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On Maṇḍalas

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Reevaluating the Eighth-Ninth Century Pāla Milieu: Icono-Conservatism and the Persistence of Śākyamuni

INTRODUCTION

The typical way to begin an essay such as this—that is, a "reevaluation"—is to say that the period in question has been neglected, understudied, or simply passed over. One could hardly say this about the Pāla period. Indeed, since Banerji's 1915 monograph, *The Pālas of Bengal*, this has been one of the more intensely examined periods in Indian Buddhist history. One of the effects of all of this attention, however, is that certain very basic assumptions have simply been handed down, *paramparā*, without sufficient scrutiny. What I wish to examine here is what is perhaps the most glaring of all such assumptions: namely, that Pāla-period Buddhism *is* Vajrayāna Buddhism. I shall call in to question this simple equation, and argue that rather than the hotbed of innovation that is typically seen in the Pāla period, this is in fact a strikingly conservative period. I argue here that in the early Pāla milieu what we see appears to be a concerted effort to preserve and conserve the sense of Magadha as the locative center of the Buddhist world, and to assert and reassert Śākyamuni's place at the center of this center.[1] Paul Mus, of course, made this very point in his *Borobuḍur*,[2]

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1. I should say at the start that I am using the phrase "Pāla period" here as a convenient rubric, and that I am thus bracketing the decidedly messy issues involved in such easy, if not facile, periodization. It is, for instance, virtually impossible to determine just what constituted the Pāla polity, or to determine the geo-political extent of that polity, let alone to determine the extent to which the Pālas as kings influenced the production and use of Buddhist sculpture: see my 1996 Ph. D. Dissertation, "Wisdom Divine: The Visual Representation of *Prajñā* in Pāla-Period Buddhism," particularly ch. two. One important issue that is indirectly raised by the present paper is the degree to which the artistic remains from the early Pāla milieu are reflective of a larger political discourse aimed at, or at least in tension with, the Rāṣṭrakūṭas to the South. The fact that Buddhists in the early Pāla milieu did not develop the maṇḍalic programs prevalent in the Deccan during the same period is certainly saturated with political significance and issues of

but he never fully pursued his own assertion. It is my hope to flesh out Mus' suggestion here, and I shall argue that the early Pāla period is characterized as much, if not more, by continuation as it is by innovation.

On its face, this is indeed a tall order. What I shall do here, then, is approach this issue from a very specific angle. I want to focus on the representation of the Buddha—or let me say for now of the Buddhas—during the early Pāla period, and in particular the prominence of images of the Buddha in the *bhūmisparśamudrā*. What these representations tell us, or more properly *show* us, is that, in contrast to what we might see during the same period in the Deccan or in Orissa, it is not maṇḍalas that are being propagated, but what I shall tentatively call the extended biography of Śākyamuni.[3]

I shall proceed here by first discussing some of the most commonly perpetuated assumptions about the sort of Buddhism prevalent in the early Pāla period; I will then turn to an analysis of the sources of these assumptions, and offer some alternative interpretations of these sources; and finally, and I hope most substantially, I shall discuss the iconographic representation of the Buddha during this period. It is this last discussion that I think provides the most insight into the nature of Buddhist practice during this period in the Pāla milieu. For although this period is notable for its innovative and even radical *textual* practices, the overwhelming amount of hard evidence provided by the sculptural remains of the period indicates a strik-

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dynastic "legitimacy": i. e. the Pāla period Buddhists' development of a kind of locative maṇḍala of Śākyamuni's life, the center of which is the Pāla realm, can be seen in a tense sort of juxtaposition with the Rāṣṭrakūṭa period Buddhists' development of a complex of maṇḍalas that create a different sort of "center," a "cosmic Bodhgayā" away from Bodhgayā. See Geri Malandra's in Malandra 1993, for the very different view from the Deccan.

2. Mus suggests that it is Śākyamuni who remains in the foreground of Buddhist practice—particularly art—until the "irruption" of Islam into the Indian Subcontinent: see *Borobuḍur*, 10ff.

3. At Ratnagiri, as well as elsewhere in Orissa, there was a tremendous amount of iconographic innovation taking place during this period, and, in particular, a marked emphasis on female deities and a move away from Śākyamuni as the central figure in Buddhist art see Hock, 1987. However, it is important to note that Śākyamuni does not simply drop out of the picture, in either Orissa or the Deccan. As Geri Malandra has argued, at Ellora there is at once an innovative thrust in the direction of increasingly complex maṇḍalas, while at the same time a concerted effort to retain the importance of Śākyamuni and also to equate Ellora with Bodhgayā and the enlightenment episode: see Malandra 1993, particularly 29, 70-71, and 114-15.

ingly conventional and conservative *modus operandi*. It is also my hope that this specific discussion will open up some possibilities for understanding the contemporary developments in such "periphery" locales—periphery, at least, from the Pāla point of view—as the Deccan and Orissa, not to mention the contemporary developments in Southeast and East Asia.

