Sowing the Seeds of the Lotus

A Journey to the Great Pilgrimage
Sites of Buddhism, Part III

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The literary study of the four events of the Illusion of the Pairs, the Descent from Trāyastriṃśa, the Taming of the Mad Elephant and the Gift of Honey by the Monkey in the life of Sākyamuni Buddha and the sites associated with them is much more complicated than that of the Birth, Enlightenment, First Sermon and Parinirvāṇa. These four events, belonging to the period of Sākyamuni’s ministry, are invariably known by some term such as ‘secondary events’ in that they are not part of the group of four permitted devotion by Sākyamuni in the Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra (see Part I in Orientations, November 1985, pp. 46-61). Yet, there is no question but that all of the sites involved are legitimate early sites and three of them, Rājagha, Vaissali and Śravasti, play enormously important roles in the life of the Buddha as where the majority of sūtras were taught. Because of this fact, they are, at the least, equal in importance to the sites of the ‘primary events’, especially for the subsequent developments of the Buddhist religion. Regrettably, none of the sites of the four ‘secondary events’ has been accorded the same archaeological attention as that of the four ‘primary events’. The actual physical locations of the events are not specifically known and, indeed, for one event, the Gift of Honey by the Monkey, there is only one reference to its having taken place at Vaissali; other descriptions of the event do not mention a site.

The major unresolved issue is, why were these four events selected from many others in the Buddha’s life to be given such prominence? There are literally thousands of narratives of individual events from the period of Sākyamuni’s enlightenment to his parinirvāṇa. Some of them are apparently much more potent in terms of demonstrating the Buddha’s religiosity than these, especially the Gift of Honey and the Taming of the Elephant. What force of intuition, didacticism or soteriological methodology binds these events together into what became one of the major themes in Buddhist art from the fourth to the twelfth century in central and eastern India, the very heartland of Buddhism and the region in which the events occurred? Whatever the reasons, along with the four ‘primary events’, the four ‘secondary events’ came to epitomize the life of the Buddha as a paradigm for the lives of all future Buddhas (see last part of this article).

Śravasti and Jeta’s Grove (Jetavana) Monastery

[Because one of his disciples rose in the air to obtain a particularly fine begging bowl, the Buddha issued a precept against the performance of miracles. Assuming they would not be tested because the Buddha had forbidden the practice among his disciples, a group of six heretics insisted that they would perform miracles (in competition) only with him.]

King Bimbisāra heard their talk, and went to the Teacher, and said, ‘Revered Sir, is the report true that you have forbidden your disciples to perform miracles?’ ‘Yes, great king.’ ‘The heretics are saying, “We will perform miracles with you,” what do you intend to do about this?” ‘If they perform miracles, I will do the same.’ ‘Have you not laid down a precept forbidding the performance of miracles?’ ‘Great king, I have not laid down a precept for myself; the precept was intended only for my disciples.’

(Burlingame, Buddhist Legends [Dhammapada-Atthakathā], vol. 3, p. 39)

With these words, Sākyamuni Buddha agreed to a traditional ‘conjurer’s contest’ to demonstrate the validity of his religion over that taught by the ‘heretics’ (in a Buddhist context, anyone who is non-Buddhist). Traditionally, and throughout the history of Asian religions, royal or imperial patronage was all too often decided not by the subtleties of philosophy but by the apparent demonstration of paranormal powers. Whether the sun was stopped in its course in the sky by the great saint pointing at it and commanding it to stop because he could not pay his wine bill and wished the king to excuse him from it, or, as in the Illusion of the Pairs, the Buddha multiplied himself into many counterparts of himself, there was always both a didactic aspect intended to educate the intellectual and a brute demonstra-
tion of control over the metaphysical intended to win over the less easily educable.

Known in literature either as the Mahāprātiḥārya ('Great Illusion' or 'Miracle') and the Yamakaprātiḥārya ('Pair Illusion' or 'Miracle'), there are both differing versions of the narrative and disagreement between the narratives as to exactly where the event took place.

According to the Dhammapada-Aṭṭhakathā, the Buddha promised King Bimbisāra of Rājagaha in Magadha (or, according to the Divyāvadāna, Prasenajit of Kosala whose capital was Śrāvasti) to perform a miracle under a mango tree outside the gates of the city of Śrāvasti (between the town and the Jetavana monastery in the Divyāvadāna). The Buddha, arriving there the day before, discovered that the mango trees had all been cut down.

