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## Serpents and Buddhas

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*(Abstract) This paper asks why the predominant Buddhist icon of ancient Angkor was a Buddha seated on the coils of a giant multi-headed serpent with raised cobra hood. The Khmer Buddha has yet to be named or explained despite being the principal image in the central sanctuary of the Bayon, Angkor's first Buddhist state temple. The icon is very widely taken to represent the Naga Mucalinda sheltering the Buddha from a storm six weeks after his enlightenment. Several scholars have expressed puzzlement at why this minor episode in the Sakyamuni biography should have found such favour with the Mahayanist ancient but few have dismissed it as a wrong interpretation. I will endorse rejection and suggest that the Khmer naga and Mucalinda are doppelgänger with quite different meanings -- a conclusion reached after examining the Buddhist contexts of the Khmer icon's naga-enthroned (preferable to 'protected') predecessors in Amaravati, Sri Lanka, Malay Peninsula and northeast Thailand. The Angkorian Buddha, I will claim, should be seen as the Khmer Vairocana or 'Sarvavid' ('Omniscient', named in one key inscription) of the tantric Vajrayana and unrelated to the minor Mucalinda biographical episode which later occasionally appears in the southern Buddhism of modern Thailand, Burma and Cambodia. The latter we have allowed to interpose itself and distort our understanding of the centrally important earlier icon.*

The most venerated Ancient Cambodia's Buddhist icon is a Buddha seated in meditation on the throne-like coils of a huge cobra, whose multiple heads and hood rise up behind him. The Khmer temple inscriptions do not directly name the Buddha or explain why he sits on a giant *nāga*, yet this icon occupies the place of supreme honour in the central sanctuary of the massive first state Buddhist temple built at the apogee of the ancient Khmer Empire by its greatest king Jayavarman VII. With only laconic texts inscribed on stone surviving the tropical environment, interpretation of the icon relies on iconographic or contextual evidence. Art historians have generally assumed that the naga symbolises a fusion of Cambodia's imported and adapted Indic religion with a local, primordial worship of the naga spirits of the earth and the waters of its irrigation.

Apart from Hiram Woodward and Wibke Lobo, most historians and writers<sup>i</sup> I have read see the Khmer Buddha enthroned on a huge naga as originating in and perpetuating the rather minor narrative in the Buddha biographies about a naga called Mucalinda, who left his lake or river to enwrap the meditating Sakyamuni seven times in his coils and cover him completely with his cobra-like hood against an unseasonal storm in the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> week of his enlightenment. I too would like to dissociate the Khmer icon from the Mucalinda myth and for this purpose I propose describing the icon as a *naga-enthroned* Buddha rather than as a 'naga-protected' Buddha.<sup>ii</sup>

Woodward rejected the Mucalinda interpretation in 1979:

[The] Nāga-protected Buddha...should be interpreted not so much as Sākyamuni, sheltered by Mucalinda subsequent to the enlightenment, as a supreme Buddha in the embrace of an autochthonous spirit of the waters.<sup>iii</sup>

Lobo in 1997 noted that the Buddha erected in the central sanctuary of the Bayon appeared to be accorded far greater importance than the minor Mucalinda legend would justify. Lobo claimed he represents a primordial Adibuddha of tantric Buddhism:

This *nāga* taking the place of a throne<sup>iv</sup> indicates that the Buddha represented is in fact the Adibuddha who, having achieved enlightenment at the dawn of time, embodies the fundamental principal of Buddhism.<sup>v</sup>

The Mucalinda association is indeed unsupported by Khmer epigraphy. In centuries of inscriptions from pre-Angkor to the decline of Angkor, the naga Mucalinda incident is never mentioned. Yet the Buddha enthroned on naga became the most reproduced as well as the most honoured by the Khmer Buddhists. The widespread allusions to the Mucalinda myth do not form a consensus that has been argued for and tested by the scholars focused on the art of the ancient Khmers, but attest rather to an untested but accepted convention of the last century of scholarship. Woodward calls it 'only a consensus by default...not a true consensus.'<sup>vi</sup>

This mismatch of legend and icon should, I suggest, encourage us to take a different approach: we should assume that there was no Mucalinda icon in southern Buddhism before the 13<sup>th</sup> century – and see whether any evidence counters this. Let us start by taking a brief look at the difficulties scholars have experienced from this narrative myth being attached to the icon.

### **The Mucalinda myth**

Pierre Dupont believed the Buddha seated on the naga originated at the early stupa sites of Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda. He said the sculptors chose the Mucalinda episode 'with the intention of relating the Buddha to a pre-existing naga cult' earlier illustrated by J. Ph. Vogel,<sup>vii</sup> though he noted lack of statues from that region.<sup>viii</sup> The iconographic record leaves little doubt that prehistoric Nagaraja cults were widespread in Southern India, Sri Lanka and mainland Southeast Asia and retained a major presence in the incoming Buddhist and Hindu cults of the first millennium CE. Jean Boisselier indeed thought the first Indic icon imported into Southeast Asia may have been a 2<sup>nd</sup> century alabaster Nagaraja found at My-Son.<sup>ix</sup>

