. He was an Oxford man of the old school - a historian, a scholar, a man of letters. He lived in Burma most of his life. He had a Burmese wife and he'd expected to die there, but then there was a military coup. A nationalist government took over and forced all foreigners to leave and so he ended up coming to Jersey with his wife and a lot of books, a lot of records. His sister, who had spent a lot of time in America and was quite a bit wealthier than him, arranged to have a library built where our pigsties had once stood. So the pigsties were demolished and a library was built and this man, Gordon, would sit in his library studying his books, listening to his records and having people come and visit him quite regularly - other scholars and other people with whom he shared his interests. And he'd work away there and I'd go in and chat with him from time to time.

When I went to university and started to develop an interest in Eastern religions, and especially in Buddhism, he gave me a book. He himself had quite a strong interest in Buddhism. He had a painting of the Buddha hanging in his library painted on bamboo that he'd been given just before he left Burma. He gave me a book, and that book was Nanamoli's *Life of the Buddha*. That's this book here. And for almost ten years, that book was hardly opened. And then in 1979 I moved to Norwich and began my involvement with the FWBO and early in 1980 I went on my first solitary retreat and I took this book with me. Actually it wasn't exactly this book. The original that Gordon gave me was stolen in Estonia from a car when I went to look at a frozen waterfall on my way back from a retreat. But someone else very kindly gave me this copy to replace that much loved copy that was lost.

So on this solitary retreat, I read through this book Nanamoli's *Life of the Buddha*, which is an anthology of stories, extracts from the Pali Canon put together by Nanamoli, who was an English Buddhist monk who went to Sri Lanka after the second world war and spent many years there. So I'd read accounts of the life of the Buddha before, but they'd always seemed very distant, always seemed a bit abstract. But now suddenly reading the extracts from the Pali Canon that Nanamoli had very skilfully put together, it all came very real, it all became very close and for the very first time I had a vivid sense of a human being wandering the highways and byways of Ancient India. Living now in the jungle far from anyone, now near a village, now in one of the teeming cities of northern India at that time. There were stories of meetings with kings, with beggars, with philosophers, with farmers, with housewives and courtesans, with murderers and holy

men, and I had this real sense of the human being who ate and slept and got sick and grew old whilst in the way he lived and the way he spoke and talked - even in the way he walked - communicated something quite extraordinary, quite remarkable. And over the years I've returned to Nanamoli's anthology again and again, but more than that through this book I gained an entrance to the whole world of the Pali Canon which until then had seemed rather daunting - perhaps because of the repetitious language of the oral tradition, perhaps because of the rather biblical language that many of the early translators used to use. They seemed to think, "Well, it's a scripture, we must use biblical language," so they used to use the language of the authorised version or the St. James version of the *Bible* rather than putting their translations into contemporary English. So for whatever reason, I'd just not found those translations very accessible but reading the stories, the extracts from the Pali Canon on that solitary retreat, something clicked, something shifted and it was as if I was able to see through what had previously put me off and begin to recognise the richness and beauty of this great treasury of teachings and stories that lay in the Pali Canon.

The Pali Canon; passing down and compiling the teachings; changes to stories over time; the Dhammapada

So just a bit about the Pali Canon. The Buddha lived for another 45 years after his enlightenment. Traditionally we are told, he was 35 years old when he gained enlightenment. He lived for another 45 years, wandering and teaching until he died as an old man of 80. So whenever he taught, those teachings were remembered by those present or by those to whom he later repeated them, together with the stories of how the teachings came to be given. They'd be remembered. And then the stories and the teachings would be recited at the gatherings of the disciples at the full moon. They'd be checked to make sure they'd been remembered correctly by the most experienced of the disciples. And then they'd be discussed and explored as a guide, an inspiration to practice. I suppose very generally in the way that we might listen to a tape of Bhante's, have a study group, make sure we've understood what he's trying to say and then go away and just reflect on it. Really try and put the teachings into practice. It was much the same principle at work except that people were remembering the stories of the Buddha, remembering what he'd taught, making sure they'd understood it and then going away and reflecting on it and really try and put it into practice in their lives.