Being offered a mango by the gardener Gaṇḍa, Śākyamuni ate it and ordered Ānanda to have the gardener plant the seed, which upon being planted instantly split and developed into a fully grown, mature tree, heavily laden with fruit. During the evening, Indra (Sakka), caused discomfort to the heretics (or built a pavilion for the Buddha's miracle, according to Jātaka story number 483). [In the morning] the Buddha caused a jewelled walk to appear extending from the eastern to the western rims of the world. In the evening, he emerged from the Gandhakūṭa (Fragrant Hall) (where he had been waiting for the appropriate time) and descended the jewelled walk into the midst of a vast assembly and performed the 'Pair Illusion'. From the upper part of his body there emitted flames, while from the lower part there emitted water and he alternated this from all sides. At times he walked up and down (while doing this) and a counterpart stood or sat or lay down. On that day, as he performed the Illusion, he taught the Dharma to the multitude. Seeing that none in the multitude was capable of questioning him, his double asked him questions.

According to the Divyāvadāna, after

(Fig. 1) Śākyamuni demonstrating the 'Illusion of the Pair'
From Pāitava, ancient Kapiṣa, Afghanistan, c. late 3rd-early 4th century
Kabul Museum
(Fig. 2) Miniature meditational sculpture depicting Sakyamuni demonstrating the 'Great Illusion'.
From Nalanda, c. 10th century
Nalanda Museum

(Fig. 3) Illustration from an Astasahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā manuscript depicting
Sakyamuni demonstrating the 'Great Illusion'
1165 (year 4 of Govinda Pillia)
Bharat Kala Bhavan, Varanasi
he had performed the ‘Pair Illusion’, he then performed the ‘Great Illusion’ in which a lotus rose from the ground upon which the Buddha sat and multiplied himself endlessly with all counterparts actively preaching the Dharma.

As is obvious from the above, the differences in relating the events are a matter of emphasis and not of substance. In the Dhammapada-Atthakathā, it is the rising in the air and the emitting of flames and water that are emphasized while the production of the counterparts is kept ancillary to the teaching that followed. In the Divyāvadāna, the multiplication is a separate event and is emphasized in that it fills the sky with Buddhas. In early literature, there seems to have been an emphasis on the Illusion of the Pairs performance and not the Great Illusion because it occurs in several occasions in Pāli literature not as the Miracle at Śrāvasti but at different times and locations following some sermon or other event. One concludes from this that the primary event, which would then have been replicated in subsequent literature, was only the Yamakaprātihārya and that either the multiplication of the counterparts was a minor aspect that became emphasized or that it was actually added at some later date during the editing of the texts. Only a thorough text analysis can determine this, and it has yet to be done.

There are two major forms of representation of the Illusion of the Pairs and of the Great Illusion. The first, found only in Gandhāra (in present-day Pakistan) and in neighbouring Kapiša (in present-day Afghanistan), shows a Buddha rising in the air and emitting water from his feet and flames (or radiance, prabhā) from his shoulders (Fig. 1). This convention seems not to have had wide popularity. Even in the Bactro-Gandhāran school, it survives in less than ten stone images while its existence in the rest of the Indian subcontinent is unverified. Interestingly, the second type, that of the multiplication of Buddhas (Fig. 2) is found widely throughout India from the Ajaṇṭā caves to eastern India and seems to have been very popular, with ultimately (by no later than the fifth century) one of the Aṣṭamaḥāprātihārya (eight great events in the life of Buddha) conventions being based on it.
There are several variations on the convention, yet the theme invariably has the same fundamental morphological basis—a large central lotus rises out of the ground plane supporting a central Buddha while branches from the main lotus stalk support additional Buddhas. There may be as few as only three Buddhas, as is typical in most later representations of the event (Fig. 3), or as many as one hundred or more images of the Buddha, each barely distinguishable from the central figure, as at Ajantā (Fig. 4). Although this author can find no specific textual source for it, the scene is generally believed to represent the ultimate universality of all Buddhas. While each individual is in one sense a distinct, autonomous being with his unique characteristics, each is at once identical to the universal absolute (Dharma-kāya) underlying all Buddhas. Since the teachings of the Buddha are aimed at expressing how the individual practitioner will attain his own enlightenment and buddhahood, the message of the Great Illusion at Śrāvasti is nothing less than every devotee's identity with the Dharmakāya.

