

Article

“Once upon a Time” – So What? The Importance of Place in Buddhist Narratives

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Abstract: This paper deals with the aspect of place (space) in Buddhist narratives. Starting from the observation that narrated time is often vaguely indicated in Buddhist narratives, but places and sites of the narrated events are quite specific—although frequently introduced in a stereotypical way (“Once the Buddha dwelled in Śrāvastī ...” “Once when Brahmadata was king in Vārāṇasī ...”)—the question is asked why a place is so important for and in Buddhist narratives. Based on selected examples, the argument is made that it is the “blueprint” of “early” Buddhist biographical sources, with the Buddha acting/preaching at specific places, which made these places accessible spaces where merit could be gained through “contact” with soteriologically important events in the past.

Keywords: Buddhist narratives; space; time; Buddha biography; Xuanzang; Faxian; Prāgboḍhi

“There are, oh monks, these four places on earth which are to be remembered by a faithful son from a good family or a good daughter from a good family as long as they live. What are these four? ‘Here the Blessed One was born.’ ‘Here the Blessed One has awakened to the unsurpassable full awakening.’ ‘Here the thrice-turning twelfold holy wheel of the *dharma* was set in motion by the Blessed One.’ ‘Here the Blessed One entered the realm of absolute *parinirvāṇa*.’” (*Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*)¹

“Time (*kāla*) generated yonder sky, time also these earths. What is and what is to be stands out sent forth by time. . . . time is the lord of all . . . ” (Whitney and Lanman 1905, 19.53.5 and 8)²



Citation: Deeg, Max. 2023. “Once upon a Time”—So What? The Importance of Place in Buddhist Narratives. *Religions* 14: 690. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14060690>

Academic Editors: Ru Zhan and Jinhua Chen

Received: 6 May 2023
Revised: 18 May 2023
Accepted: 20 May 2023
Published: 23 May 2023



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1. Introduction

“Es war einmal . . . ” or “Once upon a time . . . ”—this is the more than familiar beginning not only of the well-known fairytales (German: Märchen) collected by the Grimm brothers but also of the first part of the standard Buddhist narrative frame of Buddhist *sūtras*, an immediate continuation of the well-known “Thus have I heard”: *ekasmiṃ samaye* (Pāli: *ekaṃ samayaṃ . . .*, etc.). It is already here where the similarity between the two types of narrative genres³ introductory formulas ends. While the fairytale (usually) gives neither a concrete time nor a place,⁴ the Buddhist *sūtra* continues with a clear indication where the event⁵ “takes place”⁶—normally a sermon of the Buddha at a specific place to a specific audience, either to a group of people (the *saṅgha*, *brāhmaṇas*, etc.) or to individuals (a king, a householder, a *brāhmaṇa*, a heretic, etc.).

It seems that Buddhist narratives, particularly those about the Buddha and his disciples, have a preference for locus rather than for tempus. The spatial dimension of the Buddha’s vita was already emphasized by Alfred Foucher, who divided his biography, not surprisingly for a scholar interested in history, geography, art history, and archaeology, into geographical cycles (“Le cycle de Kapilavastou”, “Les cycles du Magadha et de Bénarês”, etc.). For Foucher, this focus on geography is a kind of natural given:

“The ascertained localization of eight sacred places of the most important episodes in the life of the Buddha, nowadays well known, will not only explain us how

their memory, more or less disfigured, has been transmitted from one age to another; it increases, in a particular way and as a whole, their authentic character. Brought back to the ground in this way and linked to one or another place in India, the most evident imaginations are deprived of a lot of their cloudy inaccuracy while the probable facts attain a surprising consistency and profile. But why should one be surprised? Has not geography always been the determining frame of history?"⁷

In a similar way and according to Bernard Faure, "[the] Life of the Buddha, just as the those of the Christian saints, is more spatial than temporal, it is a 'composition of places'"⁸ By comparing the biography of the Buddha with the biographies of Christian saints—a comparison with the life of Jesus in the New Testament would have been even more congruent—Faure indirectly points to the fact that the predominance of space over time in hagio-biographical narratives is by no means something typically Buddhist: it is likely to be found in all religious traditions which can be dubbed "founder" religions, although, in the case of Christianity and Islam, the very teleological and eschatological nature of the soteriology seems to ascribe to the dimension of time a higher degree of importance than in religions with a cyclical worldview such as Buddhism.

There is no intention here to enter the battlefield of discussions about the historicity of the Buddha and other individuals in Buddhist texts,⁹ although the aspects of time in an obvious way and of (socio-cultural) space in a more implicit way play a crucial role in the way scholars argue in one way or another. In this paper, I will only discuss the narrative dimensions of space and time: how did Buddhists, over time, construe space and time in texts¹⁰ about the Buddha's and other eminent Buddhist individuals' lives? I also—despite my title—do not claim to cover Buddhist narratives in general but am mainly concerned with the evidently primordial biography of the founder of the religion, the Buddha. Strangely enough, no narratological attempt—not asking the question of historical authenticity but seriously taking aspects, such as narrative structure, intentionality, mode, reception, etc., to analyze the biographical material about the Buddha and his closest disciples has been made so far. The closest attempt at such a reading is probably (Faure 2018), where, without explicitly using narratological approaches and modes of interpretation, the full range of Buddha biographies is taken into account, and the role of the "biographers", the ones who followed certain biographical—or rather hagiographical—conventions but also deviated from them, is emphasized.¹¹

2. Time and Space (Place) in Buddhist Narratives: General Observations

If the observation about the importance of space or places over time in basic Buddhist narratives is correct, the question arises why this is the case. Attempts to find preliminary answers to this question may start from two levels, a more general one by looking into the relation between expressions and concepts of space and time in language and in narratives, and a more specific one by trying to find a more specific Buddhist answer.

