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Buddhas of the Past and of the Future: Southeast Asia

How Many Buddhas?

The enumeration of past (*atīta*) and future (*anāgata*) buddhas is assuredly old, and may go back to the origins of Buddhism in India. Even if the number and names of buddhas vary from one list to another, what really matters in Pali Buddhism is the idea of "serialization," that is, that the buddhas follow each other sequentially in different time periods but never encounter one another (Gombrich, 1980).

The concept of multiple or infinite buddhas of past and future times was first embedded in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* (D II 82–83). It is also found in the *Dhammapada* commentary which acknowledges "several hundreds and thousands of past buddhas" (Dh-a I 11, 4), and in the *Sotatthakīmahānidāna*, a late Pali text compiled by a certain Culla-Buddhaghosa, similarly listing a very large number of past buddhas (Banjob, 1983; Derris, 2000). In absolute terms, the number of buddhas is described as limitless. An Old Burmese ink epigraph from Gubyaukgyi temple at Wetgyi-in, Pagan (13th century) refers to "past or future Buddhas […] be they more in number than the grains in a heap of earth" (Ba Shin *et al.*, 1971, 195). Likewise, the *Ākāravattārasutta*, composed in Thailand, speaks of "as many Buddhas as there are grains of sand in the river Ganges" (Jaini, 1992, 195, 199, 212). "Buddhas as numerous as sands" (*braḥ buddh aṁmpāl khsāc*) has also been a common metaphor in Middle Khmer language since at least the 16th century (de Bernon, 2001). Similar lists of large numbers of past buddhas are also given in the *Sambuddhe* verses in later Pali liturgical traditions (Skilling, 1996).

Buddhas of the Past

25 or 28 Buddhas

Each fully enlightened buddha is supposed to meet the being (*bodhisatta*) predestined to become one of his successors, and reveal to him his future buddhahood (i.e. offer him a prediction to buddhahood) in the course of his career. This prediction of future buddhahood is called *vyākaraṇa* (also spelt *byākaraṇa*). An important and early Pali text on previous buddhas is the *Buddhavaṃsa,* which describes or gives the names of 27 past buddhas prior to Gotama.

From the late 11th century onwards at Pagan (Burma), the 24 previous buddhas starting with Dīpaṅkara, plus the three buddhas who preceded him in the same world cycle, as well as Gotama (making a total of 28 [=24+3+1]), are commonly depicted in stone sculptures, in terracotta, and in mural paintings decorating a temple's walls and ceiling. The mural depictions of these 24 buddhas who bestow a prediction of buddhahood upon the future Gotama are often accompanied by ink captions which facilitate individual identification, for example on the north wall of the shrine at Lokahteikpan (Ba Shin, 1962, 85ff., 117ff., 155ff.); on the south, east, and north walls at Kyazin, or on the east wall of the inner corridor at the Thamuti (Luce & Ba Shin, 1969–1970, 391–397, pls. 65–67, 195–201; Bautze-Picron, 2003, 79ff.). Often, the buddhas' names are provided, as well as specific biographical details such as height, lifespan, and/or the type of bodhi tree under which they were enlightened.

Importantly, no occurrence of the list of 25 or 28 buddhas of the past, including Gotama, has yet been identified in Mahāyāna scriptures. Rather, the Pali sources for these Pagan-period paintings are thought to come from the *Buddhavaṃsa* or its commentary, *Madhuratthavilāsinī* (Horner, 1975, 1978), which gives the following list: (1) Taṇhaṅkara, (2) Medhaṅkara, (3) Saraṇaṅkara, (4) Dīpaṅkara, (5) Koṇḍañña, (6) Maṅgala, (7) Sumana, (8) Revata, (9) Sobhita, (10) Anomadassī, (11) Paduma, (12) Nārada, (13) Padumuttara, (14) Sumedha, (15) Sujāta, (16) Piyadassī, (17) Atthadassī, (18) Dhammadassī, (19) Siddhattha, (20) Tissa, (21) Phussa, (22) Vipassī, (23) Sikhī, (24) Vessabhū, (25) Kakusandha, (26) Koṇāgamana, (27) Kassapa, (28) Gotama.