Known as Saheṭh-Maheth (Set-Mahet) on the maps, the dual sites of Śrāvasti city (Maheth) and the ancient Jetavana monastery (Saheth or Set) today are best reached by automobile via either Balarampur or Bāhrajch. (It must also be noted that photographic restrictions are strictly enforced and that specific written permission must be obtained to photograph at the site from the Office of the Director-General at the Archaeological Survey of India in New Delhi before going to the site.) The wealthy merchant from Śrāvasti, Sudatta (best known by his appellation Anāthapiṇḍada or Anāthapindaka, 'Incomparable Bestower of Alms to the Poor'), met Śākyamuni while visiting a wealthy householder in Rājagṛha and was converted to a lay
follower. During one of their meetings, Sudatta requested that the Buddha come to his home place, Srāvasti, where he would provide the Buddha and his monks with all that would be required by them. The Buddha asked Sudatta if there was a monastery (vihāra) where the monks could stay and Sudatta agreed to provide one. Returning to Srāvasti in the company of the Buddha’s disciple, Sāriputra, Sudatta sought and finally agreed to buy a pleasure garden belonging to Prince Jeta. Jeta did not wish to sell and, presumably in jest, said he would sell only if the price was the amount of gold coins required to cover the ground itself. Sudatta agreed to this exorbitant demand. According to one version of the story, just as Sudatta was about to finish covering the ground, he ran out of coins and Jeta offered the remaining ground to the Buddha along with a temple on it. According to another version, just as Sudatta was completing the covering of the ground, Jeta asked to retain one portion so that he might make his own gift to the Buddha. In either case, the purchase of the ground was consummated and a vihāra was built on the best piece of property near Srāvasti to which the Buddha and his followers were invited to visit.

This munificent act was well known in early times and sculptural representations of it are encountered at both Bodhgaya (Fig. 5) and Bhārhat (Fig. 6). In the representations of the Jetavana (Fig. 7) and of the pīṭha of the Great Illusion (Fig. 8) at Sānci, the gift of Sudatta has been ignored in favour of concern over visiting the site as a place of pilgrimage. Indeed, there is a distinct progression in concept between the four scenes that is very important to recognize. In the Bodhgaya scene, nothing is shown but the action of workmen placing the coins on the ground. The emphasis in this scene is obviously the overwhelming cost of the gift. In the Bhārhat relief, which is slightly later in date, the gift is still emphasized but other elements of the narrative are also included in the scene. Both the Kośambakaṭṭhi hall to the far left and the Gandhākaṭṭhi at the top are clearly identified by inscriptions. In addition, in the lower centre of the composition, a mango tree enclosed in a cātya railing is presumably the sacred mango tree under which the Buddha sat while performing the Illusion of the Pairs. Above the tree, almost in the centre of the composition, stands the patron Sudatta with an ewer, ready to pour water over the hands of the Buddha (the act of giving the Jetavana to the Buddha). While still emphasizing the gift with the right half of the composition where workers spread the coins, the left half of the composition has been used to illustrate the places of pilgrimage at the site — the two buildings in which the Buddha Śākyamuni resided and the mango tree — places where one can gain merit by visitation. The Sānci reliefs, which are still later in date, are radically different in concept. In both, a completely new element, devotees, has been worked into the composition. In the Jetavana composition (Fig. 7), the devotees pay homage (pūjā) at three huts (presumably the lecture hall has been added) and approach offering platforms placed in front of the structures. (Since the platforms are depicted as in the huts within the Bhārhat reliefs, this signals a major change in the definitions of ritual space connected with the sites. It seems that the interiors of the huts had become so sacred that only the šīla of the monk and lay devotees could approach them.) In the Sānci scene showing devotion to the pīṭha of the sacred mango tree scene (Fig. 8), the devotees have literally become the predominant element of the composition. Lined in rigid rows around the tree, they do not so much illustrate the site of the miracle or the miracle itself but the later ritual at the pīṭha. Thus, the metamorphosis of the message is complete; its sculptural presentation has changed from the site of great munificence, to the site of the events, to the place where one can obtain merit by homage at the site.
Contrary to ancient pilgrims who may have seen structures similar to those shown in the Bharhut and Sānchi reliefs, the modern visitor is treated only to the foundations of buildings that date from the sixth century and later. This is not to say that the early remains are missing but that the excavation levels have not been taken down that far. To excavate to further depths would necessitate destroying, at least in part, what is presently at the site. Perhaps someday, partial excavation (for example, the north half of each building site) will reveal the foundations of the buildings of greater antiquity. Even with this limitation of not being able to see the foundations of the ancient buildings themselves, the continuity of purpose at the site still gives one a profound sense of the presence of Śākyamuni. Indeed, for anyone aware of the history of Buddhism, a visit to the excavated Jetavana and, by contrast, totally unexcavated Śrāvasti is to bask in the full vitality of the period of the Buddha’s ministry. Indeed, the poignancy of this feeling was experienced by Faxian, the fifth-century Chinese pilgrim:

