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Cult of the Eight Buddhist Pilgrimage Sites
Pilgrimage as Image: The Cult of the Aṣṭamahāprātiḥārya, Part II

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The Great Stele at Jagdiśpur and the Presumed Locus of the Cult

After the Gupta period (320-500), never again for the Buddhists of central India was there to be anything resembling the flourishing school of Buddhist sculpture as seen at Sārnāth. However, during the eighth century in eastern India, there arose a school of Buddhist art that was to spread its influence throughout the Buddhist world. Under the Pāla kings of Magadha, who came to rule much of Bihar and Bengal (now also Bangladesh), a period of comparative peace and prosperity emerged that saw a great rise in general patronage of Buddhist monuments. The relative prosperity continued under the successors to the Pālas, the Senas, whose dynasty lasted until the brutal Muslim onslaught of the late twelfth century that ended Buddhism in eastern India.

The largest and most elaborate of all known sculptures of the Aṣṭamahāprātiḥārya and certainly one of the most important of all Pāla period sculptures is an over life-size image (Fig. 1) now kept in the village of Jagdiśpur near Nālandā in central Bihar (ancient Magadha). When I first had the opportunity to see this sculpture in 1969, it was situated on a large mound in a simple brick enclosure and was buried up to the lotus base on which the Buddha sits (Fig. 2). On a visit in 1984, I found that it was still in the same location but it had been partially excavated from the rubble surrounding it and had been enclosed in a modern Siva temple (Fig. 3). (Unfortunately for the potential visitor, the temple is in worship under the direction of an unusual Saivite priest and it is not always possible to see the stele. Therefore, spectacular though the image may be, a special trip to the area just to see it cannot be recommended. However, if one is visiting Nālandā and Bodhgaya, it is worth the attempt. It should be possible if one goes to the village early in the morning while the priest is doing his devotions.)

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The mound on which the sculpture in its modern temple rests is the ruins of an ancient Buddhist temple of considerable size. Indeed, it was probably part of the greater Nālandā complex during the Pāla period and, although presently unidentified in literature, judging by both the size of the temple and of the sculpture itself, it may be assumed to have been a very important temple. Without full excavation of the site it is impossible to prove, but the scale and sculptural quality of the Jagdiśpur stele strongly suggest that it was the principal image of the temple and, therefore, given the date of the image, that the ninth-century temple was dedicated to the Aṣṭamahāpratīhārya as a religious phenomenon.

Although there were many large scale images in eastern Indian Buddhist temples, by far the majority of them were in stucco or mud plaster. None that we presently know of were in stone save the original image in the Mahābodhi (destroyed in the Tūruksha conquest of the region in the thirteenth century; the much smaller, slightly less than two-metre high, present image is a legitimate early work that was installed to replace the missing one in the late nineteenth century by the British Archaeological Survey of India under Alexander Cunningham) and the Mahāparinirvāṇa image at Kuśinagara. If we can extrapolate a regional phenomenon of large stone images at major centres by comparison with these two relatively nearby temples, it must be suggested that an image of so large a scale probably documents the centre of the cult.

In addition to these considerations, there are the surviving sānacalae (miniatures of the image to be carried away by pilgrims in commemoration of their visit to a shrine) in both stone and clay that are found in significant numbers, at nearby Nālandā and in the Nālandā style throughout the Buddhist world. This phenomenon, even
more than just the size of the images and temple, also argues for a ‘cult’ of the Aṣṭamahāprātiḥārya in eastern Indian Buddhism at the time. Given the importance of the Aṣṭamahāprātiḥārya throughout the Buddhist world, it is not surprising that such a temple existed and even less surprising that it would have existed at Nālandā, the great university of Buddhism.

