What is a Buddha Image?

THAI CULTURE, NEW SERIES No. 19

By A.B. Griswold

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The Emerald Buddha in rainy season costume.

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THE FINE ARTS DEPARTMENT
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Phra Phuttha Sihing, Phutthaisawan Chapel

Preface

Thailand is very rich in precious arts and cultural heritage which represents a long-lasting independence, prosperity and stability of the country. These various fields of heritage have been preserved, accumulated and inherited throughout generations until the present. This legacy brings pride, dignity and prestige to Thai people. Therefore, it should be shared with the world so that Thai wisdom can be appreciated.

The Fine Arts Department is responsible for the preservation, promotion, transmission and dissemination of arts and culture of the Thai nation. As such it has compiled and published a book series of 25 volumes written by experts in their respective fields. Their areas of knowledge include artistic works, architecture, music and dramatic arts as well as language and literature. Each series has been reprinted from time to time. In this publication, there are no alterations to the contents although some illustrations have been added for the benefit of the readers.

The Department hopes that this series of books will be a resource among the international community to help them understand Thailand better through its unique arts and culture.

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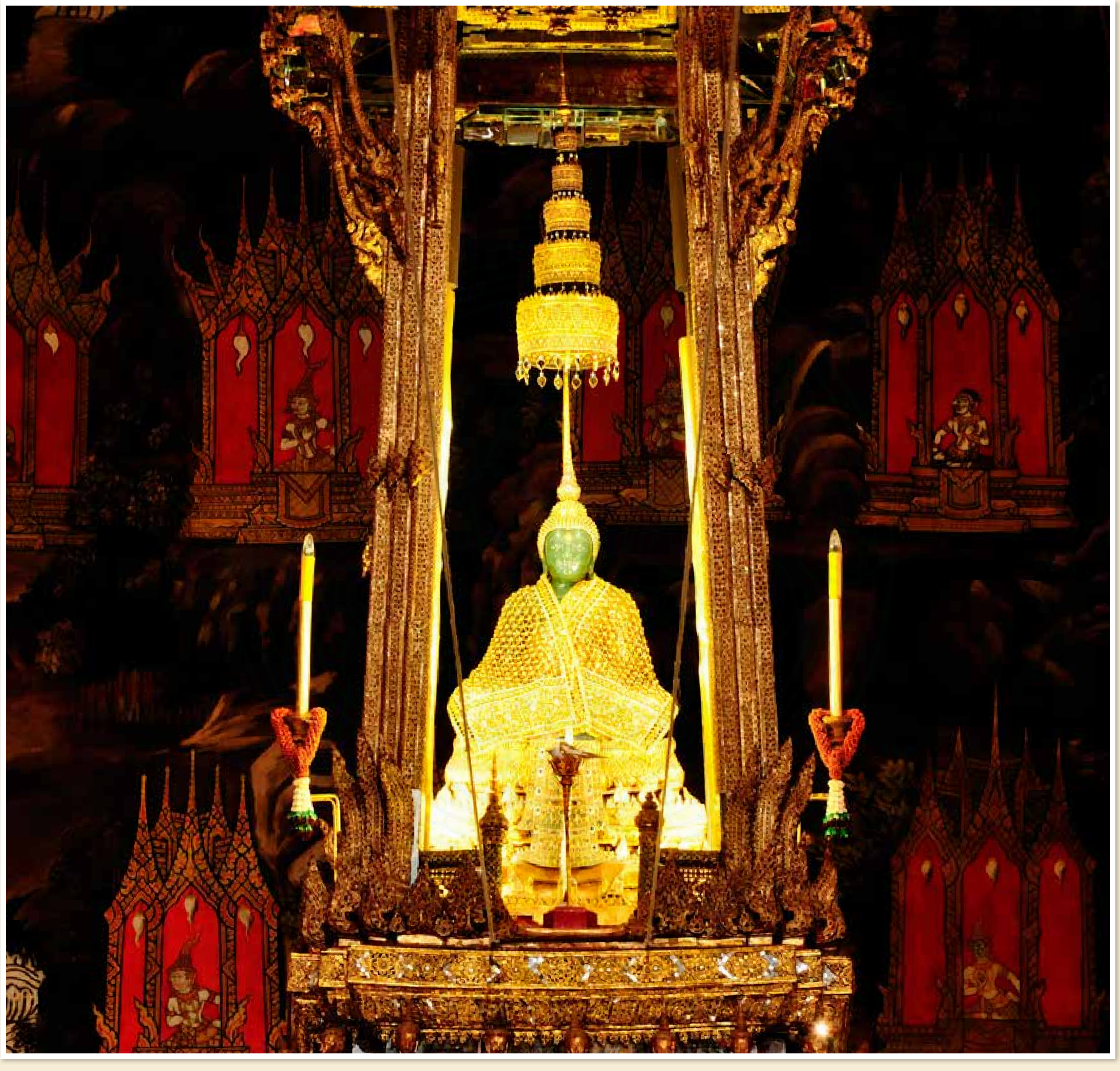
Phra Phuttha Sihing, Phutthaisawan Chapel, Palace to the Front, Bangkok.
This image, reputed to have been cast in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in the second century A.D., is considered by archaeologists to be a work of the Thai school of Sukhothai, dating from the 15th century. It is apparently a copy, at one or more removes, of a Sinhalese original, now lost.

A.B. GRISWOLD

was born in Baltimore, Maryland, U.S.A., in 1907. He was educated at Princeton University, and Trinity College, Cambridge. He was the author of Dated Buddha Images of Northern Siam (Ascona 1957), The Architecture and Sculpture of Siam (in "The Arts of Thailand" Bloomington, 1960), King Mongkut of Siam (New York, 1960), and of articles in Artibus Asiae (Ascona), Arts Asiatiques (Paris), Journal of the Siam Society (Bangkok), Śilpakorn Journal (Bangkok), Journal of the Sarawak Museum (Kuching), Encyclopedia universale delle Arti (Rome), Paranavitana Felicitation Volume (Colombo), Majumdar Felicitation Volume (Calcutta), etc. He has been awarded the Order of the Crown of Thailand, Third Class, and the Order of the White Elephant, Third Class.



The Emerald Buddha in winter season costume.
'Emerald' is a popular mistranslation of an expression that simply means a semi-precious stone (in this case, probably jasper). The image is traditionally believed to have been carved in heaven by Visvakarman, the craftsman of the gods, in the first century B.C. Judging from its style, it is a work of the Thai school of Chiang Mai, of about the 15th century, and is doubtless a copy of a Sinhalese original.

WHAT IS A BUDDHA IMAGE?