WHAT WE (THINK WE) KNOW, AND HOW WE KNOW IT

What We (Think We) Know

One of the first modern scholars to describe Buddhist practice during the Pāla period was Rajendra Lal Mitra, who, in his 1882 book, *Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal*, set the standard for at least the next fifty years by saying that the texts he believed dated to this period—texts that had been collected by Hodgson in Nepal in the 1820s and 1830s—were "reeking of pestilent dogmas and practices" (Mitra 1882, 24). The texts in question were, of course, *tantric* in nature: among them, the *Guhyasamājatāntra, Niṣpannayogāvalī, Sādhanamālā, Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*. La Vallée Poussin, in his article on Tantrism for Hastings' *Encyclopedia of Religious Ethics*, echoed and even exaggerated Mitra's opinion, saying that these Vajrayāna texts contained and promoted "disgusting practices both obscene and criminal" (La Vallée Poussin 1908-26, 195). Two other prominent early scholars of Buddhism, Maurice Winternitz and Benoytosh Bhattacharyya, certainly did not agree on much, but they agreed that Pāla-period Buddhism was of a decidedly low character: Winternitz said that the Pāla-period texts presented "an unsavory mixture of mysticism, occult pseudo-science, magic and erotics" that was expressed in "strange and often filthy language" (Winternitz 1933a, 3-4, and 1933b 389-89), while Bhattacharyya wrote that the texts of the Vajrayāna are "specimens of the worst immorality and sin" (Bhattacharyya 1929, II, xxi).

These comments, by some of the leading scholars of Buddhism in the first half of this century, were not only seldom challenged, but were perpetuated and elaborated on. Thus what started out in 1882 as a reaction to the sexual imagery and seemingly-lascivious practices of a handful of texts becomes the standard way to describe the nearly half-millennium of Buddhist practices that is encompassed by the phrase "Pāla Period." In a work that remains one of the standard sources for the period, *The History of Ancient Bengal*, R. C. Majumdar is representative of this tendency when he writes: "Buddhism under the Pālas differed essentially from what it was even in the time of Hiuen Tsang in the seventh century A. D. There was no trace, not only of the ancient schools of the Hīnayāna system, but even of the pure form of Mahāyāna. What we find instead were forms of mysti-

cism that had developed out of the Mahāyāna," namely, Vajrayāna and Mantrayāna (Majumdar 1971, 378). In another widely read and quoted work on the period, Sukumar Dutt's *Monks and Monasteries of India*, we read that "during the 'Pāla Period' of its history Buddhism itself was already in a phase wherein it was heavily adulterated by the Tāntric cult and its magic spells and practices. . . . The effect of this on its old cultural standards," writes Dutt, "was to stunt their catholicity of intellectual interests—in fact to reduce culture to a cult" (Dutt 1962, 345). In short, according to Dutt, under the Pālas, "The religion had entered on a phase in which the Mahāyāna philosophy, of which Nālandā had hitherto been the intellectual stronghold, had slanted off to an esoteric cult know as *Vajrayāna* (Tāntric Buddhism)" (Dutt, 1962 349). We find the same conclusion in Joshi's *Studies in the Buddhistic Culture of India*; he too emphasizes the development of the Vajrayāna, and remarks that "except for some exceptional examples, few and far between, the figures of Buddha, the historic Śākyamuni, became rare during this period. He being relegated to the position of Mānuṣī Buddhas, the Dhyānī Buddhas became famous and popular . . ." (Joshi 1967, 78).

I shall return to this last point in particular, since one of the assumptions that goes along with the Pāla Buddhism *equals* Vajrayāna Buddhism equation is that Śākyamuni simply drops out of the picture; in the early part of the Pāla period, as we shall see, this assumption could hardly be less true. The question I wish to address first, however, is from where these scholars have gleaned these characterizations of early Pāla-period Buddhism as being almost exclusively Vajrayāna.

Tāranātha

Perhaps the single most commonly cited source for this early Pāla period has been Tāranātha, who wrote his unambiguously Vajrayāna-centric *History of Buddhism in India* (*rGya-gar-chos-'byuṅ* or *dGos-'dod-kun-'byuṅ*) in Tibet in 1608. Tāranātha begins his description of this period with an account of the ascent of Gopāla, the first of the Pāla kings, who seems to have taken over the rule of the region in 750, following the so-called *matsyayana*, the "reign of fishes" mentioned in the Khalimpur copper-plate of Dharmapāla (Kielhorn 1896-97). Tāranātha makes the Vajrayāna sympathies of this first Pāla king quite clear. Before ascending the throne, Tāranātha tells us, Gopāla "received *abhiṣeka* from an *ācārya* with instructions to propitiate the goddess Cundā," and, having "attained *siddhi* of goddess Cundā. . . . he became the king on the next day" (Chimpa and Chattopadhyaya 1970, 257-58). In the remainder of Tāranātha's account of

this first Pāla king there are several other allusions to the Vajrayāna; he mentions a variety of *siddhi*s and *sādhana* practices, implying, although not actually stating, that Vajrayāna was practiced at the highest level of this first Pāla king's realm.