The conceptional predominance of space over time in narratives seems to build on the well-established fact that human orientation in the natural environment is, first of all, a spatial one linked to the basic senses of seeing, hearing, and touching (and, to a minor extent, smell). Mentally, and hence also linguistically, time is secondarily perceived through spatial parameters, such as movement and distance (*deixis*), and is then "translated" into mental concepts of time (See, for instance, (Evans 2013; Chilton 2014)). Most natural languages mirror this relationship between space and time: time indicating linguistic entities or metaphors of time are normally derived from words referring to a spatial relationship, position, and movement (before, after, between, etc.). Applying this observation which has been supported and modified through cognitive linguistics and pragmatics (See, for instance, (Gentner 2003; K. E. Moore 2006; Zinken 2010)) one-to-one to narratives as one of the more complex "outputs" of natural languages—in comparison with the focus on semantic units (words) by the before-mentioned disciplines—seems to be a little bit too simplistic, but the fact that humans orientate themselves both by experience and linguis-

tically first by spatial points of reference may be the starting point for an answer to the above question.

In a way, in a world view with circular time concepts of repetition as the Indian one, which includes the Buddhist,¹² the experienced extension of time is relativized through quantitatively larger cycles, such as the *kalpa* or the *yuga*. In the narratives, such as the one of the Buddha's life, the position in this larger time-periodical system is already determined: he is the "Fully Awakened" (*samyaksambhuddha*) of the present world age or *kalpa*. What is important in such a cyclical scheme are what could be called the "points of repetition" in a specific micro-cycle of the year: on what day in which month is the Buddha—or a specific Buddha of the past—born, when does he reach enlightenment, or when does he enter *parinirvāṇa*, etc.? The year itself in relation to any other bigger time circle, even to the Buddha's own lifespan, is, with a few exceptions—at which age did he leave the household, or did he enter *parinirvāṇa*—less important.

On a more specific level, I am a little bit hesitant to explain, as one may be tempted to do, the predominance of spatiality and place over time in Buddhist narratives by doctrinal implications of the concepts of time in Buddhism other than in a very general sense of (karmic) causality and momentariness¹³ or/and the final "goal" of a timeless (and unconditioned) *nirvāṇa*.¹⁴ It is, however, interesting that the Buddha, as far as I am aware, very rarely talks about time (*kāla*, *samaya*) in the *sūtras* or in biographical texts other than referring to some blurred and unspecific past of his own previous existences or mythical times or beings, such as his own predecessors or the primordial king Mahāsammata (in the *Agāṇṇasutta* and other texts) or the *cakravartin*-king Daḷhanemi (in the *Cakkavattisihanādasutta*) (See Tambiah 1989; M. J. Moore 2016, 17ff.). In the bigger cosmological time units referred to here and there in these texts, it is the relative duration of these time spans which is fixed: the time scheme of the present *kalpa* is determined by decline, and therefore, time units are shorter than compared with those in earlier *kalpas*—a concept complemented by its spatial correspondence of smaller dimensions: the body size of humans is smaller, and the lifespan of humans is shorter. In very general terms, one could say that time, measured and indicated in more concrete terms, starts playing a more important role when it is soteriologically relevant and then refers to the life cycle of the Buddha: at what age did the Buddha achieve enlightenment, what is the timespan between enlightenment and the First Sermon or between the *parinirvāṇa* and the cremation and distribution of the relics? Relevant is, of course, also the question of when the period of the "true *dharma*" (*saddharma*) established by the Buddha really ends.¹⁵ Buddhist time conceptualization on a meso- and macro-level has accepted the powerful drive of time expressed, for instance, in the famous hymn of the *Atharvaveda* quoted at the beginning or in the inevitable events unrolling in the great epic, the *Mahābhārata* (See Brodbeck 2022, particularly 171ff.), and regularized it. It encapsulated into and, in another way, subordinated time as a powerful entity of its own right to the law of causality.

In the end, however, it is not a doctrine that makes a good and successful narrative but a story that appeals to an audience on different emotional and intellectual levels, a story to which this audience can relate. If such stories succeed in conveying a (potential) experience beyond the imaginative and relating it to the physical power of seeing (*darśana*)¹⁶ the place where the events are supposed to have happened once, if it allows the audience to take part in the events in the past represented through the place by a visit, a ritual act of veneration, then the impact of the narrative on its audience is bound to be stronger and long-lasting.

In a religious context, a meaningful past such as the one of the Buddha's life can be remembered but cannot be physically accessed. This is different with places: they may be linked—in the sense of an established fact or as the process of localization of narratives or episodes—to past events in physical space, the place "where it happened", and as such, they become open to the senses: one can visit, see, touch and even smell (for instance, in the form of incense, flowers) the place, and the past becomes "tangible".

