The Art of Pāla India (8th-12th centuries) and Its International Legacy

LEAVES FROM THE BODHI TREE
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107. Vajrāsana Visualization with Life Scenes of Śākyamuni Buddha. Tibet. Late eleventh or early twelfth century.
VAJRĀŚANA VISUALIZATION WITH LIFE SCENES OF ŚĀKYAMUNI BUDDHA FROM THE
ASTAMAHĀPRĀTIHĀRYA CYCLE AND THE
LALITAVISTARA

Tibet, Early Shar mthun bris
Late eleventh or early twelfth century
Water-based pigments on cotton cloth
H: 31 1/2" W: 23 1/2"
The Zimmerman Family Collection
Illustrated in color

This iconographically complex painting combines two
separate but parallel and complementary iconographies
of the life of the Buddha into one format (fig. 46). First, the
major images of the composition are from the
aṣṭamahāprātihārya (AMP) sequence (see introduction to
the Pala Period and Appendix I), consisting of AMP 1, the
birth; AMP 2, the victory over Māra (Skt. Māraśyāja);
AMP 3, the first sermon (Skt. dharma cakra pravartana);
AMP 4, the display of supernatural powers at Śrāvasti (Skt.
maḥāprātihārya); AMP 5, the descent from Trāyastriṃśa
at Śāmkaśyā in the company of the gods Brahmā and Indra
(Skt. devarohana); AMP 6, the taming of the mad elephant
Nālāgiri; AMP 7, the gift of honey from the monkey at
Vaiśālī; and AMP 8, the death of Śākyamuni (Skt.
parinirvāṇa).

In addition to this well-established iconographic
program, a sequence derived from the twelve deeds of the
Buddha as found in the Lalitavistara (LV) is also depicted.
Starting with the fourth event, LV 4, the birth of the
Bodhisattva (the future Buddha), the sequence of eight of
the last nine of the twelve deeds encircles the central
composition in a clockwise direction. LV 4, the birth of
Siddhartha, is identical with the scene from the
aṣṭamaḥāprāthitārya composition. LV 4a continues the events of the birth narrative in the Lalitavistara. It portrays the visit of the sage Asita who, while overjoyed at the promise of future Buddhahood for the infant, is overcome with grief for himself because he has sought all his life the enlightenment that the Bodhisattva will attain and realizes that he will not live even to witness the event. The sage is shown in two positions: first, on one knee making his prediction of future enlightenment for the Buddha to King Sudhodana, who holds the infant Bodhisattva, and second, doubled over in grief because he will not live to witness the great event.

In LV 5, the group of archers behind the figure mounted on the horse characterizes the youthful life of Siddhārtha, which culminated in the series of contests by which he won his future bride, Yaśodhara. In the Lalitavistara the archery contest is described in great detail and is the culminating event in the sequence of competitions for the bride. By winning the contests, the Bodhisattva proved his superiority over his peers and also won the right to move on to the next stage of his life—that of a married householder.

[LV 6 (not included in this composition) is the sequence of his four trips out of the sequestered palace in which Siddhārtha sees an old man, a sick man, a dead man, and a renunciant who is seeking release. These events convince the young prince that there was something beyond the life of luxury and pleasure that he was living and set the stage for his becoming an ascetic.]  

LV 7 is the great departure of Siddhārtha on his white horse Kanthaka in the company of his groom Chandaka when he takes leave of the palace and retires to the hills to become a wandering mendicant. LV 7a is the return of the horse Kanthaka to the home court of Siddhārtha at Kapilavastu. Kanthaka carries on his back the jewelry, specifically Siddhārtha’s princely crown, as shown in the composition, which he had removed in order to take up his new life. LV 7b continues the same set of events with the renounced prince cutting off his long hair to become a shaven-headed mendicant.

LV 8 is the practice of extreme asceticism, illustrated in Tibetan iconography even at this early date by two youths poking cotton with a long stick into the ears of the ascetic Siddhārtha who they have mistaken for a statue due to his emaciation and motionlessness. The text tells that Siddhārtha cleared his ears by blowing the cotton out through his nose! LV 8a is the temination of the practice of extreme asceticism when Siddhārtha accepts food from the village girl named Sujātā.

LV 9 shows the Buddha-to-be seated on the kuṣa grass seat at the moment of making the vow to remain at the bodhimaṇḍa until he receives enlightenment. LV 10 is the conquest of Mara, or Māravijaya, and is identical with AMP 2. LV 11 is the first sermon of the Buddha at Sarnath (i.e. the Mrgadavā, or the Deer Park, near modern Vārānasi) and differs compositionally from the AMP version. The figure of the five mendicants still surround the Buddha as in the AMP version, but on the left of the composition are three Buddhas and three Bodhisattvas who apparently have come to hear the sermon. The account in the AMP may not have agreed closely with the LV, or this may be simply a compositional device.

