

Introduction to Agama Sutra: The First Buddhist Scripture

by Thomas Tam, Ph.D., M.P.H

June 6, 2002

Asian American / Asian Research Institute
The City University of New York

Quoted passages in the following article are translated by Thomas Tam from the Chinese version of the Agama Sutra, edited by Rev. Yin Suan. Number following the translation refers to the assigned number in this edition.

One of my fondest memory involved a lecture about how the sixth Chinese Zen master, Wei Nung, was chosen. Wei Nung was an illiterate monk who worked mostly in the kitchen of the monastery, when the abbot announced a poem contest to choose his successor. Sun Siu, a most highly respected monk, wrote the following poem:

I treat my body like a bodhi tree,
And my mind, I treat it like a panel of mirror.
I will often wipe and clean them diligently,
To make sure that no dust may settle on them.

The entire monastery marveled at the imagery conjured up by Sun Siu, and the fine sentiments presented by him. They thought that the contest would be over, when Wei Nung, inquiring about the excitement, asked someone to read the poem to him. After he heard it, he composed his response, and asked his friend to write it down for him. This is what he wrote:

Bodhi does not grow from a tree,
And a mirror needs not be a panel.
From the start, there is not anything.
On where can dust settle?

When the abbot saw the poem, he felt that Wei Nung, despite his illiteracy, understood Zen much better, and so selected him to be his successor.

This is a very popular story in China. Quite often, the two poems became, for many youngsters, the first introduction to Buddhist writings. Obviously, the story romanticized Wei Nung, the illiterate monk who knew the deeper meaning of Buddhism. For many years, I have also been drawn to this simple, seemingly effortless revelation of absolute nothingness, and stay away from the tedious discipline to reach enlightenment called for by Sun Siu.

Now, I have to make a confession. A few years ago, I was troubled by my tendency to get angry, which often got me into trouble that I did not want. Intellectually, I could understand that all things are void, but found myself helpless when I was consumed by anger. The horrible things that I would do, say, or think, were appalling even to me, after all the dusts settled. When I joined a pilgrimage to visit Tibet, I asked a monk how I could deal with my anger. He said: "You must develop love and pity." That was well said. In fact, this is one of the main theme of Mahayana Buddhism, that encompasses Chinese, Tibetan, and Japanese Buddhism. The most illustrious example is that of Kuan Yin, the all merciful Bhodisattva whom Buddhists learn from. It is true that when I feel love and pity, I do not get angry. The trouble is that when I am angry, I don't know where love and pity are.

In my search for some practical guidance, accidentally, I bumped into the Agama Sutra in a visit to Chuang Yen Monastery in Carmel, New York. It was in the form of a book of twenty excerpts written by Chuang Chun Jiang, a disciple of reverend Yin Suan who, I found out later, has written many tomes of work on early Buddhist history. It showed that at the time of the Buddha, his teachings focused much less on the intellectual aspects of "Sunyata", but more centered on the practical ways of seeking deliverance.

Agama means "heritage". Sutra means "sewed together". Together, it means the Buddhist sayings that were transmitted orally from masters to disciples. This is a sutra that was highly recommended by Liang Chi Chao, the great Chinese scholar from early last century. He praised the sutra for its literary content, as well as its useful description of Indian life twenty five hundred years ago. All the major Buddhist schools today can find their seminal origins in this sutra. Even more important, Liang called this sutra a record of Buddha's teaching life that was closest to his time, thereby allowing readers a glimpse into the personality of Buddha.

The Agama Sutra is basically the proceedings of a gathering of the five hundred disciples of Buddha a year after he passed away. At that time, many of his disciples were very sad about his passing. An older monk comforted them and said, "While the Buddha was around, we couldn't do this and we couldn't do that. Now that he is away, we can do whatever we want! Why should you feel sad?" When Mahakasyapa, the most respected disciple heard this, he became alarmed that Buddha's teaching might get lost in a short time, and so he called for a gathering of the five hundred monks in Rajagrha to recollect Buddha's teachings. Upali was chosen to head the recollection of the disciplines established by the Buddha, while Ananda, the personal attendant of the Buddha was chosen to head the recollection of the dharma, or teachings of the Buddha. Mahakasyapa, who disliked Ananda, almost succeeded in excluding him from the gathering. After Ananda publicly apologized to the gathering for whatever that was bothering Mahakasyapa, was he allowed to attend and to carry out the important task of recollecting Buddha's teachings. (For a collection of passages, or vignettes, that may illuminate the different personalities of the two disciples, please look at the appendix at the end of the discussion.)