Let us now return to the introductory formula of the *sūtras*.¹⁷ I would suggest that its sequence already implies a hierarchy: it proceeds from a generic auctorial "I" via a very

generalized narrated time (“once”) to a concrete place and agent (“the Buddha dwelled at ...”). While the agent obviously is the most important narrative element, a place comes next and is always concrete listing, in descending order, polity (Magadha, Kosala, Malla), city (Rājagṛha, Śrāvastī, Vaiśālī), and place (Veṇuvana, Jetavana, Āmrvana). Even if, as Gregory Schopen has famously and rightly pointed out, this is presented in a rather schematic (“made up”) way,¹⁸ in the narrative framework of the story, the spatial point of reference is definitely more concrete than the temporal. This also is even true for the biographies of the Buddhas of the Past as sketched out by the Buddha himself in the *Mahāvadānasūtra* (Pāli *Mahāpadānasuttanta* in the *Dīghanikāya*, *Chu-daben-jing* 初大本經, or *Da-yinyuan-jing* 大因緣經 in the Chinese *Dīrghāgama*): as schematically as they may be structured, the emphasis on location becomes evident through the references to “individual” toponyms given for the major events in the life of these Buddhas parallel to the ones in the biography of Śākyamuni.

Another indicator of the importance of place is what could be called the formation process of the Buddha’s biography, which included the inserting (“filling in”) of episodes in the biographical skeleton of the four major events, birth in Lumbinī, enlightenment under the *bodhi* tree near the village of Uruvilvā, the first sermon in the “Deer Park” (Mṛgadāva) near Benares, and *parinirvāṇa* in Kuśinagara as referred to by the Buddha himself in the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* (see above). The focus of these partial biographies is on the first half of the life up to the first conversions after enlightenment; these episodes are, in a way, more “narratable” and “individual” than the conversions and sermons in the later period of the life. An exception is the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, which is, not least because of its constant referencing to concrete places on the Buddha’s way from Rājagṛha to Kuśinagara, probably the most “biographical” text found in the canonical literature. The “authors” of this text are literally obsessed with concrete places: the *sūtra* starts with a topographical foundation story, that of Pāṭaliputra, and continues with the journey of the Buddha to Kuśinagara, which is mapped in topographical details, dropping the names of villages, homes of individuals, forests, and shrines.

The predominance of place is also nicely demonstrated in the *Aśokāvadāna* when Upagupta, Aśoka’s preceptor and guide, leads the king to the different places linked to important events in the life of the Buddha (See Strong 1983, 119ff. & 244ff. (translation)). The places visited by the king and his guide are then marked by a *caitya*. In the narrative, the time distance between Aśoka’s own present and the past of the Buddha is “neutralized” at some places where Upagupta had witnesses of the *bodhisattva*’s/the Buddha’s presence in the past appear in front of the king (the tree spirit in Lumbinī, the *nāga* Kālīka near the *bodhi* tree). Here, the intention of giving a linear biography is clearly traceable, but one could argue that the paradigm of linearity ironically creates a fuzziness in temporal terms: along the timeline of the life of the Buddha, two fixpoints are naturally given, birth and death, but what lies between these stays remarkably imprecise as far as the biographical timeline is concerned, and the narrative rather follows a topographical scheme.

Another indicator of the importance of place is the geographical extension or expansion of the Buddha’s biography beyond its “natural habitat”. Places that did not belong to and are far from the more central area, which is linked to the vita of the Buddha, Magadha, and its adjacent regions, become included in the “sacred geography” of the Buddha’s life. One immediately thinks of the visit of the Buddha in the Northwest of the Indian subcontinent, in Gandhāra, with its narratives of conversions and prophesies (e.g., of the Kuśāna ruler Kaniṣka) found in Vinaya of the Mūlasarvāstivādin (See Przyłuski 1914). The motivation behind such spatial inclusivism in certain texts is a regional or local interest to be included in this “sacred geography”. There were, of course, limits of plausibility to this agenda: while the Theravāda tradition of Śrī Laṅkā claims three visits of the Buddha on the island (See Deeg 2016, 78ff.), and a Central Asian place such as Khotan still links its own “foundation myth” to a visit of the Buddha (See Deeg 2016, 118ff.), East Asia could and did not claim, as far as I know, such places.¹⁹

Of the three basic questions or parameters positioning a narrative in a meaningful way into a context—who, when, and where—two are clearly answered: it is the Buddha (Śākyamuni) who is acting, and he usually is acting at a specific place, but in most cases, time stays remarkably unspecific and unspecified. There are, of course, indicators of time in the narrative, but they are mostly unspecific in relation to temporal reference points, e.g., the Buddha's birth or death (*parinirvāṇa*), or to the reign of a king (Bimbisāra, Ajātaśatru, Prasenajit).

Even the later literature, such as the Pāli commentaries, focus on places and not so much on the chronological situatedness of a particular *sūtra* along the biographical timeline. Buddhaghosa, in his commentary to the *Brahmajālasutta* in the *Dīghanikāya*, calls the explanation of *ekaṃ samayaṃ* in the introductory formula an “indefinite explanation” (*aniyāmita-paridīpanaṃ*).²⁰ A similar “uneasiness” in relation to *samaya* is reflected in the commentary to the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, the *Da zhidu lun* 大智度論, translated by Kumārajīva (T no. 1509, 25: 1.65b7), when it states that using the term *kāla* (*jialuo* 迦羅) would have left doubts (*ju yi you yi* 俱亦有疑) but fails to explain how *samaya* (*sanmoye* 三摩耶) is more specific.²¹

Concrete references to the age of the Buddha (or *bodhisattva*) at the time of a certain “event” are rare and evidently linked to the most soteriologically important stages in life, such as, for example, enlightenment and *parinirvāṇa*.

