

SECTION VI

NOTES AND COMMENTS



# SOME COMMENTS ON A NORTHERN PHRA MALAI TEXT DATED C.S. 878 (A.D. 1516)

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Among the thousands of valuable palm leaf (Thai: *bai lan*) manuscripts catalogued and microfilmed by Chiang Mai University in recent years is a Phra Malai text that may perhaps be the oldest extant book written in a Tai language.<sup>1</sup> Comprising sixty-one pages, the manuscript has a C.S. date of 878,<sup>2</sup> corresponding to 2059 B.E. or A.D. 1516, and is written in the *tham* or Northern Thai script.

The actual manuscript is carefully stored at Wat Kittiwong in Amphur Mae Sariang, Mae Hong Son province, under the care of the district abbot, Phra Khru Anuson Satsanakiat, who has long taken an active role in cultural preservation. The wat houses an extensive collection of *bai lan* in Pāli and Northern Thai, many of which were discovered in a cave near the Salween River in 1968.<sup>3</sup>

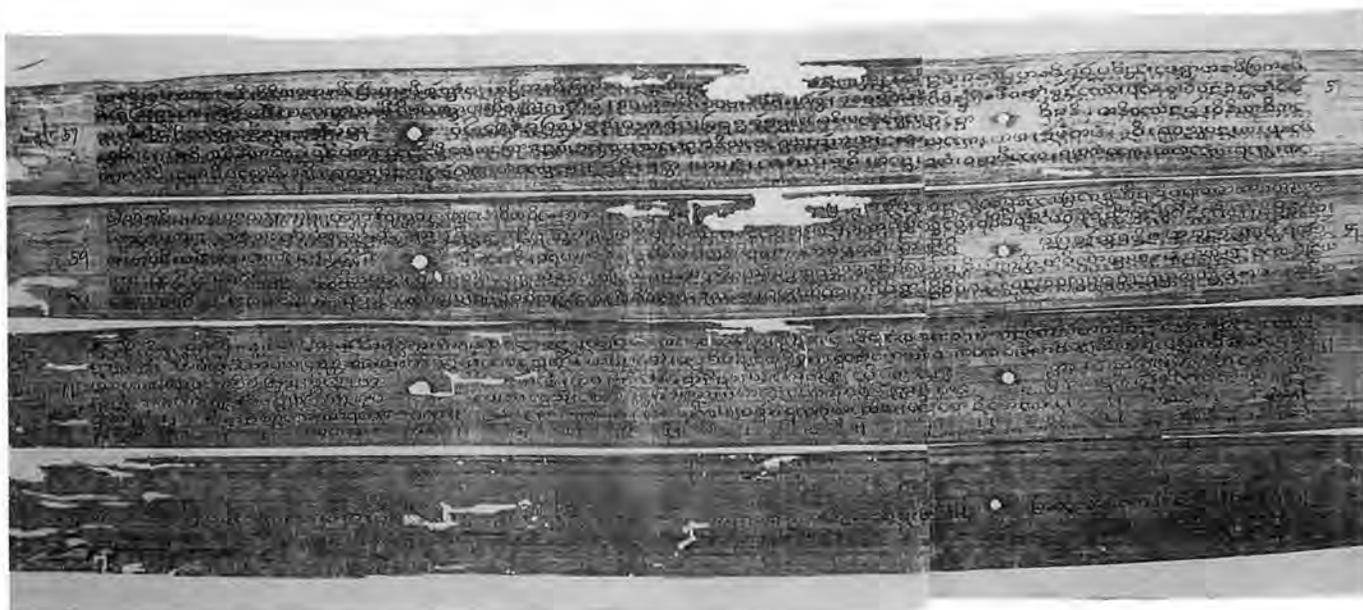
The text, a copy of the *Malai Plai*,<sup>4</sup> is written in a dual language format of Pāli and Northern Thai. It is the second of a pair of Phra Malai texts, the first of which is known as *Malai Ton*. (The word *ton* here may be translated as “beginning,” and *plai* as “end.”) They have traditionally been read as a preface to the *Vessantara Jātaka* in northern Thailand. This pair of texts, the *Malai Ton–Malai Plai*, represents a basic version of the *Phra Malai Sutta*, a work that has taken many forms<sup>5</sup> over the years throughout Thailand, Burma, Laos, and Cambodia.<sup>6</sup> Although the variant forms of the *Phra Malai Sutta* have different emphases, the essential teachings—revealed generally through questions and answers (Thai: *puccha–wisachana*)—are the same. These teachings include the kammic effects of good and bad deeds, the benefits of merit-making, the meritorious acts performed by the Bodhisattva Maitreya (Pāli: Metteyya, known in Thai as Phra Si An) during his previous lives, and the utopian age that will ensue when he comes to be born in the human realm and leads all beings to nirvana. The connection between the *Phra Malai Sutta* and the *Vessantara Jātaka* is contained in the central message of the former: that those who want to be born when Maitreya is on earth should listen to the entire *Jātaka* in one day and one night.

