

# A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE BUDDHA'S FINAL JOURNEY AND ITS HISTORICAL-GEOGRAPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE

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## Abstract

The Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, preserved in the Dīgha Nikāya of the Pāli Canon, occupies a distinctive position in Buddhist literature as the most extensive narrative account of the Buddha's final year and passing away. Unlike doctrinal discourses that primarily focus on philosophical exposition, this sutta presents a continuous narrative that integrates historical events, geographical references, ethical teachings, and ritual practices. This article examines the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta as a form of sacred history, arguing that the text functions not merely as a biographical record but as a religious framework that shapes collective memory and normative understanding within early Buddhism.

Through a critical textual analysis, this study explores the historical and geographical dimensions of the Buddha's final journey, highlighting how specific places, political contexts, and ritual elements are imbued with religious significance. The analysis demonstrates that the sutta sacralizes historical events and physical spaces, transforming them into enduring sites of moral instruction and communal identity. By situating the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta within the broader context of Buddhist historiography, this article shows how early Buddhist communities constructed a sacred narrative that integrates impermanence, ethical responsibility, and institutional continuity. The study concludes that understanding the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta as sacred history provides valuable insight into the formation of Buddhist historical consciousness and the role of narrative in preserving religious meaning.

**Keywords:** Early Buddhism, Historical Geography, Mahāparinibbāna Sutta

## Introduction

The Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, preserved in the Dīgha Nikāya of the Pāli Canon, occupies a unique position within Buddhist literature. As the longest discourse in the Nikāyas, it presents a detailed narrative of the final year, last journey, and ultimate passing away (Mahāparinibbāna) of the Buddha. Unlike doctrinal suttas that primarily expound philosophical teachings, the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta adopts a narrative (ākhyāna) form, weaving together historical events, geographical references, ethical instructions, and ritual practices. This distinctive composition has led scholars to regard the text not merely as a religious discourse, but as a foundational document of Buddhist sacred history.

Sacred history differs from secular historiography in that it does not aim solely at chronological accuracy or empirical verification. Rather, it seeks to preserve events imbued with religious meaning, shaping collective memory and ethical identity within a religious community. The Mahāparinibbāna Sutta exemplifies this function by recounting the Buddha's final journey in a manner that integrates historical recollection with normative guidance. Through its narrative, the text establishes sacred places, legitimizes social and political relationships, and provides a framework for understanding death, impermanence, and continuity within the Buddhist tradition.

This article argues that the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta should be understood as a work of sacred history that plays a crucial role in shaping early Buddhist self-understanding. By critically analyzing the historical and geographical dimensions of the Buddha's final journey, this study seeks to demonstrate how the sutta functions as a bridge between lived history and religious meaning. Such an approach not only deepens our appreciation of the text itself but also contributes to broader discussions on the formation of Buddhist historiography.

## The Mahāparinibbāna Sutta as Sacred Historical Narrative

The narrative structure of the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta clearly distinguishes it from most other canonical discourses in the Pāli Canon. Rather than offering systematic doctrinal exposition, the text unfolds as a continuous and detailed narrative recounting the events of the Buddha's final year and last journey. The narrative voice, frequently mediated through Ānanda—who is portrayed as an eyewitness and intimate attendant—creates a strong sense of immediacy and lived experience. This narrative strategy enhances the sutta's authority by presenting the events as remembered and transmitted within a community of direct witnesses, thereby reinforcing its canonical and religious significance (Walshe, 1987; Gethin, 1998).

From the perspective of textual history, scholars have long recognized that the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta reflects multiple stages of compilation and redaction. While some passages appear to belong to the earliest strata of Buddhist literature, others reveal later editorial concerns, particularly regarding monastic discipline, institutional continuity, and ritual

practice after the Buddha's passing. Winternitz (1972) argues that the text combines archaic narrative material with later interpretive layers, illustrating how early Buddhist communities continuously reworked historical memory to address evolving doctrinal and social needs. This layered composition suggests that the sutta functions not merely as a historical record but as a living tradition shaped by collective religious reflection.