The image is by far the most detailed single representation of the Aṣṭamahāprātiḥārya currently known. In the centre is the image of Gautama Siddārtha at the moment of the victory over Māra (Māravijaya), the Buddhist personification of evil, with hordes of Māra’s demons surrounding him (Figs 4-7) and with Māra’s daughters shown tempting the Buddha-to-be on the front of the plinth below the main figure (Fig. 8). Māra himself is shown, with his bow fully drawn, leading the attack (at the viewer’s left). Above the Buddha-to-be’s head is a tripartite foliage design symbolizing the bodhi tree (pipal or śāvattha tree) of Gautama Siddārtha under which he sat to make his realizations (Fig. 2). (Different buddhas have different bodhi trees to symbolize their respective enlightenments; ‘bodhi tree’ is a generic term for a tree under which a buddha attained enlightenment and does not necessarily, as is so often said in Western literature, indicate the Ficus religiosa or śāvattha/pipal).

Above each of the groups of demons (Figs 4 and 6) are two pairs of devotees, one pair to each side, on foot bearing garlands (vidyādharas or ‘bearers of knowledge’) and making the gesture of obeisance (aṅjali-mudrā), and one pair on elephant-back apparently throwing floral offerings at the scene. Below them and extending down to the level of the lotus throne are the horrific demons of Māra’s army: animal-headed creatures (Figs 4 and 6), a multi-armed being with its face on its torso (Fig. 6) and ogres of the cremation grounds (rākṣasas, emaciated figures next to central figure’s legs in Figs 5 and 7). Other attackers simply prepare to hurl stones, shoot arrows or otherwise launch weapons at the meditating Buddha-to-be. Curiously, at his proper left side (Fig. 6) near his head appear two small figures in aṅjali-mudrā, apparently Indra and Brahmā and immediately below them a Nāgarāja (‘serpent king’) also making the same gesture. Although not included in any text of the Māravijaya that I know, these supporters of the future Buddha seem to have appeared in the scene as witnesses to the great struggle.

Vastly larger than the other scenes on the stele, the Māravijaya scene hierarchically stresses the importance of the moment that the ascetic prince demonstrates his right to full enlightenment. He does this by touching the ground (actually the vajrāsana or adamantine throne of the enlightenment of buddhas) with his right hand (bhūmisparsa-mudrā) to call the earth goddess, Bhūmidevi, to bear witness before Mara to the perfection of his past lives and to his right to enlightenment. By all accounts, the moment is the summum bonum of Buddhist soteriology. At this instant, he has defeated Death (Māra) himself and broken
the endless cycle of rebirth and death to which one is
ever totally attached. From the point of this victory on, he
is no longer the Śākyas and Siddhārtha but a fully
enlightened buddha (buddha, literally ‘the state of being
enlightened’ [bodhi + ta to bud’dha]).

Many of the details of the rest of the scenes are familiar
to readers of the ‘Pilgrimage’ series. In the scene at
the viewer’s lower right, Māyādevi, queen of the Śākyas and
the mother of Prince Siddhārtha, gives birth to the infant
bodhisattva from her right side (Fig. 9). The child is shown
as a miniature Buddha flying from the side of his mother,
while she stands under the aśoka tree at Lumbini. The
infant is received by Indra (Sakra or Sataketu), ruler of
the Heaven of the Thirty-three (Trāyastriṃśa) gods of the
Vedic pantheon, who is shown holding a cloth; to receive
the infant, as though he were a midwife (thus demonstrat-
ing his subordination to Buddhism). Beneath the
emerging infant is another representation of the child,
showing him again as a miniature Buddha standing on a
stack of seven lotuses, representing the seven steps the
infant bodhisattva took in each direction when he declared
his universality (the visually apparent eighth lotus in the
photograph is a result of the uppermost lotus having both
upturned and downturned petals, demonstrating its
mature, fully-open nature; see the lotus throne in Fig. 1).
Next to the lower left of the infant Buddha-to-be on the
stack of lotuses is a nāga holding a container of water for
the infant’s first ceremonial bath. Other figures in the scene
are either Māyādevi’s attendants or minor gods witness-
ing the event.