The prominence of Vajrayāna in Tāranātha's account of the next Pāla king, Dharmapāla—here I am correcting Tāranātha's somewhat confused chronology—whose reign was from 775 to 812, is even more explicit. During this period, several Vajrayāna *ācārya*s are said to have been active, including, notably a figure named Kṛṣṇācārya who Tāranātha says was a great *paṇḍita* of Cakrasambara, Hevajra, and Yamāri (Chimpa and Chattopadhyaya 1970, 268), some of the very deities to whom Tāranātha himself is know to have been devoted.

One of the most commonly cited passages in Tāranātha's *History* is this account of Dharmapāla: "He accepted as his preceptors Haribhadra and Jñānapāda and filled all directions with the Prajñā-pāramitā and the Śrī Guhya-samāja. The *paṇḍita*s versed in the Guhya-samāja and the Prajñā-pāramitā were offered the highest seats of honour etc.," (Chimpa and Chattopadhyaya 1970, 274). This purported dissemination of the *Guhyasamājatantra*, what might be called the *Urtext* of the Vajrayāna, has often been taken as proof-positive not only of the Pālas' official support of Vajrayāna, but also of the prominence of this text in the region. As we shall see, however, it is precisely this kind of freewheeling extrapolation that leads to what I think are misguided assumptions about the sort of Buddhism prevalent between 750 and 850 in Northeast India; the date of this text is a matter of much debate, and the Buddhism that we see contained within it does not jibe with the predominance of sculptural remains from the time. I am not suggesting that the *Guhyasamāja* had *no* significance in the Pāla milieu, but rather that its prominence has been, at the very least, overstated, and that this overstated emphasis has skewed our understanding of this period in Buddhist history.

Throughout his account of the Pāla period, Tāranātha is most interested in the goings on at Vikramaśīla. At Vikramaśīla there was, for instance, "a temple of Vajrāsana [where] there were then a large silver-image of Heruka and many treatises on Tantra." According to Tāranātha, however, these were destroyed by Śrāvakas from Sri Lanka because they said that these images and texts were made by Māra; "So they burnt these and smashed the image into pieces and used the pieces as ordinary money" (Chimpa and Chattopadhyaya 1970, 279). Again, we see quite clearly where Tāranātha's sympathies lie, for in one of his few references to non-tantric monks, he portrays these Śrāvakas as heretics. He goes on, however, to tell us that

Haribhadra, who was then the preceptor of Vikramaśīla, saved the people from these misguided and evil Śrāvakas: he explained to them the *kriyāyoga*s, and "he preached most extensively the five Tantras of the insiders, namely the Samāja, Māyājāla, Buddha-samayoga, Candra-guhya-tilaka, and Mañjuśrī-krodha. Special emphasis," Tāranātha tells us, "was put on the teachings of the Guhya-samāja and so it was very widely spread" (Chimpa and Chattopadhyaya 1970, 279).

I could go on and on about Tāranātha here; his account is brimming with names of authors and texts and descriptions of monastic complexes. My point, however, should be clear by now: Tāranātha is hardly engaged in what we would call "objective historiography." On the face of it, certainly, Tāranātha's account gives an unambiguous description of the early Pāla period as being dominated by the three classes of tantra and, in particular, by the Vajrayāna teachings and practices as described in the *Guhyasamāja* and other *anuttarayoga* texts.

Consider, however, the problems with taking Tāranātha at face value: First, Tāranātha is writing from Tibet for a Tibetan audience; his history, in fact, is more or less a chronicle of the significant Tibetan figures and those Indians who either came to Tibet themselves, or whose work became central to Tibetan Buddhism. Second, Tāranātha himself seems to have been an adherent to the *Kālacakratantra*, and he wrote several texts within that vein. Third, he finished his history in 1608; although Goeffrey Samuel may be correct in asserting that Tāranātha objectively used the sources available to him, (Samuel 1993, 420), we should be skeptical, to say the least, in taking as "objective" a history composed eight hundred years after the fact. Clearly Tāranātha had a sectarian axe to grind, and part of his historiographical exercise was to legitimize his own preferred brand of Buddhist practice. As David Templeman nicely puts it, "Tāranātha's purpose . . . was not to paint a completely accurate portrait of the Dharma and its adherents but to glorify them, to make them serve as inspirations to the Buddhists of Tibet . . .," (Templeman 1981, 45). Thus the mainstream Mahāyāna, as exemplified by the *Prajñāpāramitā* genre, is present in his *History* only as a kind of lesser partner to the tantras.[4] And the Śrāvakas who were present in the Pāla realm at this time are mentioned only as icon-

4. This is a particularly significant absence, since the majority of extant texts from the Pāla period are *Prajñāpāramitā* texts, and the evidence provided by roughly contemporary authors, such as Śāntideva, indicates that it was the *Prajñāpāramitā* that was at the center of the early Pāla-period Buddhist discourse.

oclasts who go so far as to melt down consecrated images and turn them into money. Furthermore, the locative emphasis in Tāranātha's account is on Vikramaśīla, which does seem eventually, that is post-tenth century, to have become the center of Vajrayāna practice in Pāla India; he makes only passing reference to the obviously major, and decidedly mainstream, monastic centers of Nālandā and Bodhgayā.