The tourist who comes to Bangkok and visits the monasteries —'temples' as they are commonly called— will see in every *vihāra* and ordination hall a Buddha image, nearly always larger than life-size and often colossal, occupying the place of honor; and he will see an indefinite number of lesser ones distributed in halls and galleries — often several hundred of them, and in certain monasteries more than a thousand. Frequently he will see people prostrating themselves before an image, offering flowers and incense, and displaying every sign of fervent devotion. If he goes into the National Museum, he will find that there are more Buddha images than works of any other kind on display. If he goes into a private house, he may find a special room set aside for Buddha images, where they are reverently placed on a kind of sectional altar consisting of tables of different shapes that fit together into a neat pattern; or if the owner cannot afford so costly an arrangement, there may be part of one room set aside, or perhaps only a shelf, where images are kept at the respectful level; and in any case they will receive, from time to time, the same sort of homage as in the monasteries. Before touching one of them, for the purpose of moving it or cleaning it off, a Buddhist will usually pause for a moment with head bowed and palms pressed together, as if asking permission to take such a liberty.

The forms of honor paid to Buddha images have recently been studied in an interesting booklet by Luang Boribal Buribhand, the learned Advisor on Archaeology to the Department of Fine Arts. Here I am more concerned with the reasons for these honors than with their form; but I should like to mention one point which I think is specially pertinent : in speaking Thai, or at least in writing it, when making any statement about a Buddha image, the rule is to use the 'royal vocabulary' *(rājāśabda or rachasab)*, which contains an unusually high proportion of Khmer and Sanskrit terms. The pronoun for a Buddha image is not the equivalent of English 'it', but an honorific roughly translatable as 'His Highness'; an image is not 'shipped' or 'taken' from one place to another, but is 'invited'; it does not 'go', but 'proceed'; and its head, eyes, mouth, arms and hands, legs and feet, and so on, are referred to be the same terms as those of royal personages.

Phra Phuttha Mongkhonbophit, Wat Mongkhonbophit, Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya.

Quantities of votive tablets, of metal or terra cotta, stamped with tiny figures of the Buddha in tens, hundreds, or even more, can be seen in museums and private collections. They are often objects of great beauty; yet in most cases they were made not to be seen at all, but in order to be buried away inside a monument, or perhaps inside the arm or body of some colossal statue. The same may even be true, though less often, of bronze Buddha images of considerable size, up to almost a metre in height: a few years ago the left arm of the huge *Mangalapabitra* image at Ayudhya was found to contain a quantity of such bronzes, apparently many of them made for this particular purpose, but with no less painstaking workmanship than if they had been intended for public display.

There is another use of votive tablets, and of various sorts of miniature figures of the Buddha : many Thai people wear them suspended from a metal chain around the neck. If we think they are merely decorative, like a string of beads worn by a woman, we should be much mistaken. They are popularly believed to make the wearer invulnerable.

How has it come about that Buddha images have been made in Thailand in such incalculable numbers? Why do they command such devotion and respect? And why has such care gone into the making of those that were never intended for the public eye?

The first answer that might spring to mind is that they are idols, images of a god. But that runs into trouble at the outset. As everyone knows, the Buddha was a human being, not a god: he was a great Indian Sage, born in the 6th century B.C *

In one sense, nevertheless, the answer is not entirely wrong. During his lifetime the Buddha received the outward marks of homage that it has always been the custom in India to bestow on a highly revered teacher, and after his death his followers instituted a systematic cult. As a result the ignorant often regard him as a kind of god. But serious Buddhists reject any such concept; and in fact they do not 'worship' either the Buddha or his image.

To understand these seeming paradoxes, we shall have to make a rather long digression.

The form of Buddhism that prevails in Thailand, and has prevailed for centuries, is the Theravāda, the 'Doctrine of the Senior Monkhood,' which is a very different thing from the Mahāyāna, or 'Greater Vehicle,' of Tibet, China and Japan.** The basic document of the Theravāda is its Canon, preserved in the Pali language. Its interpretation has been the subject of innumerable Commentaries, also in Pali. Most of the Canon has been translated into English and several other languages, but only a small part of the Commentaries.

* According to tradition he died in 544/543 B.C. at the age of eighty; but modern scholarship is inclined to think that the date remembered is more nearly that of his birth.

** The Theravāda is commonly called 'Hīnayāna' by western writers, a practice of which I confess myself to have been guilty on occasion in the past. The term Hīnayāna ('Lesser' or 'Inferior Vehicle') originated as an expression of comtempt applied by those who preferred the Mahāyāna, and ought not to be perpetuated by the unprejudiced.

While the popular digests of Buddhism in English often fail to do justice to the Theravāda, there is at least one exception, the chapter on Buddhism in the series of The World's Great Religions published several years ago by Life Magazine. Some of the very best books on the subject were published a long time ago, such as Henry Alabaster's *Wheel of the Law* (London, 1871), and the following works by T.W. Rhys Davids: *Buddhism* (London, 1878), *Buddhism, its History and Literature* (New York and London, 1896), *Buddhist India* (London, 1903), *Dialogues of the Buddha* (translations from the Pali Canon, with explanations, 3 volumes, London, 1899, 1910, 1921), and the article *Buddhism* in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, 11^{th} edition.

The works of Rhys Davids are particularly apt, as his views are very much the same as those of the most learned Buddhists in Thailand today. Both consider that the Theravāda is essentially a doctrine of rationalism, paralleling modern scientific and humanistic thought, an ethical and psychological system in which no deity has a significant part. It has one aim and one only : to abolish suffering. It proposes to do so, not by the aid of divine intervention, but by purely human means : that is, by examining the law of cause and effect, and acting accordingly. The causes of suffering are craving, malice and delusion; if they can be eradicated, suffering will disappear. The remedy sounds simple, but no one supposes it is easy to apply. All Buddhists are expected to play their part in the struggle against craving and malice, by exercising self-restraint and kindness toward all living creatures; but only relatively few are able to participate directly in the struggle against delusion. That task is assigned more directly to the monkhood (not 'priesthood,' as it is often called), which is expected to lead the struggle against ignorance, bigotry and mental torpor, and to promote good conduct by precept and example.

The Buddha lived at a time and place in which nearly everyone believed in the transmigration of souls, taking it for granted that each individual would be reborn again in various conditions on earth, or in heaven or hell for periods of various length. The condition of each re-birth was a reward or punishment for actions committed in previous ones, in accordance with the will of the god in whom one put one's faith; and the gods sometimes tested this faith by requiring the devotee to commit the most outrageous actions.

