

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

LEAVES FROM THE *BODHI* TREE





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APPENDIX I : THE EIGHT GREAT ILLUSORY DISPLAYS (AṢṬAMAHAṀPRĀTIHĀRYA) 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 *dhāraṇīs*, invocation formulae that are mainly of interest to the practitioner who wishes to recite them.¹ However, the other text (translated below) describes the events and their symbolism and explains the practice behind the eight scenes.² 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 Māyādevī at the Lumbinī garden (now in Nepal); 2) the Buddha-to-be's defeat of Māra (Māravijaya) and his subsequent enlightenment under the *aśvattha* tree at the *bodhimaṇḍa* in Bodh Gayā; 3) the first sermon, or setting the wheel of the Dharma in motion (*dharmacakra pravartana*) at the Deer Park (Rṣipatana Mrgadāva) at Sārnāth near modern Vārāṇasī; 4) the "great illusion" (*mahāprātihārya*), or "illusion of the twins" (*yamakaprātihārya*), at the Jetavana monastery outside of Śrāvastī; 5) the descent from the Trāyastriṃśa heaven (*devarohaṇa*) near Sāmkāśya; 6) the taming of the wild elephant Nālāgiri at Rājagṛha 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 *parinirvāṇa*, 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.³

BUDDHA TELLING THE NAME OF THE EIGHT GREAT MAGICAL POTENCY (AṢṬAMAHAṀPRĀTIHĀRYA) STŪPAS⁴

At one time, Lokajyeṣṭha ("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 Nairāñjanā River,⁵ is the place where the Buddha attained enlightenment. The third one, in Vārāṇasī city of the Kāśī kingdom, is the place where the Buddha turned the great Dharma-wheel. The fourth one, the Jetavana [monastery] of Śrāvastī kingdom, is where the Buddha showed his great spiritual transcendence. The fifth one, Chuan city (i.e., Sāmkāśya), is where the Buddha descended from Indra's heaven (Trāyastriṃśa). The sixth one, at Rājagṛha, is where Devadatta was destroyed and the *saṃgha* purified (i.e., the taming of the wild elephant Nālāgiri). The seventh one, at Vaiśālī, is where the Buddha announced his speedy *nirvāṇa* (i.e., the gift of honey). The eighth one, Kuśinagara, is where the Buddha entered *nirvāṇa*. These are the eight great magical potency *stūpas*."

He then recited a *gāthā*:

"At King Suddhodana's capital in Kapila,
Buddha was born in Lumbinī Garden;
At Magadha near the Nairāñjanā River,
He attained enlightenment under the *bodhi*
tree;
In Vārāṇasī city of Kāśī kingdom,
He turned the Dharma-wheel and explained
the twelve times [of life];
At the Jetavana [monastery] of the great city
of Śrāvastī,
He demonstrated his spiritual transcendence
in the three worlds;⁶
At Chuan city in Sāmkāśya country,⁷
He descended from Indra's heaven;
In the monk's section of the great city of
Rājagṛha,

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."

Lokajyeṣṭha then told his disciples, "Listen to my *gātha* 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 Rājagṛha he converted and saved people,
Four years he stayed in the Vis-a[?] woods,
Two years he lived at 'Ja-li-yen' [?],
Twenty-three years he stayed at Śrāvastī,
At Vaiśālī, [at] the Deer Park,
[At] "Ma-ju-li" [?]," [in] Indra's heaven,
[At] Kuśinagara, [at] Kauśāmbī,
On the summit of *Stūpa* Mountain,
With the Wei-nu [?] tribe,
And [in] King Suddhodana's capital of Kapilavastu—
He stayed [in each] of these places for one year.⁸

Śākya Tathāgata then stopped travelling,
Śākya'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].⁹

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

gātha (verse) form reiteration of the same information, and 3) a separate *gātha* recounting the life of Śākyamuni. *Gāthas* have the virtue of being poetic and are therefore easier to remember than prose. Thus, the two *gātha* 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 *aṣṭamahāprātihārya* was at its height in the Pāla 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 paradisaal rebirth after this life.¹⁰