The Chinese Pilgrims

In contrast to Tāranātha's Vajrayāna-centric account, Xuanzang and Yijing—both of whom travelled in India in the seventh century, and are thus at least chronologically much closer to the early Pāla period—present views of a much more mainstream Buddhism in what is roughly the Pāla milieu. Yijing, for instance, describes a Pāla region in Northeast India that is dominated by the Sarvāstivādins and other so-called Hīnayāna schools: "In Northern India and the islands of the Southern Sea," he reports, "they generally belong to the Hīnayāna . . ." (Takakusu 1896, 14). The environment Yijing describes conforms very closely, in fact, to Dutt's "catholicity of intellectual interests," the loss of which Dutt argues distinguishes the Pāla period. Yijing sees, for instance, no real differences between the various schools extant in the seventh-century milieu, and writes: "We can reasonably practise both the Mahā(yāna) and the Hīna(yāna) doctrines in obedience to the instruction of the Merciful Honoured One, preventing small offences, and meditating upon the great Doctrine of Nothingness" (Takakusu 1896, 51). In short, one comes away from Yijing's report with the impression that the milieu he saw in Northeast India was decidedly mainstream; except for a passing mention of the *Mahāvairocanasūtra*, there is no mention of Tantric practices.

Xuanzang, in contrast to Yijing, certainly sees plenty of discord in Northeastern India: "The tenets of the schools keep these isolated, and controversy runs high . . . Each of the Eighteen schools claims to have intellectual superiority; and the tenets (or practices) of the Great and Small Systems (lit. vehicles) differ widely . . . and many are the noisy discussions" (Beal 1884, 162). Nonetheless, as does Yijing, Xuanzang describes a mostly mainstream milieu, with a notable absence of tantric and Vajrayāna practices. There is no doubt that in their accounts of their travels in India, these Chinese pilgrims also have their own sectarian agendas, and I am not suggesting somehow that they are *prima facie* more objective or more reliable than Taranātha. Rather, I am positing that they present a more diverse and more, for lack of a better term, *balanced* view of the early Pāla milieu. Furthermore, when we examine the sculptural remains of this period, we

are left with a portrait of Buddhist practices that bears a much greater resemblance to the mainstream Buddhism that we see in the Chinese pilgrims' accounts than to what we see in Tāranātha's *History*.

WHAT WE SEE

Searching for Akṣobhya

Scholars have generally characterized the Buddhist sculpture of the early Pāla period in much the same way that they have characterized the overall religious milieu. They emphasize the expansion of the Buddhist pantheon to include various Vajrayāna deities, and, most significantly here, they cite the rise of the so-called *dhyāni* Buddhas and the concomitant decline of Śākyamuni. Gouriswar Bhattacharya, echoing Joshi's comment that I have already quoted about the rarity of figures of Śākyamuni, remarks: "In the medieval period a great change took place in the Buddhist theological conception in Bihar-Bengal when Buddha Śākyamuni, the great monk, *Mahāśramaṇa*, lost his primary importance and became a family member of Akṣobhya like a Bodhisattva" (G. Bhattacharya 1989, 353). What I will argue in the remainder of this essay is that this assertion—which I believe betrays an over-reliance on Tāranātha and other Tibetan historians, such as Bu-ston, as well as on those scholars who have uncritically accepted the Tibetan portrayal of the period—is not borne out by the sculptural evidence from the early Pāla period. Indeed, almost the opposite is the case for the eighth through tenth centuries: although, certainly, a wide variety of *bodhisattva*s and related deities are represented in the Buddhist sculpture of the early Pāla period—some clearly belonging to the Vajrayāna—there is during this period a continued and consistent emphasis on Śākyamuni, and particularly on, from the tenth century onward, the group of eight significant events in his life and the places associated with these events, the *Aṣṭamahāpratihārya*.

As we have seen, Tāranātha emphasizes the prevalence of the *Guhyasamājatantra* during the reigns of Gopāla, Dharmapāla, and Devapāla. Tāranātha tells us that Dharmapāla "filled all directions" with the *Guhyasamājatantra* (Chimpa and Chattopadhyaya 1970, 274), and at places such as Vikramaśīla "Special emphasis was put on the teachings of the Guhya-samāja and so it was very widely spread" (Chimpa and Chattopadhyaya 1970, 279). The *Guhyasamāja* is one of the fundamental texts of the *anuttarayoga* class of tantra—Benoytosh Bhattacharyya calls it "the Bible of the Tāntric Buddhists" (B. Bhattacharyya 1931, 24)—and, as such, it is something of the root text of the Vajrayāna. It is in the *Guhyasamāja* that the *pañca-tathāgata*s—the five Buddhas who are

typically referred to, incorrectly, as *dhyāni*Buddhas—are first articulated and placed in a maṇḍala, with Akṣobhya at the center. These five Buddhas are described in this text as emanations or manifestations of Śākyamuni in the form of the five *skandhas*: *pañcabuddhasvabhāvatvāt pañcaskandhā jināḥ smṛtaḥ* (B. Bhattacharyya 1931, 41). Given the purported ubiquity of this text in the eighth and ninth centuries, one could reasonably expect to find evidence of the practices described there throughout the sculptural remains of the period. We could expect, for instance, to find evidence of the five Tathāgatas and the various members of their families. In short, we could expect to find evidence of maṇḍalas in the art of the early Pāla period.

