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# Pilgrimage as Image: The Cult of the *Aṣṭamahāprātihārya*

## Part I

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Over the past year, the readers of *Orientalist* have shared in the experience of visiting the Eight Great Pilgrimage Sites (*Aṣṭamahāprātihārya*) relating to the life of Śākyamuni Buddha\*. Thanks to modern photographic and publication technologies, readers have, in a limited way, 'gone on the pilgrimage', and, for most, it will be as close as they come. Yet, according to Buddhist theory, to have performed the pilgrimage even in this manner produces merit (*puṇya*) that will benefit the faithful, although greater benefit is derived from actually making the pilgrimage in person. However, despite modern transportation facilities, the journey to all of the sites is somewhat difficult, time-consuming and expensive. How much more difficult would it have been fifteen hundred or a thousand years ago? The uncertainties of extended travel, made more difficult by wildly fluctuating political conditions, robbers and exposure to regional diseases without the benefits of modern medicine, caused such a trip to be very dangerous at best. Conveyance by foot, cart, horse and boat, meant the length of time necessary for the pilgrimage was, literally, years. Moreover, the relative costs were vastly beyond what they are today.

Not only was such travel for the most intrepid, but those who set out on pilgrimages to India frequently failed to return. For example, it has been estimated that only about two per cent of the Chinese pilgrims who attempted the journey to India ever returned to China! Travellers from other lands, including Burma, the Khmer empire, Srivijaya in Java and even other regions of India, had less far to go and more direct routes to follow, but even for them such a journey was not undertaken lightly. A much more inviting way to make the 'trip' was by one's devotions before an image depicting all of the eight events and, by implication, the sites associated with them, thereby serving as a surrogate of the whole route. It is not widely known, even among scholars, that an image of the *Aṣṭamahāprātihārya* known as the 'Eight Great Sacred Locations' (*Aṣṭamahācaityas*) existed and was the apparent focus of a subcult in Buddhist lay practice. The cult developed a series of images and ultimately an image type that represented the eight events and, inherent in the depiction of the event, was the reference to the sites at which the events took place.

## Notes on the History of the Cult of Pilgrimage

The sites, also known as *pīthas* (literally 'seat [of *kuṣa* grass belonging to a deity or holy man]'; see *Orientalist*, November 1985, pp. 46-48) epitomize the life of Śākyamuni by demonstrating both his Buddhahood and his ministry. In the Mahāyāna tradition, these sites are renowned as the places where Śākyamuni performed the Eight Great Illusions, or 'conjurer's illusions', in order to teach the Buddhist *Dharma* to beings of the world. The pilgrimage to Buddhist sites including most of the *Aṣṭamahāprātihārya* became a separate subcult in Indian Buddhism at a very early date. No later than the time of emperor Aśoka (r. c. 270-c. 220 BC) and probably even much prior to his reign, pilgrimage to many of the Buddhist sites that are in modern eastern Uttar Pradesh and central Bihar in north central India and southern Nepal had become commonplace and possibly even the primary form of devotional worship by the lay Buddhist community. Apart from the eight sites, which may have been codified into essentially a standard set of places by that time, many other sites also existed. There were literally hundreds of them, some legitimately (e.g. Kapilavastu, the city of Śākyamuni's childhood and youth) and many others apocryphally (e.g. the cave of the Buddha's shadow in Gandhāra) associated with the life of Śākyamuni.

Just when the Eight Great Sites became codified into a discrete grouping is uncertain, although circumstantial evidence suggests that it might have been very early. The sequence is a kind of epitome of the life of Śākyamuni and, by extension, all Buddhas, past and future. Interestingly, except for the very brief passage in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* (*Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* in Sanskrit) quoted in the first of the 'Pilgrimage' articles (*Orientalist*, November 1985, p. 46), which gives no details of the cult, and the account of Aśoka's pilgrimage in the *Aśokāvadana*, no specific canonical source instructing pilgrims where to go and what to do has yet come to light. However, it should be noted that the *ex-post facto* narrative of Aśoka's pilgrimage in the *Aśokāvadana* is very strong evidence of a cult of pilgrimage. Although the passage is written in such a way as to imply that the emperor himself conceived of the notion of going to these places, thereby inventing

