

# Myōe's Image of Śākyamuni's *Parinirvāṇa* found in the *Nehan Kōshiki*

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The following paper is an analysis of the image of Śākyamuni Buddha's *parinirvāṇa* found in the *Nehan kōshiki* 涅槃講式 (Ceremonial for the Buddha's Nirvāṇa), a liturgical text for an annual ceremony to commemorate Śākyamuni Buddha's entry into *parinirvāṇa* written by the Kamakura period (1185-1333) monk Myōe 明慧 (1173-1232)<sup>1</sup>. This text is now included in a collection called *Shiza kōshiki* 四座講式 (Ceremonials for Four Sitzings) which includes the following texts: *Nehan kōshiki*, *Jūroku rakan kōshiki* 十六羅漢講式 (Liturgy for the Sixteen Arhats), *Nyorai iseki kōshiki* 如來遺跡講式 (Ceremonial for the Indian Sites Associated with the Tathāgata), and *Shari kōshiki* 舍利講式 (Ceremonial for the Buddha's Relics)<sup>2</sup>. In this paper, I will focus on the *Nehan kōshiki* since it is here that Myōe's image of Śākyamuni Buddha is depicted most clearly.<sup>3</sup>

The narrative of the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa* found in contemporary introductory works on Buddhism is based primarily on the *Mahāparinibbāna suttanta* of the Pāli canon, which is relatively free of mythical and hagiographic

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1 After completing this paper, I discovered the existence of Michaela Mross' excellent annotated English translation of the *Nehan kōshiki* (Mross 2016). Although this paper covers the same ground as Mross' study, I venture to publish this paper with the hope that it would be useful for people looking for a general overview of the *Nehan kōshiki*.

2 These four texts were all written within days of each other in the first month of Kenpo 建保 3 (1215), on the 29th, the 24th, the 22nd and 21st, respectively. Basic information about these texts can be found in Ono 1933-1936, 4: 188.

3 In the pages below, I will use "Śākyamuni," "the Buddha" and "the Tathāgata" interchangeably.

flourishes.<sup>4</sup> The most famous Mahāyāna Buddhist account of the *parinirvāṇa*, that found in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* (*Daban niepanjing* 大般涅槃經), opens with a long passage describing how innumerable beings, beginning with monks, nuns, laymen, lay women, gods, goddesses and various types of spiritual beings, gathered together to pay obeisance to the dying Buddha, but the rest of the sūtra is free of miraculous stories. In contrast, Myōe's account is replete with extraordinary events indicting that Śākyamuni Buddha is a supernatural being, taken from now nearly forgotten texts, such as the *Lotus Blossom Face Sūtra* (*Lianhuamianjing* 蓮華面經) and, more importantly, the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra Epilogue* (*Daban niepanjing houfen* 大般涅槃經後分, hereafter cited as *Epilogue*). Clearly the image of the Buddha's final hours that Myōe had is at variance with the one that we now possess. Unfortunately, lack of space prevents me from examining how and why this transformation took place. Instead I will simply recount Myōe's description of the *parinirvāṇa* found in the *Nehan kōshiki* with the hope that it will contribute to a fuller understanding of the image of Śākyamuni Buddha that was widely accepted in the Kamakura period.

### 1. The *Hyōbyaku* in the *Nehan kōshiki*

The *Nehan kōshiki* begins with the following verse to be recited by all participating monks while paying their respects to the Buddha at the beginning of the ritual (*sōrai* 総礼).

By the Ajiravati River of the city of Kuśinagara

(The Buddha) was under the twin *śāla* trees.

With his head to the north and face to the west, he laid down on his  
left side

And passed away on the night of the fifteen day of the second month.  
After reciting the verse, the monks also intone, "I take refuge in the great

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4 See, for example, Robinson 1970, 34–35 and Mitchell 2002, 29–31. In addition, Carrithers comments that the story of the Buddha's death is "shorn of ... mythical elements" and "portrays the last journey of an old man." See Carrithers 1983, 98.

benevolent teacher Śākyamuni Tathāgata. May I, birth after birth and life after life, encounter and pay him homage.”