There are, however, first some chronological difficulties here, since the dating of the *Guhyasamāja* is by no means certain. One of the first to attempt to assign a date to this text was Benoytosh Bhattacharyya, who in his introduction to the 1931 Gaekwad's edition of the text argues that the *Guhyasamājatantra* dates to the third century, C. E. (B. Bhattacharyya 1931, xxxiv). Bhattacharyya attributes the text to the great Asaṅga. Although he recognized that there was a potential problem with this early dating, since the text does not appear to be mentioned anywhere until the seventh century, Bhattacharyya simply sweeps this problem away. "The reason why we do not find any mention of the *Guhyasamāja* before Nāgārjuna [the seventh-century Nāgārjuna], is because the Tantra was kept secret among the professors and the doctrines inculcated therein were confined to a few adepts for three hundred years until Buddhist Tantras of the Yoga and Yogatantra classes obtained publicity during the time of the Siddhācāryas mainly through their mystic songs, preachings and works," (B. Bhattacharyya, xxxii). The shakiness of Bhattacharyya's argument is not limited, however, to this rather absurdly literal thesis about the "secrecy" of the text (the *guhya* of the title does mean secret or hidden). He erroneously connects the Asaṅga to whom a single *sādhana* in the *Sādhanamālā* is attributed with the great Asaṅga of the third century, to whom Tāranātha traces the origin of the tantras, and then he uses this to argue for the early dating of the *Guhyasamāja* on the basis of the existence of the full-blown *pañca-tathāgata* system, as mentioned in the so-labelled Asaṅga *sādhana*. The *Sādhanamālā*, however, is clearly a late text (post-tenth century, at least), and the attribution of one of the verses by the redactors of the text and subsequent Tibetan tradition to Asaṅga seems purely a legitimizing convention.[5]

5. See, for instance, Joshi 1967, 330-33.

Alex Wayman has also discussed the dating of the *Guhyasamājatantra* at length, and based on, among other factors, a commentary written by Līlavajra in the eighth century on a text that may or may not be the *Guhyasamājatantra* as we know it, he asserts that the text must date to at least before the eighth century; he concludes, however, on what he himself calls "a purely tentative basis," that the text dates to the fourth century.[6]

My purpose here is not to engage further in this dating debate—the details of which would fill several volumes—although I favor a date of no earlier than the eighth century for the text, and even then I question the prevalence and the popularity of the practices described therein;[7] rather, I wish to point out that these attempts to make the *Guhyasamājatantra* a *very early* text both fuel and are fueled by the very assumptions concerning the development and prominence of the Vajrayāna that I have been calling into question here. The argument, in short, proceeds along the logic that if the *Guhyasamājatantra* were written in the fourth century, it would then make sense, as Tāranātha claims, that the text and the practices contained in it would have been prominent by the eighth century. The question that must be asked, then, is do we see evidence of this text in the sculpture of the period? Do we see Śākyamuni nudged aside by the *pañca-tathāgata*s, particularly by Akṣobhya? Do we see, in fact, what Gouriswar Bhattacharya describes when he writes: "In Magadha or South Bihar, Akṣobhya, of all the Transcendent Buddhas, was the most important deity of worship during the Pāla period. Buddha Śākyamuni in *bhūmisparśamudrā* was identified with Akṣobhya and this Transcendent deity attained more importance than the mortal Śākyamuni?"[8] The short answer to this question is a simple no. It is, however, at least worth looking for Akṣobhya, since any number of scholars in any number of studies have misidentified images of Śākyamuni as Akṣobhya.

The overwhelming number of early Pāla-period Buddha images depict a seated Buddha displaying the *bhūmisparśamudrā*. *Bhūmisparśamudrā* images, also sometimes referred to as *māravijaya* images, on the most obvious level serve what Vidya Dehejia has called a "monoscenic" narrative and symbolic function, presenting a single episode in the life of

6. See Wayman 1977, 84-104, and also Wayman 1973, 17-19.

7. See Joshi, 1967 330-32, for a particularly concise, and sensible, hypothesis: and also see Yukei Matsunaga 1977, 179, for a view that takes in to account the Chinese translations of the text.

8. G. Bhattacharya 1989, 352 Bhattacharya makes this assertion in spite of the fact that he is very clear about the iconographic distinctions between Śākyamuni and Akṣobhya.

Śākyamuni;[9] such images represent the point at which Śākyamuni achieves enlightenment, the point at which he becomes the Buddha. John Huntington has called this event "the *summum bonum* of Buddhist soteriology" (J. Huntington 1987b, 58). "It is this moment," he writes, "the moment of gaining the right to enlightenment . . . that is the validation of the soteriological methodology taught by the Buddhists" (J. Huntington 1986a, 61). In other words, this is the culmination of the *dharma*.