At the centre of the left side of the stele is the scene of
the First Sermon (Fig. 10) at the ‘Deer Park’ (Rṣipatana
Mrgadāva) near Vārānasi where the Buddha, in delivering
the First Sermon, is said to have ‘set the Wheel of the Law
dharmacakra in motion’. The damaged figure of
Śākyamuni Buddha makes a variant of the dharmacakra-
udrā to apparently originally eight (the texts only tell of
five) ascetics who attend the sermon. Beneath the front of
Śākyamuni’s throne is a wheel flanked by two antelopes,
a standard symbolic set for both the First Sermon and the
teaching of the Buddha in general. At the top corners of
the composition are two flying apsara-like vidyādhāras
who, in the Pāla convention of ninth-century Buddhist
sculpture, when viewed from directly in front of the image,
appear to fly past the head of the Buddha towards the
viewer. The flower garlands that they carry are the sym-
ols of victory being brought to the viewer because, just
as the one who hears the preaching of the Buddha, they
too will achieve soteriological success.

In the counterpart scene to the viewer’s right (Fig. 11),
posing under a branch of a magically generated mango
tree (symbolized by the three groups of ovoid fruits under
leaves at the top of the composition), Śākyamuni demon-
strates the Great Miracle (Mahāprātiṣṭhāna) to the heretics
of Śravasti. As we have seen in Part III of the ‘Pilgrimage’
series (orientations, March 1986, pp. 32-41), there were
two versions of the events at Śravasti found in Indo-
sculpture. To my knowledge, there are no representations
of the ‘Pairs Illusion’ (Yamakapratihāra), where flames
are emitted from the shoulders and water from the feet
of Śākyamuni, in Pāla period art. Apparently some
didactic purpose regarding the universality of the Buddha
was served by the Mahāprātiṣṭhāna version and the
Yamakapratihāra one fell into disuse. The multiplication
of Buddhas is here illustrated by four miniature Buddhas
in the ‘royal ease’ posture (lalitāsana), two at head level
and two seated beside the central image. On the (viewer’s)
left of the pedestal, two females perform aṅgali-mudrā,
while, to the right, what are apparently two heretics accede
to the power of Śākyamuni’s arguments. In the centre,
there is an unusual offering of an undetermined nature.

Also damaged is the scene showing Śākyamuni descending the golden stairs from Trāyastriṁśa (Fig. 12). Indra, to the Buddha’s proper right, holds the pole of the umbrella, and Brahmā, carrying the water pot, is to his left. In a most unusual feature for Pāla sculpture, the Buddha is also attended by Viṣṇu (above and behind Indra), Śūrya (above and behind Brahmā) and a fifth unidentified Brahmanical deity (possibly a ‘Buddhistized’ form of Śiva) to the viewer’s left of Indra, and who is depicted carrying a club, a lotus(?) as a rosary and making varada-mudrā (the gesture of giving). The presence of Śūrya (a very popular deity in ninth-century Bihar) and the unusual form of Śiva (if it is indeed Śiva) are, so far as I am aware, unique to this image in Bihar sculpture. However, the inclusion of Viṣṇu and Śiva in the group of gods attending Śākyamuni commonly occurs in early Nepali paintings. Their depiction here simply further reinforces the interpretation of the scene as a demonstration of the ascendancy of Śākyamuni over the gods of Hinduism. Kneeling below the group is a devotee, presumably the nun Utpali, who received her prediction of enlightenment at the time of Śākyamuni’s descent and, who, of course, is the key to the demonstration of the promise of the descent symbolism — that enlightenment, even for women, is available through devotion to Śākyamuni.

The ‘Gift of Honey’ by the monkey at Vaiśāli is found in the lower left scene (Fig. 13). Although it too is sadly disfigured by the loss of the Buddha’s head and the vidyadhara from the upper left of the composition, it is still the most detailed image of the event known to me. Attended by four monks, the Buddha sits in meditation holding his begging bowl apparently piled high with the honey the monkey offered. Below, reading from right to left, the monkey may be seen bringing the honey, holding up the honey to the Buddha, apparently dancing about, and falling or jumping down a well with only his legs and tail to be seen. His accidental death (or suicide) leads to rebirth as a deva as a result of the merit gained by his gift to Śākyamuni.