These words are followed by an ornate *hyōbyaku* 表白, the priest's introductory statement, the gist of which is as follows. The dharma-nature is beyond movement and stillness; movement and stillness are dependent on human perception. In the same way, the Tathāgata neither arises nor perishes but he is seen as arising and perishing by human beings. According to the *Huayan Sūtra* 華嚴經, the rich man Veṣṭhita perceived the eternal buddha body in a sandalwood tower<sup>5</sup> while the *bhikṣu* Sagaramegha heard the sūtra of the Universal Eye (*Puyan qijing* 普眼契經) in the ocean.<sup>6</sup> As a result of their visions, these two Buddhist seekers experienced great satisfaction. Similarly, who among the people of this world would not rejoice at seeing the Buddha's birth at Lumbini and who would not shed bitter tears upon seeing the Buddha enter nirvāṇa at Kuśinagara? Everything the Buddha did during his lifelong teaching career all served as bright torches for awakening sentient beings slumbering in delusion. Likewise all of his three hundred fifty perfec-<sup>7</sup>tions served as instruments for ferrying over beings mired in transmigration. The light of the Buddha's teachings reaches even us in the age of the Latter

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5 The “Entry into the Realm of Reality Chapter” (Rufajiepin 入法界品) of the *Huayan Sūtra* describes how Sudhana visited 53 teachers in search of supreme perfect enlightenment. Veṣṭhita is the 26th of the 53 teachers that Sudhana visited. When Sudhana visited him, Veṣṭhita explains to him that no buddha enters *parinirvāṇa*. Veṣṭhita also tells Sudhana how he has opened the door of the sandalwood tower of the throne of the *tathāgata*, thereby attaining a *samādhi* called “manifestation of the endless lineage of buddhas.” T 10, 366a-c. For an English translation of the passage, see Cleary 1993, 1273.

6 The *bhikṣu* Sagaramegha (Haiyun biqiu 海雲比丘) is the third of the 53 teachers that Sudhana visited described in the “Entry into the Realm of Reality Chapter” of the *Huayan Sūtra*. After meditating on the ocean for twelve years, Sagaramegha gained a vision of a colossal lotus blossom emerge from the ocean. Upon the lotus blossom sat a buddha, who revealed to Sagaramegha a teaching called Universal Eye. See T 10, 335a-336b. For an English translation, see Cleary 1993, 1182.

Dharma and his efforts to lead sentient beings to enlightenment encompass even *icchantikas*, evil beings incapable of attaining release from the cycle of transmigration. How trustworthy! How delightful! Through the merits of hearing and believing the Buddha's teachings, our long night of ignorance will finally dawn and through the good roots leading to enlightenment that we have gained by creating karmic bonds with the Buddha, we will be ferried over to the further shore beyond the sea of suffering. Hence, every year on this day and month, we will hold a ceremony in four sittings and will remember the Buddha's entry into nirvāṇa with deep sorrow.

This, in brief, is the contents of the *hyōbyaku*. Next follows the main body of the ceremonial, which is divided into five sections: "Revelation of the Sorrow at the Buddha's Entry into Extinction" (*Ken nyūmetsu aishō* 顯入滅哀傷), "Description of the Sorrow at the Buddha's Cremation" (*Kyo dabi aishō* 舉荼毘哀傷), "Description of the Causes and Conditions for Nirvāṇa" (*Kyo nehan innen* 舉涅槃因緣), "Description of the Remains of the Twin Śāla Trees" (*Kyo sourin iseki* 舉双林遺跡), and "Arousing of the Vow and Merit Transference" (*Hotsugan ekō* 發願廻向). It may be added that each section concludes with a short verse which, for lack of space, will not be discussed below.

