

Magician as Environmentalist: Fertility Elements in South and Southeast Asian Buddhism

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INTRODUCTION

MOST attempts to establish a Buddhist environmental ethic have, to date, been built on the interpretation and exegesis of an elite, largely urban,¹ textual tradition. I myself have made a couple of relatively unsucessful attempts in this direction, but it was only recently that I began to realize that I might be barking up the wrong tree. This fact came home to me when I first stumbled upon references to the Tibetan earth ritual several years ago. It seems that this rite is primarily designed to gain the submission of the earth goddess so that a piece of ground can be used for the construction of a human artefact, such as a temple. The emphasis on submission and control is, in many respects, hardly surprising given the context in which such ceremonies must have emerged, for the Tibetan tradition draws heavily, although not exclusively, on a highly scholastic and clerical Indian prototype. In the great cosmopolitan monastic universities of medieval India, as indeed in their subsequent Tibetan counterparts, agrarian concerns must have seemed remote, and great sensitivity towards the natural world, though still present in a somewhat attenuated fashion, probably appeared odd and, perhaps, rather embarrassingly rustic. The institutionalisation of Buddhism meant that the goal of practice became associated with the idea of nature

¹ In this context, I am inclined to regard the great monasteries of medieval India, Nālandā being the pre-eminent example, as virtual cities.

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transcendence rather than with accommodation to the natural world.² In this light the lack of any coherent body of especially positive environmentalist resources in a Buddhist textual corpus representing the views of a sophisticated elite, only very tangentially interested or concerned with agriculture and the seasonal cycles, is hardly surprising.

Let me illustrate my point by reference to a couple of Pāli sources. The *Devatāsamyutta* [S.i.41] provides a mainstream interpretation of the respective domains of the gods, on the one hand, and a Buddha, on the other. When questioned by the latter on “what is the best of things that spring up, and chief of those that fall?” a *deva* replies “seed and rain” respectively. The god’s main focus is on the natural order. The answers the question in its explicit sense. The Buddha, in contrast, takes the question metaphorically and replies by stating that “knowledge and ignorance” are actually the most significant examples of emergence and destruction. Here is an excellent illustration of the internalization of natural imagery found so frequently in Buddhist literature. The passage underlines an apparent dichotomy between externality and interiority, the latter having precedence over the former. To put it another way, the Buddha is superior to the gods because their domain is confined merely within the natural order.

The distinction, though fairly ubiquitous, is not hard and fast and has a tendency to break down. A good example relates to the putative causes of rain, something which in the pre-Buddhist religious background was generally attributed to one or other god-like figure. According to the *Sāratthapakāsinī* [SA.ii.255f], there are seven possible factors that bring about rain, namely, *nāgas*, *supannas* [a species of mythical bird], *devas* and *Māra*, an act of truth (*saccakiriyā*), *iddhi*-power and, finally, a change of weather. The first four items in the list meet the traditional criteria while the final element represents the newly emerging empirical/scientific perspective of the renouncer traditions of which Buddhism was a part. Items five and six, on the other hand, are connected with human agency, particularly that represented by an individual well-advanced on the Buddhist path. It is this final item that will be the major focus of attention in the course of this paper.

Now, the Buddha assigned the rank of chief disciple to both Sāriputta and Moggallāna from the moment they were ordained. In many respects they are

² The comparable stewardship/dominion dichotomy within the Judaeo-Christian cultural domain may also be related to a similar tension between a rural/pagan environment, on the one hand, and one based on the city, on the other.

identical. They were born on the same day, at the same place. They renounced the world together, and both had the same teacher, Sañjaya, prior to the Buddha, etc. Iconographically they are also indistinguishable set either side of the Buddha and, in a sense, representing the two wheels or aspects of his power. Sāriputta always comes first in the listing of the two reflecting the importance placed by orthodoxy on scholasticism. He is closely connected with the Abhidhamma³ and his title is dhammasenāpati (lit: chief of doctrine).

While Sāriputta's special preserve is the wisdom or insight that enables him to make plain the four noble truths, etc., Moggallāna uses the wonder of his magical powers (*iddhipāṭihāriya*) or *jhānic* attainments to point towards the truth. Moggallāna can create and inhabit innumerable living shapes [BuA. 31], crush Mt. Meru "like a kidney bean", or make it rotate like a potter's wheel [DhA.iii.212]. He regularly threatens to turn the world upside down, such as when the Buddha and his retinue of monks failed to receive alms in Verañjā [Sp.i.182f]. On another occasion his intention to make available the earth's watery underbelly so that beings could be revived after a serious drought is only thwarted by the Buddha who reminds him that animals will be thrown about and injured in the process [Vin.iii.76]. When monks are talking frivolously near the Buddha Moggallāna shakes the foundations of their dwelling-place, the Migāramātupāsāda, giving them all a great shock [S.v.269ff] and, with his big toe, he punishes Sakka's pride by shaking his palace until the god's hair stands on end [M.i.252f]. Interestingly he does not seek to depose Sakka or permanently overturn the heavenly order but regularly visits the *deva*-worlds, where his visits are eagerly anticipated by the gods, as the *Vimānavatthu* makes clear. Finally, by virtue of his *jhānic* attainments, he is the only monk with the power to subdue the dangerous *nāga* Nandopananda [ThagA.ii.188f] who, recapitulating the Vedic story of the serpent Vṛtra, has coiled around Sineru blocking the road to the heaven called Tāvatimsa. In this Indra-like role Moggallāna clearly re-establishes the proper cosmic order.

Moggallāna's connection with the magical maintenance of the external or cosmological order is in great contrast to Sāriputta whose concerns seem more analytic than synthetic.⁴ This is well-illustrated by the story of

³ In his Mahayanist incarnation he is closely connected with the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature and the major philosophical systems associated with Nāgārjuna and Asaṅga respectively.

⁴ Tambiah's distinction between the retrospective and the progressive aspects of the

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Anuruddha who, coming to Sāriputta for meditational advice, is told to avoid visualizing the thousandfold world systems; only then will he be able to achieve arahantship [A.1.281f].

Despite the fact that the Sāriputta strand of the Buddhist tradition dominated the great monasteries of the classical period of Buddhist history resulting in the anti-naturalism alluded to in my opening remarks, a concern for the magical manipulation of the natural world, most usually for the benefit of other beings, represents a vigorous minority tradition which, in the absence of support from the powerful monasteries may be traced to the royal cult and to the non-orthodox traditions of peripheral rural areas of South and Southeast Asia. It is for this reason that I shall be seeking to resist the characterisation of the material I present in the bulk of the paper as representing some kind of “spirit-cult”.

Buddha and the Restoration of Natural Order

The Buddha is supposed to have related the *Maccha Jātaka* [No. 75; J.i.329f] while residing at Jetavana during a drought. In the form of a fish, the *bodhi-satta* successfully petitions Pajjuna (=the Vedic god of the rain cloud, Parjanya) for rain. He is motivated by compassion [indeed, we could regard all of the instances of Buddhist rain-making, etc., as a concrete examples of *mettā* or related *brahmavihāra* practice]⁵ for the suffering of his

ascetic meditator's lifestyle is another way of articulating this synthetic/analytic polarity. The latter role is to the fore in the dominant representations of the Buddhist path, oriented as they are towards the attainment of *nirvāna*, since it links with the themes of world renunciation and the individualized spiritual path. The retrospective or regressive aspect, expressed through the performance of communal rites, however, is equally important since it underlines continuity with the past and the “civilizing” mission of the Buddhist *sangha* as a whole. It is this latter aspect that is explored in the following discussion. (Stanley J. Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984], 346).

⁵ I am grateful to Prof. Schmithausen for pointing out the inadequacy of my earlier presentations of *mettā* practice as fundamentally instrumental in the sense that the extension of loving kindness to other beings, whether human or not, largely accrues to the advantage of the practitioner rather than to the object(s) of the practice. Despite his detailed discussion of the topic [eg. “The Early Buddhist Tradition and Ecological Ethics” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 4 (1997), 7f], I have only recently abandoned my former position. It is clear to me now that many of the ritual acts, such as rain-making and other agriculturally-oriented attempts to control the environment for the benefit of other beings, could be (indeed, are) seen as *mettā*-type activities in which the instrumental component has been considerably weakened.

fellow creatures stuck at the bottom of a fetid and rapidly diminishing pond who have become easy prey for the crows. According to the commentary to the *Jātaka*, the Buddha's act of truth (*saccakiriyā*), constituted through his statement to Ānanda that, "great is a Buddha's power" [J.i.330], is sufficient to make Sakka's throne hot, that deity in turn commanding Pajjuna to use a *meghasutta* to send the necessary rain.⁶ In this way the pond is filled once more and order restored.