In contrast to such beliefs, the Buddha taught that retribution does not depend on the will of any god, but on a natural law whose workings can be discovered by the use of human intelligence. There is nothing capricious about it; we ourselves can discriminate between good actions and evil ones, without fear that some god will unexpectedly change the rules; the gods, if such there be, are incapable of setting aside the laws of nature. Favoritism cannot operate; and no act of faith can erase the consequences of an evil deed.

The Buddha did not deny transmigration, but as he flatly denied the soul it is clear that he interpreted it very differently from most of his contemporaries. The law of impermanence, he taught, applies to all living beings: men, animals, and any other conceivable category. Life is inevitably accompanied by growth, and growth cannot occur without decay. What we commonly call the 'individual' is in constant disintegration, a process which in man and the higher animals begins even before emerging from the womb. No being, not even a god, is an enduring entity. Each is a compound of elements such as form, matter, perception, and so on; and in each the relationship of the component parts is constantly changing, never remaining the same for any two consecutive moments. It follows that individuality and personality are mere figures of speech, and the soul an illusion. Yet that does not mean in the least that good and evil are indifferent; somehow or other, though it is not always easily perceptible, every action brings its retribution; and though there is no soul to be reincarnated, the energy of past action, good or evil, continues forever. This energy, under the impact of craving and delusion, is what is 're-born'. When simple people, who could not grasp this argument, asked the Buddha whether or not they should believe in transmigration, he advised them to be on the safe side : by acting as if it were true, and doing their best to lead a virtuous life, they would gain the rewards of a tranquil conscience, and lose nothing even if they guessed wrong; but if they thoughtlessly rejected it and followed their own evil desires, they would lead a tormented life and finally, if it turned out after all that they were mistaken, they would be 'like travellers without provisions'.

Many Indian and European scholars today say that Rhys Davids, Henry Alabaster, and the others who believed the Thera-vāda to be a doctrine of rationalism, were all wrong. They say that the rationalist view is a 19th century invention, largely due to Prince Mongkut, who became King of Siam in 1851, and that there is no justification whatever to be found for it in the Canon. They assert that the Buddha took transmigration quite literally, just like everyone else; that he was no less superstitious than the generality of educated persons of his time; that he believed firmly in the gods; that he thought himself able to perform miracles; and that he taught his disciples spells to drive away troublesome sprites.

It is true that these scholars can point to a great many passages in the Canon that would seem to prove their argument; but we can point to others, less numerous but somehow more convincing, in which we see the Buddha as a skeptic, gentle but thoroughgoing: he counsels his disciples not to put their faith in tradition or in any honored teacher, even himself, but to rely on their own powers of reason; he limits the meaning of re-birth to an impersonal abstraction; and he not only condemns magic and superstition but even rejects the whole supernatural basis of religion, placing its moral values firmly in human psychology instead.

In fact two contradictory currents of thought, one rational and the other pietistic, run side by side through the Canon, where anyone can see them for himself. The Buddhism that prevailed before Prince Mongkut's time emphasized the pietistic and the marvelous, just as popular Buddhism still does today. But Prince Mongkut did not need to invent the current of rationalism: it was already there, though less noticed; he called attention to its importance, and shifted the emphasis at the highest level.*

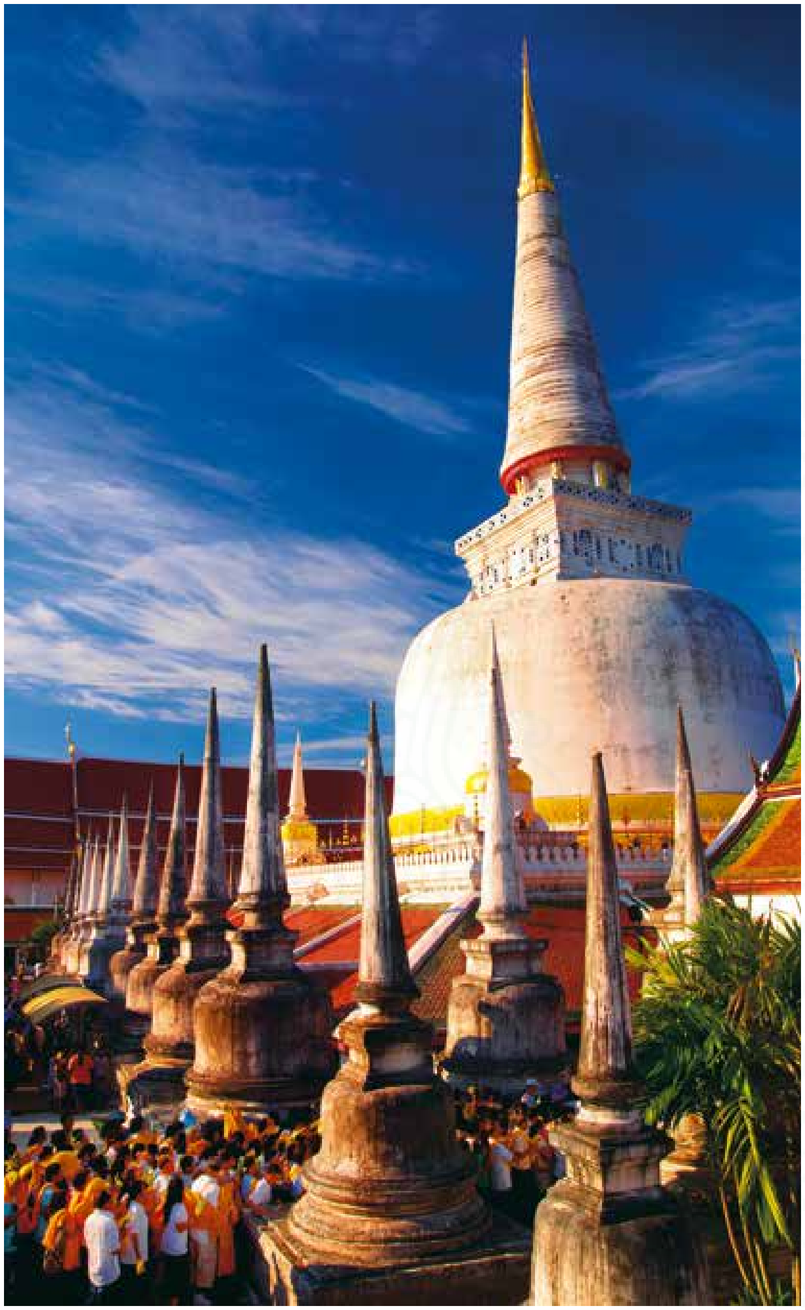
The Emerald Buddha in summer season costume.