The relative timeline becomes relevant when the narrative becomes soteriologically “tight” and/or important, e.g., towards enlightenment. Even then, time is not “real” time but organized according to a certain pattern of densification of regularity. An example of the former is the quick series of events leading to enlightenment (abandoning of extreme austerities, acceptance of food from the village girl(s), bath in the Nairāñjanā river, etc.), although they are not really brought into a relative chronology (after x days), and of the latter the famous seven-days periods which the Buddha spends around the *bodhi* tree after his enlightenment.²²

3. The Interrelation between “Narrative” and “Real” Places

From what has been said so far, one may conclude that there was a more or less imagined “sacred geography” of the Buddha's life, which is expressed in the toponymy of Buddhist texts. Already the pilgrimage of Aśoka and Upagupta in the *Aśokāvadāna* points to a topography of real and accessible places. It emphasizes that Aśoka erected *stūpas* or *caityas* after visiting the places to commemorate the biographical events and to facilitate pilgrimage and veneration.

Archaeological sites and inscriptional material—“real” places, as it were—support the hagiographical report of the *Aśokāvadāna*: Aśokan monuments and inscriptions in the Nepalese Terai pointing to the veneration of places linked to the birth of the Buddha (Lumbinī), but also to Buddhas of the past (Gotihawa, Nigali Sāgar) (Deeg 2003), and in Sārnāth (First Sermon) and Bodhgayā (place of enlightenment with the so-called “diamond throne”).²³ The most striking evidence for a continuous and developing Buddhist “sacred geography” in India, however, comes from the Chinese Buddhist travelogues, spanning a period of about three hundred years between the early 5th century (Faxian 法顯) and the 9th century (Wukong 無空).²⁴ The period of Chinese engagement with Buddhist sacred places in India may be extended beyond this period up to the Song dynasty, which we have evidence of in Chinese Buddhist historiographical sources and through Chinese inscriptions from Bodhgayā as well.²⁵

The relevance of the Chinese travelogues consists in their combining information about sacred spots with references to the corresponding narratives. While the standard *mahāsthānas* of the original four or extended eight major sacred places are mentioned, the Chinese records considerably add to our knowledge of the development of the sacred geography of Buddhism by referring to sites linked to other events from the life of the Buddha. They reflect a topographical infrastructure not only at the *mahāsthānas* but also in the Bud-

dha's hometown Kapilavastu, in Rājagṛha, Śrāvastī, Vaiśālī, etc., by mapping all the events reported in the extended biography of the Buddha.

Obviously and according to the travelogues—I am mainly referring here to Faxian's and the Tang monk Xuanzang's 玄奘 (600 or 602–664) records—the Buddhist sacred landscape in India expanded over time. This seems to have been driven by the desire to populate the landscape with more sacred places, which, in my view, can be divided into two categories for which two strategies of authorization were used in which narratives played different roles. The increase of such places can be observed through their increase of numbers from Faxian's to Xuanzang's travelogue.

The category with the quantitatively higher number of places can again be divided into two groups. One is linked to the narrative of Aśoka's distribution of the original eight shares of the Buddha's relics into eighty-four thousand *stūpas* all over Jambudvīpa.²⁶ While linked to a single narrative in the biography of the king, this was a blueprint for locating Aśokan *stūpas* all over India, a tendency well documented in the Chinese travelogues. The other category is, let us call it, narratively more neutral in the sense that its places are not linked to individual narratives but rather to concepts. These concepts are the ones of the solitary Buddhas (*pratyekabuddhas*) and the Buddhas of the past; both are anonymous, which may come as a surprise in the case of the Buddhas of the past because their names are, of course, well-known. Faxian already talks about places linked to *pratyekabuddhas*, the Buddhas of the past, and Xuanzang's records contain an increased number of such places. As for the non-individual places "where the Buddhas of the past walked and sat in meditation", they also seem to have no concrete narratives giving them authority. Here, it seems to be an amorphous past, which legitimizes such places and not individual narratives.

The other category of emerging sacred places is the one already indicated above, where the wish to become part of the sacred geography of the Buddha's biography leads to the creation of narrative episodes of the Buddha's visit to certain places. Such as in the case of the Buddha's visits to Northwest India and Śrī Laṅkā, these can be places outside of the central realm of the Buddha's life story, Magadha and adjacent regions, or they can be "new" locations in that central region. This is, for instance, the case with a mountain north of Bodhgayā on which the Buddha sat in meditation and looked at the hills of Rājagṛha from a distance, as reported by Xuanzang (T no. 2087, 51: 8.913c2–13): the known Buddhist sources do not contain a respective episode. This hill has been recently identified with the Dhavadol mountain southwest of the Bārabār hills between Patna and Bodhgayā, and this identification seems to be confirmed by the existence of Buddhist remains on top of the hill.²⁷

Another interesting observation stressing the importance of localizing Buddhist narratives is that some Jātakas or Pūrvayogas which in the Pāli collection are stereotypically localized in Vārāṇasī ("when Brahmadaṭṭa was king") are shifted to other regions, particularly to the Northwest. As I have tried to show elsewhere, this shift may be linked to a Buddhist strategy of reclaiming narratives from the Hindu tradition, particularly from the Rāmāyaṇa, which places stories such as those of the (Buddhist) R̥ṣyaśṛṅga or Śyāma, but also the one of Rāma's exile, which thematically corresponds to the story of the Buddha penultimate existence as the generous prince Viśvantara, in Ayodhyā or towards the Vindhya range.²⁸

Another tendency of localization reflected in the Chinese records is the identification of what could be called micro-topography at several important places, such as Kapilavastu, Bodhgayā, Rājagṛha, and Kuśinagara. While the Buddhist texts only give more general place names—in the context of Bodhgayā, for instance, the village of Uruvilvā is specified—the Chinese travelogues localize almost every sub-episode of these texts and very often refer to *stūpas* or shrines/temples, which were erected at these places. The area around the Mahābodhi temple, for instance, must have been scattered with such sites, which probably were part of a pilgrimage course.²⁹

There are a few cases where the toponym of a certain narrative or episode is not given in any other Buddhist source but is only found in the Chinese records. One striking ex-

ample is the Prāgbodhi Mountain, the “Before (or Towards) Enlightenment Mount” near BodhGayā, on which the *bodhisattva* is supposed to have meditated just before moving to the *bodhi* tree. I would like to discuss this example in some more detail to trace how narrative topography develops into a “real” place.