Apparently, the Thai king Rāma I (reigned 1782–1809)⁷ commissioned a statue of the Buddha in a bathing cloth with his right hand raised to the heavens and the other outstretched to catch the rain directly based on this incident. Styled Phra Gandhāra Rāṣṭa, after a mythical king of Gandhāra who is supposed to have successfully petitioned for rain using just such an image, the statue was employed in royal rain-making ceremonies until modern times.⁸ In Burma, also, there is a pagoda on a hill near Yeigyи which houses three images of fishes representing the Buddha's fish incarnation. At the beginning of every year's planting season, and whenever there is a drought, they are processed around, accompanied by monks chanting *paritta*, to bring on the rains.⁹

⁶ Sakka's throne tends to become hot whenever highly meritorious actions, asceticism in particular, are performed by humans. For example, after performing *tapas* for 3, 000 years, the sage Vibhāṇḍaka, Rśyaśrṅga's father [more on Rśyaśrṅga in due course!], caused flames to rise to Indra's heaven (see Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Śiva: The Erotic Ascetic* [Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1973], 47).

⁷ My source may be incorrect. Olivier de Bernon (personal communication) has suggested that, since Rama III (1824–51) commissioned Prince Patriarch Paramanuchit Chinorot to design a new collection of Buddha images in the middle of the last century, this king is the more likely sponsor of the Phra Gandhāra Rāṣṭa figure.

⁸ Kenneth E. Wells, *Thai Buddhism, Its Rites and Activities* (Bangkok: The Christian Bookstore, 1960), 94. In nineteenth century Cambodia a similar Buddha image, with one hand raised to the sky and the other pointing accusingly to a pool where small creatures appear to be suffering from lack of water, was called Vota (or Vossa) Volahak or Moha Ther (see Eveline Porée-Maspero, *Étude sur les rites agraires des Cambodgiens* 3 Vols. [Paris: Mouton, 1962–9], 268).

⁹ Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes* (Second, Expanded Edition. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 259–60. Also in Burma, during the month of June, monks used to perform a ceremony in the royal palace in honour of the lord of rain, Ngayin Min, a *bodhisattva* who is supposed to have taken the form of "the king of Murrel-fish (snake-head)." See R. C. Temple, *The Thirty-Seven Nats: A Phase of Spirit Worship Prevailing in Burma* (London: W. Griggs, 1906), 25–26.

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The Buddha's association with the gift of life-giving water is strongly connected to Southeast Asian mythologies of his enlightenment. In the stories of the Buddha's victory over Māra (*māravijaya*), Nāng Thōrānī, the earth goddess, finally emerges to put the Buddha's enemies to rout after the Evil One's daughters have failed to excite the Buddha's sexual passions. Indeed, through the power of his asceticism he turns the girls into "old women."¹⁰ Now, Nāng Thōrānī's iconography cannot be traced to Indian or Sri Lankan sources but in Cambodia and Thailand her image is found at the entrance to almost every Buddhist *wat* where she is represented standing [though occasionally seated] ringing water out of a thick braid of hair which she has brought over her left shoulder. Cœdès, who has traced the legend on which the iconography is based to the Pāli *Pathamasambodhi*, an anthology of biographical accounts of the Buddha's life known only in Southeast Asia, has argued that the figure probably has an Indo-Chinese origin.¹¹ The text informs us that her hair was soaked with water libations made in honour of the *bodhisatta*'s liberality when living his penultimate existence as Vessantara.¹² It is this water that sends Māra's hordes running helter skelter.¹³

Interestingly, the author of a nineteenth century Burmese treatise, the *Samantacakkudipani*, concludes that the earth goddess legend, given the fact that it is not attested in mainstream sources such as the *Nidānakathā*, is a "popular fancy". He underlines his view by citing the example of the seven-

¹⁰ Stanley J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 166.

¹¹ George Cœdès, "Une vie indochinoise du Bouddha: la Pathamasambodhi," in *Mélanges d'Indianisme à la mémoire de Louis Renou* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1968), 217–27.

¹² In Burma she is known as Wathundaye, which seems to be the Burmese form of the Sanskrit Vasundhari or Vasundharā. Variations on this story are also found in two Burmese texts, the *Tathāgata-Udānādipani* I, 199 and *Samantacakkudipani* I, 205–7, both cited by Charles Duroiselle in his "Wathundaye, the Earth-Goddess of Burma," *Annual Report, Archaeological Survey of India* (1921–1922), 144–46. In Laos Nāng Thōrānī is the goddess of the soil responsible for fertility and harvests. Her area of responsibility overlaps somewhat with the *phibān*, although the role of the latter is geographically more specific and functionally less defined (see Georges Condominas, "Phibān Cults in Rural Laos" in G. William Skinner and A. Thomas Kirsch, eds., *Change and Persistence in Thai Society: Essays in Honor of Lauriston Sharp* [Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1975], 258).

¹³ In a noteworthy variation on this theme, modern Cambodian political propagandists have often updated the imagery of Nāng Thōrānī wringing her hair to drown enemies. The depiction of the defeat of Vietnamese troops during the Khmer Republic period transposed into this traditional context is of particular interest.

teenth century monk Tipitakālaṅkāra who, given the apparently unorthodox nature of the image of the goddess, caused it to be defaced from the wall of a cave.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the iconography is clearly old as carvings from the period of the Bayon (late 12th-early 13th century) attest,¹⁵ and we may wish to interpret this dismissal as representing a reformed, rationalist strain of thinking so much in fashion at the time of the composition of the treatise.

Kingship and Rain

As we have already noted, mastery may take two basic forms; mastery of the external world and mastery of the self. While the Sāriputta strand of tradition is primarily oriented to the latter, that symbolized by the character of Moggallāna points more obviously in the former direction. In the context of Indic civilization, the clearest agent of external mastery is a king and, from the Buddhist textual perspective, Mahāsudassana [D.ii.169f] is the prototypical Buddhist king or *cakkavatti*. All actual rulers must be measured against him. Like the Buddha, he possesses all the major and minor marks of a great man (*mahāpurisa*). He is popular with all classes of his subjects and always acts judiciously eschewing favoritism, hatred, delusion and fear. Since he is proficient in the four meditational stages (*jhāna*) he suffuses his realm with love, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. The *Cakkavatisīhanāda Sutta* [D.iii.58ff] further underlines this fact by presenting the *cakkavatti* as someone who rules entirely without violent coercion.¹⁶

The *cakkavatti*'s proficiency in the *jhānas* is of particular interest for these meditational stages represent an interiorized cosmology in which all the regions of the world from the heavens to the hells are assigned to a hierarchy of interior states. In a sense, then, such states reflect hierarchical forms of social order which are precisely what traditional kingship is in the business of supporting. Insight meditation (*vipassanā*), on the other hand, with its emphasis on bare awareness and analytic (as opposed to synthetic) reasoning, tends toward a dissolution of hierarchy and a suspicion of kingship.¹⁷ If we now transpose this distinction onto our earlier discussion, it

¹⁴ Cited in Duroiselle, "Wathundaye, the Earth-Goddess of Burma," 144–46.

¹⁵ George Coëdès, "Une vie indochinoise du Bouddha," 225.

¹⁶ "... a fantasy world" according to Steven Collins, "The Lion's Roar on the Wheel-Turning King: A Response to Andrew Huxley's 'The Buddha and the Social Contract'" in *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 24 (1996), 442.

¹⁷ Gunawardana shows that Buddhism can only survive, from the civilizational perspec-

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becomes apparent that kingship is more in tune with the Moggallāna strand of tradition than it is with those features symbolized by Sāriputta; its focus is on external, as opposed to internal, mastery. Kingship, then, is associated with supernaturalism and the authentic Buddhist king must magically manipulate his domain in such a way that the exercise of his power gives protection to his subjects. Such protection may take many forms but the benevolent control of the natural environment is clearly one of these, for if the order of the world is disrupted through some kind of disaster the well-being of the kingdom and those within it, whether human or otherwise, will be adversely affected. Geertz's designation of some Southeast Asian countries as "theatre states" has some relevance here, in that actual Buddhist kings have indeed tended to eschew explicit political activity preferring instead to engage in a series of annual, largely agricultural ceremonies designed to ensure good weather, crops, the absence of disease, prosperity, etc.¹⁸

We have plenty of examples of kings acting in this way in traditional Buddhist literature. For instance, the Ceylonese king Upatissa I (c. 362–409) is said to have ended a drought by sponsoring a procession of a Buddha image holding an alms-bowl filled with water while monks chanted the *Ratanasutta* [Sn. 228–38], a short *paritta*¹⁹ ending with Sakka's homage to the power of the triple jewel, and sprinkled the assembled multitudes with water [Cv.i.179ff]. Elsewhere, we read of King Sirisaṅghabodhi (c. 307–9) who brought much needed rain to his domain through the power of his compassion. It is reported that he took a vow to lay in the courtyard of the

tive, if it is somehow able to hold these two strands together in a state of "antagonistic symbiosis". See, Gunawardana R.A.L.H., *Robe and Plough: Monasticism and Economic Interest in Early Medieval Sri Lanka* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1979), 344.