\*Part I (*Orientalist*, November 1985, pp. 46-61) discusses Aśoka's archetypal pilgrimage, Lumbinī and Kapilavastu, and Bodhgayā and its environs; Part II (February 1986, pp. 28-43), the Rṣipatana Mṛgadavā (Vārāṅsi and Sārnāth); Part III (March 1986, pp. 32-46), Śrāvastī and the Jetavana Monastery, and Sāṅkāsya; Part IV (July 1986, pp. 28-40), Vaiśālī and Rājagṛha; and Part V (September 1986, pp. 46-58), Kuśinagara, the Division of the Relics and the Eight *Mahāstūpas*, Aśoka's Division of the Relics, an alternative site for Kapilavastu, and the Piprahwa Reliquary Inscription.

pilgrimage, it actually indicates that pilgrimage to Buddhist sites was already very important and that the emperor essentially followed the established practice of going on pilgrimage. The fact that there is direct, contemporaneous evidence of Aśoka's pilgrimage in the pillar inscriptions and, furthermore, that the emperor went so far as to erect the pillars at the sites points to the popular appeal of the pilgrimages. Obviously, one would not erect an extremely expensive pillar at a site no one ever visited but only where one was certain of large numbers of people. Accordingly, one may be assured that pilgrimage and its major sites were an established tradition that predated the reign of Aśoka, and therefore had to have originated and become established in the lay community between the death of Śākyamuni in 483 BC and the beginning of the reign of Aśoka in c. 270 BC.

This insight gives us the ability to extrapolate a general history of pilgrimage in the early Buddhist period. John Irwin has suggested in his recent *Burlington Magazine* series of articles (see bibliography at end of Part II) that many of the Mauryan pillars were not actually erected by Aśoka but by his predecessors, though Aśoka added inscriptions to them. Thus, the cult of pilgrimage originated and had time to become important well before the reign of Aśoka's father (c. 315-c. 270 BC), giving us solid evidence that pilgrimage was well established in Buddhist practice by no later than approximately one hundred years after the death of Śākyamuni (i.e. c. 383 BC). Then, if (for technical reasons that shall not be discussed here) we understand the passage in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* as being evidence of an already ongoing cult, then it is clear that the practice of pilgrimage to at least the four sites began in Śākyamuni's lifetime or immediately thereafter. Given the evidence of the reported 'War over the Relics' and the subsequent division of Śākyamuni's relics for encasement in the Eight Great Reliquaries (*Aṣṭamahāstūpas*) at the time of his death (see *Orientalions*, September 1986, pp. 53-54), it is my opinion that there already was a cult of *caityas* (a general term for places of pilgrimage and holy sites including *stūpas*), incorporating local surrogates, already in practice prior to Śākyamuni's death. In that light, each of the princes contending for the relics wanted (among several other benefits to be derived) the logical conclusion to the pilgrimage in his dominion.

Even though one must be content with a very general and admittedly speculative 'sketch' of the beginnings of the cult of pilgrimage, there is no doubt that, by Aśokan times, the pilgrimage was a well-established, major practice in Buddhist soteriological methodologies. During the Śuṅga period (c. 185-73 BC) and around the turn of the Christian era, extant depictions of pilgrimage sites in permanent materials were not 'life scenes' as is commonly said but depictions of the *pīthas* as places of pilgrimage; the great majority of these scenes even show pilgrims at the sites. Indeed, based on the surviving sculpture of the period, it must be argued that this was the 'Golden Age' of Buddhist pilgrimage in India. If one accepts this viewpoint and its obvious extrapolation that the lay cult of faith (*śraddhā*) was intensely focused on the loci of sacred acts rather than on the persona of the Buddha, many of the patterns of early Buddhist practice and iconography fall into place.

First of all, it accounts for the need for apocryphal

*pīthas*. The necessity for accessible sites coupled with intense local chauvinism drove teachers to produce either surrogates for the *Aṣṭamahācaityas* or to create their own regional legends to give importance to local Buddhist traditions. Places like Kelaniya in Sri Lanka, or any of the numerous Gandhāran *pīthas*, and even ancient Kauśāmbī (just west of modern Allahabad), rose to prominence in the early Buddhist world on the basis of a presumed visit of Śākyamuni Buddha, in spite of the unlikelihood that such visits had ever taken place. Other still problematic symbols, for example the *pītha* in front of the pillar of radiance (*prabhā*, not flame as is so often said) from Amarāvati and Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, are probably best understood as manifestations of regional *pīthas*, the local heritage of which is now lost.