The *Nidānakathā* that introduces the *Jātaka* commentary may also have played a significant role in the wide popularity of the 28 buddhas scheme, since it largely borrows from the *Buddhavaṃsa* (Gombrich,

1980, 69; Jayawickrama, 1990, 3–61). The first three buddhas of this list (Taṇhaṅkara, Medhaṅkara, and Saraṇaṅkara), however, only appear briefly in the *Buddhavaṃsa* and its commentary, since the future Buddha Gotama, strictly speaking not yet a bodhisatta, did not receive a direct prediction from them. In contrast, the *Sotatthakīmahānidāna* gives a slightly longer account of the future bodhisatta's meeting with these three figures (Banjob, 1983, 46–47, 56–57). The bilingual Paṇḍit inscription from Thaton in lower Burma, composed in Pali and Old Mon in circa the late 11th century, is the earliest known Southeast Asian epigraphic reference to the 28 buddhas (Luce & Pe Maung Tin, 1933–1956, pl. 359; Chit Thein, 1965, vol. I, 4–5). This much damaged but important inscription has yet to be properly edited or translated into any European language. The Pali opening portion gives a complete list of the 28 buddhas of the past (ll. 8–19), hence clearly confirming some acquaintance with a scheme paralleling that of the *Buddhavaṃsa*. It is possible that the list of the 28 buddhas could have also circulated orally and independently as a *paritta* (protective chant). Indeed, the Pali portion of the Paṇḍit inscription is parallel to the chanting of the *Aṭṭhavīsatiparitta* or "Protective chant of the twenty-eight [buddhas]," also known today in Sinhalese as *Aṭavisipirita* (Luce, 1974, 133; Saddhatissa, 1975, 22–24; Liyanaratne, 1983, 78).

Interestingly, this specific *paritta* is not found in root texts of the Tipiṭaka or its commentaries, although it is still learned by rote in some modern monastic communities of lower Burma (Bhaddantasiṅgha, 1994, 21ff., vv. 111ff.), and remains part of the liturgical traditions of Thailand and Cambodia to this day (Som Suvaṇṇ, 1966, 26–29; Pabhaṅkaro, 2003, 97; Pussadeva, 2012, 38ff.). Several premodern Thai compendia of protective chanting texts similarly enumerate the 28 buddhas. Most collections of texts that include this *paritta* such as the *Mahādibbamanta* are still in manuscript and remain unpublished.

The recitation of other "protective texts" such as the *Jinapañjaraparitta* or "Protective chant of the conqueror's cage" (Jackson, 1994; McDaniel, 2011, 77–85; Kieffer-Pülz, 2018), and of the *Uppātasantiparitta* (vv. 1–58), believed to have been composed in Burma or northern Thailand (Budh 1916, 61ff.; Ñāṇindena, 2009; Khanthasaraphiwong, 2015), both open with an invocation to the 28 past buddhas. The canonical source for this tradition is quite plausibly the famous *Āṭānāṭiyasutta* (D III 194ff.), a versified homage made to the seven past buddhas which the Buddha Gotama himself recommended should be used as *rakkhā* or protection. In some later Southeast Asian expanded versions known as *Āṭānāṭiyaparitta*, the same verses on the 28 buddhas as found in the Paṇḍit inscription are incorporated into the original *Āṭānāṭiyasutta*.

That depictions of rather large numbers of past buddhas are given in a few instances in murals at Pagan, as well as biographical details for the first three buddhas who lived before the time of Dīpaṅkara, has led some scholars to possibly link their ultimate sources to other texts such as the *Sotatthakīmahānidāna* (Ba Shin, 1962, 159–160; Samerchai, 2014, 35–37, fig. 5). The *Sotatthakīmahānidāna* was certainly mentioned in a late Pagan inscription, dated 1442 (Luce & Tin Htway, 1976, 229, list no. 95), but it is also possible that it was already known in one form or another at Pagan as early as the 13th century. Several illustrations of 28 and numerous past buddhas are also found at nearby Sale (Samerchai, 2015, figs. 4, 23), as well as further away at the later Powin Taung Caves in upper Burma (Munier & Myint Aung, 2007) and in central Thailand (Samerchai, 2014: 37–43, figs. 6–8).

Some of the earliest representations of the 24 or 27 past buddhas in central Thailand in fact occur in a bronze footprint from Wat Sadet, Kamphaengphet (Lorrillard, 2000, 44), and in the Thai murals discovered in the crypt inside the main *prang* tower of Wat Ratchaburana, in Ayutthaya (Santi, 1985), both dated to approximately the early 15th century. Each past buddha is either standing or seated in meditation under his respective bodhi tree with his name inscribed on the base. This arrangement follows closely the *Buddhavaṃsa* or its commentary. Further north, inscriptions possibly dating back from the 1460s in Chiang Mai province also invoke the protection of the 28 buddhas (McDaniel, 2011, 83).

The Five Buddhas of this Eon and the Ten Directional Buddhas

The *Mahāpadānasutta* (D II 1–54) is an early canonical text which lists the six former buddhas preceding Gotama. These are Vipassī, who lived 91 eons ago, Sikhī and Vessabhū, 31 eons ago, as well as Kakusandha, Koṇāgamana, and Kassapa, who attained buddhahood in this "auspicious" or "fortunate eon" (*bhaddakappa*). This period of time sees the maximum authorized number of five buddhas (*pañcabuddha*), with the next one, Metteyya, yet to come, within a single eon according to the Pali

scriptures (→Maitreya). In other Chinese, Sanskrit, and Tibetan traditions, however, the "fortunate eon" may consist of up to 1,000 buddhas or so, of which around 996 are yet to come (Skilling, 2010).