Dupont assumed the Buddhism of Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, Sri Lanka and the pre-Thai Peninsula, was uniformly early Buddhist or Hinayana (I will later suggest the Mon naga-enthroned Buddha was the emblem of Mon Mahayana communities) and so the biographical incident with the naga was unproblematic. However, when, centuries later, the Buddha-on-Naga icon crossed from mainly early Buddhist or Theravadin Dvaravati to Mahayanist Cambodia – where it first appears on the 10<sup>th</sup> century Kbal Sre Yeay Yin caitya (now in the Musée Guimet MG 174487) in the company of the

Mahayana/Vajrayana deities Lokeshvara, Vajrapani and Prajnaparamita -- Dupont was less comfortable. He had to assume that the Buddha was a mere form, without cultural trappings, which was borrowed from the Dvaravati Hinayana,<sup>x</sup> but then took on a quite different Mahayana meaning in the Khmer Mahayana. Dupont seems to have inherited this problem of an icon maintaining its form but sloughing off its meaning from his teacher George Cœdès, who was among the first historians to be caught between Theravada and Mahayana interpretations of the Buddha seated on a Naga. When Cœdès published a study of Khmer bronzes mostly from private collections in Bangkok in 1923, he saw the naga-enthroned Buddhas as representing 'the Buddha in the most transcendent form conceivable.'<sup>xi</sup> Yet the Mucalinda myth was still clinging on as its origin:

The response is apparently that, for the artists of Indochina, the *nāga*, which they used in such abundance in other decoration, had become the seat, the normal *āsana* of the Buddha: it sufficed that it had been so once in his life.<sup>xii</sup>

The hesitations of Cœdès and Dupont are now mostly forgotten and Mucalinda is routinely cited in the literature. Yet as Cœdès well knew, nothing in the surviving ancient Khmer religious art and epigraphy alludes to Mucalinda or suggests the storm episode held any significance at all for the Khmers. The name Mucalinda is found only once in all Khmer epigraphy and the context is *not* Buddhist. An undated inscription fragment recorded and translated by Louis Finot at the pre-Angkorian 7<sup>th</sup> century Śaiva temple site of Sambor Prei Kuk names one of the donors to a temple foundation as 'Kamraten an Mucalinda' (Lord Mucalinda).<sup>xiii</sup> The top part of the stela is missing so the names of the gods invoked are lost, but the cult is Saiva and the script indicates the early 7<sup>th</sup> century<sup>xiv</sup> when Saiva king Isanavarman (r. c.611-c.635) succeeded his father Mahendravarman who moved southwest from Wat Phu to this city.<sup>xv</sup> The naga Mucalinda's absence from seven centuries of Khmer epigraphy may indeed be a sign that the name and story did not reach Cambodia until the arrival of the Theravada in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century.

Apart from Woodward and Lobo, historians who are sceptical about linking the mass-produced Khmer icon to the Mucalinda myth have mostly been cautious about reaching conclusions, more even than Cœdès or Dupont. David Snellgrove sees the elevation to supremacy of what he takes to be Mucalinda as unique and unexplained in the Buddhist world:

Although [Buddha Mucalinda is] well known in all other Buddhist traditions, only in Cambodia is this envisaged as representing the supreme manifestation of buddhahood.<sup>xvi</sup>

Bruno Dagens finds Mucalinda inappropriate to the Khmer Mahayana but is unsure how to deal with it:

At first sight, nothing explains the success of the Buddha on the Nāga, unheard of in the rest of the Buddhist world; we would like to think it is not due to the Mucalinda anecdote, but instead to the distinctly Khmer character conferred on him by the Nāga's presence; as for the annexation [of the icon] by the Great Vehicle, in the absence of any explanation, doctrinal or other, all we can do is note it.<sup>xvii</sup>

Pratapaditya Pal points to the Khmer Buddhas seated on naga coils being a poor fit with the Buddha biographies that say Sakyamuni was enveloped by Mucalinda and covered over by his hood against the storm. Pal finds a 'literal' representation of the legend in a 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> CE Gandharan relief in the Victoria and Albert Museum (I.S. 179-1949), which shows Sakyamuni almost covered by seven serpent coils.<sup>xviii</sup> He supports Robert Brown's suggestion that it may have been considered 'inauspicious' to cover the Buddha's body and leaves the myth firmly in place, until in a sudden afterthought in his final sentence, he wonders whether the transition to the Mahayana did not layer the icon with new and unrelated meanings:

Could his inverted pyramidal arrangement [of the Naga's coils] signify Mount Meru, the cosmic seat of the Buddha? This would add another layer of meaning to a Buddha image by transforming the historical Buddha being protected by a serpent into a transcendental, cosmic Buddha, more suited to Mahayana or Vajrayana iconism.<sup>xix</sup>

Given the power of icons in the mediaeval world, I too share the difficulties experienced by these scholars in aligning the minor Sakyamuni biographical episode of uncertain import (but perhaps associated with proselytising venerated of serpent cults), with the massive elevation of the Naga-enthroned Buddha to the apex of Khmer imperial Buddhism. As the Mucalinda narrative just does not fit the illustrious context of the Khmer icon, I suggest we abandon this narrative meaning and pursue the icon's symbolic meaning.