The only “canonical” source in which the story of the *bodhisattva* meditating on a mountain before his approach to the *bodhi* tree is found is—as far as I am aware—the *Saṅghabhedavastu* of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya*; this text may support, because of its “openness” for integrating later narrative material, the suggestion that the narrative emerged relatively late (T no. 1450, 24: 5.122b12-c2, Yijing’s 義淨 Chinese translation, Genben shuo yiqieyou bu pinaiye poseng shi 根本說一切有部毘奈耶破僧事):

“Because the *bodhisattva* had eaten the rice gruel, his physical strength was completely restored, and his six senses had fully recovered; he roamed the bank of the Nairāñjanā river for a pure place where he wanted to go and stay in solitude. He saw a solitary rocky mountain³⁰ which was beautifully covered by all kinds of flowers and fruits; after the *bodhisattva* saw it, he climbed on the mountain and sat cross-legged on top of a flat rock.³¹ Thereupon the mountain suddenly broke apart. The *bodhisattva* rose and thought doubtfully: “Is it my bad *karma* which has not exhausted that the mountain breaks apart?” The gods in the sky realized the *bodhisattva*’s doubts and told the *bodhisattva* from the sky: “World-Honoured One! It is not bad *karma* from the past—this is a lasting law of the *bodhisattvas* attaining enlightenment; their bodies and minds are so filled with the merit of roots of good deeds (*kuśalamūla*) [that] the whole strength of the earth cannot successfully carry them. This present piece of land is not the place where *bodhisattvas* attain *bodhi*. The whole strength of the great earth cannot carry two kinds of men: first, those who have most goodness, and second, those who have most evil. The *bodhisattva* has so much good *karma* that the mountain breaks apart by itself. Now, crossing the river Nairāñjanā from the east³² there is a diamond piece of land: at that place, on top of it, all the Tathāgatas of the past, present and future attain the ultimate wisdom, have attained it, attain it now, and will attain it.” When the *bodhisattva* heard this, he went toward this piece of land, and underneath each step grew a lotus flower: the waters of the four great oceans formed lotus ponds to receive the *bodhisattva*’s feet at the places they trod, and all the places vibrated such as a struck bronze vessel. *Zhesha*-birds³³ and auspicious deer came and circled around the *bodhisattva*. The deity presiding over the winds released his pure breeze to remove the dirt, and the deity presiding over rain gently sprinkled sweet moisture to prevent the fierce flying around of dust. When the *bodhisattva* saw these signs, he thought: “Now that I have seen these signs, I am sure that I will achieve full enlightenment today.”³⁴ (for the Sanskrit text, see (Gnoli 1977, 110f.))

In Faxian’s record, the *Foguo ji* 佛國記 or *Gaoseng Faxian zhuan* 高僧法顯傳, the story is localized at a specific place and shows signs of extension (T vol. 2085, 51: 1.863a29-b6):

“Going from there (i.e., the place where the girl Mekā gave rice gruel to the *bodhisattva*) in north-eastern direction, one arrives at a cave which the *bodhisattva* entered and sat down cross-legged, looking in western direction and thinking: “If I will achieve enlightenment, there should be an ominous sign.” Thereupon, the shadow of the Buddha appeared on the surface of the rock, about three *chi*³⁵ long and still clearly visible today. At that time, heaven and earth shook, and all gods in the sky said: “This is not the place where all the Buddhas of the past and the future achieve enlightenment. Going from here less than half a *yojana* [you will reach] a place underneath an *aśvattha* tree where all the Buddhas of the past and the future have reached and will reach enlightenment.” After the gods had spoken these words, [they] went ahead singing and guiding [him]. The *bodhisattva* rose [from his seat and] went [with them].”³⁶ (see Deeg 2005, 554f. and 439f.)

It is Xuanzang who, in his *Datang Xiyu ji* 大唐西域記, provides the most specific and detailed account of the place, including the name of the mountain and the cave, *Prāgbodhi (T vol. 2087, 51: 8.915a16-b7):

“To the east of the place where Gayākāśyapa entertained his fire, one crosses a great river and arrives at the mountain Boluojiputi³⁷ (in the language of the Tang this is ‘Before-