We do find information on the four past buddhas of this eon in early Sri Lankan chronicles composed in Pali. The *Dīpavaṃsa* (chap. II, vv. 62–69), for example, mentions the site known as the Mahāmegha grove in Anurādhapura where bodhi trees were planted during the dispensation of the three former buddhas as well as that of Gotama, a clear allusion to the travels of these past buddhas in the island (Law, 1959, 145). Likewise, the *Mahāvaṃsa* (chap. XV) specifies how each buddha of the past, upon visiting the island, removed the four oppressions and successfully achieved the conversion of beings (Geiger, 1912, 97ff). The inclusion of the three previous buddhas to such local legends and chronicles seems to enhance the stature and sacredness of the site, here Sri Lanka, but the same phenomenon will be reproduced in the 2nd millennium in mainland Southeast Asia, where the grouping of the five buddhas of the present eon becomes very important.

The two reliquaries of the 5th to 6th centuries found at the Khin Ba Mound in Śrīkṣetra (Burma) are the earliest archaeological evidence discovered to date for the representation of the four past buddhas in Southeast Asia (Guy, 2014, cat. no. 27; Fraser-Lu & Stadtner, 2015, cat. no. 2). Of these two reliquaries, one, gilded in silver and inscribed, is of tremendous importance, since it lists, albeit in an unusual order, the names of the four past buddhas in the ancient vernacular language of the Pyus (Duroiselle, 1930b, 175; Falk, 1997, 88ff.; Stargardt, 2001). In Old Mon, such groupings of images are called "the four buddhas" (*ḳyāk pun*), while in Old Khmer they are known as "the four faces" (*catumukh*).

Two stone covers for the relic chamber at the same Khin Ba Mound portray five buddhas seated in a row at the base of a bell shaped monument (Guy, 2014, cat. no. 26). The arrangement of four colossal buddhas seated in cardinal directions around a stūpalike structure is also found at Wat Phra Men, Nakhon Pathom, in central Thailand, dating to circa the 7th to 8th centuries. In the context of Pali Buddhism in Dvāravatī, these cardinal buddhas probably reflect a diagram of the four past buddhas, although no inscriptions confirm this (Revire, 2010, 2014a).

There is copious archaeological evidence for the cult of the five buddhas at Pagan during the 12th to 13th centuries. This consists of architectural forms depicting foursided monuments (*leḥ myak nhā*), of which many are known from Pagan, with one further example from Śrīkṣetra. At Pagan, the most famous example is the Ānanda temple (11th–12th cents.), said to contain four buddha images of the past (Luce & Ba Shin, 1969–1970, 370–371, pls. 269, 277). A series of distinctive pentagonal or fivesided monuments (*ṅāḥ myak nhā*) are also found at Pagan – plus one at neighboring Sale – dated to approximately the late 12th, early 13th century. These are possibly devoted to the five buddhas of this eon (Pichard, 1991). The most popular pentagonal monument is the Dhammayazika, with five external niches of buddha images represented almost identically, seated either in meditation or in the earth touching gesture. Contemporary epigraphic evidence seems to confirm this hypothesis. For example, an indirect reference in the Dhammayazika royal inscription (1196–1198) mentions the "five buddhas of the eon" (Luce & Pe Maung Tin, 1933–1956, pl. 20a, l. 22). Other epigraphs at Pagan referring to the five buddhas of this eon are the Shwegugyi inscription, dated 1131 (Luce & Pe Maung Tin, 1933–1956, pl. 1, ll. 2–3); and the Kutha inscription, dated 1265 (Luce & Pe Maung Tin, 1933–1956, pl. 249, ll. 21–23). Such pentagonal monuments are rare outside Pagan, but at least one other miniature bronze has been found in Arakan, Burma (San Tha Aung, 1979, 51, pl. 27), as well as two examples from central Thailand, still under Khmer cultural influence in circa the 13th century (Revire, forthcoming).