### **No Mucalinda in the south before 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century**

In attempting to put these cultic anomalies behind us, I propose we begin with the assumption that there was no Mucalinda icon in southern Buddhism before the 13<sup>th</sup> century, or very seldom one. This is the earliest date Bautze-Picron sees for the first appearance of Mucalinda and the meditating Sakyamuni on Theravadin plaques in Burma. Such small plaques showing the 'Eight Great Events' of Sakyamuni's life are cut in a soft yellow stone and called 'andagu' in Burma. They have been found from Bihar to China.<sup>xx</sup> When an arch of the 'Seven Stations' of Bodhgaya was later added inside the arch of Great Events enclosing the principle image of Sakyamuni in earth-touching mudra, one of the Seven Stations is taken to be Mucalinda's.

If Bautze-Picron is right in detecting here Mucalinda's first entry onto the Southeast Asian stage, the event was indeed a modest one. One of the Seven Stations is a tiny Buddha beside the main Buddha's left knee sitting fully exposed (with no enveloping naga coils) and with three naga heads stretching above him. With so many icons extant in the neighbouring Khmer Empire to the east, it is I suppose possible that the form of this new Mucalinda may have owed something to the grand naga-enthroned Buddhas of the Khmer Mahayana.

### **Amaravati**

Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda were massive early stupa sites with multiple carved panel reliefs that celebrated the junction of naga cults and Buddhism. Nagas are draped around carvings of stupas as the guardians of the Buddha's relics, much as they are said to have guarded the Mahayana sutras

until 2<sup>nd</sup> century patriarch Nagarjuna came for them. The reliefs illustrate the move from early aniconic scenes to late 3<sup>rd</sup> century<sup>xxi</sup> iconic representations of the Buddha both standing before the stupa housing his own relics and seated on the coils of a giant Naga, whose double, multi-headed hoods rise behind his nimbus as a throne-back.

The standing Buddha functioned as a prototype for the propagation of Buddhism through Southeast Asia. The Buddha seated on the Naga is also prominently displayed on Amaravati's stupa slabs – again far too prominently for the minor Mucalinda episode. The slabs with this seated Buddha are crowded with courtiers and worshippers and are presided over by a cakravartin. Nothing here remotely recalls the lonely spot beside a river where a Naga emerged to protect the solitary meditator who had still not yet resolved to teach mankind. This prominent Amaravati naga-enthroned Buddha, whatever his exact identity, then disappeared for some centuries before being revived in Sri Lanka.

The strongest case put forward for seeing Mucalinda in these Andhra Pradesh stupas is made at Nagarjunakonda, famed for its many elaborate Nagaraja court scenes, which the Buddha and Bodhisattva Vajrapani enter. Longhurst identifies one panel which he thought recalled the Mucalinda story, because it sketches a schematic river or lake in the background. Yet the identification of the panel with the solitary Mucalinda episode must remain in some doubt because of four onlookers, including archers, who emerge from behind a screen and who have no place in the myth.<sup>xxii</sup> It could be recounting a quite different story. The Nagarjunakonda and Amaravati stupas bear many reliefs from the Buddha's biography, but the Mucalinda episode is probably not among them.

### **Sri Lanka**

After Amaravati, the material record turns darker, except for Faxian's visit to Sri Lanka from 411-13 CE, where he recorded a long-embedded naga culture.<sup>xxiii</sup> Von Schroeder dates to the same century a schist relief panel of a Buddha seated on a naga, surrounded by Nagarajas and Nagini musicians in the Anuradhapura Museum, which he suggests was an import from the late Amaravati school.<sup>xxiv</sup>

The record as we have it shows no naga-enthroned Buddha for several centuries. By the 8<sup>th</sup> century in Sri Lanka the heterodox Abhayagiri monastery had risen to pre-eminence thanks to a change in royal patronage, which for a period left Buddhaghosa's Theravada lineage in the shade. Abhayagiri became a major regional centre for the study of Mahayana and Vajrayana texts. The importance of Sri Lanka at this time for the international tantric Buddhist community can be gauged from the fact that Amoghavajra, the patriarch of Chinese tantric Buddhism, returned to the island from China in 741 on the death of his master Vajrabodhi and collected 500 tantric texts for translation for the Chinese emperor.<sup>xxv</sup> It is in this period that stone icons of the naga-enthroned Buddha reemerge at Seruvila on the east coast and elsewhere. Von Schroeder dates them to the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries and notes

their similarities to the later prolific Khmer production. And like so many Khmerologists he adduces the Mucalinda myth:

It is of interest to point out the similarities between Sinhalese and Khmer artists in the rendering of Buddha images protected by the Nāga Mucalinda. This [Khmer] iconography...was almost certainly inspired by Sinhalese examples, such as the one from Seruvila.<sup>xxvi</sup>

But in this period of Abhayagiri dominance, it seems to me more likely that these icons of a supreme Buddha belonged to a tantric cult like that which supplied Amoghavajra with copies of the *Sarvatathāgatattvasaṃgraha* (*STTS*). The supreme Buddha of the *STTS* is Vairocana, the 5<sup>th</sup> and unifying sun Buddha of the Vajradhatu Pentad, whose image was to appear on top of the great Borobudur Buddhist monument in Java – in Java however, he is not enthroned on a naga. The association of the naga-enthroned Buddha with the *STTS* tantra will recur when we reach 10<sup>th</sup> century Cambodia.