So the stories, the teachings were remembered and gradually the Buddha spent 45 years, he did a lot of teaching. A lot happened. There were a lot of stories, a lot of teachings to be remembered and they used to be gradually collected together. Some of the monks would become specialists in remembering the stories and different collections were made in different geographical areas, in different schools and whole collections were gradually formalised. And eventually they began to be written down after about 500 years. Some may never have been written down. Some collections have been lost or only have survived in fragments and there's only one complete collection, as far as we know, that has survived to the present and that's the collection of the School of Elders - the Theravada - that was written down in Sri Lanka at the start of the Common Era (that's

around the year zero) in a language called Pali, which is apparently a language very close to the language the Buddha himself probably spoke.

Some parts of the oral tradition got set very early on, others continued to change in the telling. So if we imagine a story being told for the first time in Shakespeare's time, in the England of Elizabeth, in Shakespearean English, Elizabethan English, and that story - well it might have been remembered exactly as it was told and passed down over the centuries. Or it might have been retold in the idioms of the sixteenth century, seventeenth century, eighteenth century, Victorian English, even contemporary English. Over 500 years, you can imagine how the telling of a story would change and how the ways in which people told it would change - the sort of assumptions that the storyteller would bring to bear that were perhaps very different to the assumptions of the original story tellers. So we have something of that same phenomena in the stories of the Pali Canon. Some have a very archaic feel to them. In them we come very close to the Buddha himself and the way he spoke, the way people saw things. Others... It's obvious that monasticism has formed out and the whole way of thinking of the monastic community very much colours the way the stories are told and the way incidents are seen.

So one of the oldest sections of the Pali Canon is one that you're probably all very familiar with, where various pithy sayings were collected together in the *Dhammapada*. Put together in sets according to subject matter, and these would have been kept in the form that they were originally passed on from very early on, so in the verses of the *Dhammapada* we come very close to the authentic voice of the Buddha, hearing the Buddha himself as he might have spoke. And there's actually a new translation of the *Dhammapada* by Sangharakshita that's going to be due out next month in hardback edition. So, that's something to be looking forward to.

Best-known stories brought together; humour and lightness in the scriptures

But as well as these collections of sayings that we have in the *Dhammapada*, there are many, many stories and I've just become very fond of these stories over the years and I've recently brought together a number of the best known in a little book which Ratnaprabha will tell you more about later. I've included some of the best-known stories. The story of Meghiya the young monk who wanted to go off and meditate in the mango grove and found it just wasn't quite as easy as he thought it was going to be. The story of Angulimala's finger necklace, the murderer who used to chop off people's fingers and wear them in a great necklace around his neck who the Buddha went out to find and converted. The story of Nanda and the dove-footed nymphs. When I first heard this title of the story, I had this picture of these bizarre creatures with little pink claws, but apparently pink-footed just means lovely, delicate, pink feet. So this is the story of Nanda and the dove-footed nymphs. There's the story of Kisagotami and giving the grain of mustard seed to the young mother whose child had died and who the Buddha taught in a most kind way, sending her off to find a grain of mustard seed from a household where no one had ever died. And that story of the three Aniruddhas, the three monks living together. The three brothers living together in perfect harmony. So I put together quite a

number of these and other very well known stories. Stories that in one way or another have moved or inspired or that I've just enjoyed.

Another thing though is that some of the stories I've found in the Pali Canon have amused me. So one of the things that really struck me reading the Buddhist scriptures, and this isn't just the Pali Canon, but it's certainly there too, is that there's humour to be found there. Perhaps this was all the more striking for me having been brought up in a rather dull and humourless brand of Christianity, but it was really refreshing for me to find in the Buddhist scriptures along with some very profound insights and teachings a sort of beautiful lightness and humour.

The Story of Little Ugly

And one of the stories that I came across is one that the Buddha himself told which is the story of Little Ugly. So the Buddha was an immensely skilful teacher, he could engage in sophisticated debate with philosophers and Brahmins. He could use down-to-earth analogies when speaking to farmers and country folk. And sometimes he'd tell amusing tales involving the gods and goblins that peopled the universe of ancient India. So we're told that once, whilst staying at the Jeta Grove, the Buddha told this story to some of his disciples.

So a long time ago in the realm of the gods there once appeared an extremely ugly pot-bellied dwarf yaksha, seated on the throne of Sakkha, King of the Gods. And when the gods saw this, they became very annoyed. They got very upset and worked up they thought, "This is outrageous!" and they started telling the yaksha what they thought of him, but to their astonishment the more angry and annoyed they got with this yaksha, the less ugly he became and the more they insulted him, the more he turned into this very beautiful and handsome creature that just stayed sitting there on Sakkha's throne. So they were very confused and bewildered by this. They just didn't know what to do, so they went off to find Sakkha and told him what had happened. "Aha," said Sakkha, "he must be a yaksha who feeds on anger."