## 2. Revelation of the Sorrow at the Buddha's Entry into Extinction

This section, recounting the scene of the Buddha's entry into *parinirvāṇa*, is the longest section of the *Nehan kōshiki*. Myōe begins this section by

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7 The idea that there are three hundred fifty perfections derives from the *Xianjie-jing* 賢劫經 (Wise Kalpa Sūtra). Although this sūtra does not say there are three hundred fifty perfections, it does state that there are two thousand one hundred perfections. The sūtra further claims that each of these perfections consists of the usual six perfections (giving, keeping the precepts, forbearance, vigor, meditation and wisdom). See T 14, 11c-12a. If the number two thousand one hundred is divided by six, the result is three hundred fifty. Hence, it appears that the *Xianjie-jing* takes the position that there are three hundred fifty perfections, each of which in turn consists of six perfections, making a total of two thousand one hundred perfections. This point is discussed in detail in Iwano 1930, 219-220.

stating that all the events in the Tathāgata's eighty year long life, whether it be his birth at Kapilavastu, his enlightenment at Buddhagayā, his preaching the Dharma at the Vulture Peak or his *parinirvāṇa* under the twin *śāla* trees, all occurred as a result of his great compassion and must be seen as manifestations of his skillful efforts at teaching sentient beings. Thus all these occasions serve to benefit sentient beings and lead them to enlightenment. However, once the Buddha enters *parinirvāṇa*, it is no longer possible to see him, and this becomes the source of great consternation. Alluding to the words found in the *Lotus Blossom Face Sūtra*, Myōe declares,

The Buddha said to Ānanda, "At a time not far in the future, the Tathāgata, on the fifteenth day, will attain *parinirvāṇa*." At that time, a great *yakṣa* general called Pañcalā (Panzheluo 般遮羅), together with hundred million billion *yakṣas*, simultaneously cried out loud while shedding streams of tears. Holding back their tears with their hands, they recited the following verse.

World Honored One! Your body is radiant and golden.

It is adorned with merits and your face is like the full moon.

The white tuft of hair between the brows is your extraordinary mark.

Now I, for the last time, take refuge in you and pay you obeisance.<sup>8</sup> (T 84, 898c. It is originally found at T 12, 1074c.)

In similar ways, Myōe continues, all the heavenly beings and the eight types of supernatural beings (heavenly beings, dragons, *yakṣas*, *gandharvas*, *asuras*, *garuḍas*, *kiṃnaras* and *mahoragas*) cried out in sorrow and shed streams of tears. Having heard that the Buddha will soon definitely enter *parinirvāṇa*, they found it impossible to bear the sorrow arising from their longing for the Tathāgata.

As noted above, the sūtra passage that Myōe cites above is a paraphrase

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8 T 84, 898c. In the sūtra, it is found at T 12, 1074c.

of the *Lotus Blossom Face Sūtra*. This sūtra, a short text in two fascicles, presents a fascinating account of the final three months of the Buddha's life. Since it is not a well-known text, I will briefly summarize its contents. This sūtra begins with the Buddha setting out with Ānanda from Vaiśālī to Pāvā village. After reaching the Ajiravatī River near Kuśinagara, the Buddha takes off his robes to bathe and commands Ānanda to take a good look at his body adorned with the thirty-two marks, declaring that he will enter *parinirvāṇa* in three months. Subsequently the Buddha travels to the realms of various heavenly beings, dragons and *yakṣas* to command them to uphold the True Dharma. After returning to earth, the Buddha next describes how evil precept-breaking *bhikṣus* will fill the world after his *parinirvāṇa*. Upon reaching Pāvā, the Buddha teaches innumerable sentient beings and declares his intention to enter *parinirvāṇa*. Subsequently twenty-seven heavenly beings, *asura* kings, dragon kings, *yakṣa* generals and other spirits, each surrounded by millions of beings in their retinue, recites verses expressing their grief. The lines cited above were the verses that the *yakṣa* general Pañcarā recited at this time. The sūtra concludes with a lengthy story of how the Buddha's begging bowl will be stowed away in the palace of the dragon king Sagara but will return to this world when Maitreya appears in the future.

