

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

LEAVES FROM THE *BODHI* TREE





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Susan L. Huntington and John C. Huntington

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107.
Vajrasana Visualization with Life Scenes of Śākyamuni
Buddha. Tibet. Late eleventh or early twelfth century.

107

VAJRĀSANA VISUALIZATION WITH LIFE SCENES
OF ŚĀKYAMUNI BUDDHA FROM THE
AṢṬAMAHĀPRĀTIHĀRYA 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 Pāla Period and Appendix I), consisting of AMP 1, the birth; AMP 2, the victory over Māra (Skt. Māravijaya); AMP 3, the first sermon (Skt. *dharma cakra pravartana*); AMP 4, the display of supernatural powers at Śrāvastī (Skt. *mahāprātihārya*); AMP 5, the descent from Trāyastriṃśa at Sāṃkāśya 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*¹ (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 Siddhārtha, is identical with the scene from the

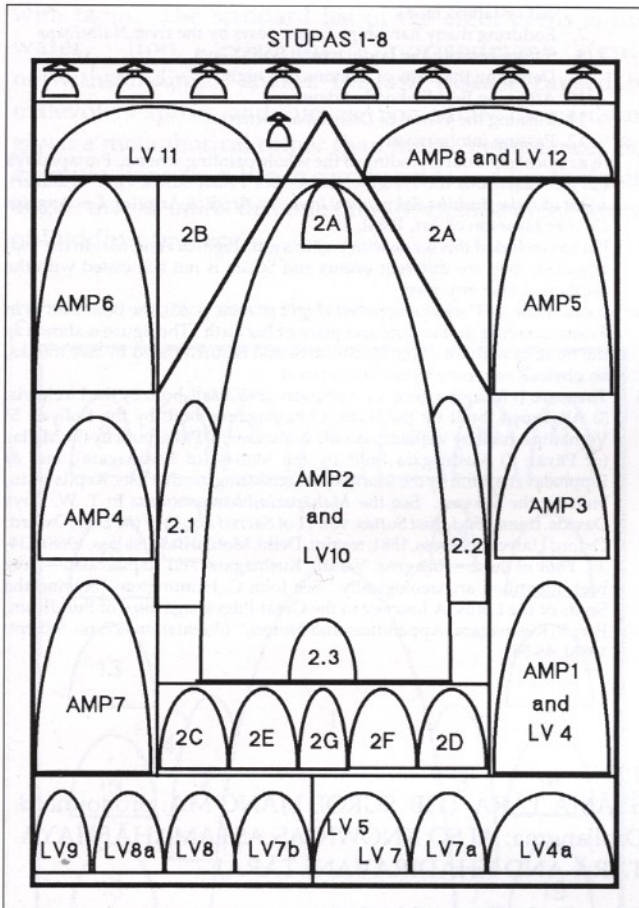


Figure 46. Diagram of cat. no. 107.

aṣṭamahāprātihārya 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 Suddhodana, 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 Kañṭhaka 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 Kañṭhaka to the home court of Siddhārtha at Kapilavastu. Kañṭhaka 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 motionlessness². (The text tells that Siddhārtha cleared his ears by blowing the cotton out through his nose!) LV 8a is the termination 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 *kuśa* grass seat at the moment of making the vow to remain at the *bodhimaṇḍa* until he receives enlightenment.³ LV 10 is the conquest of Māra, or Māravijaya, and is identical with AMP 2. LV 11 is the first sermon of the Buddha at Sārnāth⁴ (i.e. the Mṛgadāva, or the Deer Park, near modern Vārāṇasī) 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 *aṣṭamahāprātihārya* themselves or the *stūpas* into which the Buddha's relics were placed at the time of his death. Since the *aṣṭamahāprātihārya* are already represented in the painting, and since in Indian *aṣṭamahāprātihārya* scenes the relic *stūpas* are usually at the top, it must be presumed that these were intended to be the relic *stūpas*.⁵ This element completes the narrative of the Buddha's life and

has its roots in the early (Pāli) *Mahāparinibbāna-suttanta*, which describes in detail the last days, death, cremation, and distribution of the relics of Śākyamuni Buddha.

This painting is virtually identical stylistically to the Early Shā 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 re-proselytized Tibetans.

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

PUBLISHED:

Pratapaditya Pal, *Nepal: Where the Gods are Young* (New York: The Asia Society in association with John Weatherhill, Inc., 1975), 24-25, 71, no. 3; Pratapaditya Pal, organizer, *Light of Asia: Buddha Sakyamuni in Asian Art* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1984), 24, 63, no. 11; Valrae Reynolds, "The Zimmerman Family Collection," in *American Collectors of Asian Art*, ed. Pratapaditya Pal (Bombay: Mārg Publications, 1986), 176-177, fig. 11.

1. An English translation of the *Lalitavistara-sūtra* recently has become available. See Gwendolyn Bays, trans. [from Edouard Foucaux' French], *The Voice of the Buddha, The Beauty of Compassion*, 2 vols. (Oakland, California: Dharma Publishing, 1983). For immediate reference, two lists of the twelve deeds from secondary sources are given below:
 - I. From a list given in F. D. Lessing and A. Wayman, trans., *Introduction to the Buddhist Tantric Systems (mkhas grub rje's Rgyud sde spyi hi rnam par gzag pa rgyas par brjod)* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1980), 25, citing the *Mahāyānottara-tantra*:
 - 1) The descent from Tuṣita
 - 2) Entrance into the womb
 - 3) Rebirth
 - 4) Skill in worldly arts
 - 5) Enjoyment of harem women
 - 6) Departure from home
 - 7) Arduous discipline
 - 8) Passage to the precincts of illumination
 - 9) Defeat of Māra's host
 - 10) Complete illumination
 - 11) The wheel of the law
 - 12) Departure into *nirvāṇa*
 - II. From a list given by Thinley Norbu in *The Small Golden Key to the Treasure of the Various Essential Necessities of General and Extraordinary Buddhist Dharma*, 2nd ed. (New York: Jewel Publishing House, 1985), 3-4:
 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 Lumbinī 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 Gayā
 9. Defeating the hosts of demons that night
 10. Attaining Buddhahood at dawn
 11. Turning the Wheel of Dharma at Sārnāth
 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 Sujātā's gift (*Light of Asia*, 63). In the text, however, they are different events and Sujātā is not associated with the *bodhimanda* 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) Rājagrha, built by Ajātaśatru; 2) Vaiśālī, built by the Licchavis; 3) Allakappa, built by the Bulis; 4) Rāmagāma, built by the Koliyas; 5) Veṭhadīpa, built by Veṭhadīpaka the *brāhmana*; 6) Pāvā, built by the Mallas (of Pāvā); 7) Kuśinagara built by the Mallas (of Kuśinagara); and 8) Pippalavāna, built by the Moriyas (or, according to other lists, Kapilavastu, built by the Śākyas). 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—Rājagrha, Vaiśālī, Kuśinagara, 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 [Kuśinagara, Appendices and Notes]," *Orientalism* 17, no. 9 (Sept. 1986): 46-58.