So he took the gods back to his palace and stood before the throne looking at the beautiful creature sitting there and he knelt very respectfully before the yaksha and introduced himself as Sakkha, king of the gods and he just continued to talk very politely in a very friendly way with the yaksha. But the more polite and friendly he was, the more ugly the yaksha became, the more pot-bellied and dwarfish, until he finally disappeared completely. And Sakkha then declared to all the gods who had gathered to witness the spectacle that it was a long time since he had given way to anger. Harsh and angry words had no place in his life, because he trained himself always to hold his anger in check and in this way guard his spiritual progress. So that's the rather lovely story of Little Ugly that the Buddha once told, which I was really delighted to find.

The Story of an Insulting Brahmin

And humour and gentle irony come through a number of times in the Buddha's dealings as well with difficult people. So once the Buddha was staying at a place called Veranga, where he had a large number of followers, and a Brahmin had heard a lot of criticism of the Buddha - particularly because the Buddha didn't always, well he never, played up to the Brahmins. He didn't show them the deference that a lot of them would expect. So this Brahmin called Udaya came along to meet the Buddha. They exchanged the usual polite greetings. People were always very polite in those days even when their intentions weren't at all friendly or polite. And then the Brahmin started off he said, "Master Gotama, I've heard that you just don't pay proper respect to old and learned Brahmins, and I've seen for myself that this is true. This just isn't the way to behave, Master Gotama."

But the Buddha wasn't slow to respond to this. He said, "Brahmin, in this whole world there isn't anybody who is worthy of being paid respects by a Buddha. If a Buddha were to pay respects to anybody, their head would probably split wide open."

So the Brahmin didn't like this. "Master Gotama has no taste!"

The Buddha responded, "Well, there is a sense in which it could be said I have no taste, for I no longer have any taste for the world of the senses. But surely that isn't what you mean?"

"Master Gotama has no sense of values!"

"Well, there is a sense in which it could be said I have no sense of values. For I attach no value to the world of the senses. But surely that's not what you mean?"

"Master Gotama teaches passivity!"

"Well, there is a sense in which you could say I teach passivity for I teach that one must be passive in the face of provocation or temptation and not go along with the evil actions of body, speech, or mind, but surely that's not what you mean?"

"Master Gotama teaches nihilism!"

"Well, there is a sense in which you could say I teach nihilism, for I teach the annihilation of greed, hatred and delusion, but surely that's not what you mean?"

"Master Gotama teaches rejection!"

"Well, there is a sense in which you could say I teach rejection for I teach the rejection of all evil actions of body, speech and mind, but that surely isn't what you mean?"

"Master Gotama teaches destruction!"

“Well, there is a sense in which you could say I teach destruction, for I teach the destruction of greed, hatred and delusion, but that surely isn’t what you mean?”

“Master Gotama teaches mortification!”

“There is a sense in which I teach mortification, for I teach the mortification of all actions rooted in greed, hatred and delusion, but surely that’s not what you mean?”

“Master Gotama rejects rebirth!”

“Well there is a sense in which I reject rebirth, for having completely freed myself from all defilements, I’ll never again come to birth in the world, but surely that’s not what you mean?”

Well, the Brahmins anger and ill-will was spent. He couldn’t come up with any more insults to throw at the Buddha, and seeing this the Buddha now asked him a question. “Brahmin, tell me, if a hen has carefully incubated a clutch of eggs and a chick was to break out of one of those eggs before all the others using its beak to get through the shell, would you call that chick the oldest or the youngest?”

“Well, the oldest Master Gotama”

“Well, just this way, Brahmin, in this world encased in a shell of ignorance, I was the first to break through the shell, so I can truly be called the elder brother to the world.”

The Buddha then went on to describe the unfolding of enlightenment of being like breaking through successive shells that led eventually to complete revelation and by the time the Buddha had finished, the Brahmin had been completely won over and declared, “Master Gotama is indeed the elder brother to the world. Master Gotama is indeed the best of men. It is wonderful, Master Gotama, wonderful!”

So he, there and then, asked to be accepted as a disciple of the Buddha. So we see the Buddha using gentle irony and humour there to meet and eventually win over this man who came along determined to insult him.