In Orissa, Donaldson records four images of Buddhas seated on naga thrones at the Mantranaya and later Vajrayana monasteries of Lalitagiri, Ganiapali and Udayagiri, which he dates to the 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>xxvii</sup> Hock's reading of the iconic record at nearby Ratnagiri suggests the early *kriyā* tantras of the Mantranaya dominated in Ratnagiri in Orissa in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries and the *annutarayoga* tantras only from the 10<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>xxviii</sup> The middle *yoga-tantras* are reflected in the sacred art of Orissan monasteries in the eighth century and they may have had cultic links with Sri Lanka and Java. A Vairocana statue mandala at Udayagiri,<sup>xxix</sup> dated by Donaldson to the mid-eighth century, could almost have been a model for the icons in dharmacakra mudra on the circular terraces of Borobudur. Orissa's major port at Puri was important for trade and cultural connections with Southeast Asia and the Orissan Buddhist pantheons in the 10<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries have clear affinities with the Khorat bronzes and the Phimai temple and in Angkor under Jayavarman VII.

### Peninsula

Boisselier thought the naga-enthroned Buddha migrated at the same time from Sri Lanka ('c.7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century')<sup>xxx</sup> to the pre-Thai Peninsula. As in Sri Lanka, they appear to have been venerated by Mon Mahayana/Vajrayana communities, which have usually been called 'Srivijayan' on the Peninsula. Pierre Dupont looked for signs of direct influence from Sri Lanka on the Khmer art of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, but concluded that only a Mon intermediary could have assured the transit of the naga-enthroned icon to the Khmers:

It is therefore not possible that at the end of the 10th century Khmer art borrowed directly from Ceylon and, as an intermediary was indispensable, only the art of the Mons could have performed this role. We must therefore have to determine that the Khmer image of the Buddha on the naga was inspired...by Mon iconography...<sup>xxxi</sup>

Dupont traced five naga-enthroned stone Buddhas in high relief from Nakhon Si Thammarat, Dong Si Maha Phot, Lopburi and Pracinburi and dated them to the 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries. Most are sea or riverine ports at the end of Cambodia's main trade route with the outside world. The Peninsula was linked culturally and at times politically to Srivijaya and Java, but the naga-enthroned Buddha appears neither on Sumatra nor Java, so the Buddhist cultural influence that

sat the supreme Buddha on a naga can only have come from Sri Lanka. This link with Sri Lanka at the time of its Vajrayana period may indicate that the Peninsula Buddhas on nagas mark a chain of Mon Mahayana communities.

The Ligor inscription dated 775 CE records a stronger link with Srivijaya, suggesting even political absorption, for it records a Srivijayan king building three brick shrines, perhaps at the port of Chaiya,<sup>xxxii</sup> ('Siwichaiya'—Srivijaya - in Thai). The iconic record of Peninsular bronzes and votive tablets attests the presence of both Hinayana and Mahayana-Vajrayana communities in this period. M.L. Pattaratorn Chirapravati determined that the most popular tablets were of Vairocana in *dhyāna mudrā*, surrounded by eight Bodhisattvas, as found in Khao Krom, Wiang-sa district and in Trang province.

The recovery of Vajrayāna votive tablets at Khao Krom in Nakhon Si Thammarat province helps to confirm that this [Vajrayana] sect of Buddhism was practised in the Peninsula as early as the ninth century.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Woodward's analysis of iconic lobed throne-backs from the region suggests a date closer to the seventh century.<sup>xxxiv</sup> A rich assortment of bronzes found in the Peninsula and on the Khorat plateau in the northeast suggests a direct link with Pala Bengal. There are icons of Vajrasattva, Vajradhara, Mahākāla, Manjusri-Manjuvajra and eight-armed Avalokitesvaras. A link between Bengal and Java was defined by Scheurleer and Klokke as involving iconic models, like the 60-bronze Jhewari hoard from Comilla in Chittagong in Bangladesh, being shipped to Java where they were copied and changed by local sculptors.

The throne is sometimes elevated in a special manner, viz. the deity is seated on a cushion or lotus, which does not rest on a rectangular socle, but on a lion, pouncing on an elephant's back, serving as a caryatid....The parasol is small and right above the backslab, the ribbons hanging below it are flatly rendered.<sup>xxxv</sup>

This description of Jhewari bronze thrones fits both Javanese and Khorat icons, possibly indicating there were two contemporary Vajrayana links established and running from Bengal-Sumatra-Java and Bengal-Peninsula-Khorat. Bengali, Peninsula and Javanese ports all lie on the same sea lane.

### **The transmission of the naga-enthroned Buddha to Cambodia**

Woodward sees a 10<sup>th</sup> century 16 cm bronze in the Walters Art Museum (from the Griswold Collection) in Baltimore as an important marker of the transit of the naga-enthroned icon from Isan, Northeast Thailand to central position in a Buddhist revival in Cambodia that was to have major historical consequence.

