

On Buddhist “Bibliolaters”: Representing and Worshiping the Book in Medieval Indian Buddhism

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I. Rhetorical Excess and Ritual Possibilities

IN the introduction to the Sanskrit version of the *Suvarṇaprabhāsaśūtra*, the “Sutra of Golden Light,” an important Indian Buddhist text about, among other things, the relationship between the ideal king and the religious realm, the editor remarks on a peculiar characteristic of early Mahāyāna Buddhist literature: “[T]hese texts are adored with profound religious fervor. And this is not inconsiderably due to the eulogy of merits accruing to the devout devotee from the study and blind worship of the texts. We may find in it *the germ of bibliolatriy* that equates the book with the Divinity extolled in it.”¹ The *Suvarṇaprabhāsaśūtra* is certainly not unique; indeed, the early Mahāyāna literature from 100 B.C.E. to around 400 C.E. is a strikingly self-referential genre. In such well-known texts as the *Lotus Sutra*, the *Diamond Sutra*, the *Heart Sutra*, and virtually all variations of the *Perfection of Wisdom*, there are long passages devoted to extolling the text and propounding the many virtues that will accrue to anyone who learns or recites its doctrines.

On its face, this sort of rhetoric makes good sense, since these texts were composed at a time when the Mahāyāna schools were in their infancy and were competing to establish themselves in the midst of a variety of both new

¹ Bagchi 1967 p. 3.

and very old schools of Buddhism. This rhetoric would have served both as an effective polemic and a potent advertisement. Such texts go further than saying that hearing, learning, or practicing the *dharma* contained within them will lead to benefit. They say that the text should, quite simply, be venerated: "... honor, worship, think about, adore, and pay reverence to it, with various *pūjās* and many forms of worship, and with flower lamps all around, with heavenly flags, bells, banners, umbrellas, garments, powders, ointments, garlands, perfume, incense, and flowers . . ." ²

This is *prima facie* a puzzling claim, particularly given that at the very core of Buddhist doctrine and practice is the necessity to critically examine the minutiae that constitute the human being. How, then, are we to interpret such passages? Is it possible that these texts really do mean what they say, that one should literally worship the book itself? If that is what they mean, did real Buddhists of those times actually treat and respond to books as they were instructed to by the sutras?

Let me first say that the language of this and other passages makes it clear that it is explicitly a written object that is being discussed, ³ and although the doctrines should ideally be learned and understood, this is not necessarily a book that needs to be read, but can also simply be looked at and worshiped. ⁴ Again, although at first glance this may seem distinctly *unBuddhist*, such passages must be seen in the context of a consistent emphasis in early Mahāyāna texts, particularly in the *Perfection of Wisdom* literature, on seeing as a means of obtaining and cultivating *prajñā*, or wisdom. ⁵

In the pages that follow, I wish to explore in greater detail, three specific issues that are directly connected with such a cult of the book, issues that are, I want to argue, progressively related. First, I will examine the use of the book as a sculptural motif intended to signify wisdom in what had been in medieval India the largely Buddhist northeast (what is now the north Indian states of Bihar and Orissa). Second, I will discuss a number of images from this same milieu that extend the signifying function of the book and seem to interpret the textually expressed cult of the book rhetoric quite literally, by

² Vaidya 1960, p. 28.

³ The Sanskrit reads, "*likhitvā pustakagatām kṛtvā*," "having written (it) and having made it into a book," *ibid.*, p. 42.

⁴ Again, the Sanskrit is telling: the verbs used are "*prekṣisyayati*," 'to be looked at' and "*namaskarisyanti*," 'to be honored' *ibid.*

⁵ Kinnard 1999; for a more general discussion, see Ray 1985, pp. 148–180.

depicting it as an object that is set up and worshiped.⁶ Lastly, I will turn to the way in which the Buddhist rulers of northeastern India adopted this visual motif, for we also see in the sculpture of this period an interesting development of a very old royal motif, that of the *saptaratna*, or the seven “jewels” that legitimate a righteous Buddhist king’s rule. Specifically, we see evidence that the book was incorporated into this set and that it seems to have functioned for the king as a kind of palladium, a physical emblem of his adherence to and protection of Buddhism.

II. The Book as Signifier and Signified

The emphasis on the book as the source and container of the Buddha’s wisdom that is expressed as the rationale for its elevation to cult status in the *Lotus Sutra* and *Perfection of Wisdom* literature begins to make its way into the ritual realm by about the fifth century C.E. in northern India. It becomes manifest as a prominent iconographic detail on sculptures of a variety of bodhisattvas and bodhisattva-like figures who in some way are related to the propagation and protection of the *dharma*. Before I proceed to discuss the specifics of these representations, however, it might be useful to briefly, and rather generally, put such images into their doctrinal and devotional context.

Although there are many essential principles that distinguish the Mahāyāna from the various schools that preceded it, the bodhisattva is the hallmark of this new school.⁷ What is important in the present context, however, is that not only was the bodhisattva considered an active force in the world, but also that sculptural images of bodhisattvas were not simply representations, but embodiments. There has been a significant amount of debate among scholars of Buddhism on the topic of the status and function of images in early Buddhism, first about whether or not there was a prohibition against iconic images in the early Buddhist milieu, and second about the

⁶ Gregory Schopen published a highly influential article on the cult of the book, see Schopen 1975, pp. 147–81, in which he argued that in early Mahāyāna texts such as the *Diamond Sutra*, *Lotus Sutra*, and various *Perfection of Wisdom* texts, we see evidence of a newly-emerged “cult of the book,” in which the physical text as an object of veneration was discursively elevated as part of a polemic intended to displace the previously dominant relic cult. Although Schopen’s argument is quite convincing, he does not provide any physical evidence to support his contention.