Let us briefly recall the event: Just at the point at which he is about to attain *bodhi*, Śākyamuni is confronted by Māra, who realizes that he is about to be defeated by this man who has discovered the means with which to cut through all artifice and to conquer death. Māra, however, the embodiment of subterfuge, creates all manner of illusion and temptation to distract and defeat the Buddha-to-be. He unleashes his various armies—appropriately named desire, discontent, hunger and thirst, craving—but Śākyamuni is unmoved. Māra then uses his own daughters to tempt Śākyamuni, to stir in him lust and desire, but again to no avail. So finally Māra assaults him verbally, and challenges his very right to be beneath the *bodhi* tree, his right to achieve enlightenment. Śākyamuni responds that all of the millions of offerings that he has made in the past have given him the right to enlightenment. Māra, however, persists; he says there is no witness to support Śākyamuni's claims. Śākyamuni's response is the exact moment depicted in *bhūmisparśamudrā* images: he reaches out his right hand and touches the earth. The *bhūdevī*, the goddess of the earth (who is also sometimes depicted in the images), is impartial and free from malice, and thus serves as the ideal character witness.

Scholars have frequently identified *bhūmisparśa* Buddha images from the early Pāla-period as Akṣobhya; for example, in the volume *The Image of the Buddha*, edited by David Snellgrove, several *bhūmisparśamudrā* Buddha images are identified as Akṣobhya, although there is virtually no iconographic rational for doing so other than the fact that in the *Guhyasamājatantra* and other *anuttarayoga* tantra texts, Akṣobhya's characteristic hand gesture is the *bhūmisparśamudrā*.[10] Again, it seems that the assumption about the prevalence of tantric practices in the early Pāla period has simply clouded the vision of such scholars, transforming Śākyamuni into Akṣobhya. Take, for instance, the image from Bodhgayā

9. See Dehejia 1990, for the full context of her discussion of this term, as well Dehejia 1992. See also S. Huntington 1990, and S. Huntington 1993, for a different perspective on the issues Dehejia discusses.
10. See Snellgrove 1978.

that Susan Huntington properly identifies as Śākyamuni and that dates roughly to the late ninth century;[11] this is a fairly typical *bhūmisparśa* image. The Buddha (to-be) is seated cross-legged, his left hand rests in his lap, and his right hand is draped over his right knee, touching the earth. The Buddha is flanked by two bodhisattvas—Avalokiteśvara and Maitreya—and above his head, at the top of the stele, are two *vidyadhara*s and a bit of the *aśvattha bodhi* tree, the latter a fairly standard motif on such sculptures, serving to visually represent the locale of the scene. There is also a small *vajra* directly below the ankles of the Buddha, a common motif on Pāla-period *bhūmisparśa* images, and a motif that might lead one to identify the image as representing Akṣobhya; the *vajra* is, after all, the symbol *par excellence* of the Vajrayāna. In this case, however, the *vajra* is iconographically tied to Śākyamuni's defeat of Māra and, in particular, to Bodhgayā itself: as Māra tempts him, he sits atop the *vajrāsana*, the "adamantine," or "diamond-like seat" of enlightenment, pure and immovable.[12]

Although it is uncertain when Buddhist began to sculpturally represent individual *jina*-Buddhas, it appears that this practice did not begin until some time after the tenth century. Of the *tathāgata*s, Akṣobhya is in fact the most common in Northeast India (as opposed to Vairocana or Amitābha elsewhere in the Buddhist world); this later iconographic development does, perhaps, indicate the eventual prominence of the *anuttarayoga* practices such as those found in the *Guhyasamājatantra*. The distinguishing iconographic detail in such images is not, as has frequently been assumed, the crown and jewelry that adorn the Buddha in such images (these elements are typically used with images of Śākyamuni from the later Pāla period). Rather, the distinct iconographic element that does not occur on images of Śākyamuni displaying the *bhūmisparśamudrā* is the single, central elephant at the base of the stele.[13] According to Abhayākaragupta's *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, again a late, post-tenth century text that gives the iconography of many of the deities in the Vajrayāna pantheon, Akṣobhya's vehicle is the elephant. It is important to note, however, that this iconographic detail is a late development, and even in the latest periods of the Pāla era sculptures of Akṣobhya never even approach the popularity of images of Śākyamuni.

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11. S. Huntington 1984, 103.
12. See Janice Leoshko 1988, for an extended discussion of *vajrāsana* images.
13. G. Bhattacharya 1989, was, I believe, the first to point this out.

In sum, then, reports of Śākyamuni's death during this period have been greatly exaggerated. Indeed, although we do see evidence of iconographic innovations during this period—the increased popularity of Tāra, say, or of Mañjuśrī, or the emergence of Prajñāpāramitā as a deity in her own right—Śākyamuni does not get replaced by Akṣobhya, or by any of the other so-called "Transcendent Buddhas," but on the contrary continues to be the focus of early Pāla-period *śilpin*s. Furthermore, even in the later period, when the *pañca-tathāgata*s are iconographically represented, they remain, in comparison to Śākyamuni, iconographically marginal figures, frequently relegated to the periphery, to the tops and bottoms of images of Śākyamuni.