The Story of Contradictor

And there’s another story in a slightly similar vein that I also very much like. This is the story of Contradictor. So Contradictor was a Brahmin who lived in Savatthi, one of the towns where the Buddha spent a lot of time. And he was known by this name of Contradictor because he was always picking arguments with people. Whatever anyone said, he always said the opposite. If they said, “Big,” he said, “Small.” If they said, “Long,” he said, “Short.” If they said, “Fat,” he said, “Thin.” So needless to say he didn’t have many friends and often found nobody to talk to. So one day, hearing that the Buddha was staying near Savatthi, Contradictor said to himself, “I’ll go and visit that

holy man, Gotama, and whatever he says, I'll argue the opposite. Let's see what he makes of that. We'll soon find out how holy he really is."

So he set off for the Jeta grove where he knew the Buddha was often to be found and he'd not been in the park very long before he saw the Buddha walking up and down, slowly and mindfully in the open air. So Contradictor went up to the Buddha and began to walk along side him. "Let's hear a teaching then, monk." he said. [Laughter]

So the Buddha stopped and slowly turned to face Contradictor. We hear, again in the Pali Canon, how the Buddha would give people his "elephant look." He would give people the whole of his attention. He didn't just look sideways. It's said that when an elephant wants to give someone its attention, it turns its whole body and faces them, so the Buddha didn't just give Contradictor a sidelong look. He stopped, he turned, and he gave Contradictor his whole attention. And he said, in response to this request to give a teaching, "No. There's no teaching for you, Contradictor. With your twisted heart, so full of anger, you'll not be able to think clearly or enter into honest discussion. Only a person who has overcome strife and ill-will in his heart and given up all enmity would be able to recognise the truth when he hears it."

And these words just coming out like this were completely unexpected. They caught Contradictor completely off his guard and for once he was at a loss and could think of nothing to say. He was shaken. He was really shaken to the core and with a shock of recognition – he saw very clearly what he had been doing over so many years with his constant arguing. So full of remorse now and determined to change his ways, he opened his heart to the Buddha and listened earnestly to what the Buddha had to say. That very day he asked to be accepted by the Buddha as a lay disciple. So yes there we have, again, the Buddha meeting somebody in a very immediate, very down-to-earth, but very telling way.

The Story of Rahula; deliberate lying and an empty ladle

Another meeting, but of a very different flavour, is where the Buddha teaches his son Rahula. Rahula was still a tiny baby when the Buddha went forth, when he went off on his spiritual quest. And a year after his enlightenment, the Buddha returned to Kapilavastu, to the Royal city, the city where he had grown up, where his father was king. And so by now his son Rahula was seven years old and... well there's no time to tell the whole story but it ended up Rahula became ordained and went off with the Buddha as a novice monk and the Buddha gave him into the care of some of his leading disciples, and he himself would regularly teach Rahula over the years, and there's this quite delightful little story - when Rahula is eleven years old, and I don't know what he'd been up to but I think he may have been telling some fibs because the Buddha called him to his presence and gave him a teaching.

So the Buddha took a ladle and put a little bit of water in it and said, "Rahula, do you see this little bit of water in the ladle?"

“Yes lord.”

“Well, if people aren’t careful to avoid deliberately telling lies there’s as little good in them as there is this tiny bit of water in the ladle.” And then he threw the water away and he said “Rahula, did you see what I just did?”

“Yes lord.”

“Well, unless people are careful to avoid deliberately telling lies, they throw away what good there is in them just like that.” And then the Buddha turned the ladle upside down and said, “Rahula, unless people are careful to avoid deliberately telling lies they treat the good in themselves like this.” And he turned the ladle the right way up again and said, “Rahula do you see how this ladle is now quite empty?”

“Yes lord.”

“Unless people are careful to avoid deliberately telling lies, they are empty of goodness just like this ladle is empty now.” and he went on to tell another little analogy that would very much appeal to the young lad. “Imagine,” he said, “a great Royal elephant. If in battle the elephant used his head, and tusks, and legs, and body, but kept back his trunk, then that Royal elephant isn’t yet fully trained. Only when he uses his trunk as well in battle is he fully trained. In just the same way, until someone’s always careful to avoid deliberately lying, then they’re not fully trained. You must train yourself, Rahula, never to tell a lie. Even as a joke. Even as a joke.” It’s a hard one isn’t it? [Laughter] “What’s a mirror for, Rahula?”