As a form of sacred history, the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta fulfills several interconnected functions within early Buddhism. First, it preserves the Buddha's final teachings, including exhortations concerning impermanence (anicca), diligence (appamāda), and reliance on the Dhamma and Vinaya as the ultimate authority after his death. These teachings provide doctrinal continuity and ethical orientation in the absence of a living teacher. Second, the sutta legitimizes the institutional authority of the Saṅgha by emphasizing collective responsibility and disciplined adherence to established norms, thereby stabilizing the foundations of the Buddhist community during a moment of potential crisis (Gethin, 1998; Strong, 2001).

Equally significant is the sutta's role in sacralizing geography through narrative. The Buddha's final journey—from Rājagaha through Vesālī to Kusinārā—is not presented as a mere itinerary but as a spiritually charged landscape imbued with symbolic and ethical meaning. Places associated with key events—such as the final exhortations, the last meal, the Buddha's passing away, cremation, and the distribution of relics—are transformed into enduring sites of pilgrimage. This narrative sacralization of space illustrates how early Buddhism linked physical geography with religious memory, creating what scholars describe as a form of sacred geography that anchors doctrine and devotion in concrete locations (Schumann, 2004; Strong, 2001).

Crucially, the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta does not depict history as a neutral or purely factual chronicle. Historical episodes are selectively framed to convey moral, social, and spiritual significance. Political narratives—such as King Ajātasattu's ambitions or the republican governance of the Vajjians—are included insofar as they illustrate principles of ethical leadership, social cohesion, and collective welfare. In this way, the sutta exemplifies how sacred history integrates factual recollection with normative interpretation, transforming historical memory into a vehicle for ethical instruction and communal identity within early Buddhism (Gethin, 1998; Walshe, 1987).

## The Buddha's Final Journey: Historical Dimensions

The historical dimension of the Buddha's final journey, as depicted in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, offers valuable insight into the socio-political landscape of ancient North India during the fifth century BCE. The narrative situates the Buddha's movements within a region characterized by competing monarchies and republican polities, including Magadha and the Vajji confederacy. This context reflects a period of political consolidation, territorial expansion, and institutional experimentation, which forms the backdrop against which the Buddha's final teachings were delivered (Gethin, 1998; Schumann, 2004). The sutta thus preserves not only religious memory but also traces of historical realities that shaped early Buddhist engagement with society.

One of the most significant historically grounded episodes in the sutta is the encounter between the Buddha and Vassakāra, the minister of King Ajātasattu. This episode reveals contemporary concerns regarding political stability, military strategy, and governance. The Buddha's indirect response—emphasizing ethical unity and communal harmony rather than tactical advice—demonstrates how Buddhist ethical principles were applied to matters of statecraft without direct political involvement. Scholars have noted that this interaction illustrates the Buddha's role as a moral authority whose influence extended into public and political life, even while maintaining a principled distance from power struggles (Strong, 2001; Walshe, 1987).

Although modern historiography approaches canonical narratives with critical caution, the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta nonetheless preserves historically plausible details concerning routes of travel, patterns of settlement, and forms of social organization. References to specific locations—such as Rājagaha, Vesālī, Pāvā, and Kusinārā—correspond to identifiable sites in the Gangetic plain, many of which have been corroborated through archaeological and historical research (Schumann, 2004). These geographical details suggest that the sutta functions as a valuable historical source when read critically, particularly in relation to mobility, communication networks, and regional interactions in early Buddhist India.

The Buddha's counsel to the Vajjians concerning the Seven Conditions of Welfare (satta aparihāniyā dhammā) further highlights the integration of ethical norms with political resilience. These principles—such as regular assemblies, respect for tradition, and communal consensus—reflect features associated with republican governance and collective decision-making. Rather than proposing abstract moral ideals, the Buddha articulates ethical guidelines that support social cohesion and institutional stability. This passage demonstrates how Buddhist ethics were framed as universally applicable principles capable of sustaining both spiritual and civic life (Gethin, 1998; Walshe, 1987).

