

## MAITREYA FIRST

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The extraordinary power and appeal of Avalokiteśvara across Asia left lesser Buddhist cults in relative obscurity. For the scope, depth and variety of the veneration of the compassionate Bodhisattva, modern scholarship is primarily beholden to the exemplary contribution of Nandana Chutiwongs. Her achievement is such that we find difficulty in peering back through this Bodhisattva's 10<sup>th</sup> century aura to what motivated earlier northern Buddhist communities. We run into the problem of Avalokiteśvara's dominance when we try for example to evaluate the cults of the Bodhisattva Maitreya, the Future Buddha, which seem to have peaked in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Yet these earlier messianic cults signally contributed to the expansion of Buddhism and responded to profound human needs. Further, reaching past Avalokiteśvara to find Maitreya may also help resolve some of the iconographic mysteries of the second half of the first millennium of the Common Era including Buddhas seated like kings and triads of a seated or standing Buddha and two Bodhisattvas, which appeared across Asia in the 9<sup>th</sup> century and still puzzle scholars. This short paper can only broach such a large subject but I will argue that if we peer through the resplendent aura of the great compassionate Bodhisattva, we do find traces of Maitreya cults, which for several centuries sustained Buddhist communities and their kings in South, East Asia and where I will focus Southeast Asia. Indeed, the fragmentary sacred art record suggests a florescence of Maitreya cults. Iconography is our principal guide, for textual sources are limited and often non-canonical and suggest popular local cults with many local variants in belief and ritual.

### The two principal forms of Maitreya cults

**Ascent cults.** Śākyamuni's transition to nirvāna, leaving behind only his teaching and relics, generated a widespread desire to contact the next Buddha, Bodhisattva Ajita-Maitreya, presiding over Tuṣita heaven in anticipation of his descent to earth. Many legends recount Buddhist sages elevating themselves to Tuṣita to consult Maitreya on disputed points of the *Dharma* and returning with the answers. In most Ascent cults, however, devotees seek to join the *Bodhisattva* Ajita-Maitreya in Tuṣita heaven where he rules in anticipation of his eventual descent to earth at the end of Śākyamuni's era to establish the first earth-based Pure Land-style paradise Ketumatī, into which all beings may at this moment enter.

**Descent cults** focused on entering the Ketumatī terrestrial paradise opened by the descended Buddha Maitreya. According to the various Maitreyavyākaraṇa prediction texts, when Śākyamuni's *Dharma* dies out on earth, Maitreya descends to be born from the right side of his mother Bramāvati into a Brahmin's family. He speaks and walks seven steps at birth and eventually becomes a Buddha in a day under a dragon-flower (*nāgapuspa/nagakēsara*) tree before creating Ketumatī. The descent is usually predicted when the *cakravartin* in Benares is called Śankha and Maitreya incarnates as the son of the king's Brahmanical chaplain Subrāman. a. When Maitreya walks out of the city to achieve rapid enlightenment

under a red-flowered dragon-flower tree, he turns the Wheel of the Law and millions begin entering his paradise.<sup>1</sup>

Maitreya's descent was variously forecast as (a) imminent; 500 years after Śākyamuni's *parinirvāna*; (b) remote in 5,000 years or 5 million years; (c) periodic to assist kings who expand the *sangha* and establish Buddhist kingdoms. Serial interim descent cults feature Maitreya briefly descending during Śākyamuni's kalpa to consecrate a Buddhist *cakravartin* and spread the *Dharma* widely in order to facilitate his own final descent from Tuṣita. For example, in 50-100 CE Maitreya is said to have incarnated as king Vijayasambhava of Khotan and Mañjuśrī incarnated as monk Vairocana to bring Buddhism to the kingdom. His 8<sup>th</sup> successor, Vijayavīrya, was considered a second incarnation of Maitreya and built many monasteries, according to an 11<sup>th</sup> century Tibetan MS.<sup>2</sup>

Donor inscriptions in China indicate Maitreya was venerated in both ascent and descent cults. I will first propose that both cults also appeared in Burma, where some very early, Pre-Pagan Pyu bronze Bodhisattvas seated in *mahārājajalīlāsana-mudrā* appear to be images of Maitreya, while early Mon icons could represent the Buddha Maitreya. Later we will look briefly at Champa, Dvaravati and Central Java.