*See my *King Mongkut of Siam*, Asia Society, New York, 1961; distributed in Bangkok by the Siam Society, Asoke Road.

A Buddha Image in the attitude of Nirvana.

The two currents of thought are not really so irreconcilable as they at first appear. The contradiction vanishes if passages of the one sort are taken to be factual, and the other as metaphorical. The Buddha knew that teaching is useless unless it is adapted to the capacity of the listener. In addressing sophisticated people he used the technical terms of Indian philosophy, but gave them a new meaning; whereas in talking to simple people he used familiar concepts as allegories and homely anecdotes to point a moral. Sometimes the simple people remembered the anecdote more distinctly than the moral, or mistook the allegory for the recital of a real event. We do not need to follow their example; and usually there is a clear hint to stop us from doing so. For instance the three daughters of Māra try to tempt the Buddha from the path of virtue, and of course they fail miserably, but not before putting on a seduction scene worthy of Hollywood, the account of which reads as if it were intended to be a real event; but what are the ladies' names? Craving, Discontent, and Lust. There could be no clearer warning to the reader who might be disposed to take the story literally.

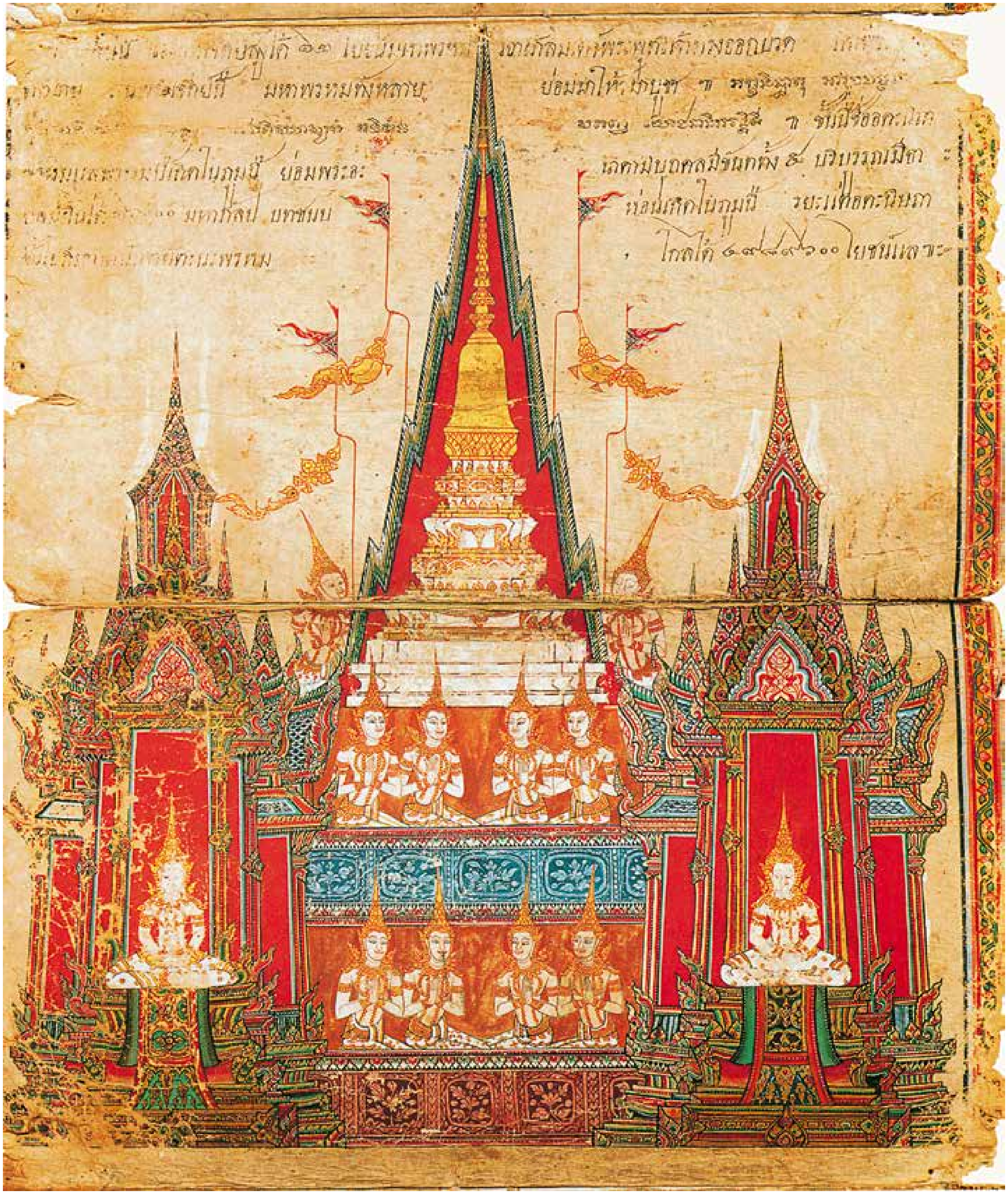
Most people in the Buddha's time believed—as a great many people in India and Southeast Asia still believe today—that a huge population of unseen but powerful creatures haunt the sky and earth, from the great Vedic and Brahmanical gods to the humbler village divinities, from the gods of planets, sun and rain, to the sprites of mountains and rocks, trees and ponds, fields, building-foundations, parasols, and almost any sort of object. The Buddha did not try to erase these creatures from the general belief—that would have been impossible—but he drastically reduced their importance, and at the same time put them to use as figures of speech. So it comes about that Buddhist literature depicts fierce dragons and earth-sprites as being converted to the Doctrine, and Indra—the formerly ferocious Vedic god of thunder and lightning—as little more than a nimble servitor of the Sage.