When Faxian and Daojing first arrived at the Jetavana monastery, and thought how the world-honoured one had formerly resided there for twenty-five years, painful reflections arose in their minds. Born in a border-land [China] along with like-minded friends, they had travelled through so many kingdoms; some of those friends had returned (to their own land), and some had (died), proving the impermanence and uncertainty of life; and today they saw the place where Buddha had lived now unoccupied by him.

Even today, walking among the ruined structures of the Jetavana one is reminded at every turn of the presence of Śākyamuni Buddha. Here he walked; at this well he drew water; he stayed in the Kośambakūṭa, where he taught. Buddhist literature is filled with the teachings and events of the
twenty-five rainy seasons Śākyamuni lived at Jetavana and no brief account can do it justice.

The present form of the Gandhākapūrī, a structure in which the Buddha once resided, had become a temple by the time of the foundations now seen at the site (Fig. 9). Approached from the east through an open courtyard, the small temple is known to have had an image of the Buddha in its interior. In Faxian's time, this was purported to have been the 'original' sandalwood image of the Buddha carved at the order of King Prasenajit during the absence of Śākyamuni after his performing the 'Great Illusion' at Śrāvasti (regarding the Buddha's absence, see below). However, by the time of Xuanzang in the seventh century, the temple was in ruins and no image remained. The Kośambakūti had also become a temple (Fig. 10) and, as recently as the 1862-63 archaeological tour by General Alexander Cunningham, contained a massive stone image of the so-called 'Bala type' (Fig. 11), which Cunningham removed to the Indian Museum where it is now on display. An inscription on the image, although much damaged, provides very useful information and, by comparative epigraphic evidence, yields a date, during the early Kusāna period, of circa 120-40 AD. Significantly, one of the three donors of the image was a Tripitaka master by the name of Bala. Given the style of the piece and the existence of two other Bala offerings, it is presumed that it is the same Bala who donated the Mathurā and Sārnāth images (see Part II, February 1986, pp. 28-43, Fig. 18). In addition, the inscription states that the image is for the acceptance of the Sāraṃśivādin teachers of the Kośambakūti, thus unequivocally identifying the hall in which it was found.

The events of Śākyamuni's life that took place at Śrāvasti could literally fill a book. Indeed, the Dhammapada Commentary is mostly devoted to a narrative of the Buddha's life at
Srāvasti. Regrettably, the entire city remains an unexcavated archaeological field. Yet within the low walls, rolling mounds and few stūpas and tanks which are all that are perceptible to the modern visitor, Sākyamuni and his contemporaries created much of the history of Buddhism, and it was here that many of the great teachings of Buddhism were offered for the first time. One can only hope that interest in the site by visitors and pilgrims will encourage future excavation. More than at any other site, at Srāvasti there is the possibility of laying bare the very streets on which the Buddha walked during his alms rounds and the places where his conversions and miniatures occurred. In spite of the fact that actual remains of Sākyamuni survive at other sites and some sites are more intimately associated with his attainments, it is at Srāvasti that his ministry — his special relationship with his disciples and lay devotees — may be felt and understood.