In the middle years of the tenth century, the encounter between the Dāvaravatī towns and the kingdom of Cambodia was a two-way street, with Khmer stylistic elements entering Dāvaravatī workshops and Buddhist subjects becoming increasingly important in Cambodia. This bronze is an important document of the exchange that was taking place.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Woodward holds, and I readily endorse, that the disposition of the seven high crested naga heads (also found on votive tablets from Na Dun in Isan) indicates this icon 'must be affiliated' with the large sandstone naga-enthroned Buddha found under heavy bat droppings by the G. Trouvé when

he drained a tank on the upper level of Angkor Wat.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Dupont, who considered this the oldest known Buddha-on-naga icon in Khmer art, noted that the *virasana* posture pointed to the Sri Lankan tradition and not to Java or Srivijaya.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Dupont also noted the similarities of posture and naga in the late 10<sup>th</sup> century caitya from Kbal Sre Yeay Yin in Northwest Cambodia, which includes a Buddha in relief seated on the coils of a naga which also has seven long necks and crested heads.<sup>xxxix</sup> The Mon input to the supreme icon of the new Khmer Buddhist cult, which was reviving after a long period of suppression and exile from the seventh century (as recorded by Yijing)<sup>xl</sup> strengthens the case for seeing the Sri Lankan-influenced Mon naga-enthroned Buddha as the distinguishing emblem of Mon Mahayana communities dotted through Dvaravati and adjoining territories. The Khmer Buddhists surely knew exactly what they were bringing in.

Via a highly original analysis of a Phimai lintel, Woodward speculates that by the 11<sup>th</sup> century the naga in Isan is conceived as a vehicle of the gods for transporting humans to a 'heavenly' realm.<sup>xli</sup> He sees an unfinished narrative lintel in the Phimai museum as perhaps reflecting the beliefs reflected in a century earlier on the door-jamb inscription of Bat Cum in Angkor in 953 CE:

Le Buddha resplendit [*ou*: règne], lui qui a exterminé le roi des ennemis – Māra – par le feu – le détachement – né de la bûche – le Samādhi – ; ayant obtenu la royauté impérisable – la Bodhi –, ce roi suprême [*adhirāja*] se rejouit dans son palais splendide – le Nirvāna.<sup>xlii</sup>

The funerary narrative honouring a prone, crowned figure whose soul ascends through a funeral pyre vessel and is borne aloft through the form of the Buddha on a naga throne. The naga here is thus a symbolic transit vehicle because its coils intersect the carved border line separating the sphere of the cosmic Buddhas from the earthly scene below. The naga here symbolises transcendence. In many South, Southeast and East Asian folk cultures, the naga or dragon can transit between the earth and heaven. The rainbow is the reflection of the coloured scales of a giant naga providing a transcendent highway between the world of man and the world of the gods.<sup>xliii</sup>

### **The identity of the Buddha**

The textual and iconic record left by the 10<sup>th</sup> century Khmer Buddhists throws further light on the Buddha's identity and he is indeed transcendent. The long Wat Sithor inscription dated to the enthronement year of Jayavarman V (r.968-c.1000 CE) talks of the king's Buddhist guru Kirtipandita sending abroad for a host of tantric texts, including the *Sarvatathāgatātattvasaṃgraha-tantra* (*STTS*) and its commentary by Sakyamitra. In a major revival of Buddhism after long being suppressed, he built a series of royally-endowed monasteries for propagating the imported texts.<sup>xliv</sup> In the *STTS* the principal Buddha is Vairocana, whose transcendence is narrated explicitly. The tantra shows Gautama in difficulty under the *bodhi* tree trying to achieve enlightenment. Sakyamitra says Gautama left his earthly body behind on the river bank, while his mental or mind-created body ascended to Akanistha heaven to be instructed in the five final 'enlightenment-revelation' stages (*pañca abhisambodhi*) by the presiding deity Vairocana.<sup>xlv</sup> Gautama attained the 'Five Wisdoms' (*pañcajñāna*) of Vairocana and became a perfectly enlightened Buddha (*sammāsambuddha*) as a part of Vairocana.<sup>xlvi</sup> He



then proceeded to the summit of Mount Sumeru and proclaimed the *STTS*, before returning to his earthly body to simulate his celestial achievement under the *bodhi* tree in a way more conceivable to humans. Thus Sakyamuni is transformed into *Sarvavid* ('all-knowing') *Vairocana*.<sup>xlvii</sup> The Wat Sithor inscription mentions *Sarvavid-Vairocana* as the head of an august lineage:

B37-38 tatsthāne sthāpitā sthityai prajñāpāramitā tārī	sarvavidvaṅśabhāsvataḥ jananī yena tāyinām //
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For the continuity (sthiti) and splendour (bhāsva) of the lineage (vaṅśa) of *Sarvavid*, he erected in this place the saviouress (?tārī) *Prajñāpāramitā*, the mother (jananī) of the protectors (tāyin, Buddhas).<sup>xlviii</sup>

The dramatisation of the five 'revelation-enlightenment' stages in the *STTS*, establishes a new framework in the *Vajrayāna* for achieving Buddhahood in one lifetime. The ultimate goal of the *Yoga-tantras*, as defined in this foundational text became the attaining of perfect enlightenment by experiencing the 'Five Wisdoms' of *Vairocana* through yogic meditation. The images of the supreme Buddha who presided over the revival are those on the Phnom Srok caitya and the statue found in Angkor Wat. In this context the naga is perhaps *Vairocana's* symbolic vehicle of transcendence to Buddhahood.