The process of editing would be as follows: Ananda would recite an anecdote that he has heard or remembered. The gathered monks would then consider whether it was in the spirit of what the Buddha would say and either correct it or accept it. There was no pen or paper at that time. Everything had to be committed to memory. Monks with good memories would be assigned the task of learning the teachings by heart, and recite them when needed. In this way, the teachings of Buddha was transmitted to the later generations.

Different personalities of the disciples and differences in local cultures were factors that influenced the ways the disciples accept the teachings of the Buddha, which laid the causes for Buddhism to splinter up into many sects later on. The chief division was that between Theravada (sometimes known as Hinayana, a disparaging term used by its 'rival'.) and Mahayana. The Theravada, perhaps can be represented by Mahakasyapa, and the Mahayana, perhaps can be represented by Ananda. A second gathering of seven hundred monks was held about sixty years later, to resolve their differences, during which the more austere Theravada prevailed.

By the time of the birth of Christ, or the beginning of Eastern Han dynasty, Buddhism entered China. By 435 A.D., Gunabhadra came to Canton, China, from middle India, via Sri Lanka. He translated the first volume of the Agama Sutra (Diverse) into Chinese. Unfortunately, it was not well received and preserved. Within a mere span of fifty years, two chapters were lost, and the order of many other chapters were mixed up. There were four volumes of the Agama Sutra in Chinese. The other three (Long, Middle, and Extended) were translated by different sects at a later date. The study of Agama Sutra was dormant in China for almost one thousand five hundred years, until Buddhist scholars in Japan began to write about it.

In Sri Lanka, the Tamrasatiyah, one of the Theravada sects, has kept their version of the Agama Sutra intact. It is called Nikaya, and contained five volumes: Samyutta, Digha, Majjhima, Anguttara, and Kuddaka. It is written in Pali, an ancient Indian language. In 1881, three Europeans established the Pali

Text Society to engage in the translation of the Nikaya. They are Thomas William Rhys Davids from England, Viggo Fausboll from Denmark, and Hermann Oldenberg from Germany. By 1899 Davids translated the Digha Nakaya. By 1930, all five Nikayas were translated.

In 1908, "The Four Buddhist Agama in Chinese" was published in Japan. By 1923, the Chinese scholar, Lu Jing published "The Editing of the Diverse Agama Sutra". In 1944, Reverend Yin Suan began his lifelong research of the Agama Sutra by publishing a series of works on the origin of early Buddhism.

The Diverse Agama Sutra, consisting of 50 chapters and 1359 passages, is generally considered to be the volume that contained the crux of Buddha's teaching. Passages cited in this discussion were translated into English from the Chinese version based on the editing by Rev. Yin Suan.

"Before I reached enlightenment, I stayed in a quiet place alone, meditating on where my mind tend to go. I observed that my mind tended to go after my past glories, a little less about my present, and very little about the future. I then took great care to guard against my mind flowing with the past glories. Because of my diligence, I found myself slowly nearing enlightenment..." [S-136]

The following passage does not appear to carry any religious message. It is just a vignette of a moment of the Buddha's life.

"It was a dark night, raining lightly, with flashes of lightning. The Buddha said to Ananda: "You can come out with the umbrella over the lamp." Ananda listened, and walked behind the Buddha, with an umbrella over the lamp. When they reached a place, the Buddha smiled. Ananda said: "The Buddha doesn't smile without a reason. What brings the smile today?" The Buddha said: "That's right! That's right! The Buddha doesn't smile without a reason. Now you are following me with an umbrella over a lamp. I look around, and see everyone doing the same thing." [S-1150]

The Buddha faced many challenges from his competitors. The following passage showed how he handled an unpleasant situation.

A Young Brahmin came to visit the Buddha, and started to curse in front of him. The Buddha said: "On an auspicious day, do you celebrate with your relatives and family members?"

"Of course, Gautama!"

"What happens if your relatives don't accept the food you offered them?"

"For those who don't eat the food, the food will be returned to me."