Sāṅkāsya

As the Teacher performed his miracle [the Illusion of the Pairs], he considered within himself, 'Where have Buddhas of the past kept residence after performing this miracle?' Straightway he became aware of the following, 'It has been their invariable custom to enter upon residence in the World of the Thirty-three [Trāyāstrīniṣa] and to expound the Abhidhamma [Abhidharma] Piṭaka to their mothers.' (Burlingame, Buddhist Legends [Dhammapada-Atīṭakathā], vol. 3, p. 47)

So thinking, Sākyamuni left his disciple Mahāmogallāna in charge of his disciples and lay followers and ascended directly to the Trāyāstrīniṣa heaven of Indra where, for three months, he taught Abhidharma to his mother and the other devas residing there (Fig. 13). Although it is not certain if this event of the Buddha's residence in Trāyāstrīniṣa ever became important in Indian art or iconography, the event invariably falls between the performance of the Illusion of the Pairs, or the Great Illusion, and the subsequent Descent from Trāyāstrīniṣa. Interestingly, it is the only time during the Buddha's ministry that he is ever said to have been absent from his disciples and lay followers. There are several narratives relating the making of images of the Buddha as surrogates of him during his absence because followers missed him so keenly. Both the image made for King Prasenajit of Kosala, noted above, and that made for King Udayana of Kausāmibi during this period continued to be of particular importance for centuries after this period. (The Udayana image and the story of its origin, although very important in East Asian Buddhism, are well known to have been later, circa first century BC, emulations modelled on the image type and the narrative of the Prasenajit image, which itself probably was not actually the 'original' image.)

Disturbed at his absence and longing to see the Master again, multitudes gathered at Srāvasti to await his return. They demanded of Mahāmogallāna to know when the Teacher would return. Mogallāna ascended to Trāyāstrīniṣa and asked the Buddha when and where he would descend, to which the latter replied:

'Mogallāna, seven days hence I will descend for the great Terminal Festival to the gate of the city of Sāṅkassa [Srāvasti]; those who desire to see me must go there.'

...When the season of the rains had passed and the Terminal Festival had been celebrated, the Teacher informed Sakka [Indra, King of Trāyāstrīniṣa Heaven], 'Great King, it is my intention to return to the path of men.' Thereupon, Sakka created three ladders, one of gold, one of jewels and one of silver. The feet of these ladders rested against the gate of the city of Sāṅkassa and their tops against the summit of Mount Sineru [Sumeru]. On the right side was the ladder of gold for the deities, on the left side the ladder of silver for Mahā Brahmagūptā and his train, and in the middle the ladder of jewels for the Tathāgata [Buddha].

...The deities descended the ladder of gold, Mahā Brahmagūptā and his train descended upon the ladder of silver, and the Supreme Enlightened One himself descended upon the ladder of jewels...Mahā Brahmagūptā held a parasol [over the Buddha to protect him from the sun]. (Ibid. p. 53)

To this narrative both Faxian and Xuangzang also added the account of the nun (bhikṣunī) Utpalā, or Utpalavārṇa, who had vowed to be the first to see the Buddha on his descent from Trāyāstrīniṣa. Because she was a woman (strictly speaking, a slightly lower form of life than a male in the sixth-century BC Indic societal context), there was no hope that she would be able to crow the way to the front of the multitudes that had gathered for the descent. The Buddha, knowing of her vow and her past accumulation of merit, changed her into a universal monarch (caṇḍavartin) with the attending seven treasures (ratna, literally 'gems': a perfect minister, general, wife, horse, elephant, wish-granting gem and Wheel of the Law) and, according to Xuangzang, the four kinds of troops to defend her so that she might take her rightful place at the front of the multitude of kings and princes. Reaching that point, she returned to her original appearance and was the first to greet the descending Buddha, whereupon the Buddha predicted her future enlightenment.

It is also interesting to note that the narrative of Faxian relates that Indra accompanied the Buddha carrying the umbrella while Brahmagūpta accompanied the Buddha carrying a yak tail fly-whisk (cārū). He further noted that the Mauryan king Asoka caused the steps to be excavated down to the level of ground water, erected a pillar with a lion on top of it and built a vihāra over the steps with an image of the Buddha sixteen cubits high standing in the middle of the stairs.

