

THE GREAT PASSING

(Mahā-parinibbāna Sutta)

With the Commentarial Explanation

This Sutta is officially known as “the Great Passing” (*Mahā-parinibbāna Sutta*). The Buddha’s (or an arahant’s) passing or demise is called *parinibbāna*, which literally means “ultimate peacefulness” because he would have no more rebirths and deaths afterward. Undeniably, this sutta is one of the most important discourses because it contains a lot of unique speeches given by the Buddha during his last days, to be exact, during last ten months before his passing. So, reading this sutta, we can witness the twilight glory of His Holiness.

When Venerable Ānanda reported it to the first Buddhist Council held just three months after the Buddha’s passing, he started it with the passage below:

(1) Evaṃ me sutāṃ. (2) Ekaṃ samayaṃ (3) Bhagavā Rājagahe viharati (4) Gijjha-kūṭe pabbate. (5) Tena kho pana samayena, (6) rājā Māgadho Ajātasattu Vedehiputto (7) Vajjī abhiyātu-kāmo hoti. (8) So evamāha, “(9) Ahaṃ (10) hime Vajjī (11) evaṃ-mahiddhike evaṃ-mahānubhāve (12) ucchecchāmi; (13) Vajjī vinasessāmi; (14) Vajjī anaya-byasanaṃ āpādessamī”ti.

The Pāḷi passage above is to be studied against the translation¹ below

THUS HAVE I HEARD. Once the Lord was staying at Rajagaha on the mountain called Vultures’ Peak. Now just then King Ajatasattu Vedehiputta of Magadha wanted to attack the Vajjians. He said: ‘I will strike the Vajjians who are so powerful and strong, I will cut them off and destroy them, I will bring them to ruin and destruction!’

“Thus, have I heard” is an introductory phrase by which Venerable Ānanda started every sutta when he presented them to the first Buddhist Council. By this phrase he normally mentioned where and whom the Buddha taught a sermon. In order to save the sutta-reciters time and energy,

¹ Rendered by Mr. Maurice Walshe (a trustee of “the English Sangha Trust,” London, England).

however, he mentioned the date of a sermon in a very general way by the phrase “On one occasion” (*ekam samayam*) although he had an amazing memory of them in detail.

Why King Ajāta-sattu Wanted to Attack Vjjians

During the Buddha’s stay on the Mt. Vulture-Peak near Rajagaha, the King Ajāta-sattu of Magadha Kingdom really wanted to attack Vjjians because of border dispute, and ordered his military to be well-prepared for war. There was a village called *Paṭṭana*,² whose borderline stretched out about four miles (*aḍḍha-yojana*) between Magadha Kingdom and Vjjian Kingdom. But there was a lot of natural resources that could greatly contribute to either king’s revenue. So, the King Ajātassattu often thought of a visit to that area, but could not make it since he was so busy with other issues. Meanwhile, Licchavī (Vjjian) kings—being very united and well-organized— intruded and occupied the entire border area. Such aggressive Vjjian move made King Ajāta-sattu so angry that he decided to fight a war with them.

But the king knew that Vjjians were so powerful because they were very united since the Vjjian throne rotated among hereditary monarchies of the royal families. [It would probably be similar to the modern Malaysian kings known as sultans or rāja.] Vjjians—having no infighting or power struggle among themselves—were very united and powerful enough to push their boundary further into Paṭṭana region, which posed great challenge and threat to King Ajāta-sattu of Māgadha Kingdom. Moreover, they were strong warriors well-trained as great snipers. They could even shoot one arrow after another successively into a small hole of a lock. Now they viciously pushed their boundary into Paṭṭana village making the King Ajātasattu extremely angry.

Why King Ajāta-sattu Sought the Buddha’s Advice

So, King Ajāta-sattu pondered thus, “A full-scale war always comes with its heavy price; even a single fight never comes without price. In order to minimize mistakes, I should discuss with someone smart.” Then, he happened to think of the Buddha and his wisdom thus, “Indeed, nobody on earth is as smart as the Buddha. So, should the war be beneficial to me, the Buddha would be silent; should it be harmful to me, he would say something like, ‘Not beneficial to the king!’” (Dī-ṭh-2, 106). Having thus pondered, the king asked his most reliable minister, Vassakāra, to go and inform the Buddha of his tentative war against Vjjians as follows:

“(1) Ehi tvaṃ brāhmaṇa; (2) yena Bhagavā (3) tenupasaṅkama; (4) upasaṅkamtivā (5) mama vacanena (6) Bhagavato pāde (7) sirasā vandāhi; (8) appābādhaṃ (9) appātāṅkaṃ (10) lahuṭṭhānaṃ (11) balaṃ (12) phāsu-vihāraṃ (13) puccha, (14) Rājā Māgadho Ajatasattu Vedehiputto (15) Bhagavato pade (16) sirasa vandati, (17) appābādhaṃ

² This is the capital city of Bihar State in modern India, still known by the same name.

appātaṅkaṃ lahuṭṭhānaṃ balaṃ phāsu-vihāraṃ pucchatī'ti. (18) Evañca vadehi '(19) Rājā, bhante, (20) Māgadho Ajatasattu Vedehiputto (21) Vajjī abhiyātu-kāmo hoti. (22) So evamāha '(23) Ahaṃ hime Vajjī evaṃ-mahiddhike evaṃ-mahānubhāve ucchecchāmi; (24) Vajjī vinasessāmi; (25) Vajjī anaya-byasanaṃ āpādessamī'ti. (26) Yathā te Bhagava byākaroti, (27) taṃ sādhukaṃ uggahetvā (28) mama āroceyyāsi. (29) Na hi Tathāgatā (30) vitathaṃ bhaṇantī'ti.

The Pāli passage above is to be studied against the translation below

‘Brahmin, go to the Blessed Lord, worship him with your head to his feet in my name, ask if he is free from sickness or disease, if he is living at ease, vigorously and comfortably, and then say: “Lord, King Ajatasattu Vedehiputta of Magadha wishes to attack the Vajjians and says: ‘I will strike the Vajjians...,bring them to ruin and destruction!’” And whatever the Lord declares to you, report that faithfully back to me, for Tathagatas never lie.’

The above paragraph is a literal translation. In daily language, it would mean thus, “Brahmin, go to the Buddha, and convey my warmest regards and best wishes to him, and then inform him thus, “*Lord, King Ajatasattu Vedehiputta of Magadha wishes to attack the Vajjians....*”