Full-Enlightenment-Mountain'; when the Tathāgata was about to realize full enlightenment, he first ascended this mountain; it is therefore called 'Before-Full-Enlightenment-Mountain'.) The Tathāgata strove for six years and had not yet realized full enlightenment, then gave up the ascetic practices, accepted the donation of rice gruel, and, while going further from the northeast, he spotted this mountain, felt isolated and lonely and wished to realize full enlightenment. When he climbed up to the peak from the northeastern ridge, the earth trembled, and even the mountain was shattered. The spirit of the mountain was frightened and told the *bodhisattva*: "This mountain is not an auspicious place to reach full enlightenment. If you stay here and enter the state of the diamond-contemplation, the earth will shake and sink in, and the mountain will collapse as well." The *bodhisattva* went down from the southwest; halfway down the slope of the mountain, with a rock on its back and facing a ravine, was a big cave which the *bodhisattva* entered and where he sat down cross-legged. Again, the earth trembled, and once more, the mountain tipped and shook. At that time, the gods of the 'Pure-Abode'-Heaven (Śuddhāvāsa) exclaimed in the sky: "This is not the place where the Tathāgata will realize full enlightenment. Fourteen or fifteen miles from here to the southwest, not far away from the place of your ascetic practice, is a *beiboluo*-tree,³⁸ and underneath it is the 'Diamond-Seat' (*vajrāsana*); all the Buddhas of the past and the future attain full enlightenment on this seat. May you go there!" As soon as the Buddha rose from his seat, the *nāga* inside the cave said: "This cave is pure and exalted and suitable for attaining sainthood; I beg you have mercy and do not abandon it!" Since the Buddha knew that this was not the place to attain the realization of enlightenment, he left his shadow to fulfil the wish of the *nāga* and went away. The shadow existed in former days and virtuous and foolish people could see it, but now only a few manage to see it. The gods directed him to the *bodhi*-tree. When king Aśoka flourished flag poles were erected, and *stūpas* were constructed to mark the traces up and down the mountain on which the Buddha climbed; although their measures are different in size, the miracles displayed are very similar: sometimes flowers rain from the sky, and sometimes light illuminates the dark valleys. Every year on the day of the end of the rainy season retreat monastics and laypeople from different regions go up the mountain to make offering, stay there for two nights and come back."³⁹

We may conclude from this sequence of evidence that the story is a relatively late episode⁴⁰ inserted into the biography of the Buddha, which underwent further development and localization. It has been identified as the middle peak of the so-called Dhungheshvari range running from Northeast to Southwest of Bodhgayā on the opposite side of the Nairāñjanā River. The mentioning of a concrete name and the reference to the concrete practice of veneration in the later source (Xuanzang) may suggest that the place gained popularity as a pilgrimage site. The archaeological evidence of not only the cave but also of seven *stūpa* remains of different sizes on top of the mountain along the ridge and a newly discovered monastic site with two *stūpa* remains on a platform halfway between the foot of the mountain and the cave supports the hypothesis of such a development.

4. Conclusions

The observations in this brief paper can only present a very preliminary and quite general number of starting points for a more detailed investigation of the role of space and time in Buddhist narratives. They should have been and will have to be illustrated by more examples than the ones given here. References to places in Buddhist stories evidently go beyond the function of name-dropping; they not only give these narratives authenticity and authority of activity but also allow for a continuity of the presence of the past events once the places are mapped in the real landscape. The sacred topography embedded in the canonical sources and in the Buddha's biography (biographies) through the respective toponyms became the blueprint for the creation and emergence of Buddhist sacred sites and topographies in other regions than the Buddhist "heartland" in a lot of cases linked to narratives about eminent Buddhist "saints" and, in a Mahāyāna context, *bodhisattvas* (e.g., Mañjuśrī on the Chinese Wutai shan).

