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

LEAVES FROM THE BODHI TREE
LEAVES FROM THE BODHI TREE:
The Art of Pāla India (8th-12th centuries) and Its International Legacy

Susan L. Huntington and John C. Huntington

1990
Published by The Dayton Art Institute in Association with the University of Washington Press, Seattle and London
APPENDIX I: THE EIGHT GREAT ILLUSORY DISPLAYS
(ĀSTAMĀHĀPRĀṬIHIHĀRYA) ACCORDING TO A CHINESE TEXT

While Pāla period iconography is a very diverse and richly complex communicative system, one theme stands out above all others—the life of Śākyamuni Buddha as summarized by eight major events. Sculpted and painted representations showing all eight or fewer of the scenes constitute a significant proportion of the subject matter of the corpus of extant Pāla art. Based on the Pāla model, the theme and its variants became highly popular in other regions of Asia. It is likely that the theme had special significance in the Pāla lands, which contained many of the important sites at which these events took place.

Two very brief texts on the theme have been preserved in the Chinese canon. One of these is simply a collection of dhāranis, invocation formulae that are mainly of interest to the practitioner who wishes to recite them. However, the other text (translated below) describes the events and their symbolism and explains the practice behind the eight scenes. Although neither text explains the complicated and rich historical developments associated with a cult of the eight major Buddha life events, they suggest one way in which the iconography was incorporated into Buddhist religious practice.

Briefly, the scenes reiterate the major events in the life of Śākyamuni Buddha. These are: 1) the birth to Queen Māyādevi at the Lumbini garden (now in Nepal); 2) the Buddha-to-be’s defeat of Māra (Maravijaya) and his subsequent enlightenment under the āśīvatta tree at the bodhīmanda in Bodh Gayā; 3) the first sermon, or setting the wheel of the Dharma in motion (dharmacakra pravartana) at the Deer Park (Ṛṣipatana Mrgadāva) at Sarnāth near modern Vārāṇasī; 4) the “great illusion” (mahāprāṭihārya), or “illusion of the twins” (yamaṇakapratihārya), at the Jetavana monastery outside of Śravasti; 5) the descent from the Trayastrimśa heaven (devarohana) near Sāmkāśya; 6) the taming of the wild elephant Nālāgiri at Rājaṅrha when the Buddha’s cousin Devadatta attempted to kill Śākyamuni; 7) the gift of honey by the monkey at the Monkey’s Pond in Vaiśālī; and finally 8) the parinīrūpā, or death of the Buddha, at Kuśinagara. The eight sites apparently are not mentioned together in Buddhist literature prior to their occurrence as a group in relatively late texts that may themselves have been products of the early Pāla period.

BUDDHA TELLING THE NAME OF THE EIGHT GREAT MAGICAL POTENCY
(ĀSTAMĀHĀPRĀṬIHIHĀRYA) STŪPAS

At one time, Lokajiṣṭha (“Best of the World,” i.e., the Buddha) told his disciples:

“Today, I am going to praise the names of the eight magical potency stūpas. Listen to me carefully. I will tell you what the eight are. The first one, in Lumbinī Garden of Kapila[vastu] city, is the Buddha’s birth place. The second one, under a bodhi tree beside the Nairājanā River, is the place where the Buddha attained enlightenment. The third one, in Vārāṇasī city of the Kāśi kingdom, is the place where the Buddha turned the great Dharma-wheel. The fourth one, the Jetavana [monastery] of Śravasti kingdom, is where the Buddha showed his great spiritual transcendence. The fifth one, Chuan city (i.e., Śāmkāśya), is where the Buddha descended from Indra’s heaven (Trayastrimśa). The sixth one, at Rājaṅrha, is where Devadatta was destroyed and the samīgha purified (i.e., the taming of the wild elephant Nālāgiri). The seventh one, at Vaiśālī, is where the Buddha announced his speedy nīrūpa (i.e., the gift of honey). The eighth one, Kuśinagara, is where the Buddha entered nīrūpa. These are the eight great magical potency stūpas.”