¹⁸ David P. Chandler, "Going Through the Motions: Ritual Aspects of the Reign of King Duang of Cambodia (1848–1860)," in Lorraine Gesick, ed., *Centers, Symbols and Hierarchies: Essays on Classical States of Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Series [Monograph Series No. 26], 1983), 106–24.

¹⁹ The *Candimāsutta* [S.i.50f] is another *paritta* chanted by monks to glorify the moon and aid the fertility of the soil. Rural traditions in Cambodia hold that the moon scatters the rain thus fertilizing the rice. It is also common for monks to sprinkle the soil of the monastery, symbolizing fertilizing rain, for a similar purpose. In an interesting variation on the theme, Houtman describes the use of *paritta* to purify reservoirs which supplied Rangoon with water during the Burmese New Year, 17 April 1998. See Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy* (Tokyo: Institute for the Study of the Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1999), 314.

Mahāthūpa until such time as it rained sufficiently for him to float [Mv.xxxvi, 73f].²⁰

More evidence of the link between kingship, fertility and water comes from accounts of the reign of Dutthagāmanī (c.101–77 BC) who, after his royal consecration, went in ceremonial procession to the Tissa tank where he spent the whole day in “water sports” accompanied by women of the harem [Mv.xxvi. 6–10]. That this seems to have been an integral part of the consecration of a Buddhist king is reinforced by that fact that the procedure is also recorded in regard to later kings of the island, eg. Ilanāga in the late first century [Mv. xxxv. 38–9].

Apparently, the Mahāmeghavana [Grove of the Great Cloud] at Anuradhapura was so called because at the time it was laid out unseasonal rain fell abundantly. The grove was subsequently donated to Mahinda by King Devānampiyatissa [Mv.xv.24] who poured water from a beautiful jug as a symbol of his gift. When this water fell to the ground the earth is said to have shook. In time the grove became the site of the Bodhirukka, Mahāthūpa, Thūpārāma, and the Mahāvihāra, ie. the power-house of Theravāda orthodoxy.²¹ Indeed, the entry of Buddhism into Sri Lanka, symbolised by Mahinda’s arrival in Devānampiyatissa’s capital, seems to have coincided with a royal-sponsored water festival in honor of Pajjuna.²² From its inception, then, Sri Lanka Buddhism, at least those forms connected with the royal cult, seems to have been concerned with the control and proper ordering of a natural environment in which the predictable appearance of the rains played such a fundamental part.

The cult of the Śrī Mahābodhi, the sacred tree of Anuradhapura, as the principal means of ensuring rain seems to have largely replaced the earlier cult of Pajjuna. The Sinhala chronicle of the tree, the *Bodhivamsaya*, attests that similar rites were performed in Aśoka’s time around the original tree of enlightenment.²³ Indeed, it is tempting to suppose that these ceremonies were imported from Magadha at a fairly early period in the missionary

²⁰ So great was Sirisaṅghabodhi’s exemplary behaviour that every king from the thirteenth through the sixteenth century seems to have formally incorporated his name into their title. (See John Clifford Holt, *Buddha in the Crown: Avalokiteśvara in the Buddhist Traditions of Sri Lanka* [New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991], 59)

²¹ We also read that the boundary of the Mahāvihāra was marked out by King Devānampiyatissa’s ploughing of a circular furrow [Mv.xv.191].

²² C.E. Godakumbura, "Sinhalese Festivals: Their Symbolism, Origins and Proceedings," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (Ceylon)* XIV, (1970), 91–133; Mv.xiv.1–2.

²³ *Ibid.*, 107.

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encounter with Sri Lanka. Included in the rites were the annual watering of the tree by four virgins of the three highest castes. In the fifth century, King Dhātusena is said to have replaced living girls with sixteen virgins cast in bronze which he had arranged around the tree [Cv.xxxviii.55–6], but by the medieval period it seems that *bhikkhunīs* took over the role.²⁴ The tree also came to be associated with human fertility, particularly the obtaining of a son, and even nowadays the ritual of watering the tree is deemed to confer significant merit.

When King Sirimeghavanna (c.362–409)²⁵ brought the Buddha's Tooth Relic (*daladā*) to Sri Lanka from India, he is said to have brought all kinds of blessings into the world [Cv. xxxvii, 53]. The rain-making capabilities of the *Daladā* were already acknowledged in Kāliṅga, its earlier home. It seems that Sirimeghavanna came to the throne at a period when the island's kings were particularly concerned with making sure that sufficient water supplies were available to cultivate the expanding lands under cultivation. Indeed, when first brought to Sri Lanka the relic was housed at the Meghagiri vihāra, the site of an early shrine to Pajjuna,²⁶ and by the medieval period, it had become the pre-eminent rain charm in the country, especially after the capital had moved to Polonnaruva. Part of its rise in popularity must be attributed to its portable nature, although evidence suggests that it was revered more by the non-orthodox Abhayagirivādins than by the *bhikkhus* of the Mahāvihāra.²⁷

The *Cūlavamsa* tells of a drought during which the king “. . . gave orders to bear the Tooth Relic of the Great Sage round the town in a fitting manner, the right side turned towards it . . . Thereupon great clouds gathered on every side, flashing with lightning and again and again thundering . . . and they began to rain, destroying the glowing heat, making joyful the people . . . and reviving the corn.” [Cv.ii.177–8]. The fourteenth century *Daladā Sirita* continues the link by describing the important procession (*perahāra*) of Äśala (July-August) as “the making of festivals to the Tooth Relic when rains fail” (*väsi novasnā kalaa mema lesin daladā pūjā karanuva isā*). Indeed, it is popularly believed that, when the British tried to abolish the Perahāra after

²⁴ Ibid., 106.

²⁵ It seems that the Sinhala term *salamevan* [= *silameghavana*] was a popular epithet for kings of the ninth to tenth centuries. (See Tilak Hettiarachchy, *History of Kingship in Ceylon* [Colombo: Lake House Investments Limited, 1972], 60).

²⁶ Godakumbura, “Sinhalese Festivals,” 107–8.

²⁷ Holt, *Buddha in the Crown*, 188.

1815, a drought was the result. This only came to an end after popular agitations succeeded in re-establishing the festival; a remedy so effective that the Kandy region was flooded by torrential rains, the so-called "Tooth Relic Floods" (*daladā vatura*).²⁸

Only the elaborate latter part of the Äsala Perahära, the so-called pageant, actually involved the Tooth Relic itself which, surrounded by shrines to the four guardian deities [the whole representing a portable *mandala*] and accompanied by temple functionaries, was processed around the ceremonial centre of the State in an attempt to secure prosperity and fertility.²⁹ This grand ritual concluded with a priestly "water-cutting" ritual (*diya-käpuma*)³⁰ which involved the drawing of a circle in the water of a nearby river with a "golden sword" (*ran āyudha*), an activity that has traditionally been interpreted as a recapitulation of Indra's defeat of Vṛtra. The sword or weapon seems to have a phallic significance³¹ and, in this respect, resembles the *vajra* of both Tantric Buddhism and Vedic mythology. At the end of the rite, four pitchers of water were collected at the river and stored safely as a symbol of adequate water supplies until the same time the following year.³²

Since its arrival on the island, the Daladā has constituted the most important item in the regalia of the king or, to put the matter another way, no-one could legitimately claim authority over the land without possession of the relic. However, at least during the Kandyan period (c.1500–1800), three keys were needed to open the casket holding the Tooth Relic and these were held by three separate individuals: the chief monks of the Asgiriya and Malvatta monasteries, i.e., the two major *vihāras* of the capital, and the king himself.³³ Apart from the fact that the arrangement resembles the mechanism employed for the deployment of nuclear weapons today, pointing to

²⁸ H. L. Seneviratne, *Rituals of the Kandyan State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 101.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 84f.

³⁰ It looks as though "water-cutting" may have played a role in the Thü-Nam ceremony of nineteenth century Thailand. This Buddhist festival, conducted in all the major temples of the realm, and associated with the half year point in the middle of the month of *bhādrapada*, involved the dipping of royal weapons into water that was "loyally drunk" to bind the drinkers (mainly officials) to the authority of the king. See G. E. Gerini, "Festivals and Fasts (Siamese)" in James Hastings, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clarke, 1923), 886.

³¹ Cf. Holt, *Buddha in the Crown*, 195–6.

³² Seneviratne, *Rituals of the Kandyan State*, 102.