Although somewhat different in narrative content from the literary versions of the story, early images of the stairs pitha are well known and the site seems to have had a very important place in early Buddhist pilgrimage and pilgrimage symbolism. Curiously, and uniquely among surviving representations of the Descent from Trāyāstrīniṣa, the depiction from Srāvasti (Fig. 12) shows only a single staircase descending between teaching pithas, one is at the top of the stairs where the Buddha would have sat in Trāyāstrīniṣa and the other is at the foot of the stairs where the Buddha would have taught after his descent. Other early representations of the pitha, from the Bhārhatu reliefs and those in the Gandhāran idioms, all show the triple stairs. It would seem in the case of the Srāvasti relief that it may be...
a representation of either a secondary surrogate or possibly a specific representation of a particular form of the stairs that was made sometime in the middle of the first century BC. In any case, the emphasis is clearly on the teaching pithas and not on the stairs, perhaps a characteristic of early thinking about the events of the Devarohana-prātiḥārya (literally ‘Illusion of the Gods’ Descent’). In later representations, from the Gupta period (320-500) onward in Indian art, the emphasis changed entirely. In an example from the site of Kurkhār near Bodhgayā in modern Bihar state (Fig. 14), we see the Buddha attended by Indra and Brahmā descending the triple stairs, with Indra and Brahmā much reduced in scale compared with the Buddha and clearly acting as his servants or attendants by Brahmā’s carrying the umbrella (Brahmā’s pole of the umbrella conventionally supports the here damaged canopy above the head of the Buddha in spite of the change in angle) while Indra carries a bowl of sweets. In this example, the stairs are simple geometric forms with rows of conventionalized gems bordering the stairs on which Sākyamuni is about to walk. Sākyamuni’s gesture with his right hand is varada-mudrā (often interpreted as the ‘bestowal [of gifts]’). His ‘gift’, of course, is not something material but the offering of the prediction of enlightenment and the promise of future attainment. Implicit in the gesture is the ability to practise as a monk. In short, in the thousand years from the Sānci relief to the time of the stele from Kurkhār, the message of the ‘Descent from Trayastrimśa’ has changed from the promulgation of the teachings, especially the Abhidharma, to the direct promise of enlightenment to all observers of the stele.

The real importance of the Devarohana-prātiḥārya, however, seems, so far as this author is aware, to be lost to modern scholarship. Above all else, the event demonstrates the Buddha’s domination over the traditional gods. Indra, the king of the Trayastrimśa gods (the thirty-three gods of the ancient Vedic literature) behaves before the enlightened Sākyamuni as an earthly king would before the holiest of priests or teachers. Even Brahmā, the archetype of the priest in the transcendent realms, is subservient to the Buddha. This is not to say that the Buddha is either a universal God or some sort of minor god; on the contrary, he has achieved such status because he is a human but one who has made the attainment that places him beyond any or all gods. His followers know him as the mortal teacher of Transcendent Wisdom (prajñā) and as the ‘doer’ of compassionate actions (karuna). He has mastered the two to attain his enlightenment (bodhi). For
reasons this writer has never understood, the detailed and complex accounting of the practice of 'Brahmanism' outlined in the early literature of Buddhism has, with the exception of Helmut von Glasenapp's *Brahma et Bouddha* (Paris, 1937), gone almost completely unstudied. In the *nikāya* of the Pāli canon, there are detailed accounts of how Buddhist practitioners, especially monks, will attain union with Brahman as a result of their having realized the four *Brahmāvi-hāras*, the states of benevolent love (*maitrī*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*) and [viewing with] equanimity or detachment [of the pure mind] (*upekkṣā*). Also in the Pāli canon, laymen are often assured of rebirth in the realms of Trāyastrimśa as the result of some action benefitting the Buddhist community. In short, there was apparently a dual religious system in Brahmanism at the time of the Buddha promising afterlife for the religious in Brahman's Brahmaloka and to the laymen in Trāyastrimśa. Ultimately, we learn in texts such as the *Athaarvaveda* (a pre-Buddhist text of about 1000 to 800 BC) that it was the union of Indra (who is the self of knowledge: *praṇātman*) and Brahman that provided the final release of the practitioner. Thus, Indra and Brahman formed the basis of the wisdom and compassion duality in the pre-Sākyamuni period and it is by transcending both of their respective achievements that Sākyamuni achieved his ultimate attainment. It has to be understood that the dual cult of Indra and Brahman was the orthodoxy of the time and that the Buddha was in a position of superseding their cult with one of his teachings of the *Dharma*. Thus, the subordination of Indra and Brahman to Sākyamuni may have been, in its time, the single most important statement of the entire set of the Asamahāprātiḥārya.