This *Jātaka*<sup>7</sup> (also known in Thai as the *Mahachat*, or “Great Jātaka” or *Phra Wetsandon Chadok*) is the last of the Ten Birth Tales. It concerns the Buddha in his previous incarnation as Prince Vessantara, who exemplified generosity or *dana* by giving away his royal elephant, kingdom, children, and wife. Formerly, the reading or preaching of this story was an annual, two-day, all-night, non-stop event at wats throughout both the North and the Northeast.<sup>8</sup> The compound would be decorated with banana stalks, other foliage, and paper cutouts in the shape of animals to replicate a forest where the saga of Vessantara would be enacted. Lay people would come to the temple with offerings representing a thousand of each item (candles, flowers, incense sticks, balls of sticky rice, etc.) and stay through the night to listen to the reading of all thirteen chapters of the *Jātaka*.

In recent years, this marathon practice has become nearly extinct in the North. Most wats now hold a much abbreviated version of the festival, in which only one or two chapters of the *Jātaka* are read. The reading of all thirteen chapters can be found at only a few large urban monasteries that are making a conscious effort to preserve traditional cultural forms. These include Wat Suan Dok in Chiang Mai and Wat Phrathat Haripunchai in Lamphun.

Throughout the Northeast, however, the Mahachat festival, or *Bun Phra Wet*, is still a popular and elaborate event. It includes a procession in which long hand-painted cloth banners depicting scenes from the *Vessantara Jātaka* as well as from the *Phra Malai* are carried around the wat compound and then hung inside the pavilion where the reading is to be held.<sup>9</sup> As in the North, the reading of the Phra Malai story<sup>10</sup> is a necessary precedent to the reading of the *Vessantara Jātaka*.

The discovery of such an old copy of this Phra Malai text is thus of great interest to scholars of the history of Buddhism in Thailand. Not only does it provide concrete evidence of Lān Nā’s importance as a center of Theravada Buddhist scholarship in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries A.D.; it also represents an important benchmark in the evolution and development of Phra



The Northern Phra Malai text dated C.S. 878 (A.D. 1516). Photograph by the author.

Malai texts. With a date corresponding to A.D. 1516, the Wat Kittiwong *Malai Plai* is more than 200 years older than any other dated Phra Malai text known at this time.<sup>11</sup>

In order to make the contents of this important text available to the general reader, the remainder of this note will be devoted to a summary of the *Malai Ton–Malai Plai*.<sup>12</sup>

*Malai Ton* begins the legend of the arhat and mahathera Phra Malai, who, as the story goes, lived long ago in the far distant past, on the island of Lanka. Endowed with great compassion, Phra Malai one day went to bestow mercy on the suffering beings in hell. Upon his arrival, the hell beings begged him to find their relatives in the human realm and ask them to make merit on their behalf. Phra Malai returned to the human realm, did as he was asked, and after the relatives performed acts of merit, the hell beings were reborn in heaven.

Then one morning, as he was going out to receive alms, the arhat encountered a poor man who presented him with eight lotuses. Phra Malai accepted the offering and traveled to Tavatimsa Heaven to worship the Chulamani Chedi in which the hair relic of the Buddha is said to be enshrined.<sup>13</sup> After presenting the eight lotuses as an offering, Phra Malai conversed with Indra, who informed him that he had built the chedi to provide the devas in heaven with a means of continuing to make and accrue merit.

Phra Malai then asked Indra whether Lord Ariya Maitreya would leave his abode in Tusita Heaven to come to worship the chedi. Indra replied that he would indeed come on that very day, since it was the fifteenth day of the waxing moon, one of the times for his regular visits.

As Phra Malai and Indra conversed, a deity accompanied by a retinue of a hundred celestial beings arrived to worship the chedi. Phra Malai asked Indra how this deity had made merit in

the past to earn this reward. Indra answered that in his former life this deity had been a poor man who, out of compassion, gave his own food to a crow. That act of generosity earned the poor man the reward of being born in heaven, surrounded by a retinue numbering a hundred.