⁷ Among the many studies on the bodhisattva, see Dayal 1932, Kawamura 1981, and Gómez 1977, pp. 221–261.

function and ontology of such images.⁸ This debate aside, it is clear that the idea of sculptural images as being worthy of veneration in their own right had already been established in this milieu. Therefore, by the time the Mahāyāna schools came into existence, images were for the most part not seen as problematic; indeed, in the centuries after the emergence of the Mahāyāna, we see a kind of iconographic explosion in Indian Buddhism, what Stephan Beyer has aptly described as a “wave of visual theism” that swept across north India.⁹ Furthermore, such images were not intended simply as reminders of the bodhisattvas’ powers, but were also meant to be worshiped and venerated as living beings. Through their proper ritual treatment, the enlightened being could be made present and thus could deliver the *dharma* directly to his or her devotee, in its most powerful and efficacious form.¹⁰ Although sculptural images cannot be fully understood outside of the doctrinal (and therefore textual) context in which they were located, the images that survive from the early medieval Indian period provide us an extremely important glimpse into the ritual and devotional character of Buddhism as it was actually lived out; indeed, they provide what amounts to the only evidence outside of the textual realm to support the idea that the cult of the book discourse was anything more than polemical rhetoric.

Books are most commonly represented in the Buddhist sculpture of medieval India as signifiers of *prajñā*, intended to connect the figure depicted with the wisdom contained within the texts. Books are most frequently included on images of the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī portrayed in any number of Mahāyāna texts as the very embodiment of the *Perfection of Wisdom* and the father (and sometimes also the mother) of all the Buddhas.¹¹ Mañjuśrī is intimately involved with *prajñā* from the point at which he appears in the earliest stratum of *Prajñāpāramitā* texts, indeed, more so than perhaps any other Buddhist figure. It is because of his great wisdom that he is often portrayed as the consummate teacher: “Whatever bodhisattva Mañjuśrī teaches is beneficial to sentient beings. Hundreds of thousands of (millions of) billions of

⁸ For a review of this issue, see Kinnard 1999, pp. 56–78.

⁹ Beyer 1977, pp. 329–40.

¹⁰ A particularly evocative example of this occurs in the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight-Thousand Verses*, with the story of Sadāprarudita; see Kinnard 1999, pp. 93–96 for a discussion of this paradigmatic episode.

¹¹ See Lamotte 1960, pp. 1–96, for an especially useful general discussion; specifically for the “progenitor” of the Buddha’s reference, see pp. 93–94. See also Hirakawa 1990, p. 251.

Buddhas never accomplished this in the past, nor are they doing it at present, nor will they do so in the future.”¹² Mañjuśrī is often described as being more effective than the Buddha himself, because “only the transcendental wisdom of *prajñāpāramitā*, which Mañjuśrī embodies, can conquer demons, and not magical formulas, spells, or other thaumaturgical techniques.”¹³

Images of Mañjuśrī were quite common in India after about the fifth century, and he is sculpturally depicted in dozens of forms.¹⁴ A consistent element in his iconography is the representation of the book—sometimes he holds the text aloft, sometimes it rises out of a lotus to one of his sides—which is described as the *Perfection of Wisdom* text of which he is the manifestation.¹⁵ Thus in one of the most well-known medieval iconographic texts, the *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, Mañjuśrī is described in this way: “He is three faced—white, blue, and yellow; he is six-armed. With his right hands he holds an arrow, makes the *varadamudrā*, and bears a sword; with his left hands he holds a bow, a blue lotus, and the *Prajñāpāramitā* book.”¹⁶

The significance of the book here seems self-evident: it conveys the bodhisattva’s ability to embody and disseminate the wisdom contained within the text. Such being the case, we can see an indirect connection to the cult of the book rhetoric of the early Mahāyāna texts. The inclusion of the sword strengthens this connection, in that this is the book’s wisdom put into action, via Mañjuśrī’s skillful means; the image thus communicates the notion of *prajñā* slashing through ignorance and delusion, figuratively cutting to the truth. A ninth-century image from the remains of the great Buddhist university at Nālandā, now in the National Museum of New Delhi, is especially striking in this regard. The image is of Mañjuśrī holding a sword aloft with his right hand, poised to slash through ignorance and delusion, while clutching the *Prajñāpāramitā* book to his chest with his left hand.¹⁷

The book is also sometimes included in depictions of the very prominent Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, and also the female figure Tārā, who is closely

¹² Chang 1983, p. 53.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 71, note 17.

¹⁴ For an extensive treatment of Mañjuśrī’s iconographic forms, see Mallmann 1964.

¹⁵ See figures 5–9 in Kinnard 1999.

¹⁶ Bhattacharyya 1949, p. 48.

¹⁷ See Bhattasali 1929, pp. 28–29, and pl. VII.b, for an iconographically similar 12th-century image. Bhattasali describes this image in this way: “The god has the sword of knowledge in his right hand raised to cleave the darkness of ignorance, while he presses the book of Saving Wisdom (*Prajñāpāramitā*) against his breast with his left hand,” p. 28.

associated with him. With his great compassion, Avalokiteśvara is perhaps the most paradigmatic of bodhisattvas, and certainly the most prevalent in medieval Indian Buddhist sculpture, represented in innumerable images in dozens of different forms.¹⁸ He is said, out of his compassion for the suffering of all sentient beings, to refuse *nirvāṇa* until all beings attain enlightenment; he grants children to the barren; he visits the various hells to free those entrapped there; he protects the faithful from *yakṣas*, *rākāṣas*, malicious bandits, and so on. It was to Avalokiteśvara, for example, that the Chinese pilgrim Faxian appealed to save him from shipwreck and pirates during his voyages to and from India.¹⁹ Tārā, likewise, whose very name, "Star," refers to her ability to guide those lost in the seas of *samsāra* to the far shore of *nirvāṇa*, is also frequently depicted holding a book. With both of these figures, the inclusion of the book in their iconography signifies that they save their devotees through wisdom, in that, as the texts state again and again, the cultivation and perfection of the wisdom contained within the book leads directly to enlightenment.