### Early Burma

A small number of small (c. 18cm) Pyu bronzes are probably the first Buddhist bronze icons made in Burma. The first bronze [Fig. 1] was found in the relic chamber of king Aniruddha c.1060 CE Shwesandaw *stupa* in Pagan and was photographed by Duroiselle in 1926.<sup>3</sup> Duroiselle speculated that Aniruddha brought it to Pagan from the old Pyu capital Sri Ksetra. It is inscribed on the base in letters *bā-Metriya bā* which Duroiselle translated, from the still partially undeciphered Pyu script, as 'honourable Maitreya'. Their princely dress indicates Bodhisattva status, which, if they represent Maitreya, would in turn suggest a Maitreya ascent cult, in which devotees aspire to join the Future Buddha in Tuṣita. The most elegant and only gilt member of this Pyu series is in the collection of London's Victoria and Albert Museum (I.M.39-1922) [Fig.3]. All the bronzes sit in an erect royal ease posture with large hands poised on knees, tiny feet, tube-like flexed arms with armllets and heavy bracelets, regal headdress, heavy earrings in the earlobes, necklace and tied stomacher. In the crown there is something which may be a jewel or perhaps the *stūpa* emblem of Maitreya. It is definitely *not* Avalokiteśvara's figurine of Amitābha. Yet the Victoria and Albert Museum now labels the icon 'probably Avalokiteśvara'. This label reflects half a century of scholarly uncertainty about the icon and probably also the continuing unfamiliarity with Maitreya cults, that I alluded to in the opening.

I think it is worth dwelling on this icon's modern reception because it seems to me a classic demonstration of how Avalokiteśvara has come to dominate our thinking, sometimes at the expense of lesser cults. Gordon Luce accepted Duroiselle's translation of *bā-metriya bā* and straightforwardly considered all the earliest Pyu bronzes of this type as the Bodhisattva Maitreya.<sup>4</sup> John Lowry took notice of the label in Pyu, considered the emblem in the hair to be 'similar to a thupa', thought the legs may be uncrossed for descent as in many Chinese Maitreyas, yet hesitated between a Theravadin Metteya and Avalokiteśvara in 1974<sup>5</sup> and settled on 'Metteya' in 1975.<sup>6</sup>

In 1984 a new challenge to these interpretations came in the Leiden PhD of Nandana Chutiwongs, who sought to identify all the manifold manifestations of Avalokiteśvara in Southeast Asia. With characteristic ingenuity, Nandana found a way of dealing with the 'Metriya' inscription while still identifying the icons as another geographical extension of the Avalokiteśvara cult:

The name Maitreya occurs often in the votive inscriptions of Burma and even on tablets stamped with a Buddha image, because the donors were praying for deliverance upon Maitreya's attainment of Buddhahood. In these instances scholars have never attempted to identify the figures on the tablets as Maitreya. The inscription on the Bodhisattva image from the Shwesandaw, which is worn out in many places, can represent the extant part of a similar votive formula, and the word "Metriya" alone should not carry any weight as to the identification of the figure.<sup>7</sup>

The inscription is slightly abraded, but there appears to be no trace of other words and not enough space for a 'formula' of several words. The principle Pyu language votive tablet found in the Shwesandaw has an inscription of no less than six lines, in which the donor seeks omniscience in the presence of Metriya.<sup>8</sup> Aniruddha's own later inscription in Sanskrit on a sealing of Śākyamuni between stupas runs to this length: *mayāniruddha-devena kṛtam, tena maitreya-sambodho labheyam nirvṛto [?] padam*: 'Done by me, Aniruddha, to obtain the path of *nirvana* when Maitreya reaches perfect enlightenment.'<sup>9</sup> (Note that the inscription seems to place Aniruddha in a Maitreya Ascent cult). It seems to me to be stretching the epigraphic evidence too far to imagine there was originally an inscription of this sort of length running all around the base of the Pyu bronze and subsequently lost to abrasions. Surely we should read the inscription for what it looks like, a simple frontal label 'bā-Metriya bā'.