A few clay sealings with five seated buddhas are also said to be from Pagan and are dated to circa the 12th to 13th centuries (Maung Maung Lay, 1974; Luce & Ba Shin, 1969–1970, pls. 60d–e). A later inscription dated 1393 from the Shwezigon temple mentions a certain Mahāthera visiting from the "Yvan/Yonok" country (probably Chiang Mai, northern Thailand) and donating "40 ticals of silver" for polishing the four colossal bronze buddhas found *in situ*, named "Kokkasan, Konākuiṁm, Kassapa, and Gotama" respectively (Luce & Ba Shin, 1961). Finally, the famous Kyak Pun monument at Pegu also attests this tradition of the four buddhas as alive and well in the late 15th century (with heavy renovation in the 20th cent.). A Mon inscription of King Dhammacetī dated to 1476 and found near Pegu confirms the establishment of images of "the exalted Buddha Kakusandha measuring forty standard cubits [c. 18 m] in height, one of the exalted Buddha Koṇāgamana measuring thirty [c. 14 m], one of the

exalted Buddha Kassapa measuring twenty [c. 9 m], and one of the exalted Buddha Gotama measuring eighteen [c. 8 m]" (Blagden, 1934, 54, 57). It is possible that these four buddhas were meant to be originally standing, rather than seated, as comparative evidence from Thailand shows.

The concept of the four buddhas of the past was also well-known and widespread in northern Thailand in the 14th to 15th centuries. For example, the *Jinakālamālinī* relates that, not long after the arrival of Venerable Sumana who introduced a new ordination lineage according to the "pure" Sinhalese tradition (Sīhalabhikkhus/Sīhalapakkha) in Haripuñjaya (contemporary Lamphun), King Kuena had a huge square monument known as Wat Phra Yuen built in 1369 with a high arched doorway at each face, as well as four new standing statues of the same height (Cœdès, 1925, 45, 97; Griswold, 1975). While these accounts do not give details or names for the four standing buddhas, very little doubt can be cast on their identities. A pilgrim and poet traveling from Chiang Mai to Lamphun in the 16th or 17th century clearly reports in the *Khlong Nirat Haripunchai* (vv. 152–153) that: "[o]ne of them is made to represent Kakusandha, one Koṇāgamana, one the holy Kassapa of princely lineage, and one Gotama who next came to found our religion" (Griswold, 1975, 47).

A metal plaque with five standing buddhas of northern Thai style (c. 1500–1600), now in the custody of the Asian Art Museum at San Francisco (inv. no. B60B531), may well echo the tradition observed at Wat Phra Yuen. That the cult of the five buddhas was popular in Lanna (contemporary northern Thailand) during this period is evident from their ubiquitous presence in Buddhist chronicles (*tamnan*). For instance, the *Mūlasāsanā* of Wat Pa Daeng (15th cent.) opens thus: "I pay homage to the Buddhas Kakusandha, Konagamana, Kassapa, and Gotama, the Fully Enlightened One, and to the Bodhisattva, Āriyamettraiya, who will be fully enlightened in the next age" (Sommai & Swearer, 1977, 74).

Late local legends and myths that explain the introduction of Buddhism to northern Thailand, such as *Tamnan Phra Chao Liap Lok* ("Buddha's journey around the world"), a collection compiled in Lanna around the 17th to 18th centuries (Prakong, 2012), mention the Buddha Gotama preaching in various areas and, *de facto*, the introduction of Buddhism in those regions, often by establishing his footprints or *buddhapāda*s. *Tamnan Phra Bat Si Roi* similarly relates that Buddha Gotama went to imprint his foot on top of the footprints of his three predecessors on Mount Rang Rung, possibly in today's Mae Rim district of Chiang Mai province (Sanguan, 2012, 609–615). Northern Thai tradition also has it that in the time of King Mangrai (r. c. 1261–1311), the ruler had a permanent covering made for the compound of the footprints (Di Crocco, 2004, 22–23). Such legends clearly reflect the belief in the five buddhas of this eon, according to which each buddha would preach and leave his footprint at the same sacred spot as did his predecessors.

A 14th-century slab containing four footprints of the past buddhas from Wat Phrabat Noi in Sukhothai, now in the Ramkhamhaeng National Museum (Di Crocco, 2004, pl. 59), is the earliest depiction known in Thailand of such multiple footprints. The earliest similar examples from Lanna date from the 15th century or later. For instance, a unique and exquisite miniature bronze of Buddha Gotama walking and impressing his footprint on those of his three larger predecessors is known to come from Chiang Rai or Phayao, and bears an inscription dated to 1481 on its pedestal (Prasert *et al.*, 1991, 30–31, 266, pl. 25). Several later maps depicted on Thai cosmological (Traiphum) manuscripts also refer to footprints of the four past buddhas being located on top of Khao (Mount) Rang Rung, and even to Sripada (Adam's Peak) in Sri Lanka (Fine Arts Department, 1999, 218; 2004, 47, 49, pls. 38–39).