After the deity and his retinue paid obeisance to the chedi and circumambulated it three times, they left the site, only to be followed by another deva, this one with a retinue of a thousand. Again, Phra Malai inquired about merit; he was told that this deity, in his former life, had been a poor cow herder who shared his food with his friends.

As the text proceeds, the deities continue to arrive, with retinues of 10,000, 20,000, etc. In each case, Indra explains how merit was made—generally through practicing *dana* (generosity), although observing the precepts and having faith are sometimes mentioned. *Malai Ton* ends with the arrival of the twelfth deity and his retinue of 100,000—the reward earned by a poor grass cutter for having observed the precepts, refrained from harmful acts, and built a chedi of white sand.<sup>14</sup>

*Malai Plai* begins with the arrival of Phra Sri Ariya Maitreya at the Chulamani Chedi, surrounded by a retinue of an infinite number of celestial gods and goddesses. Phra Malai asked Indra about the merit made by those retainers in front of the bodhisattva who were dressed, bejeweled, and adorned completely in white. Indra replied that in their former lives, these celestial beings had presented to the Three Gems offerings that were pure white in color. The text continues with the same sort of question and answer concerning the celestial beings on the right side, dressed in yellow, those on the left in red, and those behind Maitreya, in green.

Next, Phra Malai asked Indra how Maitreya had made merit. After protesting that he had insufficient wisdom to

explain the subject fully, Indra replied that Maitreya had practiced the Parami (the Ten Perfections)<sup>15</sup> for an infinite number of years. In addition, he had performed the Five Great Sacrifices, giving up material possessions, wealth, children, wife, and even his own life.

Finally, Maitreya, having paid reverence to the chedi, greeted Phra Malai, asking him where he had come from. Hearing that he had come from Jambudvīpa, the human realm, he inquired about the nature and characteristics of humans. Phra Malai commented on the diversity as well as the suffering involved in the human experience. Some people were rich, he noted, but most were poor; some were handsome, but many were plain; some lived a long life, but many died young; those who did good deeds were few in number, those who sinned were great in number, etc.

Upon hearing this reply, Maitreya wished to know how the people of Jambudvīpa made merit. Phra Malai explained that they performed meritorious acts in a multitude of ways: some presented offerings; some listened to sermons; some had Buddha images cast; some built residences for the Sangha; some presented robes; some dug ponds and wells; etc. They performed these good deeds according to their abilities, all because of their wish to meet Maitreya in the future.

Maitreya responded by giving Phra Malai a message for the people of Jambudvīpa: those who wished to meet him should listen to the recitation of the entire *Vessantara Jātaka* in one day and one night; they should also bring offerings of one thousand each to the temple.

The bodhisattva then told Phra Malai about the deterioration of Buddhism that would come about after Gotama Buddha's teachings had been on earth for 5000 years.<sup>16</sup> Human nature would degenerate both physically and morally. The life span would decrease, and incest, promiscuity, chaos and violence would be commonplace. In a tumultuous outbreak of bloodshed and fighting, virtually everyone would die, except for a small number of wise people who had retreated to the forest and hidden themselves in caves. After seven days they would emerge and create a new society based on mutual good will and a commitment to morality. Gradually the human life span, which had decreased down to ten years, would begin to increase again.

Following a period of intense rainfall, the earth would flourish with vegetation and villages would be thickly populated. The surface of the earth would be as smooth as a drumhead, rice would husk itself, people would be handsome and free from physical disabilities, spouses would be faithful to one another, and all beings would live in harmony.

At that time, Maitreya would be born in the human realm and attain enlightenment. Then the bodhisattva described to Phra Malai the various acts he had performed during previous lifetimes to earn sufficient merit to enable him to become the next Buddha. Each act involved the practice of *dana* and each would have a beneficial effect on humankind in the future. For example, because Maitreya had listened and responded to a beggar's request for alms, no one would be deaf or mute during his Buddhahood.

Maitreya continued his discourse, describing to the thera how he would help all beings transcend *samsara* (the cycle of rebirth) by freeing them from the ties of greed, hatred, and delusion. Finally, after exhorting Phra Malai to take this message to the people of Jambudvīpa, the bodhisattva returned to Tusita Heaven.

Phra Malai then delivered Maitreya's message, and the people of Jambudvīpa responded by making merit. The text ends with a reference to the poor man who had offered Phra Malai the eight lotuses. After his death he was born in Tavatimsa Heaven as Lord of the Lotuses; wherever he walked, lotuses sprang up to receive his feet—all because of the merit he had made through his single act of *dana*.