Yet it is a tribute to the thoroughness and high regard for Nandana's doctoral project that her refusal to be deterred by the inscription impacted scholarship for a decade. Wladimir Zwalf<sup>10</sup> went along with the wavering current, saying the identification from the inscription 'may not be final: both Lowry and Chutiwongs suggest that Avalokitesvara may be intended.' More than a decade later John Guy, then curator of the bronze in the VAM considered the 'partly legible' Pyu inscription 'cannot on current evidence be disproved' but offers a new argument for continuing to doubt it, based on Luce's interpretation of another sealing.<sup>11</sup> Guy holds that the Pyu terracotta triads show a *dharmacakra* Buddha flanked by 'another Buddha who can be identified as the Future Buddha Maitreya, which allows the bejewelled figure seated in royal ease on the right to be identified as the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara' (my emphasis). The problem with this identification of the Future Buddha is again that in the prediction texts, Maitreya was not tested by Mara and did not call with the earth-touching gesture for the earth to bear witness to his accumulation of merit. Maitreya sat briefly under the red-flowered *nagapuspa* (dragon flower) tree and effortlessly achieved enlightenment in a day, after which he opened the doors to his earthly paradise Ketumatī at Benares.

The central Buddha in the terracotta sealings is probably not in fact in *dharmacakra mudra*, but rather in a form of *abhaya mudra* (reassurance) as shown in these comparable terracotta sealings in Luce [Figs 6, 7].<sup>12</sup> Pamela Gutman gives I think the best account when she says the triad represents, from the left previous Buddha Kassapa, Gotama and Maitreya.<sup>13</sup> So the Pyu Maitreya cult even has a textual base.

As it is rare indeed to find an icon in Southeast Asia inscribed directly with the identity of the deity (a practice more common in China), I advocate that we simply return to the 1936 view expressed by Ray, when he says: '[T]he inscription must refer to the image on which it is engraved.'<sup>14</sup>

Luce thought other Pagan Maitreya Bodhisattva icons represented Maitreya with a large *nāgasekara* (*nāgapuspa*) flower and in *abhayamudra*: 'Two other bronzes, found at Pagan, may also represent Maitreya. One (P1. 428 b), a tiny image found in the debris inside a ruined temple near the Shwehsandaw pagoda. In *lalitasana*, right foot hanging, with high *jatamukuta* and flame-niche, right hand half-raised in *abhaya* or *vitarka mudra*, left hand on knee holding the stalk of *nagakesara*, which flowers near his left ear.

‘The other bronze (P1. 445 a) [Fig.8], seated in smiling ecstasy, elegant and Indian in style, was found by U Mya in a mound N. of Tawya-gyaung: “a small but very fine bronze image of a Bodhisattva seated in the *lalita mudra* on a lotus seat. The hair is done into a high *mukuta*, but without a crown. A sash is seen round the body, and the lower garment is a pair of close-fitting trousers. The right hand is raised in the *abhaya mudra*, and the left is resting on a lotus. The total height of the figure is 34 in..”

Dr. Ray adds: ‘...two *nāgakesara* stems rise on two sides in delightful curves, forming a frame as it were; and identifies the image as “probably Maitreya”.<sup>15</sup> The eastern Mon seem to have a possibly related Maitreya Bodhisattva cult, where he holds a different flower [Fig. 9]. Shorto read the inscription as ‘Maitreya’ on this sema stone from Banh Nong Han, 50 km from Maung Fa Daed in Isan, modern northern Thailand.