The fivefold buddha series is also well evidenced in local Pali and vernacular literature and legends from Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. A popular myth found throughout the region is that of the white or albino crow (Th. *ka phueak*; Kh. *k-èk sa*), said to be the "mother of the five bodhisattas." The folk legend usually known as *Tamnan Ka Phueak* in Thailand attempts to explain the origin of the five buddhas of this eon by going back to a bygone period when the five bodhisattas were still siblings. Once upon a time, the albino crow laid five eggs in her nest in a big tree. A storm blew away the nest and the five eggs fell down and were carried away by a flood. Eventually, these were picked up by different kinds of female animals: a hen, a snake, a tortoise, a cow, and a lion. When the eggs hatched, five infants emerged. The children, all boys, grew up and later became hermits and lived in the forest. But one day, the five hermits came upon one another and discovered that they were siblings (Skilling & Evans, 1998; Swearer, 2004). This legend is known in many variants and vernaculars, for example in Lanna, in

Laos, and in Cambodia. Some modern murals or cloth paintings from the region nicely illustrate this folk tale, the only difference being that the lion is generally replaced by a tiger in Cambodia (Roveda & Yem, 2010, figs. 55–58).

The *Pañcabuddhabyākaraṇa* or the "Prediction concerning the five buddhas" is a unique text composed in Pali, perhaps going back to the Sukhothai period (c. 13th to 15th cents.). It possibly derives from the aforementioned set of folk legends merged together with a local Buddhist relic chronicle popular in northern Thai traditions such as the *Tamnan Phra That Doi Tung*, which states that the four past buddhas have already visited and sat upon the peak of this Doi Tung mountain, and evidently Metteyya shall do the same in the future (Penth *et al.*, 1993, 105). The *Pañcabuddhabyākaraṇa* must have originally circulated independently, but today it forms one appendix of the Thai collection of so-called *Paññāsajātaka* or "Apocryphal Birth-stories" (Uttamadhammo, 2003, 293ff.). To date, the text has been loosely translated from Pali into Thai (Fine Arts Department, 2011, 687–697), and only partially in English (Strong, 1995, 220–221). Other more complete French and English translations of the same text derive from the Thai version (Martini, 1969; Skilling & Evans, 1999, 9–12). The opening paragraph of this text states that, in the past, the five bodhisattas were simultaneously born as a junglefowl, a king of snakes, a tortoise, a king of bulls, and a king of lions.

The story that follows this introduction is localized in the area of Thung Yang, Uttaradit province, and refers to a certain Mount Kaṇḍara where the five bodhisattas allegedly once gathered, sat, and announced their future buddhahood. This place is today marked by a rock slab housed at Wat Phra Thaen Sila-at, lying on a hill just outside the modern city of Uttaradit. It has been a sacred site and place of pilgrimage for Thai Buddhists possibly since the Sukhothai period. Textual sources indicate that rulers of the late Ayutthaya, Thonburi, and Bangkok periods, along with important members of the royal family and highranking monks, continuously traveled to pay homage to the rock slab or Phra Thaen Sila-at over the years (Skilling & Santi, 2014).

Another related local Pali text, the *Pañcabuddhasakkarājavaṇṇanā*, "The exposition of the five buddhas of the (present) era," has so far been translated only into Thai (Fine Arts Department, 2011, 698–700). In brief, it refers to the appearance of the four past buddhas in succession during the "four ages" (*catuyuga*) called *kitti* ("accomplished"), *tetā* ("triad"), *dvāpara* ("pair"), and *kali* ("dark"), before announcing the future advent of Metteyya at the end of the age of degeneration and ignorance in which we now live. These four ages seem to draw from ancient texts which discuss the gradual decline of dharma, wisdom, knowledge, and intellectual capability resulting in the diminution of the lifespan and height of the various buddhas. Accordingly, the proportion of people reborn in heaven diminishes while the percentage of those reborn in hell increases. A similar reference is made in the *Saddavimala*, a vernacular text composed in northern Thailand or Laos, relating that the seven books of the Abhidhamma are the creative force behind the body and mind of all things. The latter text adds a fifth age known as *kosayuga* ("granary age"), that is, the propitious epoch of the future Buddha Metteyya (Bizot & Lagirarde, 1996). In addition, the five buddhas therein are equated with each of the five syllables *na-mo bu-ddhā-ya* that comprise the formula of "Homage to the buddha(s)," and which is also a common trope in the so-called *yogāvacar* or *kammaṭṭhān* meditation system of Thai-Khmer Buddhism studied by Bizot and others (Crosby, 2000). At an uncertain date the five "heart syllables" were also equated with the groups of five precepts, five elements, five colors and lights, and so on (Revire, forthcoming).