The well-known first and second century AD change in the Indian heritage undoubtedly reflects a major change in concentration of lay faith practices from the loci of sacred actions to the persona of Śākyamuni. However, under no circumstances was he ever understood as either a god or as *the* God as has been suggested by some early scholars. Śākyamuni was always and still is understood as the great teacher (*guru*) who taught a soteriological methodology and founded the four orders of followers: 1. male mendicants (*bhikṣus*), 2. female mendicants (*bhikṣuṇīs*), 3. male lay devotees (*upāsakas*) and 4. female lay devotees (*upāsikās*). It is clear from even the earliest canonical literature that, beginning at the time of Śākyamuni, the monks had developed a strong persona cult emphasizing the content of Śākyamuni's teachings and his acts of conversion, especially of members of the *brāhmaṇa* caste. It is my suggestion that the laity also began a cult of the persona, at first essentially attached to and later effectively supplanting most of the cult of the pilgrimage.

Although the religious, political and sociological pressures that brought about the change in lay faith emphasis are unclear, it may be speculated that the decline of Theravāda ascendancy allowed an emergence of (proto[?])-Mahāyāna teachings. Since these emphasized a more personal potential for enlightenment and the attainment of *nirvāṇa*, they may have generated a more personal and therefore direct relationship of the lay practitioner to Śākyamuni. Presumably fuelled by the example of the Kuṣāṇa cult of kings and probably coupled with competition from the rapidly developing Vaiṣṇavite and Śaivite cults, these circumstances led to relatively rapid development in the popular appeal and devotional mechanisms of lay faith practices.

### Early Scenes of the *Prātihārya* Events

By no later than the Kuṣāṇa period (late 1st-3rd century), during the popularization of the use of Buddhist images in permanent materials, depictions of events of the life of the Buddha, as opposed to the *pīthas*, became commonplace and many such depictions in stone survive. One of the earliest extant composite or collected scenes in the Mathurā school depicts five of the standard eight events (Fig. 1), the four events from the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* along with the Descent at Sāṅkāśya. From right to left these are, the Birth at Lumbinī (Fig. 2), the Enlightenment (*Māravijaya*, literally 'Victory over Māra') at Bodhgayā (Fig. 3), the Descent from Trāyastriṃśā (*Devarohaṇa*) at



(Fig. 1) Stone stele depicting *Life of the Buddha*  
2nd century AD, Mathurā  
Mathurā Museum



(Fig. 2) Birth, detail of Figure 1



(Fig. 3) *Māravijaya*, detail of Figure 1



(Fig. 4) Descent from Trāyastriṃśā,  
detail of Figure 1



(Fig. 5) First Sermon, detail of Figure 1



(Fig. 6) *Parinirvāna*, detail of Figure 1

Sāṅkāśya (Fig. 4), the 'First Sermon' in the Mrgadāva at Sārnāth (Fig. 5) and the *Parinirvāṇa* at Kuśīnagara (Fig. 6).

The arrangement is unusual because the Descent scene is in the centre, surrounded by the four scenes from the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, thus giving it a clear visual pre-eminence over the others. Perhaps the sculpture reflects a local cult of the Descent, for the Descent idea was certainly not new at this time. Images of the Sāṅkāśya *pīṭha* are known in Indian art from as early as the Bhārhut railings (*vedikā*) of circa 100 to 80 BC and the Sāñcī *torāṇas* of circa 25 BC.