It is obvious from the above summary that the Phra Malai legend merits further study in terms of its structure, symbolism, references to prior texts, and historical context. While this version of the legend resembles an *anison* text in its emphasis on the benefits of merit-making, it is similar to cosmological treatises such as the *Traiphum Phra Ruang* in that it has obviously been constructed out of segments of canonical treatises, chronicles and apocryphal texts. In forthcoming publications I intend to discuss these and other aspects of the legend. I will also present an annotated translation of the *Phra Malai Kham Luang*, along with comparisons with other versions of the legend.

## NOTES

1. I am grateful to Acharn Sommai Premchit and Nai Phaithoon Phromwichit of Chiang Mai University for bringing this manuscript to my attention as well as for their help in many other aspects of my research. A number of projects involving the preservation and study of Northern Thai manuscripts have been carried out at Chiang Mai University since the 1960s. The earliest dated texts discovered thus far are written entirely in Pāli and date from the late sixteenth century A.D. (see Hundius 1990).

2. The accuracy of this date has been verified by both Harald Hundius, who has conducted extensive research on Lān Nā literature for the past two decades, and by Nai Phaithoon Phromwichit, researcher at the Social Research Institute, Chiang Mai University.

3. It is not known at this time whether or not the Phra Malai manuscript under discussion was part of this group of *bai lan*. The discovery, made by a small group led by the district abbot of Mae Sariang, Phra Khru Anuson Satsanakiat,

was described in an article by Charles F. Keyes (1970), who took part in the expedition.

At the time of the discovery, Keyes estimated the number of manuscripts removed from the cave to be about 400; another group was removed later. From these two groups an unknown number of the manuscripts were taken to Bangkok by officials of the Fine Arts Department and reportedly are now being stored in the Chiang Mai branch of the National Library.