"It is the same case here. You curse in front of the Buddha, but I don't accept it. Who is getting the curse now?"... [S-751]

Believe it or not, there were also moments that the Great Buddha seemed frustrated about teaching.

"I have shared with different people what I know about the world: suffering, impermanence, and change. The blind who have no eyes, who cannot see, and cannot understand. It is not my fault...What can I do about them?" [S-83]

The following passage may seem to show a bit of humor in the Great Buddha.

"...Buddha asked a village chief who was a horse trainer: 'How many ways are there to train a horse?' The village chief replied: 'There are three ways. gentle; hard; half gentle half hard.' Buddha said: 'What happens if the horse is not trained by any of these ways?' The village chief said: 'Then it ought to be slaughtered.' "Tell me," He continued, 'how do you teach your students?' Buddha told the village chief: 'I also use three ways to teach them. Gentle, hard, half gentle half hard.' The village chief asked Buddha: 'What happens if the person doesn't learn after the three ways?' Buddha said: 'If the three ways fail to teach the student, he ought to be killed. Why? I won't want my dharma to be disgraced.' The village chief

exclaimed: 'You have said that it is not good to kill, and that we should not kill. Why do you say that those who can't be taught should be killed?' Buddha said: 'As you said, it is not good to kill, and we ought not kill. If I can't teach someone after these three ways, I will not speak with him, nor will I teach him or criticize him again. Isn't that the same as killing him?' [S-1211]

Let me explain that Buddha does not mean God. It means a supremely enlightened person. Buddha was born Siddhartha Gautama, a prince in an Indian kingdom about 2,500 years ago. He was brought up in great luxury, married, had a son, but was deeply troubled by all the sufferings he had witnessed, when he left the comfort of his palatial home to seek enlightenment. Five of his servants followed him. In his renouncement of worldly comforts that he was so used to, he spent six years roaming from woods to woods, learning from the gurus he encountered, and practicing severe austerity, to the point where he was just a set of skeletons. At the brink of death, he still did not find enlightenment. Then a cow maid took pity on him and offered him some nourishment. It occurred to him that he could die from austerity without being enlightened, and that he needed a body to sustain him in his search for enlightenment. He accepted the cow maid's offering and was slowly nursed back to good health.

Then, one day, he sat under a bodhi tree and vowed that he would never get up until he discovered the answer to his quest. After many days and nights of intense meditation, then it happened. He was alerted by the brightness of a star in the night sky, and he discovered "pratitya-samutpada, paticca-samuppada" or roughly translated as the interrelatedness of everything:

This exists, so that exists.

This is absent, so that is absent.

This arises, so that arises.

This ends, so that ends.

Many years later, his disciple and personal attendant, Ananda said that this was so obvious and simple that he had no trouble comprehending it. After all, this is just cause and effect, that's all. The Buddha, however, warned him that it contained enormous complexity and it was the most fundamental truth in the world.

Indeed, the notion of interrelatedness is what sets Buddhism apart from many other major religions. In it, there is no creator, and there is no judgment day. There are heaven and hell in Buddhism, but they are not final resting places either. People, unless they are enlightened, will be caught in Samsara, the world of endless cycles of births and deaths.

How can one get away from this world of endless cycles?

'The Red Horse Angel, who was known for his speed, "swifter than an arrow, jumping from one mountain to another, across oceans," tried to reach the edge of the world. Limiting his time to only food and rest to sustain himself, he ran for a hundred years, but failed to reach the land where there is no more birth, aging and death.'

'The Buddha told him: "What is this world? It is the receptacles of matter, feelings, thoughts, actions, and consciousness. The world is formed when we fastened to these receptacles because of our desire. It disappears when we can give them up, and leave them alone.... When you understand suffering, and how they come about, know how they can cease, and practice ways to cease them, you would have overcome your desire and crossed the edge of the world.'" [S-920]

The five receptacles that the Buddha mentioned: matter, feelings, thoughts, actions, and consciousness, are what constitute the external and internal world of every sentient being. Through our sense organs, we take note of the external and internal world. For example, let us focus on only the interaction between matter and us, the sentient being. Our eyes see an image, our ears hear a sound, our nose smells a scent, our tongue perceives a taste, our body sense a touch, our mind recognizes an event. All these

become consciousness and stored in that receptacle. How the sentient being handle the interaction makes all the difference between imprisonment in, and liberation from, Samsara, the endless cycle of births and deaths. Failing to understand the transient nature of what we perceive or interact with, we may like and enjoy them to the point of clinging onto them, thinking that they are eternally lasting. This may lead to actions that have all kinds of dire consequences, including getting stuck in Samsara. So, to stay away from trouble and become liberated, we should learn to sever our greed, and control our desire. The crux is in understanding the interrelatedness of all things, and to be constantly aware of the falsehood induced by our ego.