Starting from the right, the first scene is the Birth, with Śākyamuni's mother Māyādevī holding the *aśoka* tree (Fig. 2). She is attended by Indra, who holds the infant, and by a female attendant to the far right. Below, the events of the Birth are continued with the bath by two *nāgas* and with the infant Buddha-to-be standing on a platform resembling seven layered lotuses and indicating the seven steps. The next scene is the Victory over Māra (Fig. 3). To the viewer's left of Śākyamuni is a figure of a woman combing her hair in a mirror, apparently one of Māra's daughters preparing to tempt the Buddha-to-be, while below the platform is Māra with a bow and a demon, representing the multitudes of Māra's demon armies. The figure of Gotama Siddārtha is shown in the *bhūmisparśa-mudrā*, the gesture of touching the earth, at the moment he wins the right to enlightenment. In the centre of the composition is the Descent from Trāyastriṃśā (Fig. 4), with the triple stairs leading from that heaven to earth occupied by Śākyamuni in the centre, with Brāhmā to his right and Indra on his left. At the foot of the stairs, the nun Utpalī kneels in supplication before the descending Buddha while in the foreground are the various princes who were present at the Descent. The first scene to the left of centre is the 'First Sermon' (Fig. 5), showing the Buddha in the earliest form of the teaching position, the *abhaya-mudrā*. Better known as the gesture of 'granting the absence of fear', in early sculpture this gesture is the symbol of offering the teachings to the community. Below him are two of his former companions from the period of his ascetic wanderings. Between them is a *dharmacakra-stambha* (pillar of the Wheel of the Dharma [or Law]), which may represent the four-faced lion pillar at Sārnāth. The scene to the far right is the *Parinirvāṇa*, or the Death of the Buddha (Fig. 6). Behind the reclining figure are the Malla princes of Kuśīnagara in mourning, while below the couch is a (badly damaged) representation of monks also in mourning. One appears to be Subhadra, the Buddha's last convert, who is usually shown with his back to the viewer.

It is important to recognize that all five of the scenes as depicted on the Mathurā slab are, with minor variations in hierarchical scaling, essentially the same iconographic conventions that will be found in later representations. This indicates that by the second century AD the iconography of the scenes was already stable, which, in turn, suggests that a relatively long period of iconographic development had already taken place. The slab clearly demonstrates that the idea of a 'set' or 'grouping' of the scenes, basically following the lines set out in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* and presumably signifying the whole of Śākyamuni's life, was already in existence as early as we have any surviving sculptural verification, in this case the second century AD.



(Fig. 7) Stone stele depicting *Life of the Buddha*  
5th century, Sārnāth  
Sārnāth Museum

In other words, we are examining a tradition that has a very long heritage, one that undoubtedly extends back to earlier periods when Buddhist art was largely in perishable materials.

By the Gupta period, several conventions for the sets of life scenes had come into existence (Figs 7, 12 and 18). Indeed, no two of the surviving sets of scenes from this period are particularly close in iconographic arrangement or even in the determination of which scenes will appear in a group. As yet, there is no completely satisfactory explanation for this variation, although Joanna Williams (see bibliography for Part II) has pointed out that the scenes seem to follow different life stories in literature. Accurate though this basic assessment is, a problem still exists in that no single surviving text gives the details of all the events as found in any one set of scenes. Accordingly, there had to have been some sort of tradition of amalgamation of a separate, possibly oral, tradition about the sets of events that led the artists to their particular interpretations.



(Fig. 8) Birth, detail of Figure 7



(Fig. 9) *Māravijaya*, detail of Figure 7



(Fig. 10) Descent from Trāyastriṃśā, detail of Figure 4



(Fig. 11) *Parinirvāṇa*, detail of Figure 7

In spite of popular opinions in today's art world, it is irrelevant to suggest that the variations were the result of artistic preference or whim. Given the very low relative status of the artisan in Gupta period India and the rising importance of stable, ritually 'correct' iconographic conventions at the time, Gupta artists had very little, if any, freedom in deciding what to include in or which scenes would be part of a set. These decisions would have been made by what I have termed an 'iconographic authority', who, if we can judge by cross-cultural comparisons to later traditions elsewhere in Asia, most probably would have been a monk as well as a specialist in iconographic matters. Thus, while a patron would have decided to dedicate an image, an iconographic authority would have been consulted to discuss the appropriate type of image.

It is entirely possible that an artist might also be an iconographic authority, as frequently happens in the case of Tibetan painting today, but this would not alter the situation where the iconographic authority would be responsible for the 'correctness' of the image while the 'artist' or group of artisans were responsible for the execution of the work. The master artist would have had a great knowledge regarding conventional details currently in vogue in the culture (what a modern art historian calls stylistic elements), but would have offered little or nothing in the way of innovation that would materially affect the major iconographic components of the image being planned. The iconographic authority would have dictated in considerable detail the appearance and position of the figure(s), the attributes, details of proportion and, ultimately, minute details such as jewellery conventions, hair arrangements, garments and so on. The artist would

have been 'free' to modify within very narrow limits aspects of thrones, lotus bases, minor elements of figural ornamentation and background conventions if any were present. On the whole, well over nine-tenths of a design was determined before the artist would become involved.