“For looking at yourself, Lord.”

“You must always be looking at yourself, Rahula, examining your actions of body, speech and mind.”

So it was in ways like this we find the Buddha teaching the young Rahula while he was a boy and as he grew into a youth and a young man and we’re told that by the time he was twenty-one, Rahula gained enlightenment.

The Story of Sona’s Sore Feet; tuning the lute

So in some of the stories of the Pali Canon, we have the Buddha giving simple, yet profound teachings, often using very simple and earthy analogies as we heard in this last story. And at the same time we sometimes find through the stories were given a quite fascinating insight into the world of ancient India. And there’s a story of Sona and his sore feet, which brings these two together.

So in the kingdom of Magadha, which was ruled over by King Bimbisara, there lived Sona, the son of a nobleman. And this young man Sona was so refined, so delicate, that hair grew even on the soles of his feet and the fame of this delicate young man spread

through the kingdom. So one day, King Bimbisara, called an assembly of representatives from all of the villages in his kingdom, and at the same time he summoned Sona to go with them. So it seemed he would habitually or regularly call all the village elders together and instruct them. And he'd heard of this youth, and he was curious to see this youth with hairs on the soles of his feet - so this is just an insight into the way kings of those days thought. So the royal summons arrived and Sona's parents felt great pride that their son should have attracted royal attention, but they were also a bit anxious, so they gave their son very careful instructions as to how he was to behave in the royal presence. On no account was he to sit with his feet stretched out toward the king because that would be very rude, very disrespectful. Rather, they told him, he should sit in lotus posture, cross-legged with his soles pointing up so the king could clearly see them but so that he wouldn't be insulted in any way. So accordingly, Sona went to the assembly, carefully did as his parents had instructed him, King Bimbisara, was there, would see the famous youth with hair on the soles of his feet and the royal curiosity was satisfied. So when the meeting with the village representatives was over, the king sent them to the Buddha saying, "I've told you now how to manage the affairs of mundane life. Now you must go to the Buddha and let him tell you how to live the spiritual life."

And Sona went along with the village representatives to the Vultures Peak, not far from the royal city of Rajagaha. And here he met the Buddha and his life was transformed. Sona was so moved by the Buddha's teachings that he remained behind after all the villagers had left and asked the Buddha to admit him into the order of monks. And not long afterwards, he went to live alone in a nearby spot called the Cool Grove and here he strove to make progress in the spiritual life. And as he paced up and down in the Cool Grove, grappling with the Buddha's teachings and trying to understand how to apply them, his delicate feet became blistered and began to bleed, but Sona carried on regardless, striving ever harder for understanding. So some of the monks saw this and were disturbed seeing this trail of blood that was now being left by Sona and they were quite disturbed to see one of their brethren injuring himself in this way through his efforts and they went and told the Buddha what was happening. And when he heard this the Buddha himself promptly went to see Sona and they sat together.

The Buddha spoke with him. He said, "When you were alone in retreat just now, Sona, did you find yourself wondering if all the energy you are putting into your spiritual life was really getting you anywhere? Did you find yourself wondering whether or not you might actually be better off returning to lay life and using your family wealth to do some good in the world and at least in that way making some merit?"

And Sona was quite taken aback. This was exactly what had been going on in his mind as he'd been pacing up and down. So the Buddha said, "Were you not once a fine lute player, Sona?"

"Indeed I was, Lord."

"Then tell me, when your lutes strings were slack, did the instrument play well and sound well?"

“Well, certainly not.”

“And when the lutes strings were too tight, did the instrument play well and sound well?”

“Well no, of course not.”

“But when the lutes strings were well-tuned, neither too slack nor too tight, did the instrument play well and sound well?”

“Well indeed, yes Lord.”

“It’s just the same in the spiritual life,” the Buddha said, “too much of the wrong sort of energy makes for agitation and restlessness. And too little energy makes for slackness and dullness. You must look for evenness in your energy and balance in your spiritual faculties. You can use your experience as a musician, Sona, to help you achieve this.”

So alone again now, Sona steadily applied himself in the way the Buddha had taught him and his feet were no longer cut and blistered and he soon gained the wisdom of the enlightened ones.