What is the world? The Buddha says:

"... The world is fragile and perishable..." [S-156]

"The eye, the image, the eye consciousness, the eye connection, when the eye is connected to all these internal and external factors, it will produce an internal awareness that is painful, or pleasurable, or neither painful nor pleasurable...This is called the world..." [S-155]

"Ignorant people do not understand how material things are formed and destroyed. They do not know how they come to appreciate them, how they can bring trouble, and how they can avoid them, so they enjoy and admire them, in the meantime, getting stuck. Their love for material things drives them to go after it and to possess it. This will lead to birth, old age, death and other sufferings. In this way, this is how their world is formed..." [S-98]

"Ignorant people treat the five receptacles as permanent, as comfortable, as themselves, as where they belong, and they take great care to nurture them, only to be done in by these five enemies in the end, like some unaware elderly people swindled and murdered by their false relatives. A Buddhist, on the other hand, treats them like diseases, like thorns, like deaths, impermanent, painful, empty, not him, and not himself. He will not accept or get stuck with them, and he will reach nirvana..." [S-106]

"Think carefully, and observe your mind. Why? For a long time, your mind was contaminated by desire, anger and ignorance...when your mind is angry, everyone is angry. When your mind is calm, everyone is calm...This is the same as a painter putting different colors on a white canvass as he wish..." [S-44]

The interrelatedness has been elaborated by the Buddha to be a sequence of 12 steps: Ignorance, action, awareness, our world of the present (including feeling, thoughts, activities, consciousness etc.), our sense organs, how we are affected, how we feel (pleasure, pain or neither), desire, pursuit, possession, birth, aging and death.

This is what the Buddha said: "Ignorance is not knowing the true nature of the five receptacles (in other words, the world)..." [S-33]

"If people don't enjoy the material things, then they don't become entangled...Because they do enjoy them, that's why they are stuck...If I were unable to observe the five receptacles objectively, and recognize their enjoyment, their problems, and their avoidance, I would not have been able to liberate myself ... I would have stayed confused and could not have reached enlightenment..." [S-13]

Scholars of Buddhism have tried to clarify the idea of Samsara by putting these twelve steps into cause and effects within the past, the present and the future. Our ignorance of the world, and our actions in the past are causes to what we are at the present. In other words, our consciousness, our world of the present, how we are affected by this world through our senses, whether it is pleasure or pain, can be considered as present effects of these past causes. Similarly, births, aging and deaths are effects in the future resulting from the causes of the present: desire, pursuit, and possession. There is nothing we can do about the causes of the past, or the effects of the present. If we can, at present, stop our desire, our pursuit, and our urge to possess, however, we can prevent future births, aging and deaths.

Past Causes: Our Ignorance, our action.

Present Effects: Our consciousness, our world at present, how we are affected by our senses, whether it is pleasure or pain.

Present Causes: Our desire, pursuit, and possessiveness. [This is where Samsara can be stopped.]

Future Effects: New births, aging and deaths

In passages after passages, the Buddha repeatedly talked about how controlling, stopping, and sublimating our desire can liberate us from the endless cycle of births and deaths. The following are some examples:

"Stay away from greed for the material world, then the knots that bind you to the image will be broken, and the related tie to consciousness will also be severed...Consciousness will not grow, because it has lost its support. You will not engage in activities, and you will stay put, feeling satisfied, and liberated. Your liberation makes you not wanting to go after anything in the world. So, you will not be stuck, and you will feel nirvana, knowing that you will not reenter the endless cycles of Samsara..." [S-55]

Admonishing those who let their desires unchecked, the Buddha gave a parable.