The Buddhists hold that there are many paradisaal 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 (Caturmahārājas); Tuṣita, the paradise of Maitreya Bodhisattva; Trāyastriṃśa (also known as the "Indra's heaven" and the "heaven of the thirty-three gods"); and the Brahmaloaka. Other Buddha worlds that are important as perfect lands, or paradises, are Ketumatī (the paradise of Maitreya when in the future he quits Tuṣita and descends to earth as a Buddha), Sukhāvati (the paradise of Amitābha Buddha), Abhirati (the paradise of Akṣobhya Buddha), Vaidūryavati (the paradise of Bhaiṣajyaguru-vaiḍūryaprabhāsa Buddha), Akaniṣṭha (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

laity will go to the Trāyastriṃśa heaven of Indra, while Buddhist monks and nuns who attain a heaven world will attain the much higher Brahmaloaka. 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/events/places is rooted in the very ancient practice of pilgrimage to the Buddhist holy sites as first prescribed in the *Mahāparinibbāna-suttanta*, 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 *Mahāparinibbāna-suttanta* were well established as places of pilgrimage and several others (far more than just the eight of the *aṣṭamahāprātihārya*) had been added. Some of the eight sites are marked by Aśokan period pillars that survive to the present day.¹¹ Pilgrimages to the sites of some of the life events of Śākyamuni are illustrated in the reliefs at Bhārhut (ca. 80 B.C.) and Sāñcī (ca. 25 B.C.), and it appears that there was a widespread practice of pilgrimage to the great *pīṭhas* ("seat," e.g., of a great teacher or holy personage) of Buddhism as early as there is any archaeological record.¹² 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.

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1. *Taishō shinshu daizōkyō*, ed. Junjirō Takakusu and Kaikyoku Watanabe (Tokyo: Daizō shuppan kabushiki kaisha, 1924-1934), no. 1684, *Aṣṭamahāsthānacaityavadāna-stava*. I would substitute *prātihārya* for *sthāna* in the Sanskrit reconstruction. See note 4 below.
2. *Taishō*, no. 1685, *Aṣṭamahāsthānacaitya-stotra*. I would substitute *prātihārya* for *sthāna* in the Sanskrit reconstruction. See note 4 below.
3. For further discussion, see my "Pilgrimage as Image: the Cult of the Aṣṭamahāprātihārya," part 1, *Orientalia* 18, no. 4 (April 1987): 55-63; and part 2, *Orientalia* 18, no. 8 (Aug. 1987): 56-68.
4. *Taishō*, no. 1685, translated into Chinese by Faxien (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 power over the elements and divine intervention or even simple magic, i.e., in Sanskrit, "prātihārya."
5. The modern Phalgu River in central Bihar.
6. "Three worlds" refers to the realms of desire (*kāmadhātu*), form (*rūpadhātu*), and formlessness (*arūpadhātu*).
7. Chu-an (literally, "bent woman") apparently refers to the story of the nun Utpalā, who knelt before the Buddha at the time of his descent from Trāyastriṃśa and received her prediction of enlightenment. Normally the city is called Sāmkāśya 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.
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/Pure Land beliefs.
11. There are pillars or remains of pillars at Lumbinī, Sārnāth, Bodh Gayā, Sāmkāśya, and Vaiśālī and records of one that has not been located at Kuśinagara.
12. See my series of articles, "Sowing the Seeds of the Lotus: A Journey to the Great Pilgrimage Sites of Buddhism," part 1 [Lumbinī and Bodhgayā], *Orientalia* 16, no. 11 (Nov. 1985): 46-61; part 2 [Rṣipatana Mṛgadāva], *Orientalia* 17, no. 2 (Feb. 1986): 28-43; part 3 [Śrāvastī and Sāmkāśya], *Orientalia* 17 no. 3 (March 1986): 32-46; part 4, *Orientalia* 17, no. 7 (July 1986): 28-40; part 5 [Kuśinagara, Appendices and Notes], *Orientalia* 17, no. 9 (Sept. 1986): 46-58. See also my series on "Pilgrimage as Image."