He then recited a gāthā:

“At King Sudhodana’s capital in Kapila, Buddha was born in Lumbini Garden;
At Magadha near the Nairājanā River, He attained enlightenment under the bodhi tree;
In Vārāṇasī city of Kāśi kingdom, He turned the Dharma-wheel and explained the twelve times [of life];
At the Jetavana [monastery] of the great city of Śravasti, He demonstrated his spiritual transcendence in the three worlds;
At Chuan city in Śāmkāśya country, He descended from Indra’s heaven;
In the monk’s section of the great city of Rājaṅrha,
The Tathāgata transformed [the wild elephant] and showed his compassion and pity;
At the magical potency stūpa of Vaiśālī,
The Tathāgata declared his eternity;
At Kuśinagara’s great power place,
He entered nirvāṇa.

These are the eight great magical potency stūpas. If there are brāhmaṇas, good men and good women, who have a great mind to establish a stūpa or offer a temple [commemorating these places], these persons will gain great merit, great retribution, and great praise. Their reputation will spread widely. You disciples should learn from them. Also, disciples, if the good men and good women can offer the eight great magical potency stūpas sincerely, they will go to the heavenly realm after their death.”

Lokajñeyśṭha then told his disciples, “Listen to my gāthā to know where the Buddha travelled and lived:
Twenty-nine years he lived in the royal palace,
Six years in the snowy mountains he cultivated his mind,
Five years at Rājaγrha he converted and saved people,
Four years he stayed in the Vis-ā?] woods,
Two years he lived at ‘ja-li-yen’ [?],
Twenty-three years he stayed at Srāvasīt, At Vaiśālī, [at] the Deer Park,
[At “Ma-ju-li” [?], “in] Indra’s heaven,
[At] Kuśinagara, [at] Kausāmbī,
On the summit of Sūḍa Mountain,
With the Wei-nu [?] tribe,
And [in] King Suddhodana’s capital of Kapilavastu—
He stayed [in each] of these places for one year.

Sākya Tathāgata then stopped travelling,
Sākya’s eighty years had ceased,
He then entered nirvāṇa.”
The sūtra of Buddha’s telling of the names of the eight great magical potency stūpas [has ended].

The sūtra is typical of late exegetical texts that have attained the status of sūtra, i.e., the words, or authoritative teachings, of the Buddha. Thus, the character of the text can be presumed to be that of explaining an existing phenomenon rather than an attempt to introduce and establish a new concept or practice.

Structurally the text seems to be a compilation of three elements: 1) a prose explanation of the sites, 2) the gāthā (verse) form reiteration of the same information, and 3) a separate gāthā recounting the life of Śākyamuni. Gāthas have the virtue of being poetic and are therefore easier to remember than prose. Thus, the two gāthā portions of the text may have had a long existence prior to their incorporation into the text and their ultimate translation into Chinese. However, no date can be assigned to the presumed origin of any portion of the text; all that can be said is that it, or substantial portions of it, must have existed in Sanskrit prior to its translation into Chinese in 989–999. This is precisely the time when the cult of the aṣṭamaḥāprāṭiḥārya was at its height in the Pāli realm, and it is reasonable to assume that this text gives an accurate, albeit extremely terse, exposition of some of the underlying principles of the cult.

The most important point in the sūtra is the promise of rebirth in a heaven world in the passage: “If there are brāhmaṇas, good men and good women, who have a great mind to establish a stūpa or offer a temple [commemorating these places], these persons will gain great merit, great retribution, and great praise. Their reputation will spread widely. You disciples should learn from them. Also, disciples, if the good men and good women can offer the eight great magical power stūpas sincerely, they will go to the heavenly realm after their death.” This undoubtedly accounts for some of the popularity of the practice and the dedication of numerous images of the subject that are found in India and abroad. The images are the product of offerings by the lay faithful who aspire to a paradisacl rebirth after this life.¹⁰

The Buddhists hold that there are many paradisal realms, and it is possibly significant that no particular one is mentioned in the text as the goal of the practice. Buddhist cosmology envisions twenty-eight heavens above Mount Meru. Four of these are important as lands of promised rebirth. They are the heaven of the Four Great Kings (Caturmahārajas); Tuṣita, the paradise of Maitreya Bodhisattva; Trāyastrimśa (also known as the “Indra’s heaven” and the “heaven of the thirty-three gods”); and the Brahmaloka. Other Buddha worlds that are important as perfect lands, or paradises, are Ketumati (the paradise of Maitreya when in the future he quits Tuṣita and descends to earth as a Buddha), Sūkhavatī (the paradise of Amitabha Buddha), Abhirati (the paradise of Aksobhya Buddha), Vaidūryavatī (the paradise of Bhaisajyaguru-vaidūryaprabhāsa Buddha), Akanistha (the paradise of Vairocana), and Potola (the paradise of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara). There are many others, and virtually every major Buddhist deity may be said to preside over his or her heavenly world; indeed, in one sense the number of such worlds is virtually infinite.