The next several lines from the *Nehan kōshiki* are based on the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*. This sūtra, one of the most influential sūtras of East Asian Buddhism, is famous for its teachings that the Tathāgata is eternal and that all beings have the Buddha-nature. Although Myōe alludes to both of these teachings in the *Nehan kōshiki*, his main focus is not on the doctrinal content of the sūtra. Rather he takes up the opening scene of the sūtra, where numerous beings come to pay obeisance to the dying Buddha,<sup>9</sup> in order to provide a description of the setting of the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*. Myōe describes the scene as follows.

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9 This takes up most of the first fascicle of the sūtra. See T 12, 365c-369b. For an English translation of these passages, see Blum 2013, 3-20.

Finally, in the grove of *sāla* trees near the Ajiravatī River in the native land of the Mallas, the Buddha emitted a ray of light from his face and, on the morning of the fifteenth of the second month, announced his final parting to the ears of the fifty-two kinds of beings,<sup>10</sup> including bodhisattvas, *śrāvakas*, heavenly beings, dragons (and the rest of) the eight types of supernatural beings. (These beings included everyone) beginning from great bodhisattvas as numerous as the grains of sand in one Ganges River, down to innumerable numbers of sentient beings such as bees and insects. (Among them were) *rākṣasa* kings as numerous as the number of sand grains in eighty Ganges Rivers, headed by the *rākṣasa* king Fearsome One, lion kings as numerous as the number of sand grains in twenty Ganges Rivers, headed by the lion king Lion Roar, on down to species such as ducks, geese, male and female mandarin ducks, and the likes of water buffalos, cows and sheep. Touched by the light and hearing the voice, each of them became greatly agitated. The humans and heavenly beings, carrying gold, silver and other treasures, and birds and animals, holding flowers, stalks, trees and leaves, all made their way to the site between the twin *sāla* trees and assembled in front of the Tathāgata.<sup>11</sup> Sweating profusely, they all beheld (the Buddha's) august countenance resembling a full moon. Each one of them shed streams of tears, listening to the sublime and wonderful True Dharma. This True Dharma teaches that *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas* all identically revert to the one fruit and those beings of the determinate<sup>12</sup> lineage and lineageless beings are without exception of one nature.<sup>13</sup>

10 The notion that fifty-two kinds of beings attended the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa* is found in *Daban niepanjingshu* 大般涅槃經疏, Guanding's 觀頂 commentary on the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*. See T 38, 43a.

11 This passage paraphrases the first fascicle of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, which describes in great detail the various types of beings that assembled around the dying Buddha. For a description of the assembled beings, see T 12, 366a-369b.

The diamond treasure is in my possession; the three dots and four<sup>14</sup> virtues<sup>15</sup> are all things I attain (and so forth). Hearing the deep meaning (of these words, the listeners experienced) sorrow and joy in turn; reflecting on the torrent of instruction (from the Buddha's mouth), their longing (for the Buddha) redoubled. (T 84, 898c)

In this way, Myōe recounts how innumerable beings of various types all assembled around the dying Buddha.

Then appears a somewhat shocking passage, based on the *Epilogue*, narrating how the Buddha bared his body, rose up into the sky and proclaimed his imminent entry into extinction. As recounted by Myōe, it is as follows.

The Buddha then took off his large robe (*saṃghāṭi*), bared his golden chest and declared to the entire assembled throng: "I am about to enter nirvāṇa. All the people and heavenly beings in this great assembly, with deep mind, should behold my physical body." After repeating this three times, he rose up into the sky to the height of

12 I. e., that all *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas* ultimately attain buddhahood, which is the sole goal of Buddhist practice.