A similar formula correlating the five syllables with the five buddhas of this eon appears in modern Mon and Khmer chanting books (Skilling & Evans, 1999, 3; Nuon, 2004, 4). In a passage from the *Aphitham chet khamphi ruam* ("A summary of the seven books of the Abhidhamma"), a condensed vernacular text composed in northern Thailand possibly in the 15th or 16th century, we find a formula which contains similar correlations (Swearer, 1995, 340). It is a tradition for Thai monks to chant condensed – especially Abhidhamma – texts at funerals even today (Skilling, 2016). In Thai-Khmer Buddhism, the formula *namo buddhāya* often appears in magical diagrams (Skt. *yantra*, Pal. *yanta*), generally written in Khom or Khmer script (Bizot, 1981, 157–158, 171–172; Becchetti, 1991, 51, fig. 1a, 56, 72), although examples written in Tham or Yuan script from northern Thailand are also known (Conway, 2014, 87–88, fig. 3). Innumerable examples of modern mural paintings from Cambodia depict the five buddhas, sometimes associated with the five syllables *na-mo bu-ddhā-ya*. Phra Bot or cloth paintings with the five buddhas and their symbolic

animals were also popular in Thailand and Cambodia up to the early 20th century.

In Cambodia are found several post-Angkorian monuments or cruciform temples in which four cardinal buddha figures are arranged so that they face out. These are known as *catumukh* and may be directly related to the cult of the four past buddhas of this eon. The central figure hidden between the other four probably represents Metteyya, specially worshipped in his princely and messianic capacity, as we learn from Pali inscription K. 82 from Wat Nokor dated 1566 (Filliozat, 1969; Thompson, 2000, 2006).

A Pali inscription from Angkor Thom discovered recently at Western Prasat Top, which is paleographically datable to the 14th to 15th centuries, reads "Buddha Kassapa [is] in the South" (Sato, 2015, 62, fig. 18). This inscription importantly refers to the cardinal position of the past buddha Kassapa, and actually draws its inspiration from a tradition which mentions not only four but ten directional buddhas representing the four cardinal points, the four intermediate points, the Nadir, and the Zenith (Revire, forthcoming).

This tradition of the ten directional buddhas (Skt, *daśadigbuddha*; Pal. *dasadisabuddha*) is an old concept already attested in several early Mahāyāna texts. The spatial arrangement of these buddhas as a magical diagram in conjunction with the pair of eight boundary (*sīmā*) stones also found at Western Prasat Top probably served specific protective and symbolical functions. This three-dimensional layout of ten directional buddhas is actually given in the *Sabbadisabuddhamaṅgalaparitta* (de Bernon, 2000, 328–330), also popular in the Mon tradition (Guillon, 1987, 149, 153). This *paritta* constitutes today a section of the *Mahādibbamanta* (vv. 21–23), a large collection of Pali liturgical texts equally known in Cambodia and Thailand (Jaini, 1965, 66, 74; Prapod, 2003). Interestingly, the names for the buddhas of the ten directions are directly excerpted from the list of 28 past buddhas, and are given as follows: (1) Padumuttara = East, (2) Revata = Southeast, (3) Kassapa = South, (4) Sumaṅgala = Southwest, (5) Sikhī = West, (6) Medhaṅkara = Northwest, (7) Sākyamuni = North, (8) Saraṇaṅkara = Northeast, (9) Dīpaṅkara = Zenith, (10) Kakusandha = Nadir.

In Laos, evidence for the ancient cult of past buddhas is scarce, but a peculiar arrangement of five buddhas of various sizes arranged in two groups is found carved in low relief on the cliffs at Vang Xang on the Ventiane plain in central Laos (Lorrillard, 2008, figs. 7–8). This grouping may be tentatively dated to the 12th or 13th centuries on the basis of style, especially the facial features of the buddhas, which are strongly reminiscent of the Mon-Khmer idioms preceding the Thai-Lao style of the region. This relief may represent either two separate groups of the five buddhas of the present eon, or a single and coherent group of ten directional buddhas. Alternatively, it is perhaps also evidence of the first visual manifestation of the group of ten future buddhas (*dasabodhisatta*), well attested in later Pali and vernacular chronicles found in the regions of northern Thailand and today's Laos.

Buddhas of the Future

The Future Buddha Metteyya

Besides the *Buddhavaṃsa* (Bv 19), the future Buddha Metteyya, appears only once throughout the earliest root texts of the Pali Tipiṭaka in the *Cakkavattisīhanādasutta* (D III 76). However, he is frequently mentioned in the Pali commentaries and in other later genres of Pali literature, especially in texts called *Anāgatavaṃsa*, "chronicles of the future," of which several Pali versions, editions, and translations are known (Minayeff, 1886; Pruitt, 1988; Collins, 1998, 361–373; Norman, 2006; Dimitrov, 2017). Vernacular (Burmese, Thai, Lao, Khmer, etc.) interverbal or interphrasal translations, known as *nissaya*s, of the *Anāgatavaṃsa* also circulated widely in manuscript form (Bamphen, 1992).