The scene of the ‘Taming of Nālāgiri’ (Fig. 14) differs little from those already illustrated in the discussion of Rājagṛha as a pitha (Orientations, July 1986, pp. 33-39). Nālāgiri kneels in obeisance to Śākyamuni while a figure who is presumably Ananda stands next to the Buddha at his proper right. Other monks from the group who were begging in Rājagṛha when the mad elephant was loosened stand behind the Buddha. Emerging from the outstretched hand of Śākyamuni are five tiny lions representing the Dharma that can overcome all external (the rampaging beast) and internal (the rampaging beast of the untrained mind) obstruction to advancement.

The eighth and final scene of the stele is the Mahāparinirvāṇa, or Final Cessation, of the Buddha Śākyamuni. It occurs at the top centre of the stele (Fig. 15) as the culmination to the life events. This scene has also become virtually
standardized and, while what must be seen as ‘reductions’ in elements did take place, the major features remained constant from the depictions at Ajanta (Orientations, September 1986, p. 49) to relatively recent portrayals. The cessation is the final step in the Buddhist soteriology — ultimate release from the cycle of rebirths and deaths that have bound one to saṃsāra. Ananda, Subhadra, Mahākāśyapa are all there in their respective positions, mourning the loss of their great teacher. Divine cymbals and a drum are played by disembodied pairs of hands that descend from the heavens. Other pairs of hands make offerings of a wreath or mala (far left) and a ball of laddūkas or other sweets (right). In the exact centre above the reclining Buddha is a tiny stūpa, the symbol of the final state to which Sākyamuni had just returned.

Of great iconological consequence are the two panels of four bodhisattvas to either side of the Māra’s daughters panel in the centre (Fig. 16; only the left panel may be satisfactorily photographed). These are not part of any narrative of the life of the Buddha but are part of the Buddha’s nature as the progenitor (ārya) of the Aṣṭamaḥābodhisattva-maṇḍala (the maṇḍala of the Eight Great Bodhisattvas), one of the fundamental practices of Tantric Buddhism. Not only does this group of bodhisattvas answer all questions as to the sectarian persuasion of the makers of the stele, but it demonstrates beyond any doubt that the life of Sākyamuni played a germinal role in Tantric Buddhism. While it is beyond the limits of this article to explore this subject, the very presence of the Aṣṭamaḥābodhisattva-maṇḍala in the context of a stele of the Aṣṭamaḥāprāṇihārya manifests a continuity of iconography through much of Buddhist art.
‘Signaculæ’ as an Esoteric Icon of the Jagdiśpur Image

Iconographically rich and complex, the Jagdiśpur stele appears to have been the direct inspiration for a whole category of smaller images and possibly even certain classes of votive stūpas (which will not be treated in this article). As noted above, in India and in the rest of Buddhist Asia, there is a whole genre or sub-type of small images that are identical in concept to the Jagdiśpur image (Figs 17-20). Significantly, a large majority of these have come from Nālandā, immediately adjacent to Jagdiśpur, but others and fragments of others have been found in Burma (Fig. 20), Tibet and China. These are apparently the equivalent of Christian signaculæ. For the terracotta types and the Burmese versions (see below), which also seem to be of a slightly different tradition, this might be true. But for the few stone versions, there are two problems with their being just signaculæ—firstly, there are not enough of them and, secondly, although very close in concept and always containing the same events of the Aṣṭamahāprātiḥārya, they are not actually identical to the Jagdiśpur stele. Thus, it must be argued that they represent a conceptual Aṣṭamahāprātiḥārya and are neither copies or direct commemorations of the Jagdiśpur image.

The variations are significant in that certain major elements connected with the Māra-vijaya change and other scenes are in different positions. The image in Figure 17 is the closest in design to the Jagdiśpur stele. Only the Gift of Honey and the Birth are reversed in position and, in place of Māra’s hoard attacking the Buddha-to-be as a kind of cloud around him, a solitary armed warrior stands to the left of the daughters of Māra, who are depicted dancing on the pedestal. Other than that, although much reduced in detailing, the scenes are easily identifiable and iconologically identical in meaning to the more elaborate versions on the Jagdiśpur stele. From the top, in the Parinirvāṇa, only two monks mourn the Buddha and only two musical instruments play in the sky. In the Descent scene (viewer’s top left), Indra alone carries the umbrella; in the Taming of Nālāgiri (top right), a tiny Nālāgiri bows in obeisance while Ananda peers from behind the Buddha. The First Sermon (mid left) is indistinguishable except for the presence of a tiny wheel and two antelope or deer at the feet of the Buddha. Māyādevī’s delivery (lower left) is unattended except for the infant emerging from her side and a vase of mani gems below, essentially predicting the future of the infant and demonstrating the benefits of faith in him. The Gift of Honey (lower right) has been abstracted into a Buddha with a full mendicant’s
bowl and lacks even a hint of the beneficiary of his own gift, the monkey.