From an early date there have been multiple heavens in Buddhist cosmology. For example, passages from the earliest layers of the Pāli canon expressly state that Buddhist
laiity will go to the Trayastrimśa heaven of Indra, while Buddhist monks and nuns who attain a heaven world will attain the much higher Brahmaloka. Accordingly, it may be suggested that the “heavenly realm” phrase in the text is a generic reference to the heavenly worlds, and which one a person will attain will depend upon the vows and practices he or she has performed.

The group of scenes/places/activities is rooted in the very ancient practice of pilgrimage to the Buddhist holy sites as first prescribed in the Mahāparinibbāṇa-sutta, in which four sites—those of the birth, enlightenment, first sermon, and parinirvāṇa—are set forth as appropriate places of devotion. When the other four were added is not clear, but it seems that by the time of Aśoka (ca. 250 B.C.) all four of the sites in the Mahāparinibbāṇa-sutta were well established as places of pilgrimage and several others (far more than just the eight of the aṣṭamahāprātiḥārya) had been added. Some of the eight sites are marked by Aśokan period pillars that survive to the present day. Pilgrimages to the sites of some of the life events of Sākyamuni are illustrated in the reliefs at Bhārhut (ca. 80 B.C.) and Sāñci (ca. 25 B.C.), and it appears that there was a widespread practice of pilgrimage to the great pithas (“seat,” e.g., of a great teacher or holy personage) of Buddhism as early as there is any archaeological record. Although the emphasis on the eight events may have a pre-Pāla origin, it was not until the Pāla period that there is clear evidence of a popular cult, in the sense of a devotional practice, or soteriological method, connected to them. The promise of lay devotees attaining heaven worlds seems to have given rise to the practice of making dozens of stūpas and temples, hundreds of miniature votive stūpas, and probably millions of sāccha as acts of faith to achieve the promised rebirth in the heaven world.

JCH


2. Taishō, no. 1685, Aṣṭamahāprātiḥārya-stotra. I would substitute prātiḥārya for sthāna in the Sanskrit reconstruction. See note 4 below.


4. Taishō, no. 1685, translated into Chinese by Fāxiān (Fa Hsien) between 989-999. Reading ling as “magician’s power” and not as “holy place,” which is redundant to “ta” and unnecessary. Accordingly, I read the title as “Buddha spoken sūtra of the stūpas of the eight great magician’s powers.”

The key word here is “ling,” which generally is translated as “spiritual” in English but always carries with it the possibility of supernatural powers over the elements and divine intervention or even simple magic, i.e., in Sanskrit, “prātiḥārya.”

5. The modern Phalgu River in central Bihar.

6. “Three worlds” refers to the realms of desire (kamadhātu), form (rupadhātu), and formlessness (arupadhātu).

7. Chū-an (literally, “bent woman”) apparently refers to the story of the nun Upāli, who knelt before the Buddha at the time of his descent from Trayastrimśa and received his prediction of enlightenment. Normally the city is called Sāñcikaṇḍa without reference to a “country.”

8. The total sum is seventy-eight years, plus one year as the birth year (counted from conception—the first year is in the womb and a child is “one year old” at birth), which makes a total of seventy-nine.

9. Based on a preliminary translation into English by Fang-I Su. I have edited extensively and in some cases revised the translation here.

10. If the practice of pilgrimage to the eight sites can be shown to have existed early in the history of Indian Buddhism, this may indicate an Indic forerunner or analogue to the East Asian paradise/Puruśa Land beliefs.

11. There are pillars or remains of pillars at Lumbini, Sāñcikaṇḍa, Bodh Gayā, Sāñkśaya, and Vaisālī and records of one that has not been located at Kuśinagara.