LV 12, the parinirvāṇa scene, is the same scene as AMP 8.

A final element in the paintings that combines yet another feature of the diverse narratives of the life of the Buddha into the whole is the eight miniature stūpas, or caityas, across the top of the painting. There are two possible interpretations of the set of eight stūpas. They could either be those stūpas representing the aṣṭamaḥāprāthitārya themselves or the stūpas into which the Buddha’s relics were placed at the time of his death. Since the aṣṭamaḥāprāthitārya are already represented in the painting, and since in Indian aṣṭamaḥāprāthitārya scenes the relic stūpas are usually at the top, it must be presumed that these were intended to be the relic stūpas. This element completes the narrative of the Buddha’s life and
has it roots in the early (Pali) Mahāparinibbāna-suttanta, which describes in detail the last days, death, cremation, and distribution of the relics of Sākyamuni Buddha.

This painting is virtually identical stylistically to the Early Shar mthun bris paintings of Vajrasattva (cat. no. 105) and Vajradhātu Vairocana (cat. no. 106) and thus can be assigned confidently to ca. 1065-1085 or only slightly later. Even though it is profoundly based on the Pāla style and iconographic conventions it contains a remarkable feature that is apparently wholly Tibetan—an iconographic synthesis of two iconographic programs. This suggests an emerging intellectual maturity among the Tibetan teachers that is beyond what one would expect in the new proselytized Tibetans.

On the whole, the painting must be understood as both an extension of what we know about the Early Shar mthun bris style, and an important insight into early Tibetan religious thinking.

PUBLISHED:


I. From a list given in F. D. Lessing and A. Wayman, trans., Introduction to the Buddhist Tantric Systems (nKhas Grib tshes Rgyud sde sphyi hrnam pa ggzag pa rgyas par brjod) (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1980), 25, citing the Mahāyānotāra-tantra:
1) The descent from Tuṣita
2) Entrance into the womb
3) Rebirth
4) Skill in worldly arts
5) Enjoyment of harems
6) Departure from home
7) Arduous discipline
8) Passage to the precincts of illumination
9) Defeat of Marśi’s host
10) Complete illumination
11) The wheel of the law
12) Departure into nirvāṇa

1. Leaving Tuṣita heaven for this world in the form of an ash white elephant
2. Entering the womb of his mother, Māyādevī
3. Taking birth at Lumbini and then taking seven steps in each of the four directions
4. Learning the arts, such as writing, mathematics, and archery
5. Engaging in sports with other young men and enjoying the company of his consorts
6. Abandoning the princely life at the age of twenty-nine to become a self-ordained monk
7. Enduring many hardships for six years by the river Nairāñjana
8. Sitting beneath the bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya
9. Defeating the hosts of demons that night
10. Attaining Buddhahood at dawn
11. Turning the Wheel of Dharma at Sarnath
12. Passing into nirvāṇa

2. In a radical misunderstanding of the whole painting schema, Pratapaditya Pal has called this the enlightenment. See Pratapaditya Pal (organizer), Light of Asia: Buddha Sakyamuni in Asian Art (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1984), 63.

3. Pal has included this scene with Sujata’s gift (Light of Asia, 63). In the text, however, they are different events and Sujata is not associated with the bodhi tree in any way.

4. It cannot be, as Pal has suggested (Light of Asia, p. 63), the Bodhisattva in Tuṣita deciding on the time and place of his birth. The figure is shown as the Buddha and not as the Bodhisattva and is surrounded by five monks; an obvious reference to the first sermon.

5. These are 1) Rājagaha, built by Ajātaśātruk; 2) Vaiśali, built by the Licchavis; 3) Alākappa, built by the Bulis; 4) Kamagaṇa, built by the Koliyas; 5) Veṭhadivipa, built by Veṭhadivipakha the brahmane; 6) Pava, built by the Mallas (of Pava); 7) Kulinagara built by the Mallas (of Kusinagara); and 8) Pippalavanaka, built by the Moriyas (or, according to other lists, Kapilavastu, built by the Śakyas). See the Mahāparinibbāna-suttanta in T. W. Rhys Davids, trans., Buddhist Suttas, vol. 11 of Sacred Books of the East (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1881, reprint, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1968), 134-35. Four of these—Rājagaha, Vaiśali, Kusinagara, and Kapilavastu—have been identified archaeologically. See John C. Huntington, “Sowing the Seeds of the Lotus: A Journey to the Great Pilgrimage Sites of Buddhism, Part 5 [Kusinagara, Appendices and Notes],” Orientations 17, no. 9 (Sept. 1986): 46-58.