The Story of the Buddha’s Sneeze

So many of the stories as well, that we find, give us a real sense of the Buddha’s pragmatism. His ability to deal with people and with situations in a very reasoned and reasonable and down-to-earth way. There was a tremendous – incomprehensible, if you like - profundity to the Buddha and his wisdom, but also a very down-to-earthness, an immediacy. And we get a sense of this in the Story of the Sneeze. So once while he was teaching a large number of monks, the Buddha happened to sneeze. Even Buddhas sneeze. So immediately as he sneezed, there was a whole chorus of monks saying, “Long life to you, Lord! Long life to you!” as was customary when somebody sneezed, like we say, “Bless you!” and the noise of this response went on for some moments and interrupted the whole flow of the discourse. So when it had all died down, the Buddha said, “Monks, when you say, ‘long life to you!’ to someone who sneezes, does it really make any difference to them? Is it really a matter of life and death?”

“Well, of course not, Lord.”

“Then I want you to stop saying, ‘Long life to you!’ when anyone sneezes. This is a rule from now on.” So this is the way the rules of the monastic community grew up you see in response to the behaviour of the monks. But this isn’t the end of this story. Soon after this incident one of the monks happened to sneeze while he was out in the village and the villager responded with the customary, “Long life to you!” and the monks who were present were rather embarrassed and didn’t know quite what to do and they didn’t make the usual polite response which they did in ancient India, “May you live long too!” They just kept silent. And, after this had gone on for a while, the villagers started to complain

saying the followers of the Buddha were very rude. When they sneezed and people said, “Long life to you!” and blessed them, they ignored it and didn’t respond. And so the monks got to hear of this and they were quite concerned that they were becoming unpopular because of their supposed rudeness, so they told the Buddha and he said, “Alright.” And he proposed a compromise. “Ordinary folk are used to their superstitions,” he said, “and there’s no point in giving offence. If they say, ‘Long life!’ to you when you sneeze, you can make the customary response, ‘May you live long too!’ but among ourselves we can forget these superstitions.” So, the Buddha dealing with his disciples in this and all sorts of other ways, just dealing with everyday life and his monks, the situations that arose.

Ensuring the stability and prosperity of the Order; seven teachings

Again this combination of practicality and profundity come together very clearly in a story from the last year of the Buddha’s life. At the start of the Mahaparinibbana Sutta of the Digha Nikaya, which is an account of this last year of the Buddha’s life. A very beautiful account actually that never fails to move me. At the very start of this last year the Buddha and Ananda are together and they’re at the Vultures Peak and back down in Rajagaha king Ajatasatru is plotting with his minister Vassakara. Ajatasatru wants to attack the Vajjians and crush them and annexe their kingdom to Magadha and so he sends Vassakara his minister to the Buddha with careful instructions, “Go to the Buddha, Vassakara, pay your respects and greet him in my name, then tell him that Ajatasatru plans to attack the Vajjians and bring them to destruction and ruin, and listen very carefully to what he has to say, because a Buddha never lies. And then come back and tell me.”

So Vassakara heads off up to the Vultures Peak, meets the Buddha, and gives the Buddha Ajatasatru’s message and the Buddha is sitting there. He’s an old man now, close to eighty. He doesn’t respond to Vassakara, but he turns and talks to Ananda who is just sitting behind him, standing behind him, fanning him. He says, “Ananda, do you know if the Vajjians are frequent and well-attended assemblies?”

“Well, I’ve heard they do, Lord.”

“Well, as long as they continue to do this, Ananda, we can expect them to prosper and not decline. Do you know if they assemble in harmony, do their business in harmony and write in harmony?”

“Well, I’ve heard that they do, Lord.”

“Well, as long as they do this we can expect them to prosper and not decline.” And he continued in the same vein, “Have you heard if they live according to their traditional laws, do they honour and respect the elders and take good notice of their advice and so on. Do they take good care of the enlightened ones and their followers when they enter Vajjian territory?”

A whole list of questions - to each one Ananda replied, "I've heard that they do so."

So turning to Vassakara, after this string of questions and answers, with Ananda, the Buddha told him that he himself when he was staying with the Vajjians, had taught them these seven rules of conduct that would prevent their decline and assured them as long as they remembered them, practiced them and taught them, the Vajjians would be prosperous and strong and not fall into decline. So Vassakara was well pleased and he declared, "Well, as long as the Vajjians practice even one of these things, they'll never be conquered by king Ajatasatru. He'll only get the better of such a people by buying some of them over, creating divisions between them. As long as they remain united, he's never going to defeat them." And so he went off back to tell Ajatasatru about his conversation with the Buddha.