Unfortunately, except for the identification of an 'Aśokan' elephant capital by Cunningham, virtually nothing has been accomplished in the way of excavation at either the city of Sāṇkhāṣa or the Stūpa of the Tripā Stairs. Today, the site is difficult to reach by a very long drive from either Delhi or Lucknow and has no rest house facilities. The ancient city of Sāṇkhāṣa is one of the largest archaeological areas in northern India, for it covers several square kilometres. Some archaeologists at the University of Kanpur have initiated a site survey, but their work has only begun in the last few years and nothing has been published so far. Although the vast expanse of the ruined city (about equal in size to imperial Rome) beckons those concerned with archaeology in a more general way, from the viewpoint of the Buddhist pilgrim, only the closely fenced 'Aśokan' capital (Fig. 15) and the ruined Stūpa of the Tripā Stairs are there to visit.

Faxian mentions a lion capital, not an elephant one, at Sāṇkhāṣa, yet he wrote from memory after his return to China and may have been in error. Alternatively, the elephant may well have been damaged prior to his having seen it (apparently the capitals of such tall pillars were frequently struck by lightning and damaged before their final falls). Thus, since the location of the stūpa at the gate of the city and the presence of the pillar (actually only the capital has so far been found) matches the descriptions of the Chinese (Fig. 13) Sākyamuni preaching the *Abhidharma* to his mother and the rest of the gods of Trāyastrimśa, Gangarama monastery, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 20th century.
travellers perfectly, there is little doubt that the site is the location of the descent. The capital is quite different in style from the rest of the Mauryan capitals for it has much softer detailing of the minor features. This suggests that it may be either the product of provincial workmanship or may be of a different date than, for example, the Sārnāth and Śāñcī capitals. However, the style of the elephant itself is clearly mid Mauryan (about the middle to the end of Aśoka’s reign).

The stūpa (Fig. 16) is presently topped by a Śaivism shrine, and because the shrine is in active daily worship, it is not eligible for excavation under present Indian guidelines for religious monuments. Circumambulation demonstrates conclusively that the mound is a stūpa, indeed, a very large one of the exact type that would have been raised at so important a location as the place where the Buddha demonstrated his dominion over the traditional gods.

Difficult to reach and offering little to see once one arrives there, the Śāñkāśya site at once both defines the westernmost activity of Śākyamuni and is the place of the demonstration of the pre-eminence of the Buddhist religion in the Indic sphere. For the true pilgrim, it is one of the key sites of the route.

n.b. Those readers familiar with Alfred Foucher’s widely held ‘aniconic’ (‘without images’) theory of early Indian art will find these interpretations slightly divergent from that theory. The aniconic theory suggests that, because the Buddha was so sacred, the ‘severest doctors’ of the religion would not allow images to be made of him. According to Foucher, this situation existed until about the middle of the first century AD, when ‘popular pressure’ and/or ‘Mahāyānist tendencies’ introduced images of a quasi-‘defiled’ Buddha. According to Foucher’s theory, there existed a pre-image period (widely known as the ‘aniconic period of Buddhism’, i.e. c. BC 483-50 AD) during which only ‘aniconic’ symbols were used to represent Śākyamuni. Therefore, the representations of the pūthra of Buddhism illustrated here have been taken symbolically and have usually been discussed as ‘the Buddha preaching’ rather than the observationally obvious pūthra of the First Sermon’. There appear to be two basic flaws to the aniconic theory. First, there is relatively extensive Buddhist literature discussing early images of which there is virtually no reason to doubt. Second, there are early Buddha images that still survive from pre-Christian era dates, at least one of which is dated to the equivalent of 36 BC under the Han dynasty in China. The implication of this last image is that the tradition had to exist in India, he transferred to Gandhāra, passed on to China.
and become popular enough that sufficient images were made so that one had a chance of survival. This suggests a substantially earlier date than any yet discussed in modern scholarship for the origin of the Buddha image — long before the railings of Bodhgaya, Bhärhat and Sāṇci and other similar ‘aniconic’ images discussed above. Thus, this author feels that it is unwise to further perpetuate the modern scholarly myth of the aniconic phase of Buddhist art when it may not have existed at all and certainly did not exist for anything like the length of time suggested for it by the theory’s originator. (See the list of ‘suggested further reading’ at the end of the last part of this article for references.)

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