Amid the ruins of the great Buddhist monastery at Nālandā, there was found a spectacular image of Avalokiteśvara, made in the ninth century, which includes a particularly interesting and complex representation of the book.²⁰ Avalokiteśvara is twelve-armed, surrounded by a host of smaller figures, including two seated Buddhas at the top of the image (perhaps the celestial Buddhas, Amoghasiddhi and Ratnasambhava), two small seated female figures in the middle of the image (the female enlightened beings, Tārā and Bhṛkūṭī), as well as a small Hayagrīva (a fierce protector of the faith and the faithful), and a ghoulishly emaciated figure, the *preta* Sūcīmukha. Among the various items that the bodhisattva holds in his twelve arms is a very prominent book.²¹ However, as if to make his connection with the text even more visually explicit, the artisans who made this image included a small, seated female figure just to the right of his waist who also holds a book. This is Prajñāpāramitā, the very embodiment of the *Perfection of Wisdom* texts.

¹⁸ Tay 1976, pp. 147–152; for a more iconographically oriented study, see Mallmann 1948 and also Waddell 1894, pp. 51–89.

¹⁹ See Legge 1965, p. 112.

²⁰ See Asher 1980, pl. 163, and pp. 81–82.

²¹ In the *Sādhanamālā*, the Śaḍakṣarī form of Avalokiteśvara does hold a book; see *Sādhanamālā*, vol. 1, B. Bhattacharyya, ed. 1925, p. 36. There are other textually described images with a book as well; see Meisezahl 1967, p. 272. There are, however, no corresponding images prior to the eighth or ninth centuries.

Whereas Mañjuśrī is the bodhisattva most closely connected to the book and the *Perfection of Wisdom* doctrine it contains, Avalokiteśvara, in contrast, tends to be the paradigmatic embodiment of skillful means, the direct intervener who uses any means necessary to save his devotees. That said, however, he is also frequently depicted in medieval Indian texts as a conveyor and protector of *prajñā*,²² and so the presence of the book in the Nālandā image and others is not outside the parameters of Avalokiteśvara's character. Furthermore, the presence of the book, as signifying his connection to both wisdom and the book, is supported by other iconographic details typically found in images of the bodhisattva: for instance, the *akṣamāla* (or rosary) that Avalokiteśvara often holds in such images is used in counting out the verses of the text as they are recited.²³

Of the various bodhisattvas and goddesses represented in the Buddhist sculpture of medieval India, none is more explicitly, or complexly, linked to the cult of the book than the female figure, Prajñāpāramitā, the perfection of wisdom personified. With her, we seem to have a remarkable example of the physical "translation" of the texts, the visual expression of what might otherwise seem to be the texts' symbolic discourse about the text as "the mother of all Buddhas." That said, however, the distinctly devotional context in which such sculptures were situated must also be recognized: they were intended as objects of veneration, and thus functioned not only as signifiers of something outside of themselves—as representations, in other words—but very much as animate beings. Therefore, although a great deal has been written on Buddhist images as reminders of the Buddha, it is important to recognize that such images were ritually treated as if they were alive, and thus were not simply "read" as a text might be.²⁴

I have already made note of the small figure of Prajñāpāramitā included on the large image of Avalokiteśvara, where she very much seems to function in the same way as the books in the other images I have been discussing, namely, as signifiers of wisdom. When she is represented as a goddess in her own right, however, the dynamics are quite different.²⁵

Prajñāpāramitā is visually represented here in typical fashion as the text

²² See also Leoshko 1987, pp. 50 and 241; see also Ghosh 1980, pl. 49.

²³ See Conze 1949, pp. 47–48. Mallmann 1948, p. 20, remarks that the rosary functions as a "sorte de boulier destiné à compter les formules d'invocation."

²⁴ See Schopen 1988, pp. 527–37, and also 1990, pp. 181–217.

²⁵ For a particularly clear example, see Kinnard 1999, fig. 1.

refers to itself, namely, as the origin of the *dharma* and the source and bestower of *prajñā*. Indeed, in the *Aṣṭa*, we are told that the book should be regarded in the same way that the Buddha himself is regarded because the *Perfection of Wisdom* text is the "*dharmacakrapravartanī*." This is an extremely important and pregnant description. It resonates, first, with a very old image, that of the recently enlightened Buddha delivering his first sermon—literally "turning the wheel of *dharma*"—in the deer park of Sarnāth. It is a sermon which is known as the "*Dharmacakrapravartana Sutra*," and an event which represents, for pre-Mahāyāna Buddhists, the moment that Buddhism as a religion really begins, for this is the Buddha's first articulation of the *dharma*. However, in *Prajñāpāramitā* texts, the gender of the noun changes to feminine, and thus the "turner of the wheel of *dharma*" language no longer refers to the Buddha, but to the text and its personification. Thus, when she is represented in sculpture, *Prajñāpāramitā* typically makes the classic teaching gesture: her hands form the *dharmacakrapravartanamudrā*, or the "turning the wheel of *dharma* gesture." Therefore, unlike in the images that include the book simply as an iconographic detail, that is, as a signifier of the readable text that contains the wisdom that leads to salvation, here the book is transformed into a goddess, the text incarnate, to be treated, it would seem, precisely as the texts prescribe: worshiped with "flower lamps all around, with heavenly flags, bells, banners, umbrellas, garments, powders, ointments, garlands, perfume, incense, and flowers. . . ." ²⁶