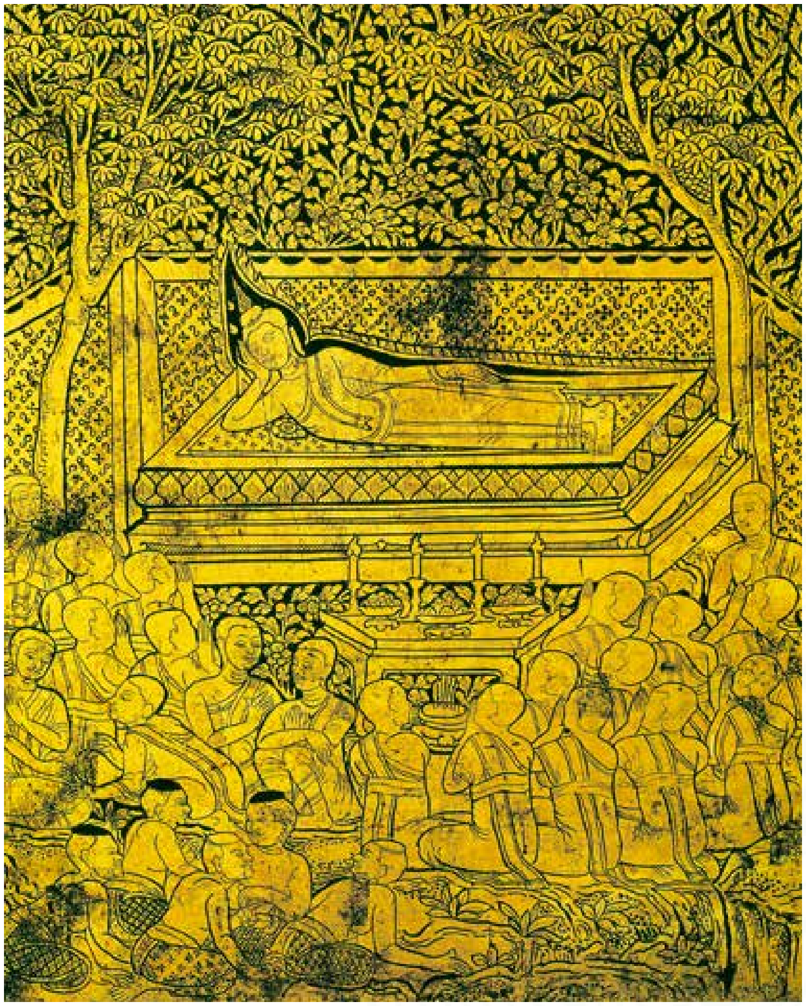
Phra Borommathat, Nakhon Si Thammarat.

A person who has extinguished all craving, malice and delusion in himself is exempt from rebirth no matter how it may be defined. In the technical terminology, when such a person dies he 'passes into parinibbāna, which is the ultimate goal of all Buddhists. It may sound strange to a Westerner who has been nourished on the hope of eternal felicity in heaven; but in Buddhist logic the law of impermanence is inexorable, and a sojourn in any conceivable heaven can be no more than temporary. Since a god is no less subject to craving, malice and delusion than a man, he is just as liable to act in such a way that punishment will follow; and so, if a sojourn in heaven is admitted as a possibility, it will inevitably be followed by more lives of abject misery in other conditions throughout countless millions of aeons. The only escape is parinibbāna, which some people equate with Total Extinction, and others with a disembodied state of changeless bliss. The Buddha himself refused to define it; but he said that anyone who achieves it 'will be no more seen by men or gods.' In other words, such a person becomes totally and irrevocably inaccessible to all, and to their prayers.

When he knew his own death was approaching, the Buddha told his disciples they must take the initiative and carry on his work without him. The rationalists among them could think for themselves; but it would be harder for the others, less strong-minded but no less devoted, who had relied on him to do their thinking for them. We can easily see how desperate their plight was. Among people who believed in transmigration, the death of someone whom they trusted and loved would ordinarily leave them some hope that they might meet him again in a future life. But in this case their beloved Master, in achieving the goal they were all to strive for, deprived them of any such hope. Only a few of them had advanced so far that they could feel confident of achieving *parinibbāna* themselves when it came their turn to die; the rest—including all those to whom transmigration was the most literal reality, for it was they who could never quite grasp the redefinition the Buddha had given it—now found themselves facing a hideous eternity of re-births without any possible access to their beloved Master.



Dusha Chetiya, a place where the Buddha’s relic was enshrined in the Brahma World. *From the Traibhumikatha painting manuscript, Thonburi Period.*



"Lord Buddha passed away at Sala Wanothayan, Kusinara",
From a gold lacquered-work bookcase, Rattanakosin Period.

Memory is a frail thing; and unless some means of preserving it could be found, the recollection of the Sage's person, and hence of his priceless guidance, would gradually fade. As the Buddha lay dying, all this was tragically evident to his disciple Ananda, who had served him with affectionate care for more than half a lifetime, making up in devotion what he lacked in intellectual power. Could not the disciples, he asked sadly, be allowed to perform some regular act of homage to the memory of the Master in whom they had put their faith? Could they not have some sort of substitute, a reminder of his Person no less than of his Doctrine, to keep them from falling back into the superstitions from which he had rescued them?

As a concession to such needs the Buddha replied that the faithful might make pilgrimages to the scenes of the Great Events of his career. When they visited these places they would visualize the Events connected with them, remember his victories over evil and ignorance, and so be inspired to imitate him. If that was not sufficient, they could gather his bodily relics *(sarīradhātu)*, such as bones and teeth, after his cremation; they could build stupas, mounds of earth or masonry, to contain them; and the stupas, by reminding people of the Doctrine, would make their hearts glad and happy.

In ordinary usage the Pali word *cetiya* (pronounced *jédî* in Thai) is thought of mainly as an architectural monument developed from the stupa. The word comes from the Sanskrit root *ci* 'to heap up', 'to arrange in order'; it is correctly enough applied to a stupa, an altar, a place of worship, and by extension to a sacred tree. But it also has connotations of *cit*, 'to fix the mind upon something', 'to remind', 'to resolve', 'to instruct'; and so, very much like English *monument* (from Latin *monēre*, 'to advise', 'to remind'), it can mean not only a piece of architecture but also a Reminder in the broadest sense.

According to the orthodox classification, there are four categories of Reminder: *sarīradhātu* or *dhātucetiya*, bodily relics; *paribhogacetiya*, reminders by association; *dhammacetiya*, doctrinal reminders; and *uddesikacetiya*, indicative reminders.* The meaning of the first is self-evident; the third was originally the whole body of the Doctrine, remembered by word of mouth, but later was extended to include written extracts from the Canon, and stupas built to contain such extracts. Neither of these categories need concern us here; but the other two require a word of explanation

Paribhogacetiya, reminders by association, include anything associated with the Buddha himself by physical contact, such as his almsbowl and robes, the footprints he left on river-bank and mountain-top, the benches he sat on, the Bodhi tree at Bodhgayā which sheltered him at the moment of Enlightenment, and in a more general way the sites of all the Great Events. Stupas containing his bodily relics are sometimes placed in this category, sometimes in the first category.

* They are sometimes given in a different order, and with slightly different definitions.