Equally important is the sutta's portrayal of the Buddha's declining physical condition during his final journey. The narrative openly acknowledges illness, fatigue, and physical suffering, thereby humanizing the Buddha and reinforcing the central Buddhist doctrine of impermanence (*anicca*). Rather than diminishing the Buddha's spiritual authority, this portrayal underscores the universality of conditioned existence and the inevitability of decay. In this way, the historical dimension of the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* serves both documentary and didactic purposes, integrating empirical realism with ethical instruction and reinforcing the Buddhist understanding of history as a meaningful arena for spiritual insight (Strong, 2001; Gethin, 1998).

## Geographical Significance and the Sacralization of Space

Geography plays a central role in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, transforming ordinary physical locations into enduring symbols of religious meaning. The Buddha's final journey unfolds across a network of cities, villages, rivers, and forests in the Middle Gangetic Plain, creating a spatial narrative that anchors Buddhist memory in concrete places. Rather than serving merely as a background for doctrinal teaching, geography in this sutta functions as an active medium through which ethical values, historical memory, and religious identity are articulated. Scholars have emphasized that early Buddhism developed a distinctive form of sacred geography in which physical movement and spiritual significance are closely intertwined (Gethin, 1998; Strong, 2001).

Among the locations mentioned, *Kusinārā* occupies a particularly significant position as the place chosen for the Buddha's final passing away (*Mahāparinibbāna*). From a political and economic standpoint, *Kusinārā* was relatively marginal compared to major urban centers such as *Rājagaha* or *Sāvathī*. This apparent marginality has long intrigued scholars, prompting questions about why the Buddha selected such a place for the culmination of his life. Historical and textual analyses suggest that the choice of *Kusinārā* reflects not historical accident but deliberate symbolic intent, emphasizing values of renunciation, humility, and detachment from worldly power (Schumann, 2004; Walshe, 1987).

From the perspective of sacred history, the geographical marginality of *Kusinārā* acquires profound ethical meaning. By attaining *Mahāparinibbāna* in an unassuming setting, the Buddha exemplifies the Buddhist rejection of prestige, authority, and material dominance. Space itself becomes morally charged: the absence of political grandeur reinforces the central Buddhist teaching that liberation is independent of social status or institutional power. In this way, geography is aligned with doctrine, and physical location is transformed into a symbolic expression of ethical ideals (Strong, 2001; Gethin, 1998).

The Mahāparinibbāna Sutta further institutionalizes geography through its explicit identification of the Four Places of Pilgrimage (cattāri saṃvejanīyāni tṭhānāni): the Buddha's birth at Lumbinī, enlightenment at Bodhgayā, first sermon at Sarnath, and passing away at Kusinārī. These sites invite devotees to engage bodily with sacred history through travel, ritual, and remembrance. Pilgrimage thus becomes a form of embodied pedagogy, enabling practitioners to reflect on impermanence, awakening, teaching, and death through direct encounter with sacred places rather than abstract contemplation alone (Strong, 2001; Schumann, 2004).

In this manner, geography in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta functions as an extension of doctrine itself. Sacred space is not merely commemorative but transformative, shaping religious consciousness and communal identity across generations. By embedding ethical and soteriological meanings within the landscape, early Buddhism ensured that its foundational narrative would remain accessible through physical movement and ritual practice. The sacralization of space thus plays a crucial role in sustaining Buddhist historical consciousness, demonstrating how geography, memory, and doctrine converge in the formation of a living religious tradition (Gethin, 1998; Walshe, 1987).

## Conclusion

The Mahāparinibbāna Sutta stands as a foundational text of Buddhist sacred history, offering a richly textured account of the Buddha's final journey that integrates historical recollection, geographical symbolism, and ethical instruction. Rather than functioning as a simple chronicle, the sutta shapes collective memory by framing events in ways that convey enduring religious meaning. Its narrative structure preserves continuity of authority, sacralizes space, and provides a model for understanding impermanence and communal responsibility.

By examining the historical and geographical dimensions of the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, this study has shown that the text plays a crucial role in the formation of Buddhist historiography. It demonstrates how early Buddhism transformed lived experience into sacred history, ensuring that memory, place, and meaning remained inseparably linked. Understanding the sutta in this light allows for a deeper appreciation of its significance—not only as a record of the Buddha's final days, but as a timeless framework for interpreting history through the lens of the Dhamma.

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