The four scenes in the sculpture in Figure 7 are close to those of the Mathurā panel in that the four events of the life are those described in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*. Starting from the bottom is the Birth at Lumbinī (Fig. 8), which curiously shows two attendant Buddhas as well as the more common elements. Because of their poor condition, it will likely remain unclear whether the Buddhas depict separate sub-scenes of Śākyamuni's life or depict Buddhas of the past as a demonstration of the Buddha-to-be's heritage. Above the Birth scene is the *Māravijaya* (Fig. 9) with Māra holding his bow to the Buddha's right and two of Māra's daughters to the Buddha's left. The next scene is a *Dharmacakra-pravartana* (Fig. 10) but with a number of elements that are not typical of most other such scenes. The Buddha is attended by two bodhisattvas, Mañjuśrī to his right and Padmapāṇi/Avalokiteśvara to his left. Behind him are two Buddhas on lotus stalks, suggesting a dual symbolism with the events of either the 'Illusion of the Twins' or the 'Great Illusion' at Śrāvastī (see *Orientalist*, March 1986, pp. 32-46). The top scene is a rather standard *Mahāparinirvāṇa* (Fig. 11) crowned by a small *stūpa* (visible in Fig. 7). While there are many minor details that vary from the Mathurā example, the general scheme of the four scenes is similar (although not the overall composition or the grouping as the Mathurā image also contains the 'Descent from Trāyastriṃśā') and each scene is clearly related to the Mathurā precedent.



(Fig. 12) Stone stele depicting *Life of the Buddha*  
5th century, Sārnāth  
Sārnāth Museum

The group of scenes in Figure 12 is one of three sets of life scenes that seem to belong to a different tradition than that of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*. The Dream of Māyā shown at the bottom left (Fig. 13) is an aspect of the narrative almost invariably left out of central Indian interpretations of the post-Kuṣāṇa period, where the Birth is the relatively standard representation of the event. None of the events in the entire next register commonly occur in central Indian sculpture; the Departure with Śākyamuni on horseback, the hair-cutting scene and the exchanging of clothes, then meeting with the Nāga Kalika and the gift of the girl Sujātā (Fig. 14) are better known from late Kuṣāṇa period sculpture in the Gandhāran region. A most unusual element is the figure of the meditating Buddha-to-be at the right of this register (Fig. 15). Given the context, this figure can only be interpreted as representing Gautama Siddārtha during his six-year



(Fig. 13) Dream of Māyā, detail of Figure 12



(Fig. 14) Sujātā's Gift, detail of Figure 12



(Fig. 15) Meditating Buddha-to-be, detail of Figure 12



(Fig. 16) *Māravijaya*, detail of Figure 12



(Fig. 17) First Sermon, detail of Figure 12

period of asceticism prior to his enlightenment. His attendant, to the meditating bodhisattva's left, carries a small bag. It is possible that the scene refers to some specific narrative, but, to my knowledge, it has yet to be specifically identified. Indeed, because of the amount of space allowed to them, these events of Śākyamuni's pre-Enlightenment life are emphasized to the apparent comparative reduction of the next two events, the *Māravijaya* (Fig. 16) and the *Dharmacakra-pravartana* (Fig. 17), which occur side by side in the same register. It is impossible to suggest what would have been next, but one must assume that a scene of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* occurred at the top of the slab. The group signifies that there were (and still are) different accounts of and differing degrees of emphasis on the various events in the life of Śākyamuni and that the traditions had very long histories.

3. First Sermon	8. <i>Parinirvāṇa</i>
5. Descent	4. Great Illusion
6. Gift of Honey	7. Taming Nālāgiri
1. Birth	2. <i>Māravijaya</i>

Arrangement of the *Aṣṭamahāprātihārya* scenes in stele in Figure 18



(Fig. 18) Stone stele depicting *Life of the Buddha*  
5th century, Sārnāth  
Sārnāth Museum