One must also note that the two preaching buddhas are seated in the so-called ‘legs pendant pose’ (properly, bhadraśāna ‘the joyous seat’), probably indicating that they represent Maitreya Buddha. At his final rebirth, Maitreya, the future Buddha, (at the time of the Kingdom of Ketumati) will live a life identical to that of Śākyamuni. But that detail need not concern us here; these stelae show representations of the life of Buddha, any buddha and all buddhas, especially that of the practitioner when his time to become a buddha arrives. That it is Maitreya is simply a way of reiterating the notion of one’s own future buddhahood.

Other miniature sets of the Aṣṭaṁahāprātiṁhārya scenes leave no doubt regarding the identification of the specific event though many major details are absent. In the case of the most beautiful and best preserved of these Nālandā images (Fig. 18), the order of the scenes is radically altered, but each is identified by a key subsidiary element that clearly marks the specific event. Compared to the Jagdiṣpur stele, only the Parinirvāṇa and the Māravijayā are in the same locations. As with the previous image, two monks and two sets of arms playing musical instruments attend the Parinirvāṇa. The Māravijayā remains the central scene in the composition. Māra’s armies and daughters are entirely lacking, however, and in their place below the vajrāśaṇa are three Buddha images, perhaps all depicting various aspects of Śākyamuni during his post-enlightenment meditations at Bodhgaya. The Buddha in the centre under the Nāgarāja Mucilinda obviously illustrates one of the four or seven post-enlightenment meditations. A Buddha to the viewer’s left makes varada-mudrā (the gesture symbolizing bestowing the gift [of being able to pursue enlightenment]); and a Buddha to the right makes abhaya-mudrā (the gesture symbolizing providing absence of fear [of death through knowledge of the teachings]). It is possible that these three figures are based on some version of the northern tradition of the post-enlightenment meditations (see Orientations, November 1985, pp. 55-59) or that they are symbolic of the practitioner entering the path (varada) and advancing by means of the teachings (abhaya). Moreover, given the ubiquitous double entendre common in Buddhist symbolism at the time, several other meanings are probably also present.

All of the other scenes are both easily identified and are essentially standard versions of the subjects. At the top left, a heretic falls over backwards, overwhelmed at Śākyamuni’s eloquence in debate at the sermon prior to the performance of the Great Illusion at Śrāvasti. As in the previous example, two tiny deer and a Wheel of the Law identify the First Sermon (top right). Identical standing images represent the Descent from Trāyastriṁśa, characterized by Indra carrying the umbrella (mid left), while a mouse-sized elephant kneels in obeisance before the Buddha at the Taming of Nālāgiri. In this scene, an apparently less brave (and barely visible) Ananda peers timidly from behind the viewer’s right of Śākyamuni’s aura. In the Birth scene (lower left), Māyādevi, without attendants, clings to the Aṣoka limb and the infant Buddha emerges with Indra present to receive him. Even the pile of lotuses indicating the seven steps is without an image of the infant due to considerations of space. In the Gift of Honey scene (lower right), a miniscule monkey bends on one knee to offer his gift to Śākyamuni.

By contrast, in another version, the subsidiary elements are reduced to the absolute minimum or are even absent (Fig. 19). In this case, for example, nothing distinguishes the two top Buddhas, both of whom display dharmacakra-mudrā, so that there is no possibility of determining which depicts the First Sermon and which illustrates the sermon prior to the Great Illusion at Śrāvasti. In other words, in this image it is not the specific details of the individual events that are so important but rather the whole of the life of the Buddha—the ‘Enlightened One’, enlightenment as demonstrated by Śākyamuni being the primary soteriological phenomenon in Buddhism. That is symbolized by the central image in bhūmisparśa-mudrā, and the rest of the images are conceived as ancillary to that attainment.