³³ *Ibid.*, 15.

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the obvious power and potential danger thought to be associated with the relic, we can also perceive a very concrete example of the principle of “antagonistic symbiosis” between *sangha* and state at work here.

Seasonal Rites

A quarter of a century ago Tambiah noted that, while it is something of an exaggeration to assert that Thai Buddhism derives its primary meanings from agricultural preoccupations, its rituals nevertheless have certain links with the seasonal round. His perception that the annual cycle alternates between “ascetic” and “festive” periods is particularly noteworthy.³⁴ In the former, which coincides with the three month retreat of July to October (*vassa*), organised Buddhism is withdrawn and rendered inaccessible, while after the rains there is a return to the world and festivities may begin once more. The chart in Appendix I illustrates this process with regard to Cambodia and Thailand and my contention is that the seasonalization of ritual, when combined with the previously discussed influence of kingship, is the glue that once was believed to bind together the natural order into a harmonious whole, at least in so far as the cultures of Buddhist South and Southeast Asia are concerned.³⁵ The following discussion focuses on four particularly significant points in the annual and main rice-growing cycles, although we should bear in mind that attempts to undermine and criticise these agrarian rites are now fairly commonplace among reform-oriented monks, particularly in Thailand.³⁶

A) New Year

In Cambodia, mounds of sand (*phnom khsac*) are constructed and complex rituals performed in the first weeks of *cet* (March-April) which marks the end of the dry season, culminating in the New Year festivities in the middle

³⁴ Tambiah, *Buddhism and Spirit Cults*, 160.

³⁵ Although I have no expertise on Tibet, my suspicion is that, given its geographical isolation from monsoon Asia, difficulties involved in the accurate prediction of its rains, differing forms of agriculture, and a greater emphasis on hunting (See Toni Huber, “The Chase and the Dharma: The Legal Protection of Wild Animals in Pre-modern Tibet,” in John Knight, ed., *Wild Animals in Asia* [Richmond: Curzon, forthcoming]), etc., much of the foregoing discussion will be inapplicable to this region of the Buddhist world.

³⁶ Acharn Chā’s criticism of the inherent power of sacralized water, and his view that monasteries should not be used as venues for festivals, is a case in point (Tambiah, *Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets*, 138).

of the month.³⁷ The mounds are directionally arranged in concentric patterns of five or nine, surrounded by a small wall pierced by openings at the cardinal directions, usually under a banyan tree within the monastery enclosure, although there are wide regional variations in detail. In the Siem Reap region, for instance, *phnom khsac* can be very elaborate, each one modelled on the form of the *stūpa*. As late as 1994, the Cambodian king constructed such a three-dimensional *mandala* in the precincts of Wat Phnom, Phnom Penh, where monks also performed rites for his ancestors (*bangskol*). Various offerings are made to the *phnom khsac* including frequent sprinklings of water which both retain the integrity of the structures and link them with the magical production of rain.³⁸ Intriguingly, the individual *phnom*, which seem to anticipate the heaps of paddy (*phnom srov*) at harvest-time, are ordained as monks for the duration of the ceremony. In the course of the ritual, pardon is also asked of the earth goddess, Nāng Thōranī, for despoiling her both in the collection of sand for the ceremony and during the coming agricultural season. She is also asked to absolve any demerit accrued over the previous year and to confer a life as long in years as there are grains of sand in the *phnom*. Most importantly, she is asked to provide as much rain as she did when she routed Māra and his hosts.³⁹ When the festivities have ended the mounds of sand are levelled, but the material is retained in the *wat* enclosure. Over the years this leads to a gradual increase in height above surrounding rice fields which, whether planned or not, helps mitigate the risk of future flooding. It is also tempting to speculate that the levelled sand may reinforce the status of the monastery as a kind of Theravadin pure land.⁴⁰

In the royal cults of both Thailand and Cambodia, the first day of the three

³⁷ In Thailand, the mounds are generally constructed on 14 April, ie. the mid-point of the three day New Year celebration (Wells, *Thai Buddhism*, 87). For further information, see Louis Gabaude, *Les cetiya de sable au Laos et en Thailande: Les Textes* (Paris: EFEO, 1979).

³⁸ For Faure, *abhiṣeka* is “an act of impregnation” or a “sacred union” (*hieros gamos*). Bernard Faure, *The Red Thread: Buddhist Approaches to Sexuality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 51.

³⁹ Eveline Porée-Maspero, *Étude sur les rités agraires des Cambodgiens*, 3 Vols. (Paris: Mouton, 1962–69), 50ff.

⁴⁰ Rajadhon offers another explanation for the mounds of sand or sand-pagodas (*phrache-di sai*). On leaving a *wat* one inevitably takes some soil out on the soles of one’s feet. This can mount up over the year and result in considerable demerit. The rite is, thus, an act of atonement. See Phya Anuman Rajadhon, *Popular Buddhism in Siam and Other Essays on Thai Studies* (Bangkok: Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development & Sathirakoses Nagapradipa Foundation, 1986), 182.

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day New Year festival is a time when the king is elaborately lustralled with water (*mūralhābhiseka*) and blessed by monks. In the royal palace, monks recite the *Ātānātiyasutta* (D.iii.195f),⁴¹ and Brahmanical and Buddha images are also bathed. Monks, particularly elders, are also given a ceremonial soaking, probably in an attempt to bring the dry season to an end, since the heat of their asceticism has a powerful drying tendency. In some parts of Thailand the practice seems to have fallen into abeyance and village folk now seem content to present senior monks with a towel and a bar of soap!⁴² On the last of the three days, young people engage in “straightforward fertility rituals.”⁴³ Indeed, it was not unusual for village girls in more remote parts of the region to soak their favourite young monks at this time.⁴⁴ Apart from the obviousness of the act as a preliminary mating ritual, it is also deemed a highly effective means of making merit.

B) Beginning Rains

The rainy season starts in *pissakh* (April/May), the month immediately following the New Year celebrations. In Cambodia, a rite entitled Sophuto, named after the first word in the text recited at the ceremony, was until quite recently employed for rain making. Sophuto is, in fact, Subhūti Thera, Anāthapiṇḍika’s younger brother. According to canonical sources this monk settled in Rājagaha where king Bimbisāra promised to build him a dwelling. This the king forgot to do and a drought ensued. When Bimbisāra finally built him a leaf-hut the rains fell. Subhūti also seems to be an ascetic figure since he is described as living a secluded or peaceful (*aranavihārin*) life [A.i.24].⁴⁵ The ceremony is part of the royal rite and involves both *baku* (brahmins) and Buddhist monks. The former create a small square pit in previously purified ground into which a small amount of water and some serpent-shaped fish are placed. This is surrounded by a variety of offerings including parasols and banners. A green painted statue of Indra with his

⁴¹ The four great kings (*cātummahārājikadeva*) are the major figures of the *paritta*. Vessavana (= Kuvera) actually recites the *sutta* which, at one point mentions Lake Dharaṇī in Uttarakuru, Kuvera’s own kingdom, as a source of rain (D.iii.201). The connection between kingship and rain-making is rather obvious here.

⁴² Rajadhon, *Popular Buddhism in Siam*, 189.

⁴³ Tambiah, *Buddhism and Spirit Cults*, 154.

⁴⁴ Rajadhon, *Popular Buddhism in Siam*, 192.

⁴⁵ Interestingly, the first tale told to Aśoka by Upagupta in the *Kalpadrumāvadānamālā* is the story of Subhūti (John S. Strong, *The Legend and Cult of Upagupta: Sanskrit Buddhism in North India and Southeast Asia* [Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992], 160).

right hand pointing to the sky and his left to the earth stands close by. Next to him is an image of Sophuto in a cross-legged position. Four properly purified monks then position themselves around the pit and recite the Sophuto over a three day period. Neither the monks nor their assistants may be shaded from the sun.⁴⁶ The setting is a clear recapitulation of the *Maccha Jātaka* story. The ceremony is also performed in rural areas, although on a less grand scale. In its simplest form Buddhist monks are exposed to the full blast of the sun within the monastery compound while they recite the Sophuto one hundred and eighth times. Volahak (= Valāhaka Devatā), ie. gods in the retinue of Sakka, may also be invoked and water from specially placed jars is sprinkled around. The efficaciousness of the rite seems to be related to the extraordinary heat the monks generate through their asceticism. Purity, exposure to the sun, and the identification with Sophuto are all significant here. As we noted in our earlier reference to the *Maccha Jātaka*, it is this heat that prompts Sakka and associated gods to send rain.⁴⁷

A variation of the ritual is attested in Thailand, again within the context of the royal cult. The pit or basin, this time containing a range of water creatures, including fish, turtles and frogs, is again dug in the monastery precincts. The four angles of the pit have images of *nāgas* and the so-called “king of fish”, presumably another reference to the *Maccha Jātaka*. Four groups of five monks attend in shifts over a four or five day period and a royal scribe reads a proclamation, partly in Pāli, praising the Buddha. Extracts from the *Devatāsamayutta* (S i.1–45) are recited, the Valāhaka Devatā petitioned for rain, and other recitations playing on various “watery” attributes of the Buddha, for instance, his “grace without end like a river of water,” are offered up. In another text associated with Thai rain-making, the *Phra Rajabidhi Barunasatr Gatha*,⁴⁸ Sophuto is described as having “a stout figure, a big stomach, black skin and much power. By virtue of the power of this great *thera* may the *devatās* of the clouds cause rain to fall.”⁴⁹

Bunbangfai [lit. ‘merit of (firing) rockets] is a festival which takes place around the full moon of *pissakh* (April/May). In Northeast Thailand it is held between the 14th–16th day of May, the 15th being the most important.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Porée-Maspero, *Étude sur les rites agraires des Cambodiens*, 256.