What hopefully has become evident is that it is the importance of and the focus on places, narratively expressed in toponyms in texts and, at individual “real” places, through markers, such as pillars, inscriptions, temples, or monasteries, which obviously made Buddhist narratives, particularly the ones linked to the Buddha’s life, so successful by making them still accessible for a long time after the events—a feature which clearly contributed to establishing Buddhism as a successful religion in India and beyond.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Translated from the Skt. text constituted by (Waldschmidt 1950–1951, p. 388) (online version Greta https://greta.sub.uni-goettingen.de/greta/corpustei/transformations/html/sa_mahAparinirvANasUtra.htm, accessed 2 February 2022): 41.5 *catvāra ime bhi(k)ṣ(avaḥ) pṛ(thivī)ṛ(adeśāḥ śrāddhasya kulaputrasya kuladuhitur vā yāvajjīvam anusmaraṇīyā bhavanti ||* 41.6 *(katame catvā)rah || iha bhagavān jātaḥ || iha bha(gavān anuttarāṃ samyaksambodhim abhisambuddhaḥ || iha bhagavatā triparivartam dvādaśākāraṃ dhārmyaṃ dharmacakram) pravartitam || iha bhagavān anupadhiśeṣe nirvā(ṇadhātau parinirvṛtaḥ ||*).
- ² Translation (Whitney and Lanman 1905, p. 988). *kālō ’mūṃ dīvam ajanayat kālā imāḥ pṛthivīr utā | kālō ha bhūtāṃ bhāvyaṃ ceṣitāṃ ha vī tiṣṭhate ||5|| kālō ha sāvoasyeśvarō . . . ||8||* (electronic edition Greta, http://greta.sub.uni-goettingen.de/greta/1_sanskr/1_veda/1_sam/avs_acu.htm, accessed 2 February 2023).
- ³ I am fully aware that such a comparison of the two literary types is anachronistic and problematic on a level of scientific stringency, and I am, of course, only using the “surface-similarity” as a starting point. I cannot enter the quite complex discussion of literary genres, neither of “Märchen” nor of Buddhist *sūtras*. It may suffice to point out that some basic structural definitions of “Märchen” can be applied to *sūtras*, as a randomly chosen example shows: “One calls ‘Fairy Tale’ an oral folk tale without individually determinable author which owes an existential part of its existence to oral tradition. The language of the fairy tale is prose . . . ” ((Heldmann 2000, p. 13); all translations from the original German are my own).
- ⁴ See Heldmann 2011, 14f.: “. . . the fairy tale primarily can serve entertainment; its fictionality is neither seriously doubted by the narrator nor the audience. Due to its character as pure fiction, the fairy tale generally is marked by personal, local, and temporal anonymity. The agents either have everyday names (. . .) or are marked by status (. . .), profession (. . .), or family relations (. . .). Both place and time of the plot are kept in abeyance (“Once upon a time . . .”).”
- ⁵ I refrain from speaking of action(s) because, as is well known, Buddhist *sūtras* are—with exceptions such as the already quoted *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*—rather static in terms of dramaturgic development. This is, of course, different from narrative genres, such as the Jātakas, Avadānas, or biographical texts, which, however, do not contain the authoritative initial formula.
- ⁶ The allusion to Jonathan Z. Smith’s often-quoted book and his concept of place is not coincidental. Although Smith’s focus is on the role of place in aboriginal and Judaeo-Christian rituals and the function of places, such as the temple in Jerusalem, some of his claims may be applied to the Buddhist sacred places as well. Smith points out the ritual aspect of sacred places: “Ritual is, first and foremost, a mode of paying attention. It is a process for marking interest. . . . It is this characteristic, as well, that explains the role of place as a fundamental component of ritual: place directs attention.” (Smith 1987, p. 103) The link to pilgrimage activities at sites such as Bodhgayā, Sārnāth, and others is obvious, although we have only restricted insight into what these ritual activities were in the past.
- ⁷ (Foucher 1949, p. 6). “La localisation certaine en huit places saintes, aujourd’hui bien repérées, des principaux épisodes de la vie du Bouddha ne va pas seulement nous expliquer comment leur souvenir, plus ou moins déformé, a été transmis d’âge en âge; elle rehausse singulièrement dans l’ensemble leur caractère d’authenticité. Ainsi ramenées sur la terre et fixées à tel ou tel coin de l’Inde, les fictions les plus évidentes perdent beaucoup de leur imprecision nuageuse, tandis que les faits vraisemblables acquièrent une consistance et un relief surprenants. Mais pourquoi s’en montrer surpris? La géographie n’a-t-elle pas toujours été le cadre déterminant de l’histoire?”
- ⁸ (Faure 2018, p. 87): “La Vie du Bouddha, tout comme celle des saints chrétiens, est plus spatiale que temporelle, elle est une «composition de lieux».”
- ⁹ See more recently Drewes’ skeptical view (Drewes 2017) and the balanced response and discussion by (Von Hinüber 2006, 2019); for a strongly positive view on the Buddha’s historicity, severely criticizing Drewes, see (Wynne 2019).
- ¹⁰ I will not touch upon the difficult question of time representation or the representation of temporal sequence in art historical material but restrict myself to textual sources. For a more “structuralist-functionalist” view of the Buddha biography see (Penner 2009).