What is the reason behind the variations in the representations of the eight scenes? Was there a purpose to it or was it just due to artistic whim? By extrapolating from still surviving Tibetan traditions (originally heavily dependent on practices in eastern India), it may be suggested that the variations served individualized didactic purposes. In the Tibetan tradition, a teacher might ask a painter to make two conceptually identical icons, but the details of certain ‘elective’ sub-units (for example, the protective deities across the bottom of a composition) may be entirely different from one practitioner to the next. It is probable that the same is true for the variations in these miniature representations of the Aṣṭaṁahāprātiṁhārya. In no case does the actual soteriological content change in spite of the fact that certain of the subsidiary elements are different. Indeed, a detailed study of these variables (vastly beyond the scope of this article) reveals that the changes that might be called significant (not just more or less detail in a given scene) are all variations on the interpretations of the events surrounding the Māravijayā.

Two Types of True Signaculæ of the Jagdiṣpur Image

As an example, let us examine one of the several known examples of the so-called ‘Burmese’ type (Fig. 20). (They may not be Burmese in origin as the stone type has been identified as Indian and there is some evidence that they may have been made in Bihar and carried back to Burma by Burmese pilgrims.) These images are quite common by comparison to the three stone images previously discussed and it is probable that they primarily served the purpose of being mementos of a visit to the site by the Burmese pilgrims. The Burmese Buddhist community has a long and still ongoing tradition of connection with central Bihar and with Bodhgaya in particular. The numbers of these and closely related types of images that have been found in Burma and have left Burma to find their way to collections worldwide is enough to demonstrate an intimate association with Burma regardless of their place of fabrication.

A detailed examination of this image in the Cleveland Museum of Art reveals an ‘extra set’ of figures of the Buddha surrounding the Māravijayā. These are six of the so-called ‘seven sites’ that, in Burmese iconography, are identical with the locations of the seven meditations of the
Theravāda tradition. The first meditation is not represented among the six tiny figures because it is, of course, the bodhi tree meditation itself, which is the central figure of the image (thus, the central figure is again a ‘dual image’). The other six Buddha figures are so small that only the standing, walking and Mulīlīnī méditations are obviously identifiable. The point of this example is that the elaboration of adding the locations of the seven meditations still falls within the limitations of the basic configuration and that the seven meditations are themselves within the broadly defined event of the Enlightenment. This image, although fundamentally different in appearance, was made strictly within the parameters of the Jagdiśpur stele, although altered to fulfil a Theravāda didactic process that emphasizes the seven post-enlightenment meditations. It is necessarily different than the Mahāyāna images but is recognizably identical in its iconological content; it still represents the epitome of the life of Śākyamuni and of all buddhas and any buddha.

One must take into account that these images were carved in stone, and thus were relatively expensive signaculae. Hundreds of other images in both baked and unbaked clay have come to light that were press-moulded in such a way that they could have been made very cheaply and by the thousands (Fig. 21). Popularly known in Western literature by the Tibetan term tsa-tsa, they are properly known as sācca in Sanskrit, the term appearing to be an onomatopoeia of the sound of the wet clay squeezing into the mould. Sācca form a major category of objects in Buddhist sculpture, with examples known from India, Pakistan, Tibet, China, Burma and Thailand. There are hundreds of designs and, hopefully, someone will write a thorough comparative study of them in the future. At present, they are treated as minor objects and are given little notice. Examples of the exact type illustrated (although not necessarily from the same mould) have been found at Nālandā, several sites in Bengal and in Burma, with fragments from very similar types also known from Tibet. Given such a widespread base, it must be argued that this was the true ‘everyman’s’ signacula. Anyone with a few cowrie shells (the primary medium of exchange in rural eighth- to twelfth-century Bihar) could obtain one. Like this example, some were fired to a very low level of vitrification while others were simply ‘sun-baked’.