As we are dealing with the *Yoga-tantras* it is quite likely that the naga rising behind *Sarvavid* in *dhyana* meditation mudra symbolises yogic techniques. Wibke Lobo suggests the naga throne is a graphic rendering of the yogin's concentration to arouse the latent energy at the base of the spine, conceived as a tiny naga called *Kuṇḍalinī*.<sup>xlix</sup> This yoga, both Hindu and Buddhist, aims to connect the astral or subtle body of the yogin with the gods and achieve spiritual enlightenment by inciting the serpent to rise as a white fluid up through the four (Buddhist) or six (Hindu) nerve plexuses of the body which are conceived as yantras with Sanskrit characters. She also speculates that the three naga coils represent the trikaya doctrine of the three spheres in which Buddhas appear.<sup>l</sup> Cakra wheels are usually carved on the serpent's necks.

The identification of the Khmer *Sarvavid-Vairocana* is borne out by a pink sandstone stela in the Bangkok Museum which Woodward thinks originated in Prachinburi province near the Khmer border<sup>li</sup> and which is more likely to be Khmer than Mon. The principal image is a Buddha enthroned on a naga whose seven crested heads and long necks may be stylistically dated to the same period as the two icons above from the Khmer side of the modern border. In trefoil niches on the sides of the stela, Woodward identifies four-armed reliefs of *Lokesvara* and *Vajrapani* above female consorts *Tara* and *Mamaki*. This concatenation of deities is rare in the Khmer world and we have no idea whether it arrived from India or China. But it seems clear its origin is in the great seventh century Buddhist cave complexes of Western India, which were frequented by *Vajrabodhi*, before he moved to make his substantial mark on the Buddhism of East and Southeast Asia. John Huntington identifies the same grouping of *Vairocana*, *Lokesvara*, *Vajrapani* and consorts in *Aurangabad* cave six and a variant in cave 7.

There are signs that this triad persisted into the apogee of Khmer Buddhism in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Claude Jacques records that a still unedited inscription K. 1183 from Thmar Puok near Banteay Chhmar speaks of the Buddha ('Srighana') forming a triad of compassion with Lokeshvara and Vajrapani.<sup>lii</sup>

## Conclusion

It seems appropriate to tentatively conclude that the naga-enthroned Buddha of the Peninsula and the Khmer Buddhists is the Khmer Vairocana, the fifth sun Buddha of the Vajrayana, who played the supreme role in Asian Buddhism before the arrival in Tibet, Yuan China and Southeast Asia of the final wave of fierce Buddhist Vajrayana deities in the 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Why, then have we been relating this Buddha to the minor Mucalinda episode in Sakyamuni's biography? The answer, I suggest, is that the post-1300 Pali Theravadin Buddhism in Thailand, Burma, Laos and Cambodia, adopted the *earlier* Mahayanist image and recast it as one of the episodes in the life of Sakyamuni. Yet the earlier communities who erected these images followed the Mahayana and did not share the later Theravada's focus in the biography of Sakyamuni. Imposing the Mucalinda legend on the principal icon of the pre-1300 Sanskrit Mahayanist Buddhism is therefore a misinterpretation arising from looking at the earlier images through a later Theravadin lens. If we see Mucalinda in the Angkorian naga-enthroned Buddha, we ignore all we know about the beliefs of the Peninsular Buddhists and the Mahayanist Khmers. The naga-enthroned Buddha has no link whatsoever with Mucalinda, its unrelated Theravadin *Doppelgänger*, that for too long has obscured the meaning of the ancient Khmers' supreme, transcendent Buddhist icon.

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<sup>i</sup> Michael Wright raised an ideological objection to the Buddhist appropriation of the prehistoric naga fertility myths by imposing the Mucalinda episode on them, but did not question the Mucalinda identification: '[T]he Nāga, bringer of rain, father of grain and older than all the gods....Of course we have been provided with an iconotropic explanation of the Buddha under Nāga; how the Nāga Mucalinda slithered out from his pool to protect the newly-enlightened Buddha from the storm sent by Mara...I reject this explanation because of broad mythological principle: the image does not derive from the myth; rather the myth is created later to explain (or falsify) the image.' Michael Wright (1992:90-1) 'The Buddha under Nāga: Animism, Hinduism and Buddhism in Siamese religion – a senseless pastiche or a living organism?' *The Journal of the Siam Society* vol.80/2. I will propose there was a falsifying imposition of the Mucalinda myth, but post-13<sup>th</sup> century on earlier Mahayana icons.

<sup>ii</sup> See for example Foucaux, P.E. (1884:316) 'Le Lalitavistara' in *Annales du Musée Guimet* E.Leroux Paris; or Bhikku J.Kashyap ed. (1956:3) *The Mahāvagga* Pāli Publication Board.