"In the mountain where the monkeys roam, the hunter puts glue on the grass. The smart monkeys avoid them and run away. The foolish monkey will touch them gently with its hand, however, and get stuck. Trying to free itself with its other hand, it soon gets stuck. The feet follow suit. When it tries to chew the grass with its mouth, it becomes stuck too. Five places all stuck together, it rolls up, lying on the ground, when the hunter comes to put a stick through and carries it away." [S-426]

"What does it mean to go after something and getting stuck? Ignorant people see the material things as themselves, as belonging to them, and something that last, and go after them. When they got them, if the material things change and become different, their minds will produce fear, misunderstanding and confusion, because they have become stuck..." [S-89]

In a different passage, Ananda asked the Buddha how to control one's sense organs. The Buddha said: "Listen carefully and think. I will explain it to you. When the eye meets the matter, and you become aware that the matter is desirable, then practice detachment. If, on the other hand, the matter is undesirable, then practice non-avoidance...In this way, you will know that your desire arises from your eye meeting the matter, and this realization will make it cease...like a drop of water on an extremely hot iron ball, it will evaporate in an instant..." [S-204]

Why shouldn't we desire the world? The beautiful things? Our good feelings? Our joyful thoughts? The Great Buddha had much to say about this. The first sutra collected in the Agama Sutra is the sutra on impermanence. This may indicate the emphasis paid to the topic by the council of monks at the first gathering after Buddha had passed away. It appears that becoming an arahat and achieving nirvana is a relatively simple and easy matter. This is what the Buddha said:

"You should observe the impermanence in things. This is the correct observation. When you are able to observe them this way, you will be tired of the things and want to avoid them. Thus ends your craving for the things. Consequently, your mind will be liberated. Similarly for your feelings, thoughts, actions, and consciousness..." [S-1]

"Things are impermanent. Impermanence means suffering. Suffering is not ME, Myself, or Where I Belong..." [S-9]

"Things are impermanent. The internal and external conditions that give rise to these things are also impermanent. If the internal and external conditions are impermanent, how can the things they produce be permanent?" [S-11]

"You should observe that all matters, from the past, the present, or the future, whether they are internal or external, big or small, beautiful or ugly, far or near, that they are all impermanent. When you can observe matters correctly, your love for matters will disappear, then your mind will be liberated..." [S-22]

To illustrate the interrelatedness, and therefore, impermanence of things, the Buddha told the story of a king who heard and enjoyed a beautiful tune so much that he demanded his minister to bring back the tune. The minister brought back the lute where the tune was played. The king said: "I don't want this lute. I want the beautiful tune." The minister replied: "The lute has many parts, the strings, the sounding board, the handle, and it needs a skillful musician to play it. Without all these ingredients, there will be no tune. The tune that you heard is long gone. It has disappeared completely. I cannot bring it back." The king exclaimed: "Damned! Why do I need this fraudulent thing for? This lute is a contraption that lures people into craving. You take it away, shred it into pieces and throw it to the far corners." The minister obeyed, broke it into a hundred pieces, and threw it everywhere. [S-186]

"Enjoyment is the pleasure we get from pursuing the material things. Trouble is the fact that material things are impermanent, changeable, and painful. Detachment is the ability to control, sever, and overcome greed...Ignorant people see themselves in the material thing, or that the material thing belongs to them, hence they become arrogant...Is material thing permanent or impermanent? ...If it is impermanent, isn't it painful? ...If it is impermanent, painful, and changeable, would a Buddhist see it to be himself? ..." [S-104]

"If material thing is always painful, people will not enjoy it and become attached. Yet people become attached to it, and feel troubled because it is not always painful. That is why people get into trouble...If material thing is always pleasurable, and not painful, people should not avoid it. Yet people avoid it because it is not always pleasurable, and they don't enjoy it because it is painful. This is why people feel liberated..." [S-72]

Did the Buddha talk about reincarnation? In the Diverse Agama Sutra, there are several passages that the Buddha had referred to it. The following is an example.

The Buddha told the monks: "Let's say the whole earth becomes a big ocean. A piece of wood with a hole floats on it, drifting with the waves, and being blown by winds from all directions. There is a blind turtle that sticks out its head once every hundred years. Will it meet this hole?"

Ananda said: "Not possible, if the blind turtle is in the ocean's east, the driftwood may be in the west, south, north, all directions. They may not meet."