Pressed from an exquisitely carved mould, this plaque (Fig. 21) from Bhita, Bihar state, tells the same story, with minor variations on the theme, as all the other icons of the Aṣṭamahāprātihārya we have examined. In the centre, the Buddha-to-be sits with hands in the bhūmisparsa-mudrā at the moment of the Māravijaya. Unlike all others we have seen, he is shown in a conceptual depiction of the Mahābodhi temple (maṇḍir) at the Bodhimaṇḍa at
Bodhgaya, an obvious symbol of the place as well as the event. It is certain that it is a conceptual representation because the four towers at the corners of the first storey are not depicted (see Orientations, November 1985, p. 36). Eleventh- and twelfth-century models of the Mahabodhi temple all have the four towers and thus this representation has to be understood as a more abstract Mount Meru temple, demonstrating that the action taking place was at the conceptual centre of the universe in Buddhist cosmology.

At the lower left, Mayadevi gives birth to the infant in the presence of one attendant. At the centre left and centre right of the Māraviśyāya are almost indistinguishable preaching scenes. In both cases, Śākyamuni Buddha appears to be attended by seated buddhas; however, the minute detail of the usṣṇīsa (protrusion on top of head) on the subsidiary figure in the right scene and the lack of usṣṇīsas on the subsidiary figures in the left scene probably indicates that the figures in the left one are unenlightened ascetics while those in the opposite scene would be the manifestations of the Buddha in the Great Illusion at Śrīvāsī.

At the top right of the plaque is the Descent from Trayastrimśa, with Śākyamuni attended by one of the gods (probably Indra) while he is in the act of predicting the future enlightenment of the nun Upali. Because the nun has been so enlarged and the scene lacks the details of the steps, it may be suggested that the prediction of her future enlightenment is the pre-eminent feature of this particular interpretation.

At the bottom left is the Gift of Honey with a most curious element. Beside the throne of the Buddha is a recumbent(?) or kneeling(?) elephant, the presence of which makes the source seem to go back to the earliest known version of the story from the Dhammapada Aṭṭakathā (Orientations, July 1986, p. 28), in which the elephant serving the Buddha provides the role model for the monkey. This feature does not occur in any other Pāla period version known to me. At the top left is the Taming of Nālāgiri in a very standard representation where the Buddha is accompanied by Ananda and the puppy-like elephant kneels in supplication before him. Finally, at the top centre is the Purinirvāna, with Śākyamuni mourned by two attendants and a female deity(?) waving a banner above him.

A curious feature of this particular version of the Aṣṭamahāprāthihārya is that, besides the presence of the Mahābodhi maṇḍir, two of the scenes, the Descent and the Taming of Nālāgiri, occur in temple settings. There are two potential interpretations of this phenomenon and probably both carry some truth. The first is that the emphasis on the site as a place is re-emerging in the art depicting the Aṣṭamahāprāthihārya and that temples at the site were conceptually depicted in some of the scenes. The other is that the presence of Mount Meru is inherent at every location where the Buddha is, as a demonstration of his universality. The temple/Mount Meru symbol is shown in this case over the sets of scenes at the side implying that each of the scenes is actually in the Meru maṇḍir.

Regardless of the minor iconographic details of these variations, the final stage in the development of the Aṣṭamahāprāthihārya has been reached. By the eleventh century, a popular icon that was both inexpensive and could be carried away with a minimum of effort was made to meet the demands for signaculæ. Interestingly, signaculæ of this type only rarely have been found at the sites of the events themselves, while frequently at Nālandā, not itself one of the sites but the home of the great surrogate for the sites, the Jagadīśpur stele. Had Nālandā taken over as the major place of pilgrimage? Only future research will tell.

The Aṣṭamahāprāthihārya and the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Texts

One last element of the Aṣṭamahāprāthihārya, the iconography of the pūthas and the cult also concerns us. The text known as the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā, which is the pre-eminent or ‘core’ text of all Mahāyāna Buddhism, is known in extant eastern Indian versions from the Pāla period. Nearly all of these copies are illustrated with the events of the Aṣṭamahāprāthihārya (see Orientations, March 1986, p. 34, and July 1986 pp. 30 and 35 for examples from one such text). It is very curious, however, that no known version of the text contains the narrative that would be appropriate to the illustrations. Indeed, the Aṣṭamahāprāthihārya are simply not mentioned in any of the Aṣṭasāhasrikā texts.