Uddesikacetiya, indicative reminders, are what might be called 'reminders by convention'. They are objects, neutral in themselves, which the general opinion might recognize as substitutes for *paribhogacetiya*, and indeed are usually man-made replicas of them. Trees grown from seeds or cuttings taken from the original Bodhi tree may be put in this category, in the sense that they have come into existence as a result of human intervention; but sometimes, in view of their genetic connection with the original, they are considered to be *paribhogacetiya*. Replicas of stupas containing bodily relics, when they themselves contain none, are indicative reminders; so are replicas of the footprints; and so are replicas of the scenes of the Great Events, or any essential part of them, in painting or bas-relief or any other suitable medium. These last assumed increasing importance with the spread of Buddhism to distant lands, as they enabled people who lived far away to make pilgrimages, by the power of mental projection, to the holy sites without actually leaving home.

Educated opinion in India long held the notion of image-making in contempt: images were needed only by the ignorant, who could not grapple with sublime abstractions. In the earliest Indian bas-reliefs depicting scenes from the Buddha's life the Buddha himself is invisible. He is represented by an 'aniconic symbol' only, such as a stone altar-slab or bench, a tree, a serpent, a pair of footprints, or a stupa. Such symbols are obviously depictions of the chief features at the scenes of the Great Events and other incidents: the Bodhi tree at Bodhgayā, and the stone slab under it; the nearby statue of the Serpent King who had protected the Buddha from the storm while he meditated; the disk or wheel commemorating the preaching of the First Sermon, the event which 'set the Wheel of the Doctrine in motion'; the footprints the Buddha had stamped in rock or clay as souvenirs for the faithful; and the stupas commemorating his *parinibbāna*.* In the bas-reliefs we see people worshipping the symbols, not only as pilgrims to the holy places might worship the monuments there, but even as if they were worshipping the Buddha in person. Some of the worshippers, it may be suspected, had only recently been converted to the Doctrine, and had previously been in

"Lord Buddha passed away at Sala Wanothayan, Kusinara"
From Mural at Phutthaisawan Chapel, Palace to the Front, Bangkok.

* The list is not homogeneous, The stupas are ***dhātucetiya***; most of the other objects, supposed to have come into existence during the Buddha's lifetime (wheel, footprints), or even before it (tree, slab), are ***paribhogacetiya***. But as Luang Boribal Buribandh reminds me, the statue of the Serpent King is in a different category ***(uddesikacetiya)***, as it must have been erected some time after the Budda's death as a marker or memorial at the scene of the incident.

Phra Achana, Wat Si Chum, the largest Buddha Image in Sukhothai, 13th Century.

the habit of worshipping very similar objects in an entirely different context. In the older cults the solar disk and the serpent had long been worshipped, and so had stones and trees, either in their own right or as the abode of powerful sprites who conferred all sorts of favors when properly approached, but who took terrible vengeance when displeased.

Buddha images, it seems, were first invented about the beginning of the Christian Era, either in Gandhāra or at Mathurā. In a curious way they grew directly out of the old symbols, almost as a seedling grows out of a coconut: and just as it takes some time for the coconut shell to rot away, so vestiges of the symbols long clung to the images: the slab as pedestal, the footprints as feet, the serpent or the tree as shelter, the wheel as halo, and various other combinations. And since in the popular mind these symbols were still animated by the sprites inherent in them, we need not be surprised if people felt that certain images, though representing the Sage of Rationalism, possessed the powers and personalities of sprites.

But it would be entirely wrong to think the power of Buddha images was due solely to such superstitions. To the pietistically inclined, the most efficient reminders of the Buddha's doctrine were objects that had some particularly intimate connection with his person; and the images, in theory, were copies, at no matter how many removes, of authentic likenesses of him, made by persons who knew him well. Often, in addition, an image, no less than a stupa, was reputed to contain relics of his body, which would reinforce the resemblance.

In any case there is plenty of evidence to show that the rationalists took the resemblance metaphorically. To cite but one example—from the pictorial rather than the plastic arts—we need only recall a story that arose about the time the Buddha first began to be portrayed in human form. During his lifetime, it was said in retrospect, an artist begged permission to draw his portrait; the Sage stood still in the sunlight, casting his shadow on the ground long enough for the artist to scratch the silhouette in the sand with his stick; but when the artist found himself unable to fill in the facial features, the Buddha took his stick and wrote in their place a synopsis of the Doctrine.

In due course Buddhism was brought from India to Southeast Asia, and the art of image-making as well. One of the most reliable chronicles we have, the *Jīnakālamālī*, makes it clear what an important role the images had in spreading the Doctrine in Thailand. Certain of them were reputed to possess great magical power, and the timely miracles they performed were a great help in converting the people.

We should not dismiss such stories as fanciful. The power of the images was real enough, though it exerted itself differently at different levels. The staunchest rationalist would admit that Reminders of the Doctrine can start a mental process that will end by dispelling the fear of demons. In the traditional belief, moreover, every Buddha image inherits some fraction of the *teja*, 'fiery energy', which the Buddha himself possessed in incalculable abundance, and which is conventionally represented by a fiery halo, a flame springing from the top of the head, the gilded surfaces of bronze or stone, and so on.

It is not difficult to guess why some images were thought to possess much more magical power than others. One that was believed to be very old would seem to have demonstrated its unusual potency by its unusual power of survival; and if it was thought to be directly copied from one of the original authentic likenesses it would naturally hold more *teja* than those whose resemblance to the Buddha's person, transmitted through copying at many removes, was less perfect. Old local beliefs played their part in a variety of ways. If statues of the Buddha sheltered by the Serpent King were particularly popular in Cambodia, and in Thailand during the Khmerizing period, it was surely because converts from the old serpent cults saw them as inheritors of the serpent's power. Images carved from certain stones, or the wood of certain trees, which had previously been worshipped as the abode of sprites, were still instinctively felt to be animated by those terrifying creatures. And if a particular image happened to be present when a very striking and unusual event occurred, people might easily think it responsible for a miracle.

Such beliefs now and than produced incongruous results. Our chronicles make no attempt to veil the fact that ambitious rulers resorted to unscrupulous tricks and even the threat of open warfare to get the most powerful images away from their rivals. Each city would need one for its own protection, and if the enemy got hold of it he would very likely be able to take the city too. Thus it came about that certain images became deeply involved in political affairs.

The chronicles dealing with events from the 13th to the 16th century openly admit that the images themselves did not always behave very well. Certain of the most famous ones were very unpredictable, and often downright cranky, acting in a way the Buddha himself would have condemned in the strongest terms. Like powerful sprites, they gave material rewards when flattered and made much of, but in moments of annoyance inflicted disease, set buildings on fire, and caused earthquakes.