Searching for a Maṇḍala

It is possible, I must admit at this point, that I have been overly rigid in my discussion of *bhūmisparśamudrā* Buddha images in the Pāla milieu, and that in attempting to correct the "Pāla-period Buddhism equals Vajrayāna" equation, I have in the process blurred my own vision. Let me, then, step back from my own thesis for a moment. Both Geri Malandra and Nancy Hock have suggested that *bhūmisparśamudrā* Buddha images, as well as other Buddha images with what we might call "historical" referents, have a polyvalent potential, and that seeing them as representing only Śākyamuni is an overly narrow interpretation.[14] Hock, for instance, sees an "intentional ambiguity" and a "dual nature" in several sculptures from Ratnagiri that depict a *bhūmisparśamudrā* Buddha, with a blurring of the distinction between Śākyamuni and Akṣobhya. She argues that the sculptural evidence from Ratnagiri reflects the transitional nature of that site, transitional in the sense that the Buddhism practiced there in the eighth and ninth centuries was midway between the Mahāyāna and the Vajrayāna, what she describes as Mantrayāna. Thus, suggests Hock, images of *bhūmisparśamudrā* Buddhas are best seen as what she calls "Śākyamuni in a tantric form,"—that is, not the Śākyamuni of the Pāli and Mahāyāna texts, what we frequently call "the historical Buddha," but Śākyamuni as he appears in several early *caryā* and *kriyā* tantras, such as the *Mañjuśrī-mūlakalpa.*

Hock's "transitional stage" thesis is, I think, largely convincing, for she presents a great deal of evidence, both sculptural and textual, that indicates the practice of a variety of early maṇḍalas in Orissa. As Hock herself notes, however, the evidence from eighth / ninth-century Ratnagiri stands

14. See Malandra 1993, 29, 70-71, 114-15 and Hock 1987, 55-56.

in contrast to the contemporary evidence from the Pāla milieu, from Nālandā and Bodhgayā; as she says about Nālandā, it is a site "that lacks the iconographically more complex images and programs found at Mantrayana sites," such as Ratnagiri (Hock 1987, 33). Indeed, as I have already sug gested here, in the early Pāla milieu we see almost an opposite sort of iconographic thrust.

Thus whereas Hock argues for an intentional ambiguity in the representation of the Buddha in the Ratnagiri context, I am arguing that there is no such blurring in the early Pāla milieu, but instead a consistent emphasis on Śākyamuni. At Ratnagiri such images seem to be best seen in the context of an iconographic expansion—what Hock calls an "explosion" of the pantheon—that includes increasingly more complex maṇḍalas. *Bhūmisparśamudrā* Buddha images from the Pāla period, however, must rather be seen in the larger context of the *Aṣṭamahāprātihārya* images that first appear in the early Pāla period and which continue to be popular into the 12th century; for these images, and the pilgrimage centers associated with them, present the full biography of Śākyamuni in a condensed form, and thus they recreate the presence of the historical Buddha in the Pāla realm. The viewer of, or we might more accurately say the *participant in*, such images is visually transported into the past, into the presence of Śākyamuni, to the time when—and also to the place where—the Buddha was alive, defeating Māra, preaching the *dharma*, and so on.

Another common Buddha image from the early Pāla milieu that also forms part of the conventionalized set of eight scenes is the Buddha displaying the *dharmacakrapravartanamudrā* (or simply the *dharmacakramudrā*). As with *bhūmisparśamudrā* images, these images have a biographical and also a locative significance, since the first sermon was delivered by Śākyamuni at Sārnāth, located at the heart of the Pāla realm. And as with *bhūmisparśamudrā* images, such images have frequently been misidentified as representing one of the *pañca-tathāgata*s, in this case Vairocana, who is described in later texts as displaying this same hand gesture. Again, however, such images from the Pāla milieu unambiguously represent Śākyamuni, as evinced by the common iconographic details at the bottom of such stelae, such the five disciples who are gathered to hear the first sermon, and the two deer who represent both the locale of this first sermon in the *ṛṣipatana mṛgadāva* at Sārnāth and also the power of the *dharma* to "tame" and give refuge.[15]

15. It is not insignificant, also, that the Pālas adopt this motif for their royal seals: see, for instance, L. D. Barnett 1925-26.

These two sorts of images—*bhūmisparśa* and *dharmacakrapravartanamudrā*—when taken individually are iconographically quite conservative, repetitions of iconographic conventions that extend to the earliest periods of Buddhist sculpture. When they are placed in the larger context of the *Aṣṭamahāprātihārya* stelae, however, this conservatism takes on a more innovative dimension. Four of the scenes that make up the set of eight—the birth, the enlightenment, the first sermon, and the *parinirvāṇa*—had been sculpturally depicted together from a very early period, and the four places associated with these scenes had been predicted to become pilgrimage spots by the Buddha himself, as recorded in the *Mahāparinibbanasutta*. Although various collections of scenes from the life of the Buddha had been depicted in a variety of groupings since as early as the Kuṣāṇa period,[16] the standardization of the *Aṣṭamahāprātihārya* is new to the Pāla period.[17] Furthermore, the four additional scenes—the miracle at Śravastī, the descent from the *trāyastriṃśa* heaven at Sākāsya, the taming of the wild elephant Nālāgiri at Rājagṛha, and the gift of honey to the monkey at Vaiśali—all take place within the basic confines of the Pāla realm.