The so-called classical *Anāgatavaṃsa*, a verse composition in Pali, is exclusively dedicated to the story of Metteyya, as is the *Metteyyasutta* which comprises essentially the same text with some interspersed prose material, and their respective commentaries, the *Amatarasadhārā* and the *Samantabhaddikā*. Western printed editions and translations of most of these commentarial and subcommentarial texts are still to be produced, although a few recent scholarly attempts have been made (Filliozat, 1993; Khin Lin Myint, 2005; Stuart, 2017).

Material and epigraphic evidence for the cult of Metteyya during the 1st millennium is rather limited. A small terracotta plaque of a seated disciple (a monk?) was discovered inside a ruined monument at U Thong (modern Thailand) dating from roughly the 7th to 8th centuries; it has a short inscription on the back with the Pali name *metteyyako*. However, it is not certain whether this

refers to the donor's name or to the figure represented on the obverse. If the latter, the tablet could either represent the buddha-to-be Metteyya or perhaps just a "hearer" or disciple, hitherto unknown, of the historical Buddha (Skilling, 2013, 78, figs. 1a, 1b). Some donors from this period also expressed the wish to be reborn again in the time of the future buddha, inscribed in Old Mon, on a large *sīmā* stone found in Khon Kaen in northeast Thailand (Revire, 2014b, 47, Table 2, no. KhK 16).

Several stunning bodhisattva images in stone, silver, or in bronze, also produced in the late 1st millennium, are reported to come from the regions of Si Thep and Buriram, in northeast Thailand, as well as from northwest Cambodia. In most cases, their identification is given as Maitreya because they wear a tiny stūpa on their headdress (Nandana & Leidy, 1994; Jirassa, 2001; Pattaratorn, 2012). Even if this identification is accepted, these latter bodhisattva images, often four armed, were most likely originally part of triads, composed of a buddha image flanked by two attendants and thus have little, if anything, to do with the concept of future buddhas.

The best evidence for the emergence of a cult of Metteyya comes from Pagan in the early 2nd millennium. At the Thambula temple, depictions of several episodes from the life of the future Buddha Metteyya have been recently identified. They have ink captions sharing similar content with verses from the classical *Anāgatavaṃsa* (Samerchai, 2016, figs. 2–5). Bronze images of allegedly imported "Pyu Maitreyas" have also been reported from early Pagan monuments dated to the late 11th century (Luce & Ba Shin, 1969–1970, 188–90, pls. 444a–c; Gutman, 1996, figs. 1–3; Guy, 2014, cat. no. 145). In one particular instance, the inscribed bodhisatta bronze was found inside the reliquary shrine of the Shwesandaw stūpa at Pagan. The pedestal bears a short Pyu donative inscription mentioning the name "Metriya" (Duroiselle, 1930a, 164–165, pls. 39f). At least one clay molded tablet, incised in Pyu script and language on the back, similarly reports a donative inscription in which the donor prays, it seems, to "reach omniscience in the presence of *Metriya*, when the latter becomes a Buddha" (Luce & Ba Shin, 1969–1970, pls. 35c–d). Many other donative formulas found throughout the entire period of premodern Burmese history equally refer to the pious wish for rebirth at the time of the future Buddha Metteyya, and to become enlightened during his dispensation (Than Tun, 1988, 7, 29, 33).

The Ten Future Buddhas

The separate cult of Metteyya, often combined with the four past buddhas, has been ubiquitous in premodern Southeast Asia since the early advent of Pali Buddhism as the most widely practiced religion in the region. However, at a point that is difficult to date precisely, but which probably postdates the emergence of the preceding fivefold buddha scheme, a rare list of ten future buddhas, beginning with Metteyya, was elaborated on and extolled in the same religious context.

A popular text in Thailand is the *Dasabodhisatta-uddesa*, also known as *Anāgatadasabuddhavaṃsa*, translated into French from Pali (Martini, 1936). Many vernacular versions also exist in central and northern Thailand (Phan, 1979), Laos, and Cambodia. This text was much in vogue during the late Ayutthaya and early Rattanakosin periods in Siam. The *Dasabodhisattuppattikathā* transmitted in Sri Lanka (Saddhatissa, 1975) may be a later version of the former text, possibly brought to the island in the course of the 18th century from Siam. In both examples, the Buddha Gotama tells Sāriputta that the number of beings who will become buddhas in times yet to come is countless, and admits that he himself cannot count them (Martini, 1936, 297, 337; Saddhatissa, 1975, 54, 119). It is also said that a person who worships the ten future buddhas will not be reborn in hell for 100,000 eons (Martini, 1936: 334, 367). The cult of the ten buddhas evidently reflects the ten supreme perfections (*dasapāramī*), of which *dāna* (giving) is preeminent, as each of the ten stories tells us. The *Dasabodhisatta-uddesa* could then be perceived as a utopian view projected into the future to counterbalance the last ten lives of the Buddha Gotama (*dasajātaka*), narratives of which are retrospective, with each story also illustrating one of the ten perfections of Gotama in the Thai tradition (Appleton & Shaw, 2015). The names of the ten future buddhas are listed as follows: (1) Metteyya, (2) Rāma, (3) Dhammarāja, (4) Dhammasāmi, (5) Nārada, (6) Raṅsimuni, (7) Devadeva, (8) Narasīha, (9) Tissa, (10) Sumaṅgala.