The feeling that certain images behave in so un-Buddhist a way lasted right down to modern times. Two of them, the 'Emerald Buddha' and the 'Pra Bâng', are said to have detested each other; and towards the end of the 18th century, when they were brought to Thonburi together, they caused all sorts of trouble, including a brief revolution, so they had to be separated. As late as 1867, when they were both in Bangkok (occupying separate buildings, but still not far enough away from each other), their jealousy was said to have caused two disastrous crop-failures within three years.

One still hears of Buddha images that bring bad luck to their owners. The only remedy in that case is to present them to a monastery, where their mischievous tendencies will be kept in check.

Wat Suan Dok, built by King Kue Na in 1371 A.D.

Not many years ago I saw an amusing example of misplaced piety. In the gallery of a monastery at Ayudhya there was a long row of apparently identical images, one of which had been singled out for particular favors by an admirer. He had presented it with a silk scarf, and he spent a good deal of time in front of it in a reverential attitude, with palms pressed together as if in prayer. Why had he singled out this particular image, which differed in no way that I could see from the dozens of others in the same row? Upon inquiry I found that a week earlier it had inspired him to place a bet on a certain horse, which won the race handily and paid off well; so now he wanted to express his gratitude and at the same time seek further inspiration. The supposed personality of the image reminds one more of a Neapolitan saint than of the Buddha; it is hard to believe that the Founder of the Doctrine himself would have given such encouragement to gambling.

Tradition explains such eccentricities by saying that they are not caused by the Buddha image as such, but by the sprite inhabiting it. We have already noticed the old belief that almost any noteworthy object is animated by its particular sprite, and Buddha images are no exception. When they are made of certain sorts of wood or stone, it may be guessed that the sprites were already in them before they were carved into Buddha images, and the process of carving did not wholly change their original nature.

In any case the trouble-makers are rare. Most images behave with perfect decorum.

Quite apart from that, there is a very general feeling that Buddha images are living things. When they are first made, they are inert, inanimate objects; they have to be brought to life by a particular ceremony, the operation of ‘opening the eyes’, a Brahmanical rite thinly overlaid with a veneer of Buddhism.

One of the most famous and beautiful images in Thailand is the *Jinarāja* (Chinnarat) - 'Victorious King' - at Phitsanulok, cast when that city was part of the kingdom of Sukhothai. Not long afterwards Sukhothai, including Phitsanulok, was conquered by the rival kingdom of Ayudhya. The annals record a curious event : in 1438, when the Crown Prince of Ayudhya proceeded to Phitsanulok, to become Viceroy of the conquered provinces, tears of blood were seen to flow from the eyes of the statue.

Images are often presented with cloth robes to wear, and some are presented with gem-studded golden crowns and costly garments. The Emerald Buddha has three changes of costume : a princely attire for the hot season, a monastic robe for the rainy season, and a mantle of gold mesh for the cool season.

The old laws of Ayudhya provided severe punishments for anyone mutilating a Buddha image. To cut off its head was to commit murder, to scrape the gold leaf from its surface was to skin it alive; and anyone who would commit so evil an act was a criminal of the worst sort.

During the long years of warfare that ravaged northern Siam in the late 18th century, many images were broken and others fell into ruin from neglect. As soon as peace was restored, the ruler of Chiang Mai set about restoring the damage; an inscription tells us 'he thought of the old images, lying broken in field and forest, neglected and exposed to sun and rain; and he took pity on them in his heart'.

A mission with a similar purpose was performed by Wang Nâ Prince at the command of his brother, King Rāma I (1782-1806). He proceeded to Ayudhya, Sukhothai, Phitsanulok and other cities to rescue the images that had been neglected during the Burmese wars, and brought many hundreds of them, of life-size or larger, to Bangkok by raft. The colossal image called Śrī Sarbejña ('the Omniscient One'), which had been the object of the deepest veneration at Ayudhya, proved to be too badly damaged to repair; so it was reverently entombed in a large stupa built for the purpose at Wat Pho. The others were distributed among various monasteries in Bangkok and Thonburi; more than half of them were deposited at Wat Pho, where they may still be seen.*

At Phitsanulok there was a companion image of the *Jinarāja*, named *Jinasīha* (Chinnasi), 'Victorious Lion.' They were objects of particular veneration to King Rāma I; before ascending the throne he used to go to Phitsanulok as often as he could spare the time from his campaigns against the Burmese and in the civil war, and there he would offer homage to the statues. The monastery where they were located had fallen into ruins, but when peace was restored a new *vihāra* was built for the *Jinarāja*, and in 1829 the *Jinasīha* was brought to Bangkok. The raft which bore it, towed by hundreds of gilded and gaily decorated barges, stopped at the landing-stage of the Wang Nâ Prince's Palace; and after three days of rejoicing it was conveyed by land to the Excellent Abode Monastery *(Pavaranivesa)*, a vast throng of people pulling the many ropes that were required for so heavy a burden.

There are some curious stories connected with the belief that images have a life of their own. In a monastery in Ang Thong Province there is a colossal reclining Buddha image of masonry, which on one occasion during the reign of King Rāma V (1867-1911) manifested the power of speech. One afternoon, in the presence of the Lord Abbot and a large group of monks and novices, deep muffled sounds were heard to issue from its bosom. 'Are you not well, Sir?' the Abbot asked politely. The image replied : 'Thank you, I am quite well; and you?' 'Sir, I am well.' 'But trouble is on its way,' said the image; 'within two months, there will be a bad outbreak of cholera,' Upon being asked what countermeasures could be taken, the image provided a recipe to be compounded from certain herbs; and when the cholera came, exactly as predicted, the medicine proved to be an effective cure.

* They were given a curious restoration treatment: they were covered with a thick coating of plaster and gilt lacquer, which completely obscured their beauty but did not prevent their teja from functioning. In recent years the plaster has been removed from many of them, revealing the beauty of the patinated bronze; but they were then almost immediately given a new coating of gilt lacquer, though not thick enough to disguise them as completely as before. Those at the Monastery of the Fifth King Benchamabophit which is known to tourists as 'the Marble Temple', can be seen to better advantage: at the suggestion of His late Royal Highness Prince Damrong, they were left ungilded so as to serve as examples of style to students and archaeologists.

The Reclining Buddha Image, Wat Pa Mok., Ang Thong.

The belief that miniatures worn around the neck confer invulnerability, if one stops to think about it as anything else than a bit of folk magic, can be explained in more than one way. Some people would say that the *teja* inherent in the image transmits itself to the wearer and makes him immune from harm; others might argue that by reminding the wearer of the Doctrine, and particularly that part of it that counsels constant alertness, it enables him to keep out of harm's way.