But the Buddha was now thoughtful for a while and then having thought, he sent Ananda out to summon all his disciples from the surrounding area together. And when they came together, it probably may have taken two or three days, maybe longer to assemble all the monks in the neighbourhood, the Buddha said, "Monks, I want you to pay close attention and listen very carefully to what I have to say. I'm going to teach you seven things that will ensure this community continues to prosper for a long time and does not fall into decline." So the Buddha had been prompted. He knew he was old. He knew that he didn't have a lot longer to live. He was very concerned that his Sangha would prosper. That his teaching would prosper.

So now, having thought, he told his monks:

As long as the monks come together frequently and in large numbers, the community will continue to prosper and not decline.

As long as they come together in harmony, do their business in harmony and depart in harmony, the community will continue to prosper and not decline.

As long as the monks maintain the institutions and training rules we've set up, and not forever chopping and changing things, the community would continue to prosper and not decline.

As long as the monks honour and respect those who set out on the path long ago and who are deeply experienced in the life of the Order, and as long as they follow their guidance, the community will prosper and not decline.

As long as the monks do not fall under the power of craving, the community will prosper and not decline.

As long as there are monks who lead the simple life, the forest life, the community will continue to prosper and not decline.

As long as the monks maintain clear awareness so that further companions in the holy life are attracted to join them, and those who have already chosen this life are able to live happily together, the community will continue to prosper and not decline.

So he gave them seven teachings for the future stability and prosperity of the Order, but then it's as if he was starting to get fired up, inspired. He gave another seven, and another seven, and another seven. Teaching his followers how they could ensure the continuation of the Order after his death.

Stories from the Buddha's Final Days

Later on in this same sutta, the Mahaparinibbana Sutta, we meet the Buddha – he's just spent the rainy season together with Ananda - just the two of them together, and he's been very sick. He's come very, very close to death. But he's suppressed the illness and, very frail, he comes out and embarks on a last tour, a last journey to see his disciples. He describes his body now as being like an old farm cart, held together by bits of wire and string. He just can't repair an old farm cart like that. All you can do is patch up another bit of wire, another bit of string. So he really feels his body is... it can't be mended any longer. He can just patch it up, keep it going a bit longer. But he doesn't look for a comfortable last few months, but together with Ananda, he sets off again walking from place to place for one last time, rouse, inspire, encourage and teach his disciples. It's this very beautiful, moving picture of this old man, sick - knowing that death is not far away, but just bound by this great compassion that flows through him to give of himself again and again, to the end. And right until the very end we find the Buddha giving unstintingly of himself. On his deathbed he had the people from the town summoned so that he could teach them or so that they could at least take his darshan, at least be in his presence. He rejoiced in Ananda's merits for all he had given him. The wanderer Subhadda came along wanting teachings. Ananda was shooing him away, "You've come too late. It's too late." The Buddha heard it, had Subhadda brought to his presence and taught him.

He asked a last question of his followers, "Is there anybody who has a last question that they need to ask me?" He didn't want anybody to be left feeling, any one of his disciples be left feeling, "If only I'd asked this question. This crucial question for my spiritual life while the Buddha was still alive." And only when it was clear there was nothing else to do, he'd done everything that he could, did he finally relinquish this life. So this story of his unbounding, unfailing compassion, kindness and generosity to the very last, coming through again and again and again in this story of the last year of the Buddha's life.

Hopes for Encounters with Enlightenment

So I've put together these stories and a number of other more well-known stories in this book that has just come out and between the stories are verses of the *Dhammapada* in Bhante's translations, so you've got the stories and the verses together. In these stories we have just a tiny fraction of the great storehouse treasury of the teachings that are there in the Pali Canon and there isn't any real substitute for going to the originals which certainly are available now in an increasing number of good translations, but I do hope

the stories that I've collected together in this book together with the *Dhammapada* verses are going to provide at least a starting point, will start to bring the Buddha and his world alive for the reader, will provide a reference and, I hope, a stepping stone into the Pali Canon so that more people will enter into that remarkable world, be able to meet the Buddha as he taught and travelled through Ancient India together with his motley crew of disciples. And I hope that people will find in these stories and teachings something of the same inspiration, guidance and enjoyment that I have found.