As we have seen in both the foregoing and in the ‘Pilgrimage’ series, the Aṣṭamahāprāthihārya epitomize the whole life of the Buddha, his attainments, his teachings and the benefits of faith in his life to his followers. In short,
the set of eight scenes epitomizes the whole of Buddhism (see following appendix). The Prajñāpāramitā text is very like this in relationship to Buddhism. It too epitomizes the whole of Buddhism (from a Mahāyāna point of view). In the text itself, it is described as the ‘Mother of Buddhas’ (Buddhamātiri) and as such, in the Mahāyāna tradition, the text is the underlying basis (mūla, literally ‘root’ or ‘origin’) forming the foundation behind any and all advancement that the practitioner may make. It is both the beginning and the end of the process of attaining buddhahood. Like the Aṣṭamahāprāthīhārya, it too epitomizes buddhahood. The two religious symbolic systems (semiotics) complement each other and are indeed the same message regarding the ultimate attainment of buddhahood. Thus, in Buddhist soteriological communication theory, they are perceived as identical. In Buddhist practice, where there is an effort to involve all sensory perception and intellectual capacities in the attainment process, the Prajñāpāramitā and the Aṣṭamahāprāthīhārya are dual symbol sets with identical meaning, and it is highly probable that the icon of the Aṣṭamahāprāthīhārya functioned in some way during initiations to the Prajñāpāramitā text. While the specific details of this association are presently unknown to the academic world (they well may be preserved in the esoteric lore of Buddhist practitioners), given parallel relationships in other meditative and initiatory systems, there is virtually no doubt that some sort of initiatory interpenetration of the text, the icon and the practitioner was in practice during the Pāli period in eastern Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism.

The metamorphosis of the pilgrimage is thus complete. The Aṣṭamahāprāthīhārya were transformed from sacred locations, to symbols, to a part of a didactic statement, to an icon demonstrating enlightenment, to an esoteric symbol demonstrating the highest truths of Buddhism, and on to sub-groups of icons demonstrating specialized versions of enlightenment processes according to sectarian traditions. Along the path of transformation, the Aṣṭamahāprāthīhārya pilgrimage route followed the pattern of other Indian pilgrimages by being compressed first from dozens of sites into a coherent group (in this case eight, a significant number in Buddhism reflecting the Eightfold Path), then into a single cultic icon. But it went beyond that, finally developing into portable icons by which the pilgrimage could travel with its devotee rather than the devotee to the pilgrimage. All that remained was for the seed to take root in foreign lands. It happened throughout Asia; Tibet, China, Japan, Sri Lanka and Burma each had its pilgrimage routes or some version of the Aṣṭamahācaitya that could be paid homage to or visited.

Appendix: An Overview of the Meaning of the Aṣṭamahāprāthīhārya

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1. The Birth: After millions of lives of accumulation of merit, one is reborn into the regency of Tuṣita and from there descends to earth (Sahāloka) to live out the final cycle.

2. The Māravijaya: As the result of a profound internal struggle and the development of transcendent intuition, it is possible to defeat the ultimate source of evil in the mundane world (samsāra).

3. The First Sermon: The perfect buddha (samyaksambuddha) does not keep his attainment to himself but goes forth to teach ‘trainable men’ by sharing his knowledge.

4. The Illusion of the Twins or Great Illusion: The soteriological methodology taught by the fully enlightened Buddha is superior to all other religious (heretical) systems.

5. The Descent of the Gods: The soteriological methodology taught by the Buddha is even superior to that of the dual high gods of Brahmanism (i.e. all supramundane soteriological methodologies).

6. The Taming of Nālāgiri: A fully enlightened buddha has utter mastery over uncontrollable forces, whether external or internal.

7. The Gift of Honey by the Monkey: Simple faith and acts of generosity, even by the most mischievous of creatures, is enough to assure one of great rewards.

8. The Parinirvāṇa: Ultimate cessation from the endless cycle of existence is possible and the way has been shown by the Buddha Śākyamuni.

Sources and suggested further reading


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