CONCLUSION: AN ALTERNATIVE MAṆḌALA.

So what, finally, are we to make of this particular collection of eight scenes? John Huntington has remarked: "The sequence is a kind of epitome of the life of Śākyamuni. . . . the *Aṣṭamahāprātihārya* epitomizes the whole life of the Buddha, his attainments, his teachings and the benefits of faith in his life to his followers. In short, the set of eight scenes epitomizes the *whole* of Buddhism" (J. Huntington 1987a, 55, and 1987b, 67-68). How do these stelae signify such a totality? The original set of four scenes in a sense mark the outer parameter of Śākyamuni's life: his birth, his attainment of enlightenment, his first articulation of the *dharma*, and his death. The other four scenes, the ones that are added in the Pāla period, all have to do with the Buddha's propagation of the *dharma*.[18] The miracle at Śrāvastī, for instance, although it is perhaps most obviously concerned with the Buddha's superior *ṛddhi*, also represents the triumph of Śākyamuni's *dharma* over all other teachings; the descent from the Trāyastriṃśa heaven, where the Buddha had gone to preach the *dharma* to his mother, likewise can be seen to demonstrate the superiority of the Buddha's *dharma*, even

16. See Joanna Williams 1975.

17. See Janice Leoshko 1993 / 94.

18. Here I am indebted to J. Huntington's interpretation, particularly as articulated in J. Huntington 1986a and 1986b.

over the potential teachings of the gods; the taming of the wild elephant Nālāgiri represents the *dharma*'s ability to control even the most uncontrollable forces; and the gift of honey by the monkey at Vaiśali represents the importance of *dāna* and the potential the *dharma* holds for even the most humble of adherents to it.

A great deal of attention in Buddhist Studies has been devoted to the whole issue of the "absence" and the "presence" of the Buddha in such physical objects as *stūpa*s, relics, and images,[19] and we could, I think, easily use such language to discuss *Aṣṭamahāprātihārya* images. It may, however, be more appropriate in this context to think not in terms of presence, but in terms of an intentionally emphasized "pastness." Each of the events that makes up the *Aṣṭamahāprātihārya* set refers to Śākyamuni's specific activities in the past in Magadha: in other words, Buddhists in the early Pāla milieu did not emphasize the future, the coming of Maitreya; and they did not emphasize the transcendent, cosmic present of the pure lands occupied by Akṣobhya and the other *tathāgata*s. Rather, in the Pāla milieu the focus falls squarely on the past, on Śākyamuni, and images such as the *Aṣṭamahāprātihārya* make this past available—allow the Buddhists of the present to participate in this past—in a condensed, visual sort of pilgrimage. The *temporal* reality of the Pāla present (marked by the *absence* of the Buddha) was thus replaced, via such sculptural images, by the *spacial* reality of the Śākyamuni-inhabited past (marked by the *presence* of the Buddha). To use a distinction somewhere articulated by Paul Ricoeur, the worldview reflected, if not also created, by such images is *archeological*, and not teleological: the present is significant because it resonates with the past, not because it anticipates the future.

Let me pose a final question, then: Does this set of the eight great events in Śākyamuni's life constitute a maṇḍala? The answer to this question depends very much on what we mean by a maṇḍala If we mean what Guiseppe Tucci means when he describes the maṇḍala as "a map of the cosmos . . . the whole universe in its essential plan" (Tucci 1961, 23), the answer is "no." If we mean what Reginald Ray means when he calls the maṇḍala "the central and all-integrating symbol in Tantric Buddhism as a whole" (Ray 1973, 58), the answer again is "no." *Aṣṭamahāprātihārya* images in the Pāla milieu do, however, represent something similar to such conceptions of the maṇḍala, in that they create a kind of totality of the Buddhist world, but it is a totality as it was specifically conceived by Buddhists in the Pāla milieu. This totality encompasses the entire life of

19. See in particular Schopen 1987 and 1988.

Śākyamuni, from birth to Nirvaṇa, including the essential point at which the Buddha discovers the triumphant *dharma*—as represented by the *māravijaya*—as well as the crucial points at which he makes the *dharma*, and its superiority and power, known to the world. Furthermore, each of the events that constitute this maṇḍala is connected to a specific place and the set creates a pilgrimage circle that could have been completed within the basic confines of the Pāla realm. This, then, is a distinctly worldly totality. It makes the idealized past of Śākyamuni available in the Buddha-less present.

Why did early Pāla-period Buddhists might have put such an emphasis on Śākyamuni, and why they did not develop the more complex and cosmically resonant iconographic programs and maṇḍalas that we see at contemporary sites in the Deccan and Orissa, as well as in locales outside of India? We can probably never know the answer to this question. But it may be that they simply did not need to look any further than the locative present. There was no need to look to the alternative visions of the *tantra*s and the Vajrayāna to find a cosmic center, since early Pāla-period Buddhists were already at the center of the this-worldly totality constituted by the life of Śākyamuni. To use an image employed by Aśvaghosa to describe Bodhgayā, they already were at the very navel of the earth.

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