The Buddha told Ananda: "Hard as it may for the blind turtle to meet the driftwood, it may still be possible. For an ignorant person to regain his human form, however, it is much more unlikely to happen. Why? It is because these people don't follow the principles of the dharma. They don't do good deeds. They kill repeatedly, with the strong ones bullying the weak, and sinned without end. That's why for those who do not understand the four noble truths, they better start to learn and practice them diligently..." [S-328]

I would venture to say that most Buddhists, with varying degrees of intensity, believe in reincarnation. After all, Buddha lived at a time when reincarnation was accepted as much more of a universal truth by the general population. His teaching would only be complemented by this belief. Nowadays, however, some Buddhist scholars will not consider anyone to be Buddhist if he or she does not believe in reincarnation. This may become unreasonable. For those of us who are schooled in the theories of evolution, and grew up with the molecular biological models of the origin of life, reincarnation may be too harsh a requirement, and probably an unnecessary obstacle to the acceptance of Buddha's teaching. In

reading the Agama Sutra, I was struck by the relatively few passages that refer to reincarnation. Certainly, cause and effect in the flow of time, links the past to the present and the future. What was done in the past affects what we have today, and what we do today affects what is to come tomorrow. This is certainly true in our relationship with other people. If we can accept Buddha's teaching for one life time, it will already help us lead a trouble-free life. We inherit a world, with all its beauty and blemishes, left by those before us. What we choose to do in our life time, hopefully will leave a more peaceful and tolerant world to those who come after us.

The preciousness of human life, and the temporary existence of human beings were reasons that the Buddha advised people to seize the opportunity to attain enlightenment while they can.

The Buddha was counseling the monks to be diligent, to observe all the activities, and practice detachment to achieve liberation, when a monk asked him about the speed of how life changes.

"I can explain it, but it is difficult for you to understand."

"Can you give an example?"

"That I can. There are four men, holding four strong bows, shooting arrows to the four directions. Another man rushed and caught the four arrows before they fell on the ground. Now, is this man fast or not?"

"Very fast, Buddha!"

"This man may be fast, but the earth deity is twice as fast. The sky deity is twice as fast as the earth deity. The deity of four kings is twice that of the sky deity. The Sun and Moon deity is twice that of the deity of four kings. The guiding deity for the Sun and Moon deity is again twice as fast. My fellow monks! The changes in life is even twice as fast as the guiding deity. This is why, my fellow monks, you have to be diligent, observing that life changes as fast as this..." [S-1312]

In Buddha's teaching, ego is the one thing that prevents many people from attaining enlightenment.

A young and arrogant man named Sarchenyjan challenged the Buddha to a debate. He boasted that he would treat the Buddha like a royal elephant trainer taking a big drunken elephant to deep water and clean out its dirt from its body. He said to the Buddha:

"Everything in this world comes from the ground. Hence, this body is me, and good and bad comes from me..."

"Are you saying that this body is you? ..."

"Yes, Gautama! This body is me... Everybody says so."

"Why don't you establish your own argument? No use bringing in other people!"

"This body is really me."

"I now ask you. Answer me in whatever way you like. For example, can a king punish the criminals, by killing them, locking them up, exiling them, whipping them, or cutting off their hands and legs? And for the heroes, can he reward them with elephants, horses, chariots, cities, and treasures?"

"He can do that."

"Can all masters do what they want?"

"Yes"

"Did you say that this body is you, ...and it can do what it wants, making it to become this way or that way?" ...

"No!" ...

"At first, you said that this body is you...and now you say it is not, contradicting yourself...Let me ask you. Is this body permanent or impermanent?"

"Impermanent!"

"Is impermanence painful?"

"It is painful!"

"If it is impermanent, painful, and changeable, will a knowledgeable student like to see himself as such?"

"No!"

"If you can't let go of this body, can't stop thinking, desiring, loving, and wanting this body, when this body changes, will you not become troubled?"

"Yes!"...

"Fire Worshipper! ...It is like a man with an axe going into the mountain to look for solid wood. He saw a banana tree thick and strong, but when he cuts it down and starts peeling off its skin, there is nothing hard and solid in it. You are the same..."

The Buddha showed his chest to the crowd, "Take a look, did he get one hair from me?"