13 According to the Hossō 法相 school, all beings belong by nature to one of five spiritual lineages. These lineages are (1) determinate bodhisattva lineage, (2) determinate *śrāvaka* lineage, (3) determinate *pratyekabuddha* lineage, (4) indeterminate lineage and (5) lineageless beings. This theory further holds that beings of the determinate *śrāvaka* and *pratyekabuddha* lineages, along with the lineageless beings, cannot attain buddhahood. However, the Kegon school, to which Myōe belonged, held that all beings, including those of the determinate *śrāvaka* lineage, determinate *pratyekabuddha* lineage and lineageless beings, are of one nature and therefore can all attain buddhahood.

14 Refers to the three dots in the form of an inverted triangle that make up the Sanskrit letter *i*. In the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, *parinirvāṇa* is said to consist of three virtues: dharma-body, *prajñā* and liberation. Since these three virtues are considered to form an organic whole, they are likened to the letter *i*, in which the three dots are placed neither vertically nor horizontally.

15 Eternity, bliss, self and purity. According to the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, *parinirvāṇa* is said to be characterized by these four virtues.



one *tala* tree from his lion's throne adorned with the seven jewels, and declared once again, "I am about to enter *nirvāṇa*. You all in the great assembly should behold my physical body." After repeating these words twenty-four times, the Buddha again declared, "I am about to enter *nirvāṇa*. You all in the great assembly should, with deep mind, behold my physical body. This is the last time you can see me. After you see me tonight, you will not see me again." After saying so, he put on his large robe once more. (T 84, 898c-899a)

Still following the narrative found in the *Epilogue*, Myoe next describes the Buddha's last moments. Immediately after the quotation above, Myoe continues, "The Buddha then said, 'My whole body aches'" (T 84, 899a). Then, knowing that the time for his *parinirvāṇa* had arrived, the Buddha entered a state of meditation. He subsequently exited from the meditative trance and preached the sublime Dhama: that ignorance is, by its very nature, liberation and that he has attained a state of quiescence called great *nirvāṇa*. After preaching thus, the Buddha laid down on his right side, with his head facing north, his feet pointed south, his face to the west and his back to the east. He entered the fourth meditation (the highest of the four meditative trances) and entered *nirvāṇa*.

In a lyrical passage, Myōe recounts what happened next.

His blue lotus eyes closed forever and his compassionate smile ceased. His lips, the color of a red fruit, became silent and his great pure voice, so full of pity (for sentient beings), ended. At that time, arhats who had extinguished their defilements forgot the pleasure they had derived from having already established themselves in pure conduct, while bodhisattvas who had reached the first stage (of the ten stages of the bodhisattva path) cast aside their contemplative insight that all dharmas are birthless. Vajradhara<sup>16</sup> threw aside his adamant

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16 One of the guardian deities of Buddhism. He holds a *vajra* (adamantine weapon) in his hands.

weapon (*vajra*) and wailed to heaven, while the heavenly king Brahma cast aside his banner of jeweled nets and prostrated himself on the ground. *Rākṣasa* kings as numerous as the grains of sand in eighty Ganges Rivers stuck out their tongues and lost consciousness, while lion kings as numerous as the grains of sand in twenty Ganges Rivers fell to the ground and howled out loud.<sup>17</sup> Fowls like ducks, geese, male and female mandarin ducks all felt sorrow while the tribes of poisonous snakes and malevolent scorpions were all, without exception, filled with grief. (T 84, 899a)

Myōe's description of the sorrow that assailed the living beings gathered around the Buddha continues in a similar fashion for many more lines. Moreover, based on the *Epilogue*, Myōe recounts how even the physical features of the land were moved by the Buddha's passing: the earth quakes, mountains collapse, oceans seethe and rivers dry up. Similarly, trees and grasses exude mournful sighs while mountain streams and even the earth itself express their pain and anguish.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. Description of the Sorrow at the Buddha's Cremation

