

## THE BUDDHA'S RADIANCE

by

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It is well known that in most Thai Buddha images the Buddha's *uṣṇīṣa* is surmounted by a flame-like projection. This is an attribute which came into prominence at Sukhothai in the 12th or early 13th century. The bronzes of Nāgapattīṇam on the coast of southern India<sup>1</sup> and the Buddhas of Ceylon have similar projections, and earlier versions can be found in Pāla bronzes from Kurkihar (10th-11th century),<sup>2</sup> in the reliefs of the upper galleries of the Barabudur (9th century) and in some older "Amarāvati" bronzes from Southern India or Ceylon, like the one from Dōng-dzu'o'ng which is now in Saigon.<sup>3</sup> Amarāvati reliefs, finally, show a pillar emitting flames, below which the Buddha is to be imagined sitting.<sup>4</sup> There is another type of Buddha image, however, in which the object on top of the *uṣṇīṣa* is not recognizable as a flame at all. It looks instead more like a bulb, a lotus-bud, or a gem. Images of this type were made, among other places, in northern Siam and in Tibet. No one has ever worked out the formal relationships among the different sorts of crowning elements, and no attempt to do so will be made in this brief note, which is concerned instead with the question of what they were called.

The flame-projection is described in the Thai-language version of the *Paṭhamasambodhi*, a life of the Buddha special to Siam, Laos, and Cambodia.<sup>5</sup> At the request of King Rāma III (1824-1851), Prince Para-

- 1) T.N. Ramachandran, *The Nāgapattīṇam and other Buddhist Bronzes in the Madras Museum* (Bull. of the Madras Gov. Mus. N. S.-Gen. Sec. VII, 1), Madras, 1954, repr. 1965.
- 2) P. L. Gupta, ed., *Patna Museum Catalogue of Antiquities*, Patna, 1965, pls. XXVII, XXVIII.
- 3) B. Rowland, *The Art and Architecture of India*, Baltimore, 1967, pl. 137b.
- 4) E. g., D. Barrett, *Sculptures from Amaravati in the British Museum*, London, 1954, pl. XXXV. For a discussion of the concept of flames emanating from the Buddha's *uṣṇīṣa*, see L. A. Waddell, "Buddha's Diadem or Uṣṇīṣa: Its Origin, Nature, and Functions. A Study of Buddhist Origins," *Ostasiatische Zeitschrift* III (1914-15), 131-168, esp. 154 f.
- 5) G. Coedès, "Une vie indochinoise du Buddha : La *Paṭhamasambodhi*," *Mélanges d'Indianisme à la mémoire de Louis Renou*, Paris, 1968, 217-227.

mānujit revised the Pali edition, in which there is a passage that can be traced back to Dvāravatī times,<sup>6</sup> and produced a version in Thai. According to it, the eightieth of the eighty minor marks (*anuvyañjana*) of the Buddha is “the *ketumālā*, a trail of brightly-ascending rays (*raśmī*) upon the uppermost part of His Head.”<sup>7</sup> The proper name for the projection is therefore *ketumālā*, an Indic word which means ‘a garland (or crown) of flames’ (*ketu*, a word that can also refer to a banner or to a comet, in which case it is numbered among the planets). A convenient substitute would be ‘radiance’, and this term can be used to indicate the actual projection as well. The *Paṭhamasambodhi* also uses the Indic word *raśmī* [sic], which is today the more common expression for the *ketumālā* and probably was in the last century too, for only it is used in a Third Reign text on the proper proportions of Buddha images.<sup>8</sup>

*Ketumālā* appears in no canonical Buddhist scripture, and the compiling of the eighty secondary marks occurred after the canon had been put together. The word’s most notable appearance in a Pali-language text is in the *Mahāvamsa*, the Sinhalese history of Buddhism. In Chapter V the serpent king Mahākāla responds to a request of King Asoka. “The nāga-king,” says Geiger’s translation, “created a beauteous figure of the Buddha, endowed with the thirty-two greater signs and brilliant with the eighty lesser signs (of a Buddha), surrounded by the fathom-long rays of glory [*byāmapabhā*] and adorned with the crown of flames [*ketumālā*].”<sup>9</sup> As Burnouf pointed out over a century ago, the inclusion of the word *ketumālā* suggests a relationship between the description and Buddha images with a radiance.<sup>10</sup> It is not likely that either the verbal

6) *Ibid.*, 225.