It may be self-evident to say that a stone image such as this could not possibly, directly or explicitly, express what is an obviously complex discourse. I certainly would not suggest that the true participant in such images was required to be some sort of master visual hermeneutician, a person able to "read between the lines" of the sculpture. I would say, though, that such images must be understood as located within the broader cult of the book context that is rooted in the early Mahāyāna textual discourse. Such images, then, do not and cannot simply come out and say that to venerate such a sculpture is also to venerate the book; but then, as the French historian Jacques Le Goff has pointed out, "a symbolic system can be fully effective without explicit awareness" of how it works or what it is specifically intended to symbolize. ²⁷ Indeed, as Le Goff has said about the collective epistemic disposition that he calls *mentalité*: "Automatic gestures, spontaneous words,

²⁶ *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā*, p. 28

²⁷ Le Goff 1980, p. 270.

which *seem* to lack any origins and to be the fruits of improvisation and reflex, in fact possess deep roots in the long reverberation of systems of thought.”²⁸ What I am suggesting is that this and similar images presuppose, or, as Le Goff would have it, are “rooted” in the reverberations of the textual discourse, especially the decidedly visual logic of that discourse which holds that seeing the container of the *dharma* allows one to partake of the contents.²⁹ Thus, to see an image of the personification of wisdom, be it Mañjuśrī or Prajñāpāramitā, would have been more than a simple visual experience; one would venerate such an image because in so doing, one would enter into a relationship with the being who is represented, and thus create an opportunity of receiving that being’s wisdom.

III. Setting Up the Text

I wish now to return to the passage in the *Aṣṭa* that states that if someone were to set up a *Prajñāpāramitā* book, and if gods and humans were to come to that place and see it, they would worship the text. The question that immediately arises is: What does it mean to “set up” a book? To begin, the word in question is *sthāpayiṣyati*, technically the future causative form of the Sanskrit verbal root *sthā*, which most simply means “to stand.” It would most literally be translated, then, as “will cause to be stood.” The semantic range of the verb *sthā*, however, is broader than this: it can also mean “to establish.” Thus, “*sthāpayiṣyati*” as it occurs in the *Aṣṭa*, could mean that it is really the doctrine, the *contents* of the text, that is to be established. The context of the passage, though, and indeed the general thrust of the *Prajñāpāramitā* discourse, makes it clear that this passage is not a metaphoric or symbolic statement, but rather is about a *physical* book that is to be seen and venerated as such:

Blessed One, [what if] some person, the son or daughter of an elite family, having written out the *Prajñāpāramitā*, and having made it into a book, set it up; and what if that person were to honor, worship, think about, adore, and pay reverence to it, with various *pujās* and many forms of worship, and with flower lamps all around,

²⁸ Le Goff 1985, p. 170.

²⁹ The concept of *darśana*, so fundamental to south Asian religious experience, is obviously at play here; for a concise discussion of the Hindu concept, see Eck 1998; for the more specifically Buddhist context, see Beyer 1994, and Wayman 1984, pp. 153–161.

with heavenly flags, bells, banners, umbrellas, garments, powders, ointments, garlands, perfume, incense, and flowers. . . .³⁰

As we have just seen, several centuries after the *Perfection of Wisdom* texts were first composed, the cult of the book discourse begins to make its way into the sculpture of northeastern India. At about the same time that images of the book became commonplace in Indian Buddhist sculpture, such passages seem to begin to be taken quite literally; sculptures start being constructed that include images of the book *set up* on a pedestal and worshiped in an essentially identical manner as that described in the above passage.

One of the earliest examples of the visual expression of this literal injunction can be found on a fragment of a Buddha image from Kiching, in the modern state of Orissa, that dates to the ninth century. The book here is very clearly set up on an altar-like pedestal. Surrounding the book are three figures: to the book’s left is a bearded man, kneeling, seeming to be offering the book some object; to the right of the book is a standing female figure, in one hand holding a *caurī* (a “fly whisk”), in the other a two-tiered lamp; and, kneeling below the book, is another female figure making the *añjali* gesture of veneration and respect toward the book. There are, in fact, numerous similar examples from throughout medieval north India.³¹ For instance, a Tārā image now in the Dacca Museum includes a very prominent book on a pedestal being venerated by several small figures—the book is almost as large as the figures who venerate it—and a seated figure holding a *vajra*, and two *cintamāni*, or “wish-fulfilling gems,” a motif we see on several other such images. Similarly, an image of the Buddha, which is also in the Dacca Museum, has on its base a similar book set up on a pedestal being venerated by a nearly identical bearded male figure accompanied by unidentified ritual accoutrement.³²

³⁰ *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā*, p. 28: *yo bhagavan kulaputro vā kuladuhitā vā imām prajñāpāramitām likhitvā pustakagatām kṛtvā sthāpayet, enām ca divyābhiḥ puṣpadhūpa-gaṇḍhamālyavilepanacīrṇacīvaracchatra-dhvajaghanthāpatākābhiḥ samantācca dīpa-mālābhiḥ, bahuvīdhābhiḥca pūjābhiḥ satkuryāt gurūkuryāt mānayet arcayet apacāyēt. . . .*

³¹ A similar scene is represented on the base of a *bhūmiśparśamuḍrā* image from Ratnagiri, now in the Patna Museum; see Lal Gupta 1965, pp. 87–88; see also Mitra 1981 and 1983, pp. 426–428, and pl. CCCXXV, A.

³² See also Bhattasali 1929b, p. 30, and pl. VIII. Bhattasali is also stymied by the specific identity of this figure, and describes him as: “A squatting bearded man with a skull-cap holding up to the Buddha [really to the book] something like a torch and a censer with his hands: looks like a priest.” See also Bautze-Picron 1995, pp. 59–79, pp. 61–62; here the author,

The iconographic details on such images vary considerably from image to image: the book is sometimes on a pedestal, sometimes on a stand; there are sometimes multiple worshipers, sometimes only one; the book is sometimes part of what seems to be a larger ritual context, with several ritual implements represented, and sometimes it is represented alone [Figure One, frontispiece]. The exact nature of images such as these, however, is a bit of a mystery. First, it is unclear whether the comparative prevalence of such images in eastern India, in what is now Orissa and Bangladesh, represents a particular doctrinal and ritual specificity in these areas, focused on books as objects of veneration. It is also impossible to say, exactly, what sort of ritual is represented by these images, since, as I have mentioned, as far as I know there is no surviving corroborating textual evidence about the ritual veneration of books in the Buddhist context.³³ And finally, although we know that such images were situated in monastic contexts, we do not know precisely which monks made them (or had them made), nor do we know why.