As the title indicates, this second section of the *Nehan kōshiki* focuses on the events associated with the Buddha's cremation (*dabi* 荼毘). It is based almost entirely on the *Epilogue*.<sup>19</sup> After his *parinirvāṇa*, Myōe begins, the Buddha's body was wrapped in white felt and was placed in a golden casket. Sixteen strong men tried to carry the casket to the city of Kuśinagara but

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17 According to the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, *rākṣasa* kings as numerous as the grains of sand in eighty Ganges Rivers and lion kings as numerous as the grains of sand in twenty Ganges Rivers came to the Buddha's side when the latter was about to enter *parinirvāṇa*. See T 12, 368c and 369a. There is, however, no mention of *rākṣasa* kings losing consciousness and lion kings howling in this sūtra.

18 T 80, 899a. In the *Epilogue*, this is found at T 12, 905a-b.

19 In the *Epilogue*, the events surrounding the Buddha's cremation are described in great detail at T 12, 905c-910a.

found it impossible to move.<sup>20</sup> Thereupon the casket on its own accord flew up into the sky and entered Kuśinagara from its west gate. Witnessing this, numerous bodhisattvas, *śrāvakas* and heavenly beings, filling both the ground and the sky, expressed their sorrow at the Buddha's death. The casket then flew out of the city's east gate and flew into the city again from the south gate. Next it flew out of the north gate and entered again from the west gate. This happened three times. Next the casket again entered Kuśinagara from the west gate, then exited from the east gate, further entered from the north gate, then exited from the south gate and entered from the west gate. When the casket made seven circuits around the city in this way, it finally arrived at the cremation site and came to rest on a lion couch decorated with the seven jewels. Numerous heavenly beings surrounded the casket and the sound of their laments shook the earth in six directions.

The casket was then placed atop a splendid and marvelously scented pavilion for cremation. Holding a torch the size of a wagon wheel, the assembled people tried to set fire to the pavilion but the flames went out on their own accord. Similarly, the flames on the torches of all the assembled heavenly beings and ocean gods also went out when they attempted to set fire to the pavilion.

At that moment, Mahākāśyapa, accompanied by his disciples, arrived at the cremation site.<sup>21</sup> The casket then opened on its own accord, the felt and *tula* cotton sheets encasing the Buddha fell away and the Buddha's golden body appeared, causing Mahākāśyapa and his disciples to faint and collapse. After regaining consciousness, they venerated the Buddha, washing the white felt and cloth that had covered him. After that, the casket closed. But in response to Mahākāśyapa's sorrowful wails, the Buddha's feet appeared from within the casket, emitting a thousand brilliant rays of light from the mark of the

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20 The *Epilogue* says that, at first, four strong men tried to carry the casket to the city but were unable to do so. Then eight strong men attempted the task but they also failed. Finally sixteen strong men tried to lift the casket but even they were unable to move it. See T 12, 907a.

thousand spoked wheel on the sole to illuminate all the worlds in the ten directions. Subsequently, the feet withdrew into the casket.

Once again, torches were thrown onto the pavilion to cremate the Buddha but they went out as before. Out of his compassion, the Buddha emitted flames from his chest, finally succeeding in cremating the body. After seven days, the pavilion (and the body within it) was totally burned and the relics were parceled out.

#### 4. Description of the Causes and Conditions for Nirvāṇa

In this section, Myōe turns to the reason why the Buddha entered *parinirvāṇa* and explains that it was because he did not want his followers to become complacent. If his followers knew that he would always be with them, the Buddha thought, they would become lax in their practice, arrogantly assuming that the Buddha will always be available to help them. To rid them of such arrogant thoughts, the Buddha entered *parinirvāṇa*, disappearing forever from their presence. As Myōe put it, "It was in order to admonish (those practitioners having) feelings of arrogance and self-indulgence (that

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21 The *Epilogue* describes Mahākāśyapa's arrival at the cremation site in great detail.