7) *Phrapathomsoṃphōtkathā*, Rōngphimkānsātsanā [Bangkok], 2505 (1962), 85. H. Alabaster’s account of the life of the Buddha (*The Wheel of the Law*, London, 1871) is based on the *Paṭhamasambodhi*, but his rendition of this passage (p. 115) appears to be not only based on a different edition but inaccurate as well.

8) *Tamrāsāṅghaphruttharūp* (cremation volume for Saṅghakun Luang Prūangkha-dīrāt [Ring Khathawanit]), 2463 [Bangkok, 1920], 12. Copy in the Yale University Library.

9) W. Geiger, *The Mahāvamsa* London, 1912, 33-34; *The Mahāvamsa*, Geiger, ed., London, 1908 (Pali Text Society vol. 63), V, 91-92.

10) E. Burnouf, *Le Lotus de la Bonne Loi*. Paris, 1852, 609-610. Burnouf’s eighth appendix is devoted to the thirty-two characteristics and eighty lesser marks of a *muhūpuruṣa*.

concept or the plastic form long existed alone. When exactly the word *ketumālā* did first come into use is uncertain, however. It does appear in the commentary on the *Vimāna-Vatthu* as well as in the *Mahāvamsa*.<sup>11</sup> This commentary is attributed to Dhammapāla, a Tamil monk who is thought to have lived in the late fifth century.<sup>12</sup> All that can be said is that from the archaeological point of view this date is a possible one.

It is a good deal more difficult to determine what the Buddha's radiance was called in northern India and in the Sanskrit or Buddhist-Sanskrit tradition, and no dates can be conjectured at all. There are plenty of lists of the eighty minor marks, but in none of these is there a mark equivalent to the *ketumālā*.<sup>13</sup> In the *Lalitavistara*, the life of the Buddha which in its present form dates from no earlier than the fourth century A.D.,<sup>14</sup> and in the *Mahāvastu*, a compendium of about the same time, the final mark is a most peculiar one. The Buddhas, according to the *Mahāvastu* (where the final mark is actually the eighty-first), "have well-shaped heads and their hair bears the figures of [literally, 'is like to'] the Svastika, Nandyāvarta, and Muktika signs."<sup>15</sup> The *Lalitavistara* puts the Śrīvatsa, the Svastika, the Nandyāvarta, and the Vardhamāna in the hair.<sup>16</sup> It makes little sense for these auspicious symbols to be connected with the Buddha's head when they properly belong on his hands or, especially, his feet, where they are in fact placed according to the eightieth characteristic of other enumerations, like the one in the *Dharmasaṃgraha*, a text comprised of lists of various technical terms,<sup>17</sup> and the one in the *Mahāvvyutpatti*, a later Sanskrit-Tibetan-Chinese glossary.<sup>18</sup> It is not

11) *Dhammapāla's Paramattha-Dīpanī*, Part IV, E. Hardy, ed., London, 1901 (P. T. S. vol. 48), VII, 9 (p. 323).

12) L. Renou & J. Filliozat, *L'Inde classique*, II, Paris, 1953, 357.

13) On these marks see, in addition to the references given in other footnotes, A. Wayman, "Contributions Regarding the Thirty-Two Characteristics of the Great Person," *Liebenhal Festschrift*, K. Roy, ed. (*Sino-Indian Studies*, V, 3 & 4), Santiniketan, 1957, 243-260; F. Edgerton, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary*, II, New Haven, 1953, s. v. *anvyañjana*.

14) Renou & Filliozat, *op. cit.*, 367-368.

15) J. J. Jones, *The Mahāvastu*, II, London, 1952, 41.

16) Ph. Ed. Foucaux, *Le Lalitavistara*, Paris, 1884 (*Annales du Musée Guimet*, VI), 90. For explanations of some of the symbols see Burnouf, *op. cit.*, 622 ff.

17) K. Kasawara, *The Dharma-saṃgraha (Anecdota Oxoniensia I, Part V)*, F. M. Müller & H. Wengel, eds., Oxford, 1885, ¶ 84.

18) Ryosaburo Sakahi, *Mahāvvyutpatti*, Kyoto, 1916, ¶ 348 (XVIII, 80).

impossible that the compilers or editors of the lists in the *Lalitavistara* and the *Mahāvastu* were aware of a tradition in which the eightieth and last mark had something to do with the Buddha's radiance. Wishing to end their lists with the head rather than with the feet or hands, and aware of this other tradition but unable to accept it in its entirety, they shifted the auspicious symbols from the Buddha's hands and feet to his hair.