⁴⁷ There are clear parallels with Hindu notions of renunciation here. The sage Agastya, for instance, is said to use his unspent *tapas* to induce Indra to send rain [MhB xiv.95.1ff].

⁴⁸ Quoted in Wells, *Thai Buddhism*, 95.

⁴⁹ I would welcome any help in further identifying the description.

⁵⁰ Tambiah, *Buddhism and Spirit Cults*, 288.

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Rockets are made in advance by both monks and villagers and stored in the *wat* until firing commences. Some monks are held to be particularly accomplished in this regard. Monks also bless the rockets and are fully involved in the competition to see which rocket will go furthest. They also seem to fully participate in the associated banter.⁵¹ In Laos, the rocket festival's explicit association with fertility is underlined by the fact that "a wooden phallus painted red and about half a meter long, is usually displayed intermittently to the crowd in a very realistic manner".⁵² Klausner reports that in Vientiane it is believed that the rockets commemorate the lighted torch that one of the Buddha's grieving disciples threw onto his funeral pyre.⁵³ Various ecstatic dances, performed by women mediums (*nāngthīam*) who become possessed by the spirits of ponds and swamps take place in the courtyard of the *wat* this time and there is a ritual circumambulation of the *sālā*. The festival actually coincides with *viśākha pūja*,⁵⁴ although Condominas concludes that, at least in the Laotian context,⁵⁵ the Buddhist elements of Bunbangfai are quite minor.

Condominas' observation may hold good for Laos but the fertility elements of Bunbangfai certainly coincide with parallel activities in the monastery. As Tambiah has noted,⁵⁶ this is the time in rural Thai when suitable long-serving monks are elevated to the status of *somdet*. This generally takes place immediately after village youths are ordained as novices prior to

⁵¹ William J. Klausner, "Ceremonies and Festivals in a Northeast Thai Village" in *Reflections on Thai Culture: Collected Writings of William J. Klausner* (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1993), 40f [This paper was originally published in *Sang Khomsat Prithat (Social Science Review)* 4, Sept. 1968, 18–30].

⁵² Condominas, "Phibān Cults in Rural Laos," 265. Evans points out that the poor rains in Laos during 1977 were popularly attributed to the suppression of the orgiastic rites accompanying the rocket festival under the puritanical and ideologically atheistic People's Democratic Republic established in 1975. They were restored several years later. (Grant Evans, *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance: Laos Since 1975* [Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998], 59).

⁵³ Klausner, "Ceremonies and Festivals in a Northeast Thai Village," 42.

⁵⁴ Actually, this triple celebration of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death was first instituted in Thailand in 1817 under Rama II and reworked by Mongkut. The festival was brought to Cambodia by Mahā Pan in 1855 where it was adopted by the Thommayut, the Mohanikay only adopting the practice during the reign of King Sisowath (Commission n.d., 32). To this day *viśākha pūja* remains a relatively minor part of the rural Southeast Asian Buddhist year.

⁵⁵ Condominas, "Phibān Cults in Rural Laos," 270.

⁵⁶ Tambiah, *Buddhism and Spirit Cults*, 111f.

the three-month retreat.⁵⁷ The candidate for promotion is led to a stone slab under which are placed seven leaves from a *bodhi* tree and eight bundles of leafy stalks. Suspended over the altar is a wooden *nāga* with a groove along its spinal column. The preceptor (*upajjhāya*) pours water into this groove so that it pours down through the *nāga*'s poison-bag and onto the kneeling promotion candidate's head. This "milk" fertilizes the honoured monk in such a way that this dangerous power is transformed into an asexual, non-violent force which will, in time, accrue to the benefit of the entire community.

Before moving on to a discussion of the rites of *vassa*, it is worth pausing to consider one further ritual, which though fortunately rare, may add some significance to our discussions. It is quite possible that the last human sacrifice in Cambodia took place at the sacred hill of Ba Phnom in April or May 1877 when two prisoners-of-war were beheaded during a royally-sponsored ritual called "raising up the ancestors" (*lon neak tā*), a festival still held in a highly modified form at the beginning of each growing season. The ceremony seems to have been part of a festival dedicated to the goddess Me Sa (Mahīśāsuramardini). Certainly, we know that human sacrifice (usually of a criminal) occurred annually at a sacred spot on the northeastern slope of the hill prior to this date. The direction that blood spurted from his severed neck was used to predict the nature of the coming rains. Evidence also suggests that Buddhist monks based at nearby Wat Vihear Thom were involved in a

⁵⁷ In Cambodia this ordination ceremony is called "ordination of the *nāga*" (*bambuos nāk*). The ordained *nāga* concludes the ceremony with a water libation in which he calls the earth to witness (Adhémar Leclère, *Cambodge: Fêtes civiles et religieuses* [Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1917], 132). It was once the custom in Southeast Asia for the temporary ordinand to have a part of his body tattooed with the scales of a *nāga* (Paul Lévy, "Les tatouages laotiens," *Bulletin d'Institut Indochinois pour l'Etude de l'Homme* [Hanoi, 1941], 113–18). The ceremony in Cambodia was until recently followed by a puberty rite, presided over by laymen who have previously been monks, in which the teeth of the young boys are blackened (Porée-Maspero, *Étude sur les rites agraires des Cambodgiens*, 149). The term *nāga* has numerous meanings. Apart from its obvious sense of "serpent", it can also mean "arahant" and "elephant", as well as "candidate for . . . ordination" (Strong, *Legend and Cult of Upagupta*, 191). In a rather intriguing article that certainly merits further investigation, Wright suggests that the Thai ceremony could be regarded as a recapitulation of a much more archaic rite in which a boisterous procession of the laity accompany the *nāga*/monk to the ordination hall, itself marked out by sima-stones [which he reads as a vestigial stone circle] before being handed over to the *sangha* for a sublimated sacrificial act (Michael Wright, "Sacrifice and the Underworld: Death and Fertility in Siamese Myth and Ritual," *Journal of the Siam Society* 78–1 [1990], 46f). If the thesis of this paper is accepted, the nature of that act is clearly connected with fertility.

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number of prayer rituals which included prayers for the dead (*dar*) during the mornings of the first few days of the rite, withdrawing only for the *coup de grâce* on the final day, a Saturday.⁵⁸ The monks recited these prayers at the cult site of Me Sa herself and also at neighbouring sites associated with a variety of other deities (*neak tā*),⁵⁹ but we need not interpret their withdrawal from the culminating act of violence as a criticism of unacceptable practices. This would be odd in any case. Rather, their retreat could be connected with the fertility aspect of the whole ritual as I hope to demonstrate in due course.

C) Vassa

The monastic retreat during the three months of the rainy season (*vassa*), sometimes termed the “Buddhist lent”, is a time of asceticism and rigorous discipline. It also coincides with the period of maximum rice growth. From a purely pragmatic point of view, then, villagers are too busy in their fields for any major festivity to intervene in the rhythm of their work. This is just as well for the inaccessibility of the *sangha* also acts as an aid to the process of growth.

One of the most widely-known incidents in the events leading up to the Buddha’s awakening involves Sujātā, “the foremost among laywomen who have taken the threefold formula”. According to canonical sources, Sujātā took a vow that she would offer a “celestial” meal of milk-rice to the spirit of a banyan tree if blessed with the birth of a son. When this happened, she proceeded to the tree where, mistaking the future Buddha for the deity, she made her offering.⁶⁰ The Buddha accepted and ate his first meal for 49 days. In this way, he was fortified for his subsequent battle with Māra [J.i.68f].

