

5 Anāgatavaṃsa (Deśanā): *The Chronicle of the Future* (date uncertain, before 14th Century)

Introduced by Sven Bretfeld

Introduction

If secularisation is understood as the gradual decrease in the significance of religious commitment for the constitution and sustenance of society, classical Buddhist sources portray their own peculiar narrative framework of secularisation. Unsurprisingly, these narratives depict ‘secularisation’ as a negative – a *loss* or *decline* of morality, with catastrophic consequences for humanity. These narratives became especially relevant when some modern Buddhist authors created anti-secularist diagnoses of the present state of global civilisation, infusing these classical narrative frameworks with accounts of the colonial powers’ exploitation of Asia, the failure of colonial governments, the decline of Buddhism in Asia, and the spread of an inferior rival religion (Christianity), materialist capitalism, and the American way of life. While narratives of decline in classical Buddhist sources are complex and variegated, they are very much present in all Buddhist cultures.¹

While the master narratives of European historiography are centred around the idea of progress, the opposite could be said of Buddhist concepts of history: everything was better in the past, and things will worsen further in the future. Only in the distant future, after humankind has gone through the nadir of civilisation, will the few survivors of a worldwide outbreak of violence slowly achieve an improvement in their material and moral conditions. After a while, wheel-turning kings will emerge again, and the Buddhist religion – which will, by then, have been long forgotten by mankind – will be recreated with the appearance of Maitreya, the Buddha of the future.

It seems that the narrative of decline is synthesised from three originally separate topoi:

- the natural decline and ultimate disappearance of the *sāsana* (as a consequence of the cosmic law of impermanence),
- the natural oscillation of mankind between highly moral and utterly immoral, self-destructive states (likewise a cosmic law, according to which eons of moral decline and moral improvement continually alternate),

¹ For a comprehensive study, see Jan Nattier, *Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline* (Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1991).

Sven Bretfeld, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies

- the kings failing to live up to the ideals of a wheel-turning monarch, which leads to the gradual moral collapse of society, the outbreak of criminality, and martial competition for resources (as social consequences of the personal weaknesses of rulers who lacked morality and intelligence).

In the synthetic story, the synchrony of the disappearance of the *sāsana* and the nadir of human civilisation, while remarkable, is pure coincidence. The Buddha Gautama had established the present *sāsana* in a period when human civilisation had already been declining for several millennia; the respective timeframes thus mean that the eclipse of his teaching on earth will occur exactly when the rock bottom of human morality is reached. The topos of failing kings may have been added to the framework after the mythology of the wheel-turning monarch became popular as a political ideal.

The *sāsana*'s disappearance is, according to the Buddhist Theriya tradition (Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia), predicted to occur 5,000 years after the Buddha Gautama's death. Other traditions calculate other, mostly shorter timeframes. Before its final disappearance, the *sāsana* declines in several stages. According to the Theriya concept, as introduced to Sri Lanka by the famous commentator Buddhaghosa in the fifth century CE, there are five stages of decline, each lasting 1,000 years. The following extract is taken from the *Anāgatavaṃsa*, a post-canonical text narrating the history (*vaṃsa*) of the future (*anāgata*). It tells the story of the decline of Buddha Gautama's *sāsana*, up to the time when Maitreya (Metteyya), the next Buddha, appears and re-establishes the *sāsana*.

Bibliographical Information

The translation reproduced here can be found in:

Henry Clark Warren, trans. *Buddhism in Translations*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1896; 481–85.

Page numbers given in square brackets refer to this edition.

Translation Reproduced from Henry Clark Warren

[. . .]

Thus have I heard.

On a certain occasion The Blessed One was dwelling at Kapilavatthu in Banyan Grove on the banks of the Rohanī River.

Then the venerable Sāriputta questioned The Blessed One concerning the future Conqueror:

“The Hero that shall follow you

As Buddha, of what sort is he?

Th’ account in full I fain would learn.

Declare to me, thou Seeing One.”

When he had heard the elder's speech,
The Blessed One vouchsafed reply:
"I'll tell it thee. Sāriputta,
Pray lend your ears, for I will speak. [p. 481/482]

Our cycle is a happy one,
Three Leaders have already lived,
Kakusandha, Konāgamana,
And eke the leader Kassapa.

The Buddha now Supreme am I,
But after me Metteyya comes,
While still this happy cycle lasts,
Before its tale of years shall lapse.

This Buddha, then, Metteyya called,
Supreme, and of all men the chief—"

Then follows a history of the previous existence of Metteyyo, with the three Buddhas, Sumitto, Metteyyo, and Muhutto, during twenty-seven Buddhas, and finally at the time of the Buddha gotama, when he was born as son of Ajātaçattu, prince of Ajita (pp. ka–ca). On page ca begins the future history of Metteyya with a quotation of the recension compiled in verse. Then follows the description of the gradual declension of the holy religion:¹

"How will it occur? After my decease, first will occur the five disappearances. And what are the five disappearances? The disappearance of the attainments, the disappearance of the method, the disappearance of learning, the disappearance of the symbols, the disappearance of the relics. These are the five disappearances that are to occur.