Regardless of whether the absurdities of the *Lalitavistara* and the *Mahāvastu* were inspired by a list in which the *ketumālā* (or something like it) was the eightieth member, there is some evidence that in northern India the radiance was called by a term which in part consisted of the word *ketu*. The Tibetan equivalent of *ketu* is *tog*.<sup>19</sup> A Tibetan-English dictionary defines *tog* as "the top of anything, a top ornament; esp. the button on the cap of Chinese dignitaries, as a mark of distinction."<sup>20</sup> It is hard to see how this conjunction of meanings could have come about (except, of course, by chance) unless the Tibetans were familiar with Buddha images in which the radiance was in fact known as a *ketu* or a *ketu* ——. There is a Pali list of the eighty minor marks in which number eighty is *ketumālāratanaṅgita* "the quality of being brightened with the gem (Skt. *ratna*) of the garland of flames (*ketumālā*)."<sup>21</sup> It was once pointed out that there is probably a relationship between *ketumālāratana*

19) E. g., *ibid.*, *passim*, & Fr. Weller, *Tausend Buddha-namen des Bhadrakalpa*, Leipzig, 1928, *passim*.

20) H. A. Jäschke, *A Tibetan-English Dictionary*, London, 1881, 205.

21) This text, the *Dharmapradīpikā*, late in date, is generally known only from Burnouf's quotation from a manuscript of it (Burnouf, *op. cit.*, 557, 608). (In the bibliography of the Copenhagen *Critical Pali Dictionary*, a text of the same name is described as Guruḷugomin's Sinhalese commentary on the *Mahābodhi-vamsa*, Colombo, 1915.) R. Spence Hardy, *A Manual of Buddhism [sic]*, London, 1860, gives a list of the eighty minor marks according to a 13th century source; the *ketumālā* either does not appear or is omitted in the translation, and the last mark is the *byāmapabhā*. These two are the only Pali or Sinhalese lists with which I am familiar. The *Dharmapradīpikā* passage was discussed by Sten Konow in *The First Two Chapters of the Daśaśhasrikā Prajñāparamitā* (Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi, Oslo, *Avhandlingar* 1941, II), Oslo, 1942, 65-66. His translation of the passage is "to be beryll-coloured." I take *raṅgita* here as a synonym of *anuraṅgita* in *Buddhāvamsa* I, 45, "byāmapabhānuraṅgita" (P. T. S. vol. 2, London, 1882).

and classical Sanskrit *keturatna*.<sup>22</sup> *Keturatna* means 'the gem of (the planet) Ketu.' The major gems corresponded to the planets, and Ketu's gem was *vaidūrya*, which is thought to be "cat's eye" because all colors were said to be present in it through reflection.<sup>23</sup> *Keturatna* is indeed a plausible hypothetical name for the radiance in northern India, and perhaps at one point images actually had *vaidūrya* radiances. One of the Tibetan names of the Buddha of healing, Bhaiṣajyaguru, is *sMan-gyi-bla-baidūrya'i-'od-kyi-rgyal-po*, 'lord of medicine, king of the light of the *vaidūrya*';<sup>24</sup> perhaps this means the light is present in the radiance, which is shaped like a gem and made of *vaidūrya* or *keturatna*. There is apparently no record of what the similarly-shaped radiance of northern Siam was called, but possibly its name was comparable.

In this journey from Siam to Ceylon, through India to Tibet and back to Siam, the unifying artifact has been the object on the Buddha's *uṣṇīṣa* and the unifying word, *ketu*. This word has not, it seems, been used in a single sense, any more than the radiance has had a single shape. Behind the varying usages and forms, however, has lain a remarkable unity of conception and intent.<sup>25</sup>

22) Konow, *op. cit.*, 66.

23) L. Finot, *Les lapidaires indiens* (Biblio. de L'École des H.-Ét. XI), Paris, 1896, XLV-XLVI, 44, 133, 175.

24) W. E. Clark, *Two Lamaistic Pantheons*, repr. N.Y., 1965, 107.

25) D. Barrett, "The Later School of Amaravati and Its Influences," *Art and Letters*, [N.S.] XXVIII, 2 (1954), 41-53, became available to me only after this article had gone to press, and so I was unable to take into account Mr. Barrett's arguments that the flame radiance did not appear before the second half of the 8th century at the earliest.