- 11 (Faure 2018, p. 17): “L’histoire de la Vie du Bouddha est également celle de ses biographes et de leurs partis pris. . . . La Vie du
Bouddha est par ailleurs inséparable des interprétations qui en ont été données.” (“The history of the Life of the Buddha is that
of his biographers and of their partialities. . . . Furthermore, the Life of the Buddha is inseparable from the interpretations which
have been given thereof.”)
- 12 See the discussion of “linear” and “repetitive time” in (Collins 1992, 235ff.; Collins 1998, 237ff.).
- 13 On Buddhist conceptions of time, see, e.g., (Von Rospatt 1995; Emmrich 2012).
- 14 For a detailed discussion of this, see (Collins 1992; 1998, 121ff.).
- 15 This idea then could become the center of new narrative cycles which then were again, in more concrete terms, located in space:
see (Nattier 1991).
- 16 On the Indian “modes” of seeing the “divine” see (Eck 1998), and for the Buddhist context (Eckel 1992; Collins 1992, 237f.).
- 17 There has been quite some discussion about the “correct” interpretation or reading of this formula—see, for instance, (Brough
1950; Galloway 1991; Tatz 1997): At one time” (Nattier 2015)—which I refrain from entering here. For my purpose, the local
determination of the phrase is, quite in accordance with my chosen title, more important than the question of whether the
unspecific temporal phrase “once upon a time” is to be linked to the grammatical agent of the first sentence, the listener (“I”, or
linguistically, from the standpoint of the Indic versions, more correctly: “by me”), or to the “event” of the Buddha’s stay at some
specified place: for the aspect of place neither reading makes a difference.
- 18 (Schopen [1997] 2004). For more references from the other Vinayas, see (Kuan 2012).
- 19 The location of the *bodhisattva* Mañjuśrī on Wutai-shan 五台山, interpreted as the Indic Pañcaśikhparvata, “Five-Peaked Moun-
tain”, however, shows how important it was in China as well to have, at least, certain meaningful geographical points of refer-
ence in the framework of the wider, transcultural Buddhist cosmology. For the rather complex development of the Wutai-shan
topography and cult, see the contributions of (Andrews et al. 2021).
- 20 (Davids et al. [1886] 1968, p. 31). The discussion about the correct reading of the formula—whether *ekaṃ samayaṃ* (Skt. *ekasmin
samaye*) goes syntactically with *evaṃ mayā suttam* or is the beginning of the syntagma setting the stage (“Once, the Blessed One
dwelled at . . . ”), does not change the fact that the time indicated by the expression is unspecific.
- 21 For a translation of the whole passage on *samaya* see (Lamotte 1944, 76ff.).
- 22 For a detailed discussion, see (Bopearachchi 2016).
- 23 For Aśokan monuments and inscriptions, see (Falk 2006).
- 24 On the Chinese “pilgrims” see (Deeg 2005, 51ff.).
- 25 The inscriptions were discovered in situ by Alexander Cunningham and fully translated and discussed by Chavannes
(Chavannes 1896). For a more recent overview, see (Willis and Biondo 2021), and for a detailed treatment of the inscriptions
(Inamoto 2019).
- 26 (Strong 1983, 109ff. & 219ff.) (translation). For relics and their veneration, see (Strong 2004; Stargardt and Willis 2018).
- 27 See (Deeg Forthcoming). Here, I would like to express my gratitude to the team members who meticulously explored the
mountain site after my co-PI Dr. Bijoy Choudhary and a small group of researchers, including myself, visited the place in
January 2020 (pre-COVID-19) and identified it as a possible candidate for the place “described” in Xuanzang’s travelogue.
- 28 For a detailed discussion of this complex scenario, see (Deeg 2022).
- 29 For more details, see (Deeg Forthcoming).
- 30 Skt. *mahāsāila(m) parvata(m)*.
- 31 Skt. *viviktāvakaṣe prthivīpradeśe*.
- 32 *guo Nilianchan-he dong* 過尼連禪河東; although this is not really syntactically clear, I translate this phrase according to the actual
topographical situation: one has to cross the river Nairāñjanā in the western direction to reach Bodhgayā when coming from the
Prāgbodhi hill. The Sanskrit version does not give any direction, and it may well have been Yijing himself who, according to his
own knowledge of the landscape, inserted this piece of topographical information (*dong* 東, “east”) into his translated text.
- 33 遮沙/**teia-ṣe*; Skt. *cāṣa*, “blue jay”. The Early Middle Chinese reconstructed forms marked by an asterisk (*) are given according
to (Pulleyblank 1991).
- 34 菩薩因食乳粥，氣力充盛，六根滿實。於尼連禪河岸遊行觀察，覓清淨處，將欲安止。見孤石山，有雜華菓，莊嚴圍遶。菩薩見
已即登此山，平整石上結跏趺坐。爾時，此山忽自裂碎。菩薩起立，作是疑念。由我惡業尚不盡故。令山碎耶。空中諸天。觀知
菩薩疑念此事。即於空中告菩薩曰。世尊。昔無惡業此是。菩薩成道常法。善根功德充滿身心。一切地力不能勝載。今之此地。
非是菩薩成菩提處。一切大地之力。不能負載二種之人。一者善最多者。二惡最多者。菩薩善業甚多。所以此山自然摧碎。今過
尼連禪河東有金剛地。彼處過現未來諸如來等。皆於其上得最勝智。已得現得當得。菩薩聞已將往其地。舉足步步皆生蓮花。四
大海水成蓮花池。來迎菩薩足所履地。地皆振動如扣銅器。有遮沙鳥及善瑞鹿來遶菩薩。主風之神。調其清涼吹去塵穢。主雨之
神。微洒甘澤令鬻埃不飛。菩薩既見此相。作是念云。今見此相。我於今日必成正覺。
- 35 Approximately 70 cm (one *chi* à 23 cm).

- 36 從此東北行半由延，到一石窟。菩薩入中西，向結跏趺坐，心念：“若我成道，當有神驗。石壁上即有佛影現，長三尺許，今猶明亮。時天地大動，諸天在空中白言：“此非是過去，當來諸佛成道處。去此西南行，減半由延，貝多樹下，是過去，當來諸佛道處。”成諸天說是語已，即便在前唱導，導引而去。菩薩起，行。
- 37 鉢羅笈菩提(山)/*pat-la-gip-bo-dej-°, Skt. *Prāgbodhi(-parvata), Chin. Qianzhengjue-shan 前正覺山。
- 38 卑鉢羅(樹)/*pji-pat-la-°, Skt. pippala.
- 39 伽耶迦葉波事火東，渡大河至鉢羅笈菩提山(唐言前正覺山。如來將證正覺，先登此山，故云前正覺也)。如來勤求六歲，未成正覺，後捨苦行，示受乳糜，行自東北，遊目此山，有懷幽寂，欲證正覺。自東北岡登以至頂，地既震動，山又傾搖。山神惶懼，告菩薩曰：“此山者，非成正覺之福地也。若止於此，入金剛定，地當震陷，山亦傾覆。”菩薩下自西南，山半崖中，背巖面澗，有大石室，菩薩即之，加趺坐焉。地又震動，山復傾搖。時淨居天空中唱曰：“此非如來成正覺處。自此西南十四五里，去苦行處不遠，有卑鉢羅樹，下有金剛座，去來諸佛，咸於此座而成正覺。願當就彼！”菩薩方起，室中龍曰：“斯室清勝，可以證聖，唯願慈悲，勿有遺棄！”菩薩既知非取證所，為遂龍意，留影而去(影在昔日，賢愚咸覩，泊於今時，或有得見)。諸天前導，往菩提樹。逮乎無憂王之興也，菩薩登山上下之迹，皆樹旌表，建窠堵波，度量雖殊，靈應莫異，或花雨空中，或光照幽谷。每歲罷安居日，異方法俗，登修供養，信宿乃還。
- 40 Already (Watters 1905) concluded: “Prāg-bodhi is evidently a Buddhist name of late origin, . . . ”

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