4. The manuscript is known by the name, *Nisai Malai Plai*. The word *nisai*, in this context, is a specific Northern Thai term for religious treatises written in Pāli with a phrase by phrase translation into Northern Thai (Sommai Premchit, personal communication, 30 April 1991).
5. Phra Malai texts include two basic works in Pāli, the *Maleyyadevattheravatthu* and the *Maleyyavatthuthipanitika*. Each of these exists in multiple copies with variant spelling to the titles (see Na Bangchong 1986, 473–485, 312–324).  
Works in Thai include, among others, the classic highly ornate *Phra Malai Kham Luang* (1948), attributed to Chao Fa Thammathibet; the popular *Phra Malai Klon Suat* (1984), written anonymously in numerous poetic forms suitable for chanting; the detailed *Tika Malai Thewa Sut* (1971); and the modern, novel-like *Phra Malai Phu Poet Narok–Sawan* (Sakdanuwat 1977).  
While the term “Phra Malai” is frequently mentioned in scholarly writings on Buddhism in Thailand, there as yet has been only one work on the subject—the brilliant (but virtually inaccessible) thesis by Father Eugène Denis (1963?). This exemplary piece of scholarship includes translations of Pāli and Thai versions of the legend. Unfortunately, the work has never been published. I am grateful to Louis Gabaude for his kindness in helping me obtain a copy.  
Scholars frequently refer to the “Phra Malai Sutta” in conjunction with Traiphum treatises as if it were another cosmological text. There are two problems with this categorization. First, there is no single “Phra Malai Sutta;” on the contrary, numerous quite distinct Phra Malai texts exist in both Pāli and Thai. The similarity they share is that they narrate the travels of the monk and arhat, Malai, to hell and heaven. Second, the basic theme reflected in all Phra Malai texts is not a delineation of the Buddhist cosmos, but an extended lesson on the benefits that accrue to merit-making. What differs is the emphasis. Some, like the *Malai Ton–Malai Plai* and the *Malai Muen–Malai Saen*, as the pair is known in the Northeast, emphasize listening to the *Vessantara Jātaka* as a short cut to nirvana. Others, particularly the *Phra Malai Klon Suat* (1984), contain a much expanded description of Phra Malai’s visit to hell and warn of the consequences of sin. The *Phra Malai Kham Luang* (1948), on the other hand, is a glorification of the future Buddha Maitreya, while the *Tika Malai Thewa Sut* (1971) and the *Malai Thewa Sut* (1929) delineate the Buddhist cosmos.
6. The Phra Malai legend is also known in Sri Lanka, according to Sommai Premchit, who spent two years there pursuing advanced Pāli studies as a monk (personal communication, 20 March 1991). The question of whether the legend originated in Sri Lanka is discussed in detail in Denis 1963 and 1965.
7. It should also be noted that there are many versions of the *Vessantara Jātaka* as well. These range from the *Mahachat Kham Luang*, or “royal version” commissioned by Somdet Phra Boromatrailokanat in the year 2025 B.E. (A.D. 1482) and *Kap Mahachat* dating from the reign of Phra Chao Songtham, 2163–2171 B.E. (A.D. 1620–1628) to numerous regional versions throughout Thailand.
8. The times at which the festival is held differ, however. In the North it is held during the twelfth lunar month (known locally as *duan yi*), corresponding to October–November. In the Northeast it is held after the harvest, from February through April. In the Central Region the Mahachat festival is held from the end of lent until the twelfth month (October–November), and in the South during the first month (December–January) (*Mahachat Samnuan Isan* 1988, “*Khum Chi Chaeng*,” 4–5; Anuman 1968, 164–177). Only in the North and Northeast, however, is the *Phra Malai* read before the *Mahachat*.
9. *Mahachat Samnuan Isan* 1988, 4–5; Leedom Lefferts, personal communication, 3 March 1990; Sommai Premchit, personal communication, 13 July 1990; Renuka Musikasinthorn, personal communication, 12 March 1991. I also had the opportunity to attend the *Bun Phra Wet* festival at two wats in Amphur Muang Mahasarakham in March 1990, and interview monks at several monasteries in Ubon Ratchathani and Mahasarakham in July 1990.
10. This pair of texts, very similar in its content to the *Malai Ton–Malai Plai*, is known in the Northeast as *Malai Muen* and *Malai Saen*, as noted above. The word *muen*, meaning 10,000, refers to the deities who come to worship the Chulamani Chedi with retinues of 10,000, 20,000, 30,000, etc. The word *saen*, meaning 100,000, refers to Maitreya who comes with a retinue that includes “saen khoti”, or 100,000 x infinite numbers of retainers.
11. The oldest extant copy of the *Phra Malai Klon Suat* appears to be one mentioned in Denis, dating back to A.D. 1737, which was located at the National Library (1963, 49–50). In 1989, however, when I inquired about this manuscript at the Library, I was informed that no such manuscript existed. The *Phra Malai Kham Luang* has a colophon with a date corresponding to A.D. 1738.
12. The summary of the *Malai Ton* section is based on two modern printed editions of the text published in the North, one by Tarathong Kanphim in Chiang Mai (n.d.), the other by Rongphim Bunphadung in Chiang Rai (1989). The summary of the *Malai Plai* is based on the Wat Kittiwong *Nisai Malai Plai* and modern printed editions of the text from the two publishing houses mentioned above. At the time this article was written, only part of the Wat Kittiwong text was available (through Chiang Mai University’s Social Research Institute). The microfilm copy of the complete text (in the archives of Chiang Mai University’s Center for the Promotion and Preservation of Northern Thai Culture) had been sent to Bangkok to be copied by the National Library.
13. All Phra Malai texts mention both a hair relic and a tooth relic as being enshrined in the Chulamani Chedi. According to traditions concerning the life of the Buddha, Prince Gotama cut off his hair to symbolize his renunciation of worldliness when he left his father’s palace and embarked on a life of asceticism. Indra, the tradition continues, collected the hair and enshrined it in the chedi at this time. After the Buddha’s nirvana, tradition holds that the brahmin Dona divided the Buddha’s relics among eight kings who had quarreled over them. During the distribution, Dona hid the right eyetooth of the Buddha in his turban. Indra saw this, however, and believing that Dona was not able to honor this relic appropriately, removed it and placed it in the Chulamani Chedi.
14. The building of sand chedis by the laity is part of the annual Thai *songkran* festival in mid–April. For a complete account of Northern Thai and Lao textual references to the subject, see Gabaude (1979).
15. The Ten Perfections are the ten principal virtues that a bodhisattva must exercise to perfection in order to attain Buddhahood.
16. See Warren (1896) “The Buddhist Apocalypse,” for a summary of the *Anagata Vamsa* (History of Future Events) pp. 481–486. See also Rhys Davids (1921) *Cakkavatti–Sihanāda Suttanta* (D. iii. 59), in *Dialogues of the Buddha*, pp. 67–76. The section of the Phra Malai legend noted here appears to have drawn heavily on these texts.

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