In Cambodia, at the beginning of the second fortnight of *photrobot* (=*bhādrapada*), ie. immediately after the dark fortnight of August/September dedicated to the dead is over,⁶¹ a solemn re-enactment of

⁵⁸ David P. Chandler, “Royally Sponsored Human Sacrifices in Nineteenth Century Cambodia: The Cult of *neak tā* Me Sa (Mahiśāsuramardini) at Ba Phnom,” *Journal of the Siam Society* 62-2, 1974, 216.

⁵⁹ *Neak tā krohom ko* (red neck), *neak tā sap than* (every place) and *neak tā tuol chhnean* (fishing basket mound) are mentioned by some sources in this connection.

⁶⁰ When placed in mid-stream, the golden bowl presented by Sujātā floated upstream confirming the fact that enlightenment would be achieved that very day.

⁶¹ No marriages may be solemnized at this time of the year. The association of *vassa* with death clearly underlines the ascetic feel of this period of maximum rice growth.

the Buddha's feeding by Sujātā (= Nāng Socātā) occurs.⁶² This is also the day that new statues of the *māravijaya*, complete with Nāng Thōrani images, may be consecrated. Monks are offered an elaborate concoction of five kinds of cooked rice in a sweet sauce (*mothubayas*)⁶³ by four young girls who are accompanied by boys representing the four great kings (*cātummahārājikadeva*). A similar event on the last day of *bhādrapada* and the first two days of *āśvina*, marking the beginning of autumn (*sārada*), was once also connected with the Thai royal rite. In this version, thirty-three young girls offering "heavenly food" (*khao dibya*) represented Sujātā.⁶⁴ Given the fact that the ritual connects with the Buddha's enlightenment, one would have expected both Cambodian and Thai ceremonies to have been timed as part of *viśākha pūja* but, in fact, they come somewhat later in the year. As we have already had cause to note, *viśākha pūja*, at least in its present form, is a modern development artificially set at a time that means little from the agrarian perspective. Our Cambodian event, precisely set at the half-year point, and coinciding with the period of maximum rice growth, has a clear logic that the modern *viśākha pūja* simply does not possess!

Quite apart from its proximity to the fortnight of the dead, Porée-Maspero's assumption that the rite is associated with death and resurrection appears to be correct.⁶⁵ Just as the feeding of the Buddha ensures that he has the necessary vigor to defeat the forces of evil and win through to enlightenment, so the rich food offered to the monks guarantees their continued detachment from the world. This, in turn, guarantees the continued growth of the rice crop for ascetic renunciation indubitably assures plentiful rain. Indeed, at any other time of the year Sujātā is invoked to confer fecundity upon human couples,⁶⁶ yet during the period of the rains her power is redirected towards renunciation.

D) Harvest

A New Rice Festival (*alut sāl maṅgallaya*) was held in the Kandyan kingdom on the full moon day of *durutu* (December/January). In the evening,

⁶² Porée-Maspero, *Étude sur les rites agraires des Cambodgiens*, 335f.

⁶³ From the Ayurvedic perspective, this is exactly the sort of food to concentrate the essence of *rasa*, an important point to be discussed later.

⁶⁴ Wells, *Thai Buddhism*, 102.

⁶⁵ Porée-Maspero, *Étude sur les rites agraires des Cambodgiens*, 339f.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 341.

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“ploughing festival songs”, recounting the famous event in the early life of the future Buddha, in which his father King Suddhodana played such an important role, were performed. On the full moon day itself, and as a climax to the festival, an enormous bowl, containing c.160 lbs of cooked rice (*kiri-bada pātra*) and filled so that the rice is shaped in the form of a cone, was presented to the Tooth Relic as if it were a god. This fact is underlined by the fact that, in contravention of Buddhist tradition that forbids the consumption of offerings made to the Buddha, the rice is subsequently offered to the officiants, including assembled monks.⁶⁷ Similar mounds of paddy (*phnom srov*) are constructed in Cambodian *wats* during the harvest month of *makh* (January/February).

Immediately after the rice-harvest, Thai monks who so wish “. . . go to a field some distance from town, near a charnel-ground, and live in impoverished straw huts for several days, practicing *vipassanā* all night, and sleeping all day.”⁶⁸ Similar retreats or short periods of seclusion [*col barivas* (= *parivāsa*)] take place in Cambodia during *makh*. The retreat involves a strictly silent night-time rite where monks walk slowly back and forth along a specially constructed east-west oriented path, lighting candles and meditating at either end.⁶⁹ It seems that the ritual walking (*cānkrama*) may symbolically represent the path of the moon or sun. However, from our perspective the most interesting part of the practice comes towards the end, for on the evening of the final [seventh?] day the monk leaves the ritual area in search of a house where someone has recently died. He then proceeds to perform the necessary funeral rites. Now *māgha pūja*, although only a minor village celebration, takes place in this month, a time of the year when the Buddha is supposed to have predicted his own death. Could it be that *col barivas*, coming as it does at the end of the harvest, combines a commemoration of the Buddha’s death and an apotropaic attempt to circumvent the death of the natural order? Certainly the idea of death and rebirth is a prominent idea in this context for the monk apparently enters the retreat in the first place to overcome demerit caused by any unintentional killing of small creatures he may have committed throughout the proceeding year. Perhaps it is not too far-fetched to suggest that this strangely sombre practice at a time

⁶⁷ Seneviratne, *Rituals of the Kandyan State*, 65f.

⁶⁸ A.B. Griswold and Prasert Na Nagar, “The Asokārāma Inscription of 1399 A.D.: Epigraphical and Historical Studies, no.2,” *Journal of the Siam Society* 57-1 (1969), 47, n33.

⁶⁹ Porée-Maspero, *Étude sur les rites agraires des Cambodiens*, 598ff.

that should signal festivity also atones for the demerit associated with the much larger, though unintended, holocaust caused by agricultural work through the preceeding season.

The major festival of the immediate post-harvest period of *phalkun* (February/March) involves a monastery-based recitation of the *Vessantara Jātaka*, the story of the Buddha's penultimate birth. Although Prince Vessantara is not yet a king, he is addressed as if he were throughout the text. He has been exiled to a forest by his father after his excessive generosity (*dāna*) has enraged the people of Sivi. He has given away his white elephant so that the citizens of neighbouring Kāliṅga may obtain rain, nicely linking one of the prime symbols of kingship, the elephant, with the magical manipulation of nature. Vessantara is joined in the forest by his wife Maddī and the two children, but he gives away the children to a wretched Brahmin and Maddī is lost in similar fashion. The family's relationships are expressed in the story with great tenderness and the loss of the children is truly heart-rending. Gombrich actually reports that two Sinhalese monks told him that Vessantara was simply wrong to let the children go!⁷⁰ Fortunately, everyone lives happily ever after. Both family and white elephant are restored, Vessantara returns to Sivi and is crowned king, all creatures are set free (even cats!), and a rain of jewels falls from heaven which Vessantara collects, distributing some with perfect generosity and prudently storing the remainder in his treasury.

Now, the story is ritually linked with the *māravijaya* and with Nāng Thōrānī, for the Buddha actually calls the earth goddess to witness his acts of generosity as Vessantara, as has been previously mentioned.⁷¹ However, the re-enactment of the story must logically and chronologically take place somewhat later in the year, for the "ascetic" period of exile represented by *vassa* is now over, the rice harvest has been collected and, metaphorically, the treasury is full. The natural and the narrative order parallel one another as exile and renunciation are replaced by restoration and an increase of fortune. Celebrations can therefore begin once again. Read in this manner, the *Jātaka* offers a vision of a properly Buddhist civilization in which transcendent (*lokottara*) and mundane (*laukika*), forest/renunciant and magico-polit-

⁷⁰ Richard F. Gombrich, *Precept and Practice: Traditional Buddhism in the Rural Highlands of Ceylon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 267.

⁷¹ Margaret Cone and Richard F. Gombrich, *The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), xix.

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ical values are reconciled. The story's resolution of these tensions is the perfect way to bring the agrarian cycle to its conclusion⁷² before the whole annual round must be enacted once more.

Asceticism and Fecundity

According to a Thai myth, there was once a golden age in which a miraculously high-yielding rice grew. In time this was appropriated by humans, and it inevitably declined in fertility. [There are clear parallels with the story of cosmic decline told in the *Aggaññasutta* here.] However, during the time of Maitreya rice will disappear altogether and be replaced by wheat. In popular belief, each Buddha is associated with a particular staple grain, a fact underlined by the strongly held belief that Gotama and rice were born at the same time.⁷³ Their fates, then, are intimately connected as we have seen in the preceding discussion of the ritual and agricultural year of the rice-growing areas of South and Southeast Asia. In the dry season the Buddha's presence to the world is enacted institutionally through a variety of festive rites that, in great part, anticipate the future harvest by ensuring that the rains fall in adequate amounts and at the appropriate time. With the onset of rains the rice is sown and the *sangha* withdraws. The period is defined by an increased agricultural workload and by rigorous asceticism on the part of the monks.⁷⁴ Both monk and laity alike enter a time of increased piety connected to religious rituals of a more sombre character than their dry season counterparts. The cycle is brought to a conclusion by a return to dry conditions, and the re-emergence of the *sangha* and the harvest, after which all sectors of society are brought together once more by a ritual recapitulation of the golden age as represented in the story of Vessantara.