<sup>iii</sup> Use of the 'naga-protected' epithet risks recalling the Mucalinda episode. Woodward bases his use of 'naga-protected' on the Thai word for the icon 'nāk prok (nāga + Old Khmer prok, "to cover over" (1997:72), but this presumably relates to the much later Theravada images of Mucalinda.

<sup>iv</sup> Hiram W. Woodward Jr. (1979:72-83) 'The Bāyon-Period Buddha Image in the Kimbell Art Museum' *Archives of Asian Art* Vol. 32, University of Hawai'i Press for the Asia Society.

<sup>v</sup> Bunker, E. and Latchford D. (2004:282) *Adoration and Glory: the Golden Age of Khmer Art* note that with the stylisation of the form of the serpent 'the naga in Khmer art developed into a kind of throne for the Buddha, losing some of its snakelike qualities.'

<sup>vi</sup> Lobo, Wibke (1997:95 cat. 95) 'Triade bouddhique' in *Angkor et dix siècles d'art khmer* Eds Jessup and Zephir Réunion des musées nationaux Paris.

<sup>vii</sup> Woodward personal communication.

<sup>viii</sup> Vogel, J. Ph. (1926) *Indian serpent-lore or the Nāgas in Hindu legend and art* Probsthain London

- viii Dupont, P. (1950:44) 'Les Buddha sur nāga dans l'art khmer' *Artibus Asiae*
- ix Boisselier, J. (1997:289) 'Le Nagaraja de Mi Son et les debuts de l'Hindouisation du Campa' in *Studies & Reflections Studies & reflections on Asian art history and archaeology: essays in honour of H.S.H. Professor Subhadradis Diskul* Bangkok. Boisselier also noted that Funan sent the sage Nāgasena to China in 484 with a gift of a golden 'king of the dragons' (Nāgarāja) to plead for military help against Campā (Lin-yi). (Boisselier 1997:292)
- x Dupont, P. (1959:265) *L'archéologie Mône de Dvāravatī* EFEO Paris.
- xi Coedès, G (1923:37) 'Bronzes khmers' in *Ars Asiatica* 5 (monographic volume)
- xii Coedès (1923 :39)
- xiii Finot, L. (1928:43-6) 'Nouvelles inscriptions du Cambodge' *BEFEO* 28
- xiv Finot 1928:43
- xv Vickery, M. (1998:21) *Society, economics and politics in pre-Angkor Cambodia* Toyo Bunko Tokyo.
- xvi Snellgrove, D. (2001:59) *Khmer civilization and Angkor* Orchid Press, Bangkok.
- xvii Dagens, B (2003:178) *Les Khmers*, Éditions les belles lettres, Paris (my translation). Thierry Zephir takes a similar view. On first analysis, the iconographical type of the Buddha protected by the *nāga* refers to the well-know episode in the in the life of Śākyamuni at Bodhi Gaya during the sixth week following the enlightenment. In Cambodia however the theme holds a meaning probably larger and more symbolic: its scope exceeds a simple allusion to an event, precise but anecdotal, in the life of the Buddha.'
- xviii *Pratapaditya Pal (2007:53) 'An unusual Naga-protected Buddha from Thailand' in Buddhist Art: Form and Meaning* Marg Publications, Mumbai. This misfit was long ago noted by J. Ph. Vogel who found the 'highly artistic manner' of rendering the Buddha 'cross-legged on the folds of the serpent, whose many-headed hood is visible around his halo...not really in agreement with the textual tradition (for there the Nāga is said to have enveloped Buddha with his coils).' Vogel, J. Ph. (1926:104) *Indian serpent-lore or the Nāgas in Hindu legend and art* Probsthain London.
- xix Pal (2007:61)
- xx Claudine Bautze-Picron has catalogued 47 stelae which have also been found in Bihar, Orissa, Tibet and China. Bautze-Picron, C. (1999:37-52) 'Between India and Burma: the 'Andagu' stelae' *Marg* vol. 50 no. 4. A 12-13<sup>th</sup> date is supported by Woodward (1997:72).
- xx von Schroeder, Ulrich (1990:86) *Buddhist Sculptures of Sri Lanka* Visual Dharma Publications, Hong Kong
- xxi von Schroeder, Ulrich (1990:86) *Buddhist Sculptures of Sri Lanka* Visual Dharma Publications, Hong Kong
- xxii Longhurst, A.H. (1937:PlateXXIII b) *The Buddhist antiquities of Nagarjunakonda, Madras Presidency* ASI.
- xxiii 'The country originally had no human inhabitants, but was inhabited only by spirits and Nāgas, with which merchants of various countries carried on a trade. When the trafficking was taking place, the spirits did not show themselves. They simply set forth the precious commodities, with labels of the price attached to them; while the merchants made their purchases according to the price; and took the things away. Through the coming and going of the merchants, when they went away, the people of various countries heard how pleasant the land was and flocked to it in numbers till it became a great nation.' Legge, James (1886 reprint 1991:101) *A record of Buddhistic kingdoms, being an account by the Chinese monk Fa-Hsien of travels in India and Ceylon (AD 399-414) in search of the Buddhist books of discipline* Munshiram Manoharlal, Dehli.
- xxiv Von Schroeder (1990:117)
- xxv Chou Yi-Liang (1945:286-8) 'Tantrism in China' *Harvard Journal of Asian Studies* vol. 8; Tajima, R (1936:23) *Étude sur le Mahavairocan-sūtra (Dainichikyō)* Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, Paris
- xxvi Von Schroeder (1990:117)
- xxvii xxvii Donaldson, T.E. (2001:figs 104-7) *Iconography of the Buddhist sculpture of Orissa* in two vols Abhinav Publications New Dehli.
- xxviii Hock, N. (1987:3) *Buddhist Ideology and Sculpture of Ratnagiri, Seventh through Thirteenth Centuries* PhD dissertation Berkeley.
- xxix Donaldson, T.E. (2001:Fig136)
- xxx Boisselier J. (1978: cat.105) ed. Snellgrove *The image of the Buddha* UNESCO Serindia London