It states that the cremation bier could not be set on fire because the Buddha wished to delay it until Mahākāśyapa arrived. Mahākāśyapa was then on the Vulture Peak with five hundred disciples. It had already been seven days since the Buddha attained *parinirvāṇa*. Perceiving that the Buddha had attained extinction, Mahākāśyapa flew through the sky to Kuśinagara while his disciples hurried along on foot. After a week's journey, they reached Kuśinagara. Entering the city, they first met an evil monk rejoicing at the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*, saying that he will no longer have to keep the precepts strictly. Mahākāśyapa and his disciples then approached the Buddha's casket and wished to open it. But the people already there demurred, saying that it has been two weeks since the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa* and the body was already putrefied. To this Mahākāśyapa retorted, "The Tathāgata's body is diamond-like, firm and solid. It is characterized by eternity, bliss, self and purity. It cannot be destroyed. It is fragrant like a mountain of sandalwood." It is at this point that the Buddha, out of his compassion for Mahākāśyapa, had the casket open on its own accord. See T 12, 908b-c.

the Buddha) made a show of (entering) *nirvāṇa*” (T 84, 899c). According to Myōe, the Buddha, out of his great compassion, is constantly working to lead sentient beings out of the ocean of birth-and-death. This means that all the acts performed by the Buddha, from his act of appearing in this world down to his final act of entering *parinirvāṇa*, serve to instruct sentient beings in a certain way. This is the point that Myōe wishes to make when he quotes the following line from the *Huayan Sūtra*: “Because he wishes to make sentient beings experience delight and joy, (the Buddha) appears in the world. Because he wishes sentient beings to experience sorrow and yearning, he manifests <sup>22</sup>*nirvāṇa*.” Myōe further amplifies on the point that the Buddha manifested his *parinirvāṇa* in order to admonish his followers from becoming complacent by citing several other authorities. For example, he quotes the following lines from a lengthy verse found at the end of the “Life-span of the Tathāgata” chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*.<sup>23</sup>

Ordinary beings, due to their mistaken views,  
Say (the Buddha) attains extinction, even though he really exists.  
Because they always see me (i. e., the Buddha),  
They give rise to thoughts of arrogance and self-indulgence. (T 84, 900a)

Here again, the Buddha is said to have made a show of entering *parinirvāṇa* because he wished to prevent his followers from becoming arrogant, saying they can always rely on the Buddha’s help.

## 5. Description of the Remains of the Twin Śāla Trees

In the fourth section, Myōe describes the site of the Śākyamuni’s *parinirvāṇa* and cremation, revealing that his nostalgia for the Buddha extended even to the physical setting at which latter met his end.

Northwest of Kusinagara, on the west bank of the Ajiravatī River,

<sup>22</sup> T 84, 899c. In the sūtra, these lines are found at T 9, 628b.

<sup>23</sup> In the *Lotus Sūtra*, these lines are found at T 9, 43c. For an alternate English translation, see Hurvitz 2009, 225.

there is a grove of *śāla* trees. The trees resemble an oak. Their bark is green while their leaves are white. Four trees (in the grove) are particularly tall. It was there (under those trees) that the Tathāgata attained extinction. The sūtra states, "After the Great<sup>24</sup> Awakened One, the World Honored One, entered nirvāṇa, a pair (of trees) in the *śāla* grove, one to the east and one to the west, joined together to form one tree and (another) pair, one to the north and one to the south, joined together to form another tree. (From them) drooped down a jeweled couch forming a canopy for the Tathāgata. Out of misery, the trees turned pale as a white crane while their branches, leaves, flowers and fruits split violently apart and fell (to the ground). They gradually withered and crumbled until nothing was left." (T 84, 900a)