Interestingly, the process is in tune with the climatological speculations of Indian medical writers, such as Vāgbhaṭa who identified the dry season with

⁷² The recitation of the *Vessantara Jātaka* is traditionally connected with anticipations relating to the final birth of Maitreya, thus, nicely harmonizing paradises of the distant past and of the future.

⁷³ Tambiah, *Buddhism and Spirit Cults*, 356.

⁷⁴ Michael Rhum argues that such virtues of autonomy and detachment "are religiously and culturally defined as central male characteristics." Rhum, *The Ancestral Lords: Gender, Descent, and Spirits in a Northern Thai Village* (Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University [Monograph Series on Southeast Asia: Special Report No. 29], 1994), 140.

the capture of potency (*rasa*) and the rainy season with its emission.⁷⁵ Transposing this distinction onto our present discussion, it seems possible that the festivities of the dry season have the effect of concentrating this potent fertilizing energy in the Buddhist *saṅgha* so that it may be focused through asceticism and released at the ideal point to ensure maximum rice growth. As Bloch has suggested it may be the violent suppression or death of sexuality as expressed in religious renunciation that provides the link crucial with fertility.⁷⁶ Whatever the precise mechanism, there does seem to be a rather obvious sexual element present here.

Despite the rather prudish attitude towards sexuality held by orthodox Theravādins, particularly since the reforms of the nineteenth century, there can be little doubt that a number of early canonical writings, such as the Vinaya itself, are fascinated by the topic and represent a “mine of spicy anecdotes”. On the one hand, the Vinaya condemns all sexual activity by monks yet it also furnishes an immensely detailed, explicit and prurient conspectus of the topic. Indeed, Faure claims that a tradition exists to the effect that Ānanda was scolded by Mahā Kassapa and excluded from the first council because, in order to convert [!] a group of women, he showed them the Buddha’s penis while the body was waiting to be cremated.⁷⁷ Examples from other parts of the Buddhist world give some credence to the story. For instance, self-mummified Buddhist saints in Japan are “worshipped to enhance fertility”, the genitals of one particular figure being deemed signal-ly efficacious.⁷⁸

Stray historical references seem to bear out the possibility that parallel ideas may have flourished in some regions of Southeast Asia. The Burmese *Glass Palace Chronicle*, written from a strictly orthodox perspective, is vigorous in its condemnation of the so-called Ari sect of monks who, prior to the purification of the *saṅgha* by King Aniruddha in the 11th century, are

⁷⁵ Francis Zimmermann, *The Jungle and the Aroma of Meats: An Ecological Theme in Hindu Medicine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 34.

⁷⁶ Maurice Bloch, *Prey into Hunter: The Politics of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). As Eliade observed long ago, a strong general connection exists between agriculture and death (cf. *Patterns in Comparative Religion* [London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958], 352f).

⁷⁷ Faure, *The Red Thread*, 60. I would welcome some clarification on this matter. Malalasekere (*Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names* I, 264) merely notes that Ānanda was charged with “having allowed the Buddha’s body to be first saluted by women” yet he does seem to allow the possibility of some alternative rendering of the incident.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 29.

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said to have worshipped *nāgas*, made offerings of rice to idols, employed *mantras*, and “claimed the right of *ius primae noctis* on all village girls on the eve of their weddings.”⁷⁹ That the Ari may not have been as heterodox as the text might wish its readers to believe is born out by its own admission that their doctrines had been accepted by “thirty generations of kings at Pagan” before Aniruddha⁸⁰ and, partially, by our own observations of village ritual in recent times. Of course, I have only intended to depict the fertilizing power of Buddhist monks as a form of sublimated sexuality. However, other sources are less reticent. Thus, when Zhou Daguan, a member of the Chinese ambassador’s party, travelled to Cambodia in 1296 he described the involvement of Theravāda Buddhist monks in the sexual initiation of young girls⁸¹ and even today textual and ethnographical evidence bears out the possibility of similar rites, though practiced in a highly attenuated form. Indeed, Bizot makes the general point that Cambodian female initiation ceremonies tend to be structured so that they parallel, both temporally and in terms of content, those found in the monastic arena.⁸²

Perhaps the link is not as strange as it might seem. Certainly, when the temporary ordinand returns to the world once more he is considered “cooked” and ready to enter the life of a householder. And, as we have already had cause to note, a certain amount of mating behaviour between village girls and young monks does take place during the New Year festivities. As King Mongkut is once reported to have said with specific reference to the village traditions he wished to purify, women regard such monks as “fatted pigs ready for the slaughter.”⁸³ Far from being exclusively to do with celibacy, then, ordination could be seen as part of a set of wider fertility-oriented customs. As Keyes notes elsewhere, ordination is “a break with the unconscious maleness of childhood and the beginning of self-consciousness

⁷⁹ Strong, *Legend and Cult of Upagupta*, 176.

⁸⁰ Pe Maung Tin and Gordon H. Luce, *The Glass Palace Chronicle of the Kings of Burma* (Rangoon, 1960, Reprint), 39.

⁸¹ Pelliot, “Mémoires sur les coutumes du Cambodge” BEFEO II (1902), 153–54. Zhou Daguan’s memoirs also report the fact that the Cambodian king of the period, probably Śrindravarman (reigned 1295–1327), slept at the top of a golden tower [Phimeanakas?] where he united each night with a nine-headed *nāga* protector appearing in the form of a beautiful woman.

⁸² François Bizot, *Le figuier à cinq branches: Recherches sur le bouddhisme khmer* (Paris: EFEO, 1976), 40f.

⁸³ Rhum, *The Ancestral Lords*, 153.

about male sexuality,”⁸⁴ and in many respects, Buddhist “asceticism is a mechanism for increasing male reproductive force . . .”⁸⁵

To reinforce the point that such notions are not as alien to the canonical tradition as may appear on casual scrutiny, let us now turn to two inter-related texts. The first, the *Alambusā Jātaka* (No.523; J.v.152f), tells the story of the sage Isisiṅga [= the Vedic Rśyaśṛṅga; lit. “antelope horn” or perhaps “unicorn”],⁸⁶ born after a doe drank water into which the *bodhisatta*’s semen had inexplicably fallen. In due course, just like his father, the boy became a great ascetic whose austerities caused Sakka’s palace to shake. Sakka, in great fear, sent the nymph Alambusā to successfully seduce Isisiṅga who “lay unconscious in her embrace,”⁸⁷ and hence inactive on the cosmological front, for three whole years before he eventually remembered his true calling. Actually, a popular Buddhist amulet of contemporary Thailand, called Phra Ngang, depicts a humanoid figure with a curved phallic horn, very reminiscent of Isisiṅga, on its head. It is supposed to have its origin in Cambodia where it is believed to confer sexual power on its possessor.⁸⁸ The story of Isisiṅga was illustrated at Bharhut, and an active pilgrimage site was also associated with the sage in antiquity. The Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang, for instance, claimed to have visited it in the seventh century.⁸⁹ A combination of these facts mean that it would probably be

⁸⁴ Charles Keyes, “Ambiguous Gender: Male Initiation in a Northern Thai Buddhist Society” in Caroline Walker Bynum, Stevan Harrell and Paula Richman, eds., *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 73.

⁸⁵ Rhum, *The Ancestral Lords*, 151.

⁸⁶ According to Monier-Williams’ *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, Śṛṅga is the name of an ascetic who is still [?] worshipped in certain parts of India in the form of an earthen image to bring rain during a drought.

⁸⁷ Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names* I, 187.

⁸⁸ Tambiah, *Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets*, 225. Thai amulets are usually made by temple boys or lay craftsmen from any material, although wood from a coffin is the most highly regarded. The phallic amulet (*palad khik*) is activated by being blessed by a charismatic monk who may also inscribe it with a magic formula. Particular monks are renowned for these powers which derive from their forest-dwelling or ascetic practices. These, in turn, are said to generate *mettā* which is the dominant factor underlying the efficacy of the amulet. Lūang Pū (= respected grandfather) Ee, who died in the early 1970s, is perhaps the most prominent of these. It is said that a *palad khik* blessed by him, if placed in a river, will shoot “upstream as if powered by a jet engine.” (Bruno Friedman, “Thai Phallic Amulets,” *Journal of the Siam Society* 65–2 [1977], 175)

⁸⁹ Thomas Watters, *On Yuan Chwang’s Travels in India 629–645 A.D.* 2 Vols. (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1904), 218f.