At about the same time that the two stelae just discussed were made, the stele in Figure 18 was also produced. It is of signal importance to the cult of the *Aṣṭamahāprātihārya* because it is the earliest (c. late 5th century) surviving stele depicting in detail the exact set of scenes that continued to appear for the next six or seven hundred years in north Indian Buddhist art. The format of two vertical rows of four scenes suggests that an equality is accorded to each of the scenes and that the composition of the stele was intended to convey the overall meaning of the epitome of the life of Śākyamuni rather than emphasizing one of the scenes, as invariably occurs in later examples. The four primary events are at the four corners. The Birth at Lumbinī is at the bottom left (Fig. 19) and the *Māravijaya* at Bodhgayā is at the bottom right (Fig. 20). Across the top are the First Sermon at the Mṛgadāva at the left (Fig. 21) and the Final Cessation at Kuśinagara at the right (Fig. 22). This arrangement would seem to be a concession to a hierarchical importance of the four primary scenes over the four secondary scenes by having them compositionally 'enclose' or 'contain' the four secondary scenes rather than a chronological placement. The four primary scenes, the Birth, the Enlightenment, the First Sermon and the Death, are given in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* as appropriate places of devotion to Śākyamuni by Śākyamuni himself and, from the literary point of view, are demonstrably the earliest form of the Buddhist pilgrimage route.

The four secondary scenes—the Great Illusion at Śrāvastī in the upper middle right (Fig. 23), the Descent from Trāyastriṃśa at Sāṅkāśya in the upper middle left (Fig. 24), the Gift of Honey at Vaiśālī in the lower middle left (Fig. 25) and the Taming of Nālāgiri at Rājagṛha in the lower middle right (Fig. 26)—depict events that characterize the nature of Buddha's ministry. Thus, it is appropriate that they are 'contained' by three events that permitted the ministry, namely, the Birth, Enlightenment and First Sermon, and by the event that terminated it, that is, the Death.

By accepting the containment concept and by recognizing that iconologically the *Parinirvāṇa* must appear at the top of the stele, it can then be shown that the chronological order or sequence of the events on the stele makes perfect sense and is not random, in contrast to what others have suggested. Hierarchically, if the *Parinirvāṇa* must be at the top, the beginning of the sequence must be at the bottom. It is followed to the right by the next of the *Aṣṭamahāprātihārya*, the Enlightenment. Conforming with the containment concept, the third event, the First Sermon, must occur at the top next to the Death. Although one might expect the Great Illusion and the Descent to be transposed so that they would read from left to right, the opportunity for a visual 'pun' apparently overwhelmed the iconographic authority designing the sculpture. The Descent occurs after Śākyamuni has resided in Trāyastriṃśa for three months teaching the *abhidharma* to his mother and the other gods of that heaven. Sculptures in other schools are known in which there is a preaching scene above the Descent. Thus, by placing the Descent below the First Sermon, the iconographer achieves the visual statement of the preaching above the Descent, implying the teaching of the *abhidharma* as well as literally being the First Sermon.



(Fig. 19) Birth, detail of Figure 18



(Fig. 20) *Māravijaya*, detail of Figure 18



(Fig. 21) First Sermon, detail of Figure 18



(Fig. 22) *Parinirvāṇa*, detail of Figure 18



(Fig. 23) Great Illusion, detail of Figure 18



(Fig. 24) Descent from Trāyastriṃśa, detail of Figure 18



(Fig. 25) Gift of Honey, detail of Figure 18



(Fig. 26) Taming of Nālāgiri, detail of Figure 18

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Lest the reader think I am inventing a rationale for this coincidence, let me point out that in Sanskrit literature, which was at its apogee during the period in which this sculpture was made, the concept of *śleṣa* (double meaning) was one of the twelve primary 'limbs' of literary composition. Whole texts were occasionally written that could be read in two different ways and, in many texts, especially Buddhist, understanding the meaning of important passages often depended on the reader knowing two, three or even four different layers of meaning to a single word. In Buddhism in particular, this was the time of the codification of the so-called 'twilight' language with deliberate esoteric meanings to many common Sanskrit Buddhist terms. There is no doubt that this use of double meaning applied to works of art and that the communication techniques are still in practice in modern Buddhism. Indeed, one suspects that such a simple pun as the one in the stele was *de rigueur*, one almost had to do it simply because it was possible.

By this time, the integrated icon of the *Aṣṭamahāprātihārya* obviously had already come into existence. Given

the importance (to be discussed in Part II of this article) of the Magadha region (the ancient name of the south-central Gangetic Bihar), the very fact that it was found at Sārnāth, the monastery at the site of the First Sermon (Mṛgadāva), suggests that the icon was a surrogate for some image already in existence in central Bihar. With this image, a monk or lay devotee could pay homage to the whole of the *Aṣṭamahāprātihārya* without ever leaving his home monastery. Moreover, it may also indicate that it was possible for him to receive initiation into the practice tradition surrounding the primary text of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā*.

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