That said, though, we do have the images themselves as evidence, and the visual significance of such iconographic details cannot be underestimated. Although the evidence is ultimately only circumstantial, I believe that it is nonetheless possible to draw several tentative conclusions about these images. First, there is the simple fact that the images of the book set up on a pedestal, along with the figures venerating it and the ritual implements that are often included, would have been at eye level for the Buddhists beholding them, and as such, perhaps these images were intended to serve (as I have suggested represented books serve on other images) as visual metaphors—in other words as signifiers—impressing upon the Buddhists looking at them,

drawing on the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* and Tāranātha's *History*, suggests that these distinctive conical caps may have been adopted by *paṇḍitas* in the Pāla period.

³³ There are, however, interesting parallels in the contemporary Brahmanical context: a wide variety of *śāstras* and *purāṇas* discuss the concept of *vidyādāna*, the “gift of knowledge,” the practice of the gift of teaching to a student on the part of a teacher, but also the gift of books to one's *guru* or any other learned person. Elaborate rituals accompanied these gifts, rituals that included burning incense, ringing bells, venerating the text, wrapping the book in fine silk or colored cloth, placing the text in a casket or box, or on a kind of x-shaped folding table that the texts sometimes refer to as a *pustakāstarāṇa*, “book spread,” or a *vidyādhara*, “book couch,” and also worshiping the goddess of the book at the commencement of the copying of the text, and finally taking the book out in procession, sometimes on an elephant, or sometimes simply carried. Among the texts that discuss *vidyādāna* are the *Viṣṇudharmotāra*, *Vahnipurāṇa*, *Varāhapurāṇa*, and *Devīpurāṇa*.

the value of the book and the wisdom it contains. It is significant in this regard that the book usually occurs at the base of the image, and thus acts as a visual reminder that the central figure—Tārā, Avalokiteśvara or the Buddha—is supported by the book (in the same way that we find the textually expressed idea that the Buddhas and bodhisattvas themselves have as their support the *Perfection of Wisdom* texts). More importantly, such images, in addition to their representational significance, also seem to have had a prescriptive significance, or what we might call a ritually mimetic function.

This is not an uncommon function of early Indian sculpture. For instance, one of the most common forms of representing the Buddha, preaching his first sermon in the deer park at Sarnāth, almost always includes smaller figures around the base of the main image kneeling in devotion, and often gazing up at the Buddha as he teaches. These figures sometimes even have a hand cupped to one ear to emphasize that they are listening to the *dharma*. On one level, such an image would have functioned as a representation of the Buddha's first sermon, with the kneeling figures (often joined by one or two deer) representing the audience for this most important discourse (sometimes all eight of the Buddha's initial disciples are represented, and sometimes only one or two laypeople are). It is important to remember, however, that such images would always also have been situated in a devotional and ritual context, and so would have been more than just representations. In this regard, the small figures at the base of these sculptures would also have functioned mimetically, in the sense of a visual cue, or paradigm, to the participant/viewer about the correct ritual behavior before such an image.³⁴

There are dozens of such representations dating from between the eighth and twelfth centuries and almost all were produced in northeastern India. Let me here refer specifically to a single example, a lintel fragment from Bodhgayā, which seems to particularly emphasize the ritual accoutrement involved in venerating the book. On this fragment, along with the book itself, which is set upon a stand and draped in cloth, there are four kneeling figures to the right of the book making the traditional gesture of respect and veneration (the *añjali mudrā*). To the book's left, there are two other items, one of

³⁴ For a slightly different take on this idea, see Huntington 1992, pp. 111–156, in which Huntington, in response to an article by Vidya Dehejia, argues that early representations of so-called aniconic indexes of the absent Buddha (the empty throne, the tree, the *stūpa*) were intended to represent the veneration of the Buddha (absent or present), and thus served as paradigms and reminders for future Buddhist worshipers.

which seems to be a jug topped by a conch shell, the other of which seems to be a lamp. Each of these items is decidedly oversized, larger even than the worshipers, as if the makers of this image intended to emphasize their significance and, perhaps, provide a visual clue, a kind of blueprint, for the proper ritual veneration of the physical text.³⁵

IV. The Book As Palladium

By the seventh century, Buddhism in India had become what Donald Lopez has called a “self-conscious scholastic entity,” increasingly concerned with surveying, commenting on, and expanding what had already become a truly massive corpus of texts.³⁶ Not only did Buddhist monks devote themselves to learning, memorizing, and practicing the doctrines contained in these texts, they also devoted tremendous amounts of time and effort to copying manuscripts. As such, then, it is not surprising that we see books increasingly represented in the sculpture of this period, because books were very much at the core of Buddhist intellectual and ritual practice. It is also not surprising that we would see books explicitly linked with kingship in this milieu; specifically, the book begins to be included in the representation of the *saptaratna*, the seven jewels of the Cakravartin, the “wheel turner” who stands as the paradigm of the righteous Buddhist king. This is a most intriguing development—one that has gone virtually unnoticed by scholars of Buddhism—for it not only evinces the importance placed on the book in the monastic milieu, it also sheds light on the interaction between the monastic community, particularly at Bodhgayā, and the last nominally Buddhist lineage of kings in India, the Pālas.