At that point, Sarchenyjan became quiet and pale, lowering his head in shame. [S-112]

To get back to the beginning of our discussion when I cited the poems by Sun Siu and Wei Nung, we knew that the abbot has chosen Wei Nung over Sun Siu. Let us say that if everything being equal, and if the Great Buddha were the judge, whom would he have chosen as the successor, based on the poems alone? We would never know, because the Buddha was never there. The Buddha, however, had this to say:

... The Elder Soodat asked the Buddha if the understanding of the four noble truths is gradual or sudden. The Buddha said: "The four noble truths can be understood only gradually, not suddenly..." [S-357]

"It is like going up sets of stairs to the temple. It is not possible to skip the first set of stairs, and get to the second, third, or fourth set to enter the temple. Why? Because you have to take the first stairs, then the second, third, and fourth stairs to get to the temple...If you don't understand suffering, it is not possible to understand attachment, liberation, and the path..." [S-358]

"I am able to end all the troubles because of what I know...if the monks do not practice, they will never end their troubles and become liberated...Take the example of a hen with many eggs. The chicken is too weak to be born by breaking its shell with its peak and claws, without the mother hen's long period of nesting warmth. Similarly, it is not possible for a monk to be liberated without diligent practice..." [S-40]

"For example, the clothes of a nursing mother, the smell remains after the launderer wash it with different kinds of detergent. You need to spray it with different kinds of fragrance to make the smell disappear. In

the same way, the Buddhist must ponder about the five receptacles, and observe how they arise and disappear. Then he can get rid of his arrogance, his desires, and his views..." [S-105]

Whom would the Buddha have chosen, Wei Nung or Sun Siu?

Appendix

The Agama Sutra collected not only sayings of the Buddha, it also included the discussion and activities of his disciples. As long as the content is judged to be correct, they would become part of the sutra.

Ananda has pleaded with the Buddha many times to take in women as nuns. The Buddha has always refused, citing that it would reduce the life of Buddhism by one half. Finally, he relented and allowed his stepmother and her entourage to join as nuns. This was not taken lightly by Mahakasyapa, however. He almost succeeded in barring Ananda from participating in the first Council after the death of the Buddha. The following passages may shed some light on this incident...

This is what I heard: One time, Buddha was living in Garantor Bamboo Grove in Rajagrha.

Ananda went to the Yumpo River after midnight, took off his clothes, put them on the bank, and went into the water to clean his hands and feet. He went back up to the bank, put on one piece of cloth, and dried his body. Then, Ananda heard the footsteps of a Geukarna monk, who also came to the side of the river. He coughed to make some noise. The Geukarna monk heard it and asked: "Who's there?"

Ananda said: "A Shamon."

"What kind of Shamon?"

"A Buddhist."

"I have a question to ask you. Will you have time to answer?"

"Ask if you please. If I know, I will answer."

"Is there anything after the Buddha died?"

"The Buddha said that he would not comment on it."

"Is there nothing after the Buddha died? ..."

"The Buddha said that he would not comment on it."

"What is this? After Buddha died, there is something. You answered no comment. After Buddha died, there is nothing... you answered no comment. Is it because you don't know or you don't see?"

"Not that I don't know or that I don't see. I do know, and I do see."

"What do you mean you know and you see?"

"If one can see what can be seen, see where it started, and see where it is tied up and where it can be severed. This is called seeing and knowing. I know and see like that. What do you mean I don't see or don't know?"

"What is your name, Sir?"

"I am called Ananda."

"How strange! The master's disciple is engaging himself in a discussion with me. Had I known it was Ananda, I wouldn't have dared to ask the question."

After he said this, he left. [S-1269]

"At that time, Mahakasyapa stayed for a long time in a deserted meditation place, he came to visit Buddha, with long hair and beard, wearing old torn clothes. At that time, the Buddha was explaining dharma, surrounded by many people. The monks saw Mahakasyapa coming from afar, and were contemptuous of his appearance: "What kind of monk is this? Dressed in such ragged clothes, looking so uncouth." The Buddha knew what was on their minds, and he said to Mahakasyapa: "Welcome! Come share my seat. Now I am going to find out who became a monk first, you or me?" Those monks were shocked, their body hair stood up, wondering among themselves. "How strange! This respectable monk was offered to share Buddha's seat."

Then, Mahakasyapa put his palms together: "Most respectable one, the Buddha is my master. I am the disciple."

The Buddha said: "True, true. I am the master. You are the disciple. Why don't you sit down and make yourself comfortable?"