Pamela Gutman thinks the Maitreya Ascent cult may have reached the Pyu from the East possibly from the large 9<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist complex at Đông duồng in Champa. She points to striking similarities in dress and posture of this bronze icon [Fig. 10], found in the ruins of the more northern Cham Buddhist site at My Duc, which Boisselier identifies as a 10<sup>th</sup> century Maitreya.<sup>16</sup> Gutman wonders whether an earlier bronze from this cult may have been carried to the Pyu. There are 2 of these 9<sup>th</sup> century Maitreyas, with *stupa* in the hair, in the Museum of Vietnamese History in Saigon.

The Mons of Burma may also have venerated Maitreya as a descended Buddha seated ‘royally’ in *bhadrāsana*. ‘Royally’ (*bhadrāsana*) means seated with pendant legs (‘European fashion’) like a king on his throne. This is thought to signal a Buddha’s engagement with the world not withdrawal into meditation or transcendence with legs crossed. Fig. 12 was recently found in Burma c.9<sup>th</sup> century 55.1cm bronze Buddha in *bhadrāsana* & *vitarka mudrā* and is now in the Cleveland Museum of Art. This is the kind of image we would expect to be associated with the Pagan kings who claimed to be *cakravartin* and future Buddhas, which Gutman refers to. The evidence for such a widespread early Maitreya cult is sufficient for us to ask ourselves whether any Buddha seated in *bhadrāsana* is not a Maitreya venerated in a descent cult, including the still mysterious royally seated giant quartzite Buddhas of Dvaravati [Fig.13].

### Candi Mendut, Central Java

We seem to have recently lost focus on the most major 9<sup>th</sup> century Maitreya descent cult of all in Central Java. Mark Long’s translation of a major 1951 article in Dutch by J.L. Moens, made available on the [www.borobudur\\_tv.htm](http://www.borobudur_tv.htm) website, is therefore timely. Moens’ view lays emphasis on Borobudur, Pawon and Mendut forming the political hub of the new Śailendra dynasty. At Mendut, Long points to the crowned deities in the vestibule flying under garlands towards the cella with necklace, parasol, and lotus as being suitable for a coronation. [Fig. 16] In Mendut’s palatial throne-room a large, imposing Buddha sitting royally like Maitreya, though here in *dharmacakra-mudra*, is accompanied by the Bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara & Vajrapāni (Fig. 15). Was the 10<sup>th</sup> Śailendra king Prāmodavardhanī (c.782-812 CE), perhaps influenced by the Buddhist masters of China, consecrated *cakravartin* at Mendut, after pronouncing his Bodhisattva vow before the descended Buddha Maitreya? Moens considers the icon as Maitreya in the form of the earthly counterpart of the celestial Vairocana, who dominates the nearby and carefully aligned Borobudur mountain of Buddhas:



The Bharabuddha initially had functioned as *primus inter pares* among the Central Javanese kings, without independent royal power; however, during the second period, when the Shailendra also became recognized as *chakravartin*-kings, the consecration in the Mendut had already developed into the royal ritual of the Buddha-*chakravartin*, thus requiring the Pawon, for the [execution of the] *rajasuya* — the ritual affirmation of the King's status as *chakravartin*.<sup>17</sup>

The *Buddhabhiseka* rites for the young king are executed in the Mendut in the presence of the Maitreya-Buddha image; then is he confirmed in the inborn state of a *Para-vak-nairmanikabuddha*. If in Pawon the *rajasuya* rites were executed in the presence of the Manjushri-Buddha image, then by the same principle of projection he, as of that moment, has the task of the *Para-citta-nairmanikabuddha*. By these two ordinations it is ascertained that the King-*chakravartin*, who is the *nirmana*-emanation of Samantabhadra, will also spread the doctrine within his realm by proclaiming the Law and adherence to the Doctrine through the construction of temples that will clarify the Message of the Master and hence shall find easier acceptance.<sup>18</sup>