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- xxxvi Dupont, P. (1959:263) *L'archéologie Mône de Dvāravatī* EFEO, Paris
- xxxvii Woodward, H. (2003:82) *The Art and Architecture of Thailand* Brill Leiden
- xxxviii Woodward, H. (2003:82) *The Art and Architecture of Thailand* Brill Leiden
- xxxix Woodward, H. (1988:75-91) 'Southeast Asian traces of the Buddhist pilgrims' *Muse, annual of the Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri Columbia* 22.
- xl Lunsingh Scheurleer, P. and Klokke, M. (1988:28) *Divine Bronze: Ancient Indonesian Bronzes from A.D. 600 to 1600* Brill
- xli Woodward (1997:72)
- xlii 'Rapport de la Conservation d'Ankor ' *BEFEO* 34:762. I have heard it suggested that the naga heads of this icon are close in form to those of the huge naga that spans the moat of the ninth century Saiva temple of Bakong, southeast of Angkor. But the Bakong naga's heads are not crested and of course they have no association with Buddhism. The Angkor Wat Buddha was presumably hauled into the later, originally Vaisnava temple when it was converted into the central monument of a Hinayana pilgrimage centre by king Ang Chan in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.
- xliiii Dupont (1950:44)
- xliiii See Baptiste, P. and Zéphir, T. (2008:183-5) *L'Art khmer dans les collections du musée Guimet* RMN, Paris.
- xlii Yijing trans. J Takakusu (1896:12) *A record of the Buddhist Religion as Practised in India and the Malay Archipelago (A.D. 671-695)* Clarendon, Oxford.
- xlii Woodward, H (2003:151-2) *The art and architecture of Thailand* Brill, Leiden
- xliii Coedès, G. (1908:39) 'Les inscriptions de Bāt Čum' *Journal Asiatique* extrait du numéro de Sep-Oct 1908, Paris.
- xliiii Coedès, G. (1943:98) *Pour mieux comprendre Angkor* Imprimerie d'Extrême Orient, Hanoi
- xliiii Sharrock, P. (2010) 'Kīrtipaṇḍita and the Tantras' *Udaya* 10 (in press).
- xliiii Mkhas-grub-rje's analysis in Lessing, F. D. and Wayman, A. (1978:27-9) *Introduction to the Buddhist Tantric Systems, translated from Mkhas-grub-rje's Rgyud sde spyihi nram par gzag pa rgyas par brjod* Dehli
- xliiii Attaining enlightenment through the Five Wisdoms is also a major part of the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* and the *Rishukyō (Prajñāpāramitā in 150 verses)*, the other two major texts of Shingon Buddhism. (See Astley-Kristensen, Ian 1991:33 *The Rishukyō: The Sino-Japanese Tantric Prajñāpāramitā in 150 Verses (Amoghavajra's Version)* Institute of Buddhist Studies, Tring).
- xliiii Williams says that as a result of this elevation 'Śākyamuni is given the name Vajradhātu, 'Vajra-Sphere', on his attainment of the state of Buddhahood.' Paul Williams with Anthony Tribe (2000:218) *Buddhist thought* Routledge, London.
- xliiii Skorupski, T. 'Stela of Wāt Sithor, Kompong Čam 968 CE; partial English translation' in Sharrock 2010 (in press).
- xliiii Lobo, W. 'Catalogue 76 Buddha paré protégé par le nā' in Jessop, H and Zéphir, T (1997:273) *Angkor et dix siècles d'art khmer* Réunion de Musees Nationaux, Paris
- l Thierry Zéphir takes a similar view. 'On first analysis, the iconographical type of the Buddha protected by the *nāga* refers to the well-known episode in the life of Śākyamuni at Bodh Gaya during the sixth week following the enlightenment. In Cambodia however the theme holds a meaning probably larger and more symbolic: its scope exceeds a simple allusion to an event, precise but anecdotal, in the life of the Buddha.' He goes on to support her idea that the three coils of the naga (present in many icons) represent the Buddhist doctrine of *trikaya* or three Buddha bodies in which Buddhas appear. Zéphir T. (2008:243) 'Buddha paré protégé par le *nāga*' in *L'Art khmer dans les collections du muse Guimet* RMN Paris.
- li Woodward (2007:77)
- lii Jacques, C. (2003) 'The Buddhist sect of Śrīghana in the ancient Khmer land': a paper given at a conference entitled 'Buddhist Legacies in Southeast Asia' in Bangkok.