The *saptaratna* is a very old motif in Buddhist literature, occurring in several places in the Pāli canon, most notably in the *Cakkavattisihanādasutta*,³⁷ where the seven jewels are described as: 1. the *dharmacakra*, or wheel of *dharma*, denoting the king’s protection and possession of the *dharma*; 2. the *cintāmaṇi*, or “wish-fulfilling stone,” which conveys the king’s ability to bestow the *dharma* and good fortune upon his subjects; 3. a royal consort, or

³⁵ See Kinnard 1999, figure 16. Very little has been written on the nature of these ritual accoutrement; by far the most extensive discussion of this subject is found in Claudine Bautze-Picron’s excellent, “Between Men and Gods.”

³⁶ Lopez, Jr. 1995, 21–47, p. 24; see also S. Collins 1992, pp. 121–135 and Collins 1990, pp. 89–126; MacQueen 1994, especially Chapter 5.

³⁷ See also the *Mahāsudassanasutta*, as well as later texts, such as the *Lalitavistara*.

noble woman; 4. the best horse; 5. an elephant; 6. a treasurer, who sees to the material well-being of the kingdom; and 7. a minister or leader, who helps to protect the kingdom from harm and offers council. As a set, the seven jewels project the image of the perfectly balanced rule, with the proper relationship between *dharma* and *artha*, reason and power. It is unclear when the *saptaratna* began to be included in Buddhist sculpture,³⁸ but by the eighth century it had become a fairly common motif, particularly at Bodhgayā, where it appears on the base of many *stūpas*, at the bottom of a variety of images, and also on free-standing lintels [Figure Two, frontispiece]. Before I explore the question of why the book might have been included in the *saptaratna* set, I first wish to examine the relationship between the jewels and kingship in the general south and southeast Asian milieu.

As the *Cakkavattisihanāda* makes clear, the true Cakkavatti [Skt. Cakravartin] possesses these jewels as the mark of his righteous rule; they are, as a set, his palladium, the physical object that embodies and assures his rule, and as such, the safety and well-being of his kingdom depends on them. Thus the *saptaratna* links the righteous king with the religion, a connection that of course goes back to the Buddha himself, and that is paradigmatically embodied in the figure of Aśoka. This relationship became particularly important in medieval Sri Lanka and southeast Asia. As Bardwell Smith has pointed out with reference to Sri Lanka, in the great chronicle of that island, the *Mahāvamsa*, the association "is repeatedly made between the welfare of the *Buddhasāsana* [the institution of the religion] and the well-being of society as a whole. The king who internalizes this kind of legitimacy becomes the *Dhammarāja*, the protector of men from worldly harm and privation and the active agent in founding social order upon the cosmos itself. His kingship becomes one with the lord of gods (Sakka), and with the Conqueror himself (Buddha Gotama)."³⁹ Thus a tenth century inscription by the Sri Lankan ruler, Mahinda IV, "declares that a kshatriya becomes a king 'for the purpose of defending the alms-bowl and the robe of the Buddha,'"⁴⁰ a reference both to the general welfare of the monastic community, but also to two of the most important Buddha relics in circulation at the time.

Likewise, in medieval Thailand and Laos, the possession of the Holy

³⁸ The earliest sculptural representation of this motif that I am aware of, is a relief from Āndhra Pradesh that dates to the first century B.C.E.; see Huntington 1985, figure 5.36.

³⁹ Smith 1978, pp. 74.

⁴⁰ Tambiah 1976, p. 96.

Emerald Jewel (sometimes called the Emerald Buddha) is seen as so essential to the king's rule that this relic eventually "came to be identified with the Cakkavatti king himself or, perhaps more accurately, with the Buddha in his Cakkavatti aspect."⁴¹ The possession and veneration of this jewel, then, was understood to legitimate the king's power in Thailand by associating him directly with the Buddha;⁴² indeed, the jewel itself was sometimes placed on the throne and declared the true ruler of the kingdom.

We see this ideal expressed particularly clearly in Sri Lanka, where the tooth relic, the *dalada*, has, since at least the time of Faxian's travels in the fifth century, been intimately bound up with the ability of the king to rule. By the twelfth century, according to the island's chronicles, particularly the *Dathavamsa*—the history of the tooth relic—Sri Lankan kings viewed the tooth relic as "indispensable" to their rule.⁴³ "Parakkamabahu, although he had essentially brought all of Lanka under his dominion, believed his rule to be illegitimate without the possession of the sacred relics of the Tooth and Alms-bowl, which had become the palladia of the *dhammadīpa*."⁴⁴ When the Nayakars from south India came to Sri Lanka in the eighteenth century and took over the royal line after a crisis, one of the first things that they did was to bring the tooth relic back to Kandy and install it on the empty throne, a gesture, according to H.L. Seneviratne, of "royal honor and symbolically sharing the realm with the Relic."⁴⁵ Perhaps, more importantly, it was a gesture on the part of this outsider king to indicate that he was worthy of rule, since he possessed this most important of all relics.

Furthermore, in southeast Asia especially, the jewel also becomes explicitly identified with the scriptures, and as Frank Reynolds points out, since "Tilok's time the Thai and Laotian kings who have possessed the Holy Emerald Jewel have kept a full copy of the most 'orthodox' versions of the Pāli canon in close proximity to it. By bringing and keeping together these two forms of the 'body' of the Buddha"—by which Reynolds means the *rūpakāya* (jewel) and *dharmakāya* (books)—"these kings have symbolically re-established the fullness and purity of the Buddhist religion; and in so doing they have proclaimed the legitimacy of their own rule."⁴⁶ According to

⁴¹ Reynolds 1978, pp. 175–193, p. 183.

⁴² Reynolds provides a very interesting account of the origins of the Holy Emerald Jewel and its association with the *saptaratna* set, *ibid.*

⁴³ Seneviratne 1978, p. 95.

⁴⁴ Clifford 1978, p. 46.