The time has come to find a new focus on Bodhisattvas other than Avalokiteśvara who rose to supreme status in the history of the Buddhist courts of Southeast Asia. The evidence we have from the 9<sup>th</sup> century suggests pre-eminent inspiration of royal rites belonged to the messianic figure of Maitreya, the Future Buddha, who guided or consecrated the kings of Champa, Java, Dvaravati and Burma.



f. BRONZE IMAGE OF BODHISATTVA FROM RELIC CHAMBER OF THE SHWESANDAW

Fig 1



Fig 2



Fig 3

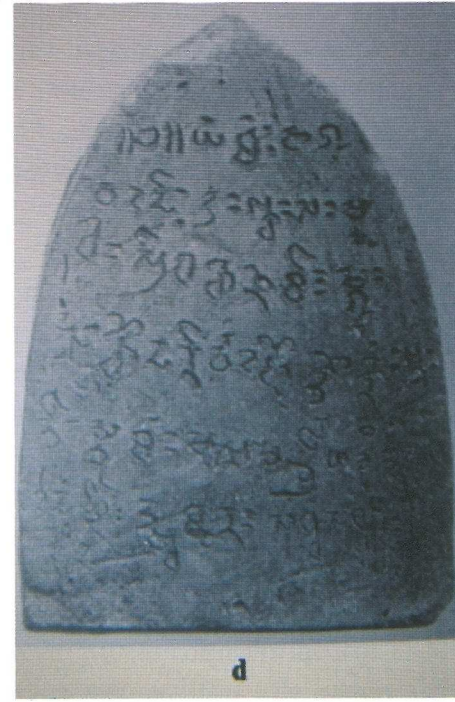


Fig 4





Fig 5



Fig 6



Fig 7



Fig 8





*Fig 9*



*Fig 10*



*Fig 11*



*Fig 12*





*Fig 13*



*Fig 14*





*Fig 15*



*Fig 16*

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Levi (1932:394) *Mahakarmavibhanga (La grande classification des actes), et, Karmavibhangopadesa (Discussion sur le Maha Karmavibhanga): textes sanscrits rapportés du Népal* Paris E. Leroux Rating; Lamotte, Étienne (1958 :780) *Histoire du bouddhisme indien: des origines à l'ère Śāka* Institut orientaliste, Louvain
- <sup>2</sup> Baruch 1947:72-3.
- <sup>3</sup> Duroiselle C. (1927:161-5) *Archaeological Survey of India*
- <sup>4</sup> Luce G. H., Bo-Hmu Ba Shin (1969:188-90) *Old Burma: Early Pagan Artibus Asiae Supplementum* Vol. 25.
- <sup>5</sup> Lowry, J. (1974:pl.18) *Burmese Art* HMSO
- <sup>6</sup> *Arts of Asia* vol.5 no.2
- <sup>7</sup> Chutiwongs, Nandana (2002:92) The iconography of Avalokiteśvara in Mainland South East Asia
- <sup>8</sup> Luce G. H. & Bo-Hmu Ba Shin (1969:100) *Old Burma: Early Pagan Artibus Asiae Supplementum*, Vol. 25.
- <sup>9</sup> Ray, Nihar-Rajan (1936:42) *Sanskrit Buddhism in Burma* H.J. Paris, Amsterdam
- <sup>10</sup> Wladimir Zwalf (1985:161) *Buddhism Art and Faith*
- <sup>11</sup> John Guy in D. Stadtner (1999:24) *The Art of Burma*.
- <sup>12</sup> Luce 1969:190
- <sup>13</sup> Pamela Gutman (1996:166) 'The Pyu Maitreyas' in *Traditions in current perspective*.
- <sup>14</sup> Ray 1936:43
- <sup>15</sup> Luce 1969:193-4
- <sup>16</sup> Boisselier 1963:137 *La Statuaire du Champa*
- <sup>17</sup> Moens, J.L. (1951:67) 'Barabudur, Mendut and Pawon and their mutual relationship' trans. Mark Long: <English-language translation © 2007www.Borobudur.tv.>
- <sup>18</sup> Moens 1951:93



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