We can now begin to see why such miniatures were made in huge quantities to be buried away inside stupas and colossal images. They were a sort of electric charge, suffusing the stupa or the statue with *teja* : even if most of them proved to be inert, or nearly so, on the basis of probability at least a few of them would turn out to be particularly effective. Looked at in another way, they were intended to assure the durability, the invulnerability, of the Reminder that contained them: and even if they failed in that, and the Reminder was ever broken open, they would pour forth in an explosion of fiery energy, *teja*, conferring their benefits as reminders and protectors far and wide upon future generations.

Phra Phuttha Chinnarat, Wat Phra Si Rattana Mahathat, Phitsanulok,
Sukhothai Art, 15th Century

Phra That Hariphunchai, Lamphun. *The legend on "The establishment of Phra That Hariphunchai", was recorded in Jinakalamalipakarana.*

In Thailand one often hears the expression tam boon, 'to make merit'. By doing good deeds, those who believe in transmigration lay up a store of merit for the future, like prudent people making deposits in a savings bank. To enter the monkhood for several days or months; to help in the construction or maintenance of a monastery; to contribute to education; to make gifts to the needy; to give alms to monks; to perform any act of kindness, great or small : all such things, and many others, are recognized as acts of merit. And of course it is an act of merit to create any sort of uddesikacetiya, from a great monument to a little heap of sand in the form of a stupa, from a colossal image to a tiny votive tablet.

The amount of the merit acquired, it is felt, is a function of the effort expended by the donor in proportion to his means. That explains why the rich like to commission images of gold or precious stone, and why King Rāma III (1824-1851) founded the vast reclining Buddha, over 40 metres long, at Wat Pó. Great efforts are expected of the possessors of great resources; but a poor man may earn as much merit by creating a simple Reminder of clay.

The most obvious reason why Buddha images have been created in such stupendous quantity is simply the intent to make merit.

Another reason is a matter of demand : people want them, either as reminders or as magical protectors; and so, depending on their means, they either buy the mass-produced images made for the general market, or have special ones made to order.

The Reclining Buddha Image, Wat Pho, Bangkok.

We can now see, too, why images inspire such fervent devotion. They fill the function for which the various sorts of reminder, *cetiya*, were designed, but they also do rather more. They act as substitutes for the Buddha himself in a sort of mystical worship that reminds us of the *bhakti* of Hindu religions; and some people have a feeling that although the Buddha himself is inaccessible, he can be worshipped through his substitutes and somehow answer prayers through them too. At a less sublime level they are magical protectors, jealous gods who must be kept in a good humor, since they are equally capable of bestowing enormous favors and of bringing on a general disaster.

But what of the rationalists? Would they not view all such notions, if not with contempt, at least with a mildly amused skepticism? Yet we often see modern minded Buddhists, including the leaders of the rationalist movement, prostrating themselves before an image and making offerings of flowers and incense.

The usual answer is that they are expressing their gratitude to the memory of the Teacher who conferred the priceless gift of the Doctrine on mankind. While this answer may seem strange to a Westerner, I am sure it is right. In all countries that take their forms of politeness from India, the manifestations of respect accorded to a teacher look very much like worship.*

*Anyone who has watched the preliminaries of a Thai boxing match, in which the contestants ‘salute their teachers’ (wai krû), will know what I mean. See also Dhanit Yupho. *The Custom and Rite of Paying Homage to Teachers of Khon, Lakon and Piphat*, Thai Culture, New Series, Vol.II.

Phra Phuttha Chinnasi (front), Wat Bowonniwet, Bangkok. Sukhothai Art, 15th Century.

Still, we might think it an exaggerated way to express gratitude to a Master who long ago passed into Total Extinction, or at least far beyond the range of human behavior, and who can consequently derive no possible satisfaction from such homage. But the rationalist knows that the expression of gratitude is really for the benefit of the living, reinforcing the power of the Reminder in his own feelings and in the feelings of others; and even in the West it sometimes occurs that the most skeptical writers, who have no belief in any sort of future life whatever, will dedicate a book to the memory of some deceased friend.

There is still another reason for such outward acts of piety on the part of Buddhist rationalists. Though they are indeed atheists, in the sense that they allow no significant place for a god or gods, they are not at all bigoted; and unlike the atheists of Communist countries they have no thought of undertaking a crusade against religion. Though for their own part they consider faith to be rather a hindrance than a help to clear thinking, they freely admit that many people need faith as a support for good morals. Tolerance is a cardinal principle of Buddhism; they recognize the good features of all religions, and in particular they respect the traditional forms of Buddhist worship.

And they believe that good manners are the counterpart, in small things, of good morals in large ones.

This is a good thing for Westerners to bear in mind, even those Westerners who have no particular sympathy for Buddhism.

Among the souvenirs a tourist takes home with him from Bangkok there will very likely be a few Buddha images. They should not be used as doorstops or decorations for a bar, placed on the floor, made into lamps or coffeetables, dressed up in humorous costumes, given nicknames, turned over to the children to play with, or treated in any other manner that does not befit objects of religious signi ficance. To put them in unsuitable places is not only bad manners, which would hurt the feelings of any Buddhist who happened to visit the house; it is also a singularly unsatisfactory way to bring out the beauty of a work of art. No one in his right mind, no matter how little he might care about Christianity, would hang a crucifix on his wall upside down. Buddha images were made with the expectation that they would be placed in a position of honor - generally speaking, at such a height that their legs are at the level of the spectator's eye - and that is the way they can be seen to best advantage.

Buddha images, however, are not 'works of art' in the ordinary sense. The purpose in making them was not to delight a connoisseur or to win praise from a critic; nor was it, except in a secondary way, to please the eye at all. As we have seen, they are religious mechanisms of a very peculiar kind. Nevertheless a great many of them are also objects of beauty by any standards; and there is certainly no harm in a non-Buddhist seeing them as such, provided he remembers that that is not the whole story. Unfortunately western taste often seems to prefer a severed head or hand, rather than the complete image, and instances have been recorded of thieves mutilating images in monasteries to obtain such fragments for sale. I would not go so far as to say that we should refuse to display a detached head or hand that has been dug up, if the body has been lost-though in the eyes of an old-fashioned Buddhist such a display is rather gruesome and indeed likely to bring bad luck-but we should always remember that the whole image is much more valuable, and more worthy of display, than a mere fragment; and we should do everything we can to discourage the mutilation of images.

Apart from that, we can only sense the inner beauty of a Buddha image by discovering what it means to Buddhists on different levels of understanding. Its surfaces and silhouette may please the eye, or even cause a gasp of surprise by their beauty. But they exist only as the capsule that contains the fiery energy; without that, whether we define it as magic or as psychological power, the image would not even have come into existence.

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