Myōe further states,

The trees are five *zhang* 丈 in height.<sup>25</sup> The roots below are intertwined and the branches above are merged together. They resemble two tree that have joined together. The foliage is luxuriant and the flowers are like carriage wheels. The fruits are as large as pots and they taste as sweet as honey. (T 84, 900a)<sup>26</sup>

Finally Myōe concludes this section with the reminder that this is the place where the Buddha's mother came down from the heavenly realms to bid farewell to her son, and also the place where Vajrapāṇi cast aside his *vajra* (adamantine weapon) in grief over the Buddha's passing.<sup>27</sup><sup>28</sup>

24 Refers to the *Epilogue*. The quotation is found at T 12, 905a.

25 About fifty feet.

26 Although Myōe says that this passage is a paraphrase of an unidentified *Record* (*ji* 記), it is actually taken from Guanding's *Daban niepanjingshu*. See T 38, 44b.

27 According to the *Mahāmāyā Sūtra*, the Buddha's mother came down from heaven (where she had gone after she died seven days after he son's birth) when she heard the news of her son's death. The Buddha, using his supernatural powers, then opened his casket and appeared before his mother. See T 12, 1012a-1013a.

Next, Myōe provides a description of the cremation site. It is located to the north of Kuśinagara, a little over three hundred paces on the further side of the Ajiravatī River. The ground, yellowish black in color, is mixed with ash, and if one looks diligently, one can even find fragments of the relics there.<sup>29</sup> Finally, Myōe continues with the story of Master Deng 燈法師, who crossed the desert and scaled snowy peaks to reach India and ultimately died in Kuśinagara.<sup>30</sup>

## 6. Arousing of the Vow and Merit Transference

In this final section, Myōe expresses his wish that, as a result of the good roots arising from his feelings of yearning for Śākyamuni, he would be able to see Śākyamuni and listen to the Dharma from him in the future. The *Nehan kōshiki* concludes with a *shinbun* 神分 (a prayer addressed to the *kamis*) and sixfold merit transferences (*rokushu ekō* 六種廻向<sup>31</sup>).

28 This is mentioned in the *Gaoseng Faxienzhuan* 高僧法顯傳 (Biography of the Eminent Monk Faxien). See T 51, 861c.

29 This is based on Xuanzang's *Datang xiyuchi* 大唐西域記 (Great Tang Record of the Western Regions). See T 51, 904b.

30 This is a reference to Dasheng Deng 大乘燈 (dates unknown), whose biography is found in the *Datang xiyu qiufa gaosengzhuan* 大唐西域求法高僧傳 (Great Tang Biographies of Eminent Monks who Travelled to the Western Regions in Search of the Dharma). He was born in the country of Ai 愛國 in what is now the northern part of Vietnam. His Sanskrit name was Mahāyānapradīpa. When he was a child, he went with his parents to Ayutthaya in Thailand and became a Buddhist novice there. However, he later went to China and was ordained by Xuanzang. Subsequently Dasheng Deng undertook a journey to India. He first went to Sri Lanka and then to Tāmralīpti in Bengal, where he stayed for twelve years. He then travelled to central India, visiting Nālanda, Vaiśālī, Buddhagayā and Kuśinagara, where he died. See T 51, 4b-c.

31 Refers to a prayer recited at the end of an esoteric Buddhist ritual, in which six types of ritual offerings, such as the sacred water (*aka* 闍伽), are presented to the buddhas (this corresponds to "*rokushu*") and the merit arising from the ritual is transferred to the benefit of all sentient beings (this corresponds to "*ekō*").

## 7. Conclusion

As we saw above, although Myōe draws on a number of sūtras and other Buddhist works in writing the *Nehan kōshiki*, he relies most heavily on the *Epilogue*, which weaves together a detailed description of the Buddha's final hours and its aftermath from the perspective of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The *Epilogue* was highly regarded in Myōe's time but is now virtually forgotten. But as the *Nehan kōshiki* shows, the medieval Japanese image of the Buddha's extinction deriving from this text is quite different from the one that we now have of the same event.

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