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unwise to dismiss the tradition represented by the story as a feature at the extreme margin of Buddhist interests.

In the *Nañinikā Jātaka* [No.526; J.v.193f], we have a similar version of the birth of Isisinga, although in this account the *bodhisattva* sheds his seed after gazing on an *apsarā* sent by Sakka for this specific purpose.⁹⁰ In both *Jātakas*, then, the Buddha's seed engenders great asceticism, a reverse of the situation described in the previous section where the great asceticism of *sangha* engenders rice seed! However, in this tale, Sakka is so troubled by the sage that he sends a three-year drought⁹¹ to Kāsi and tells the king that it can only be ended if Princess Nañinikā, the king's daughter, will seduce Isisinga. She is successful and rain falls once more. In other words, the king may only regain control of his domain after he has reduced the ascetic to the status of ordinary subject. The belief that sexual intercourse, by establishing a proper balance between *yin* and *yang* in the human domain, may induce a similar balance in the natural world and hence produce rain seems to be an ancient Chinese idea also.⁹² This may also be the meaning of the *Mahābhārata* rendering of the tale of Rṣyaśringa and Śāntā.

The legend of Upagupta is clearly relevant here.⁹³ In southern Laos, this prominent figure is also said to have been born after a *nāgī* inadvertently swallowed the Buddha's semen.⁹⁴ Since masturbation is condemned in the Vinaya it is difficult to know quite how to justify this, although Rhum's informant in northern Thailand told him that the action was intended to eject all impurities from the Buddha's body.⁹⁵ The Buddha acts in this way as an example to Ānanda who, prior to the incident, has been infatuated with a

⁹⁰ The story parallels the birth of Drona whose father, the great ascetic Bharadvāja, finds himself in a very similar situation.

⁹¹ In a Chinese version of the Isisinga story, the sage Ekaśringa, being in possession of the five *abhijñās*, uses a magical formula to prevent the *nāgas* sending rain for twelve years (Chavannes No.453).

⁹² Derk Bodde, "Sexual Sympathetic Magic in Han China" *History of Religions* 3 (1964), 295.

⁹³ In many parts of Southeast Asia, Upagupta is represented by small, roundish stones. Paul Mus ("Cultes indiens et indigènes au Champa" BEFEO 33, 376–7) reports that such stones are employed by indigenous peoples in Asia to represent deities associated with rainfall and fertility. It is, therefore, probable that he was once just such a deity.

⁹⁴ Tambiah, *Buddhism and Spirit Cults*, 170.

⁹⁵ The explanation rather begs the question, for how did the Buddha's body come to possess impurities in the first place? The full story is given at Rhum (*The Ancestral Lords*, 149), where the semen is related to *tanhā*.

beautiful girl. Upagupta is a sort-of-monk although, uncharacteristically, he is naked.⁹⁶ Like the Buddha, he has the ability to tame Māra. He is said to live in a pond or swamp and is associated with rain, being able both to produce it and bring it to an end. In particular, he can prevent the Evil One from sending storms to disrupt festivities.⁹⁷ This is one of the principal reasons why he is invited to seasonal rituals, such as Bunbangfai and the recitation of the *Vessantara Jātaka*, as well as to semi-calendric rituals like the ordination of new monks.⁹⁸

Conclusion

I hope that I have been able to point to the fact that the South and Southeast Asia regions possess a tangle of Buddhist traditions, texts, ideas and practices related to the benign control of the natural environment in so far as it is represented by the settled land. The exercise of benevolent kingship, the power of asceticism and a related sublimation of sexuality are some of the crucial mechanisms through which this control has been manifested. Specific examples of these concepts can be clearly traced to the Pāli canonical corpus. Some seem to stand in a less direct relation to the mainstream, while others may turn out to have a very tenuous connection with the Buddhist tradition. A few of the rites discussed have a fairly restricted geographical locale, although a surprising number are well-attested throughout the region in one form or another.

One thing that can be said with a fair degree of confidence is that our subject matter is little connected to the paraphernalia and agenda of modernist Buddhism. However, this is a potential source of worry for, if these traditions do represent an indigenous technology which has helped to regulate a generally harmonious relation between human populations and their natural environment for many centuries, its undermining by factors such as the rationalization of kingship (I am thinking of Thailand in this connection), the “scientific” flavour of contemporary forms of monastic education, and the ascendancy of *vipassanā*-oriented forms of meditation which can have a tendency to sever the link to an earlier “magical” worldview, could have serious consequences. Indeed, these influences may be just as significant to

⁹⁶ Tambiah, *Buddhism and Spirit Cults*, 177.

⁹⁷ Rhum, *The Ancestral Lords*, 146.

⁹⁸ Strong, *Legend and Cult of Upagupta*, 262.

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the degradation of the natural order as more obvious factors such as globalization and the embrace of alien political and economic systems.

Nevertheless, reform in this region has rarely led to a complete eradication of earlier themes. Bizot's work, for instance, has underlined the contemporary existence of a number of Buddhist countercultures which he designates as the unreformed "ancient Mahānikay tradition".⁹⁹ Whether the evidence collected above points to the existence of such a tradition with its own history and rituals, etc., is not entirely clear. My task has merely been to highlight an undercurrent that seems to have been rather neglected in the scholarly literature. Of course, whether the material provides an adequate ground from the development of an environmental ethic is quite another matter.

Abbreviations

A.	<i>Ānguttara Nikāya</i>
BEFEO	<i>Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient</i>
BuA.	<i>Buddhavaṃsa Commentary</i>
Cv.	<i>Cūlavavaṃsa</i>
D.	<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>
DhA.	<i>Dhammapadahakathā</i>
EFEO	<i>l'École française d'Extrême-Orient</i>
J.	<i>Jātaka</i>
M.	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>
MhB.	<i>Mahābhārata</i>
Mv.	<i>Mahāvaṃsa</i>
S.	<i>Samyutta Nikāya</i>
Sn.	<i>Suttanipāta</i>
Sp.	<i>Samantapāśādikā</i>
Thag.	<i>Theragāthā</i>
ThagA.	<i>Theragāthā Commentary</i>
Vin.	<i>Vinaya Piaka</i>

⁹⁹ The term "tantric Theravāda" also crops up in this connection from time to time. For a recent discussion of the debate, see L. S. Cousins, "Aspects of Esoteric Southern Buddhism" in Peter Connolly and Sue Hamilton, eds., *Indian Insights: Buddhism, Brahmanism and Bhakti-Papers from the Annual Spalding Symposium on Indian Religions* (London: Luzac Oriental, 1998), 185–207.

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Appendix I:
Village Ceremonies in Buddhist South and Southeast Asia

MONTH	WESTERN EQUIVALENT	MAJOR RICE CROP	CEREMONIES
Cet [caitra]	29 Mar–29 April	End of Dry Season NEW YEAR [13th–15th April]	Sand mounds/pagodas (<i>phnom khsac</i>) Washing of Buddha images. Ritual bathing of king and <i>sangha</i> Recitation of <i>Ātānātiyasutta</i> Merit-making for dead ancestors Sexual games
Pissakh [viśākha]	30 April–28 May	Beginning of Rainy Season SOWING	<i>Pissakh boca</i> (=viśākhapūja)-minor village celebration Bunbangfai [NE Thailand & Laos]-rocket festival Sophuto Human Sacrifice [?]
Ces [jyeṣṭha]	29 May–29 June	SOWING	
Asath [asādha]	30 June–28 July	Rice transplantation	<i>Vassa</i> -piety and asceticism.
Srap [śrāvana]	29 July–29 Aug		Asala Perahāra in Sri Lanka-water cutting
Photrobot [bhādrapada]	30 Aug–28 Sept	Rice grains forming Peak of growing season 13th day-HALF YEAR POINT	Inauspicious first fortnight-dead remembered Nāng Socātā (= Sujātā) story re-enacted-monks fed nutritious foods Water-cutting
Asoc [aśvina]	29 Sept–29 Oct	Maturation of rice	End of <i>Vassa</i>
Kadek [kārttika]	30 Oct–28 Nov	End of Rainy Season	Water Festival Kathen
Makser [mrgasiras]	29 Nov–29 Dec	Beginning of Dry Season	
Bos [puṣya]	30 Dec–28 Jan	HARVEST	
Makh [māgha]	29 Jan–29 Feb	HARVEST	Mountains of paddy (<i>phnom srov</i>) <i>Col barivas</i> (=parivāsa)-atonement for destruction of small creatures <i>Makh boca</i> (=māghapūja)-minor village celebration
Phalkun [phālgunē]	30 Feb–28 Mar		Recitation of <i>Vessantara Jātaka</i> -post-harvest celebrations Royal exorcism