Mahakasyapa touched his head to the Buddha's feet and sat aside..." [S-1204]

Sariputra is known for his understanding of Sunyata. He was the Sariputra in the famous Heart Sutra. It is a measure of the stature of Mahakasyapa that Sariputra sought his advice on the question of whether there is life and death after nirvana.

Mahakasyapa told Sariputra: "If you say there is life and death after nirvana, it is a material thing. If you say there is no life and death after nirvana, it is also a material thing... Nirvana means the end of all material things, when the mind is totally liberated... This is why the Buddha would not comment when he was asked whether or not there is life and death after nirvana..."

[S-1207]

There was a nun who had a crush on Ananda. She sent a messenger to Ananda: "I am sick, and I pray that you will show pity and visit me!"

In the morning, Ananda put on a robe, holding a bowl, and went to the nun.

That nun saw Ananda approaching from afar. She exposed her body, and lied on bed. When Ananda saw the exposed body of the nun from afar, he immediately controlled his sense organs, and turned his back. The nun saw that and was ashamed. She rose to put on her clothes, set up seats, and came out to welcome Ananda, asking him to sit down..."

[S-1050]

One day, the Buddha said to Mahakasyapa: " You should teach the monk, and explain to them the dharma. Why? I often do that. You should, too."

Mahakasyapa replied: "Most respected one! These days, the monks are difficult to teach, or they don't like to listen."

"Why do you say that?"

"I saw two monks, one is the disciple of Ananda, and the other is the disciple of Mahamujanlen. They always argued about who is the more knowledgeable, and who is the best."

Ananda was standing behind the Buddha, fanning him with a fan: "Please stop, respectable Mahakasyapa! Please be tolerant, respectable Mahakasyapa! These young monks are ignorant."

Mahakasyapa said to Ananda: "You better be quiet, don't force me to ask about your affairs in front of all the monks."

Ananda kept quiet immediately... [S-1200]

There was this time when Ananda asked Mahakasyapa to go begging with him. It was too early in the day, so Ananda suggested that they drop by a house for the nuns. When the nuns saw them coming, they quickly arranged some chairs and invited them to sit down. Mahakasyapa proceeded to explain dharma to the nuns. One of them, Toronanto, however, was displeased. She said: "Why is Mahakasyapa explaining dharma to the nuns in front of Ananda? Isn't it like the needle salesman selling needle at the needle master's house?"...

Mahakasyapa said to Ananda: "...So I am the needle salesman, and you are the needle master, and I am selling in front of you?"

Ananda: "Stop! Please be tolerant! This is a stupid old woman who has not practiced enough."

"Ananda! Haven't you heard what the Buddha said about how monks should behave like the moon, always learning afresh?"

Ananda: "No, respectable Mahakasyapa."

"You mean I am the only one who has heard it?"

"Yes, respectable Mahakasyapa."

"Ananda! Have you ever been offered by the Buddha to share his seat? And have you ever been praised by the Buddha for your achievement in staying clear of trouble?"

"No, respectable Mahakasyapa."

"Well, Ananda, the Buddha in front of countless people have offered to share his seat with me! And he publicly praised me for my achievement in staying clear of trouble."

"Yes, respectable Mahakasyapa."

Then Mahakasyapa, after roaring like a lion, left the crowd of nuns. [S-1205]

Not long after the Buddha passed away, famine struck. Begging became difficult. Ananda went to southern India with a large group of young monks who could not follow the Buddhist discipline. Thirty of them renounced their vows and gave up being monks. The rest were children. When they returned, Mahakasyapa asked Ananda: "Don't you remember the benefits of the rule set up by Buddha about eating together if there are more than three monks?"

Ananda answered: "There were two reasons. First, these were small and poor families. Second, there were bullies forming gangs fighting amongst themselves..."

"If you know this, why did you lead so many young disciples out at a time like this? You lost thirty monks, the rest are children, just like Ananda. You are a kid! You don't know how to plan."

"Respectable Mahakasyapa, my hairs now spot two colors, why do you still call me a kid?"... [S-1150]

Again, it was a nun who came to the defense of Ananda, who said that Mahakasyapa was originally a heretic. Again, when Mahakasyapa repeated that to Ananda, he asked him to be tolerant since the nun was old, and did not know what she was talking about...

Given all of these unpleasant incidents, it is understandable why Mahakasyapa wanted to exclude Ananda from attending the First Council of the Monks.