⁴⁵ Seneviratne 1978, p. 183.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

Reynolds, the Thai Chronicles explicitly connect the two, and presuppose that they had coexisted in Sri Lanka until they were, while being transported to Thailand by boat, separated in a storm: "The ideal which is implicit in their narrative is the reuniting of the Holy Jewel which was associated with the royal cult at Angkor and the Sacred scriptures which King Arawatha had succeeded in bringing to Pagan."⁴⁷

There is far less textual evidence from the medieval northeast Indian context to demonstrate a specific link between the king and the seven jewels, or even, for that matter, between Buddhism and kingship. Historical chronicles such as those produced in Sri Lanka and Thailand do not exist, thus making the visual evidence that much more important. The last line of Indian kings to rule significant parts of northeastern India, the Pālas, have typically been portrayed as Buddhists, patrons and protectors of the monks and monasteries within their vast realm. As the historian R.C. Majumdar puts it, "certain it is that the successors of Gopāla were all ardent followers of Buddhism, and for nearly four hundred years their court proved to be the last stronghold of that dying faith in India."⁴⁸ There are certainly good reasons for such a portrayal: the Pālas ruled over the ancient Buddhist homeland of Magadha; all but one of the major pilgrimage sites associated with the historical Buddha's life were located within this realm;⁴⁹ the most prominent monasteries and universities in the Buddhist world—Nālandā, Vikramaśīla, Somapura, Uddandapura, Jaggadala, and Bodhgayā—continued to thrive under the Pālas centuries after Buddhism had faded away in other parts of India. Furthermore, the Pāla kings frequently employed specifically Buddhist epithets, such as *paramasaugata*—"the foremost follower of the Buddha"—in their copperplate inscriptions; and they sometimes even compared themselves to the Buddha himself, such as in the Monghyr copperplate issued by Devapāla in the ninth century, in which the king is said to be "like the Buddha attaining enlightenment, that son [Devapāla]—clear in mind, restrained in speech and addicted to pure physical works—attained his father's peaceful kingdom."⁵⁰ The Pālas also frequently used the unambiguously Buddhist symbol of the *dharmacakra* and two kneeling deer on their official seals.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Majumdar 1943, p. 101. It is worth noting that even Majumdar, in subsequent comments, himself recognizes the hyperbole of such a statement.

⁴⁹ See Kinnard 1997, pp. 281–300.

⁵⁰ Mukherji and Maity 1967, p. 122; *nirmālo namasi vāci samyataḥ kāya-karmmani ca yaḥ sthitaḥ śucau / Rājyamāpa nirupalpavaṃ piturbodhisattva iva saugataṃ padam //*.

An analysis of the Pālas and their purported Buddhist sympathies could extend for many pages and would have to include an analysis not only of the extant inscriptions,⁵¹ but also of the many manuscript colophons that survive from that period,⁵² a discussion far beyond the scope of the present context.

We know, at least from the examples of Dharmapāla, Devapāla, and Mahīpāla—the three Pālas most generally thought to be Buddhists—that the evidence for royal support by the Pālas of the monasteries and universities within their realm is ambiguous, a far cry from the “liberal patronage” sometimes attributed to them.⁵³ We also know, however, that institutions such as Bodhgayā, Nālandā, and Vikramaśīla, with thousands of monks in residence, could not have continued to exist without at least the tacit approval of the kings, let alone their material patronage. The Pālas, then, must at least have created an environment in which these universities and monasteries continued to prosper, an environment in which there was traffic between monasteries within the realm, implying an exchange of both monks and artisans, and their specific doctrinal, ritual, and artistic concerns, as well as between monasteries and countries outside of the realm (in the form of pilgrims and

⁵¹ In spite of this imputed Buddhist identity, however, on the basis of the available inscriptional evidence, it is difficult to demonstrate a definite affinity for Buddhism for all but a few of the Pāla kings. The Tibetan historians are generally more generous in their view of the Pālas' Buddhist orientations than the inscriptional evidence would warrant, although Tāranātha, significantly, excludes from the Pāla lineage those kings who did not actively patronize the monasteries and universities: “But since they ‘left no mark of their hands’ (i.e. did not contribute any new monasteries, etc.), they are not counted among the Seven Pālas;” Chimpa and Chattopadhyaya 1970, p. 284. See also Tāranātha's assessment of Rāsapāla, who is excluded from the lineage because “he did practically nothing new for the Law,” *ibid.*, p. 271. It is striking that not a single Buddhist image from the Pāla period bears a royal donative inscription; all of the inscribed images that survive from the period were given either by the laity or by monks or nuns. And even those Pāla kings who can be shown, on the basis of their royal inscriptions, to have patronized Buddhist monastic institutions did not do so to the exclusion of other religious groups. See for instance Majumdar 1943, p. 416, and Huntington and Huntington 1990, p. 81. For more on the inscriptional evidence that relates to the Pālas' Buddhist identity, see Chowdhury 1967, pp. 87–88; Mukherji and Maity 1967, pp. 208–209; Dikshit 1938; Sastri 1942, pp. 92–102, Sastri 1923, p. 310; also Majumdar 1926.

⁵² One of these colophons is contained in a commentary on the *Aṣṭasāhaśrikāpra-jñāpāramitā*, written by Hariḥhadra; it states that the manuscript was composed under the patronage of Dharmapāla. See Majumdar 1923, pp. 375–79; this manuscript, according to Majumdar, is located in the Durbar Library in Kathmandu. See also Sāṅkṛtyāyana 1935, pp. 31–35; and Samtani 1961, pp. 399–400.