"First: —

"*The attainments*: —Only for a thousand years from the time The Blessed One passes into Nirvana will the priests be able to acquire the analytical sciences. Then as time goes on my disciples will attain only to never returning, to once returning, to conversion. As long as such exist the disappearance of the attainments will not yet have occurred. But with the death of the last disciple that has attained to conversion the attainments will have disappeared.

"This, O Sāriputta, is the disappearance of the attainments.

"*Disappearance of the method*: —My disciples being un[p. 482/483]able to realize the trances, the insights, the Paths, and the Fruits, will keep only the four purities of conduct. Then as time goes on they will keep only the commandments forbidding the four deadly sins. As long as there are a hundred or a thousand priests who keep the commandments forbidding the four deadly sins, the disappearance of the method will

I SB: This paragraph was added by the translator.

not have occurred. But when the last priest shall break the precepts, or shall die, the method will have disappeared.

“This, O Sâriputta, is the disappearance of the method.

“Disappearance of learning: —As long as the text of the Three Baskets, which is the word of The Buddha, and as long as their commentaries are extant, the disappearance of learning will not have occurred. But as time goes on there will be irreligious kings of base extraction, and the courtiers and others in authority will be irreligious, and then the country people throughout the kingdom will be irreligious. On account of their irreligion the god will not rain in due season, and the crops will not flourish properly. And when the crops do not flourish, those who are wont to give the reliances to the congregation of the priests will be unable to do so any more. And the priests, not receiving the reliances, will not teach the novices, and as time goes on learning will disappear. When it disappears, it is the Great Work [i.e. Patthâna. [. . .]] that first disappears; when that has disappeared, then the Yamaka, the Kathâ-Vatthu, the Puggala-Paññatti, the Dhâtu-Kathâ, the Vibhanga, and the Dhamma-Sangani do so. When the Abhidhamma-Pitaka has disappeared, the Suttanta-Pitaka will also disappear. When the Suttanta disappears, it is first the Anguttara-Nikâya that disappears, and when the Anguttara-Nikâya disappears, then the Samyutta-Nikâya, the Majjhima-Nikâya, the Dîgha-Nikâya, the Khuddaka-Nikâya will disappear. My disciples will only remember the Jâtaka together with the Vinaya-Pitaka. It is, however, only the well-conducted priests that will remember the Vinaya-Pitaka. But as time goes on they will be unable to remember the Jâtaka, and first the Vessantara Birth-Story will disappear, and when the Vessantara Birth-Story has disappeared . . . the Apannaka Birth-Story will disappear. When the Jâtaka [p. 483/484] has disappeared, they will only remember the Vinaya-Pitaka. As time goes on the Vinaya-Pitaka will disappear, but as long as a four-line stanza remains among men, so long the disappearance of learning will not have occurred. But when a pious king shall cause a purse containing a thousand pieces of money to be placed in a golden casket on the back of an elephant, and shall cause proclamation up to the second and third time to be made throughout the city to the sound of the drum, as follows: ‘Anyone who knows a single stanza spoken by The Buddhas, let him take these thousand coins together with this elephant,’ and yet shall fail to find anyone who knows a four-line stanza, and shall receive again the purse containing the thousand pieces into the royal palace, then the disappearance of learning will have occurred.

“This, O Sâriputta, is the disappearance of learning.

“Now as time goes on the last of the priests will carry their robes, their bowls, and their tooth-sticks after the manner of the naked ascetics. They will take a bottle-gourd, make of it a begging-bowl, and carry it in their arms, or in their hands, or in the balance of a carrying-pole. And as time goes on a priest will say, ‘What is the good of this yellow robe?’ and cut a small piece of yellow cloth, and tie it around his neck, or his ears, or his hair, and devote himself to husbandry or trade and the like, and to taking care of wife and children. Then he will give gifts to the southern congregation.

And the fruit of this gift, say I, will be a myriadfold. As time goes on the priests will say, ‘What do we want with this?’ and they will throw away the piece of yellow cloth and persecute the wild animals and birds of the forest, and thus the disappearance of the symbols will have occurred.

“This, O Sâriputta, is *the disappearance of the symbols*.

“Thereupon, the dispensation of The Supreme Buddha being now five thousand years old, the relics will begin to fail of honor and worship, and will go wherever they can receive honor and worship. But as time goes on they will not receive honor and worship in any place. Then, when the dispensation has disappeared, the relics will come from every place; from the serpent world, from the world of the gods, and from the [p. 484/485] Brahma-world; and having congregated together at the throne under the Great Bo-tree, they will make an effigy of The Buddha and perform a miracle resembling the double-miracle, and will teach the Doctrine. Not a single human being will be found at that place; but all the gods from ten thousand worlds will come together and listen to the Doctrine, and many thousands of them will attain to the Doctrine. And these will cry aloud, saying, ‘Divine sirs, on the seventh day from now our One Possessing the Ten Forces will pass into Nirvana.’ Then they will weep, saying, ‘From henceforth we shall be in darkness.’ Then the relics will put forth flames of fire and burn up that effigy without remainder.

“This, O Sâriputta, is *the disappearance of the relics*.”

Immediately after this, there follows an account of the destruction of the *Kappa* [World-Cycle].^{II}

II SB: This sentence was added by the translator.