The earliest epigraphic reference to the *dasabodhisatta* is to be found in a mid-14th-century Pali inscription of Sukhothai, face C, l. 12 (Cœdès, 1917, 30, 32), written during the reign of King Lithai (r. c. 1347–1368/74), although no names are provided for each buddha. However, the *Metteyyasutta* and the *Sotatthakīmahānidāna* give a brief enumeration of the ten bodhisattas, both with slightly different

names, in their concluding sections (Minayeff, 1886, 37; Banjob, 1983, 96, 119, vv. 632–633).

The *Dasabodhisatta-uddesa*, as we know it today in its expanded form, may have been composed or compiled sometime during the late Ayutthaya period, and may have been "politically" motivated. Evidence comes primarily from the *Praise in Honor of His Majesty the King Prasat Thong* which ostensibly identifies the Siamese king (r. 1629–1656) with one of the ten future buddhas (Buntuan, 2000, 49–56, 84–85, 169). More precisely, it states that in a former life Prasat Thong was an elephant of the Pārileyyaka forest who devotedly looked after Buddha Gotama near Kosambī. As it happens, the elephant is destined to be the tenth future buddha, Sumaṅgala, according to the *Dasabodhisatta-uddesa* (Martini, 1936, 330ff., 363ff.). In addition, another brief epigraphic reference to the ten bodhisattas appears in a post-Angkorian inscription (IMA 31, stanza 26), dated 1684, in which the donor wishes to become the 11th future buddha (Pou, 1973, 220, 224).

Mural paintings of the ten bodhisattas are rare, but not unknown. The earliest examples are found in Sri Lankan temples belonging to the Siamese branch from the late 18th century onwards, first at Dambulla on the ceilings of Cave 2, and also at the Malwatta Vihāra in Kandy (Nandana & Prematilleke, 1997). This sudden proliferation of the appearance of the ten bodhisattas in modern Sri Lanka is a strong argument in favor of the hypothesis that this tradition was actually imported from Siam in the late 18th century or slightly later. The "list of books sent to Ceylon from Siam" with the 1756 mission mentions some *Anāgatavaṃsa* texts, along with their commentaries and subcommentaries (von Hinüber, 1988, 179, nos 68–70), in which case the *Dasabodhisatta-uddesa* was possibly part of the shipment. In Thailand, modern mural paintings of the ten bodhisattas have been identified at Wat Nai Klang, Phetchaburi province, and are dated to the late 19th century (Suphicha, 2010). An interesting and unique modern mural from Wat Sithor in Srei Santhor, Cambodia, has only been recently identified, and represents the beheaded King Mahāpanāda wishing to become the tenth buddha of the future named Sumaṅgala (Revire, forthcoming).

Given the above, a working hypothesis is that the classical *Anāgatavaṃsa* and the *Metteyyasutta*, including only Metteyya, were known in Pagan at least in the 13th century, as evidenced by a few mural paintings with captions. These versions, possibly along with the *Sotatthakīmahānidāna*, were transmitted to Sukhothai, Lanna, and Angkor slightly later, incorporating brief allusions to the ten future buddhas. Later, these future birth stories were further elaborated and expanded in the late Ayutthaya and early Rattanakosin periods, knowing that the oldest manuscripts kept at our disposal date from King Rama III (r. 1824–1851) and are all written in Khom script.

Understanding the Emergence of Past and Future Buddhas

From the foregoing discussion, we have seen that material and epigraphic evidence for Pali Buddhism and the cult of the four past buddhas in mainland Southeast Asia has existed since around the 5th to 6th centuries, first in Burma. Nothing similar has been identified thus far in Sri Lanka from the 1st millennium. After a hiatus of several centuries, the concept of past and future buddhas gradually emerged again in the archaeological and epigraphic records of mainland Southeast Asia from the late 11th century onwards. For centuries, the cult of past and future buddhas has been completely appropriated and integrated into local Southeast Asian legends, chronicles, as well as in certain rituals, and often played an integral part in the iconography of temple decoration. These legends and narratives have been composed, expanded, translated, and rearranged over many centuries and continue to this day. A comprehensive study of their various cults and manifestations in the premodern and modern periods may shed further light on the distinctive traditions of Southeast Asian Buddhism.

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Nicolas Revire