⁵³ Sastri 1943, p. 20.

emissaries). Thus, it is not surprising that we see evidence of royal involvement in monastic affairs in the medieval Indian milieu. In particular, in the sculpture that was produced and used in monastic settings such as Bodhgayā, the seven jewels that signify, as we have seen, the kings’ support and protection of the religion become a very common motif, and, more significantly for the present discussion, the book begins to be included in this set.⁵⁴

Although it is reasonable to assume that such images were made for and by Buddhist monks, and that the former were situated in a ritual and devotional context, it is impossible to discern exactly who made these images and why. Therefore, we are left with merely the images themselves. One thing that appears to be occurring in such variations on the familiar *saptaratna* motif is a visual play on the relationship between the righteous Buddhist king and the book, such that the inclusion of the latter in the group shifts the emphasis of the motif away from the righteous king’s *artha*, his political and physical power—as signified by the minister, treasurer, elephant, and horse, say—and puts the focus more on the *dharma* that he is to uphold and protect, as signified by the book, wheel, and wish-fulfilling gem.

Furthermore, the inclusion of the book in such a schema fits neatly into the apotropaic promise that we have already seen expressed in the *Perfection of Wisdom* texts: “wherever this *Perfection of Wisdom* has been put down in a book, and has been set up and worshiped . . . there men and ghosts can do no harm.”⁵⁵ By protecting the book—the *Perfection of Wisdom* that touts itself not only as the supreme expression of the *dharma*, but also the single container of *all* of the Buddhas’ (past, present, and future) teachings—the king protects his kingdom. This is the very embodiment of a palladium. The visual evidence here also has a significant contemporary textual parallel: in the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa-sūtra*, a text that appears to have been composed sometime around the fifth century and that was widely circulated in the medieval Indian milieu,⁵⁶ notions of the cult of the book are embedded in an explicitly royal ideology, with long passages devoted to the explicit relationship between the righteous king and the *dharma* in the form of the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa-sūtra* text.

The text actually begins by praising the *Perfection of Wisdom*, and then

⁵⁴ See Kinnard 1999, fig. 16.

⁵⁵ *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā*, p. 85.

⁵⁶ For a general overview of the history of this text, see the introduction to Emmerick 1970, pp. ix-xii, see also Bagchi’s introduction to the Sanskrit text.

adopts essentially the same self-referential language that is so common in the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature: “Those who hear this Sūtra and who cause others to hear it, whoever rejoice in it, and those who do honor it, will be honored throughout numerous millions of eons by gods, serpents and men, by Kinnaras, Asuras and Yakṣas. They will gladly be accepted by the Buddhas in the ten directions . . .”⁵⁷ Then, in a chapter devoted to “the four great kings”—the mythic rulers of the four quarters—the text lays out the duties of the kings toward the text and the *dharma* in general, and says that the four kings will “make that king of men more honored than all kings, and we will cause him to be respected, will cause him to be revered, will cause him to be worshiped, and will cause him to be praised in all regions.”⁵⁸ The four kings further promise that for the earthly king who protects the text, and the monks who teach it, there will be a stable and prosperous reign, a kingdom free from foreign invasion, and all beings in that king’s realm will be happy. “Thereby to that king of men will be given protection, salvation, assistance, defense, escape from punishment, peace, and welfare.”⁵⁹

It is true that the text refers as much to the need for the king to protect the monks and nuns who learn and teach the *dharma* as to the need to protect the book itself. However, the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa-sūtra* provides one of the few explicit links between the medieval Buddhist king and the *buddhasāsana*—the entire institution—and it does so with a marked emphasis on the king as protector of the text and the monks who know and disseminate it. Furthermore, toward the end of the section on the four kings, the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa-sūtra* explicitly invokes the image of the *saptaratna*, when it describes itself as: “Like a jewel-box in the palm of the hand, which is a mine of every jewel, so is the excellent Suvarṇabhāsa, king of Sūtras, to a multitude of kings.”⁶⁰

Of course it is impossible to know if this text directly informed the makers of images of the seven gems that included the book, but certainly the

⁵⁷ Emmerick 1970, p. 2.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29. And to the king who does not protect the text and the monks, “there will arise in that region various regional disturbances. There will be fierce disputes among kings. The beings in all the regions will become quarrelsome. They will become argumentative and contentious . . . There will be earthquakes. The wells in the earth, disappearing, will dry up . . . Fierce rains will arise. There will be oppression by hunger in the region. Foreign powers will destroy the region.” p. 38

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

basic ideology expressed by this text—that it is the king’s duty to protect the book, and that the text, in turn, assures the stability of his reign—is borne out in the sculptural images.

Thus, I am suggesting that the particular agents responsible for the construction of such images (monks, laypeople and royal functionaries) were engaged in their own polemic, and visually “invoked” the book, not so much to advance a position about the proper “container” of Buddhist doctrine—the *Perfection of Wisdom* texts—nor about the proper object of ritual veneration—the book—but to make a point about the proper Buddhist king. From the monastic point of view, such images would serve to project the need for royal support and protection of the religion; from the laity’s point of view, such images would project the desired balance between religion and the polity; and finally, from a royal point of view, such images would promote the basic ideology of the *dharmacakravartin* by advertising, so to speak, the king’s possession of the most precious of all jewels: the book. Images of the *saptaratna* with the book might well have functioned as multivalent billboards. At a time when Buddhism was struggling to remain vital in northern India, monks may have made such images to advertise the need for the king to continue support of the monasteries; the king himself may have likewise, intended such images to legitimize his rule by advertising his involvement in the life of the monastery.⁶¹

⁶¹ Not insignificantly, I think, just such a symbiotic projection continues to be ritually performed in Nepal, where once a year, during the Cakan Dyo festival, a gold-inscribed copy of the *Prajñāpāramitā*, housed in a palanquin, is carried in procession, accompanied by an entourage including musicians, along with an image of Dipaṅkara Buddha around Kathmandu, in order to ritually mark out and protect the kingdom (much as the tooth relic is paraded around Kandy in Sri Lanka); see Lewis 2000.

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