



The Lord Buddha Protected by the Naga in the Attitude of Subduing Mara

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A bronze Buddha image, protected by the Naga in the attitude of subduing Mara, is displayed in the Bangkok National Museum, Thailand. Seated on the coils of the Naga, 1.65 m. high, it was found at Wat Wieng (Wieng Temple), Chaiya, in the province of Suratthani, southern Thailand (Fig. 1). This beautiful bronze image belongs to the Srivijayan style. On its base an inscription informs it was cast either at about the end of the 12th or 13th century A.D.

According to Theravada Buddhism, after his enlightenment under the Bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya in India, the Lord Buddha went to meditate at many sites in the vicinity. During his seventh week of meditation, while he

was under a tree called Mucalinda in Pali or Mucilinda in Sanskrit, a storm occurred. The Naga (serpent) Mucalinda, who lived in a nearby pond, then came up to protect the Buddha from the storm by lifting him up on its coiled body and spread its hood over the head of the Master. Therefore, the iconography of the Lord Buddha, protected by the Naga, should be in the attitude of meditation, with his right hand upon his left and both palms turned upwards (Fig. 2).

But, the same type of Buddha image discovered at Wat Wieng, Chaiya, Suratthani, is in the attitude of subduing Mara. This bronze image's right hand is on the right knee with palm facing downwards. This image can be separated into three parts: the hood of the Naga, the seated Buddha in the attitude of subduing Mara, and the three coils of the snake. Some scholars suggest that the Naga and the Buddha may not have been cast at the same time. And that is the reason why the Buddha image is in the attitude of subduing Mara, not in the attitude of meditation. However, because they fit in together so well, it is rather hard to believe that they were not cast at the same time.

A French scholar, Professor Jean Boisselier, recently discussed the Chinese Tripitaka (Buddhist holy manuscripts.) Among the texts discussed were those published by another French scholar, Professor E. Chavannes, entitled the Five Hundred Stories and the Apologues (fables with moral intentions). They are typical of Mahayana Buddhism. In these books, it is mentioned that the Naga could remember from the aureole jutting out from the body of the Buddha. It is also mentioned that the past Buddhas and the present one (Sri Sakyamuni) attained real enlightenment only after the week of "bad weather", which is the ultimate proof.

From this explanation, one can perceive the meaning of the Buddha's several weeks of meditation. This action was necessary for him, to pass from the enlightenment to the preaching of the Dharma (the Law of Buddhism). His last week of meditation was most difficult because it was the highest and necessary proof.

The Lord Buddha, upon reaching his ultimate goal should be represented as protected by the Naga. His attitude may be representing the Maravijaya (subduing Mara), which means the attainment of ultimate illumination,

Above: Fig. 1. The Lord Buddha under the Naga, subduing Mara. Bronze. Ht. 1.65 m. Found at Wat Wieng, Chaiya, Suratthani. Srivijayan style. End of the 12th or 13th century A.D. Bangkok National Museum.

or his attitude may be meditating. One should not forget that during the Srivijayan Period, in Southern Thailand, the majority of the people followed Mahayana Buddhism. Therefore the bronze Buddha image discovered at Wat Wieng, Chaiya, can represent the attitude of subduing Mara. Furthermore, quite a few small bronze Buddha images, also protected by the Naga in the attitude of subduing Mara, Lopburi style, have also been discovered in Thailand. These small images were cast in the same piece with the Naga and cannot be separated. During the Lopburi Period (13th-14th centuries A.D.) many people professed Mahayana Buddhism. Therefore, the same type of Buddha image, found at Wat Wieng should not at all be a surprise.

Professor Boisselier also discussed the origin of the iconography of this Buddha image protected by the Naga. This type of Buddha images, he said, exist in the art of Southeast Asia, especially in Cambodia and Lopburi in Thailand. In the Indian classical art, however, during the fourth to the eighth centuries A.D. (Gupta and the post-Gupta periods), Indian artists were not much interested with the iconography of the Buddha protected by the Naga.

According to the Life Story of the Lord Buddha, when the Lord Buddha was meditating during the last and seventh week, after his illumination, heavy rain fell. The rain was out of season. This kind of rain is usually called the rain before the season or the rain for the mangoes. Apart from that rain, the weather became cold and a strong wind blew under the trees. Small insects, such as mosquitoes which could disturb the meditation of the Lord Buddha, swarmed.

The Lord Buddha, having just attained enlightenment, was not

supposed to be disturbed. And the Naga knew this. Therefore when the Naga sensed the storm it made merit by protecting the Buddha during his meditation. It slithered and coiled in seven layers under the Master and spread its hood over his head.

At the end of the seventh week the weather calmed down. The Naga Mucalinda transformed itself into a human being and listened to the sermon of the Lord Buddha. Certain Buddhist texts specify that the Naga was the first animal to hear the preaching of the Buddha. Certain texts, however, mention that the Naga came into the scene because of its longevity which is the usual custom of the great Naga.

Because of the Lord Buddha's meditation, an aureole emitted around his body. This bright light spread everywhere. It woke up the Naga Mucalinda. The Naga realised this



Fig. 2. The Lord Buddha under the Naga. Stone. Ht. 1.13 m. Found at Wat Mahathat, Ayudhya. Lopburi style. 11th century A.D. Bangkok National Museum.

event had happened three times before. It remembered that each time this happened it protected the Lord Buddha, who was represented in these events as: the Buddha Kakusandha, Konagama and Kassapa. These Buddha are subsequently the twenty-second, twenty-third and twenty-fourth past Buddhas.

Professor Boisselier continued to explain that this natural event could have happened in India or other tropical countries. And this has given rise to the iconography.

The place where the Naga lives is the same as those inhabited by serpents or snakes. Serpents normally come up above the water during floods. In monsoon countries, it is believed that all living creatures come to live together when there is a special event. Meditation without any movement induces credibility among animals. A fisherman can be a



Fig. 3. A bas-relief representing a vacant throne protected by the Naga Mucalinda. Stone. From Bharhut, India. Ancient Indian Art style. Second century B.C. National Museum, New Delhi.



Fig. 4. The Lord Buddha in the attitude of preaching, protected by a double serpent hood. Stone. Indian Amaravati style. Third to fourth century A.D. Museum, London.

witness for this action. Meditation also generates warmth which can be perceived by most of animals, especially reptiles like snakes. Then the power of friendliness. All of these

features are quite well known and believed in South and Southeast Asia.

Some snakes try to be friends with human beings; this is quite difficult to explain. One should not

forget that the python in South America does the duty of the cat. The snake's friendliness is also known in India. In fact, many *jatakas* (tales of the past lives of the Buddha) relate such characteristics, especially in *jataka* no.253, the Munikantha Jataka. It tells about a young hermit who found out that the love of a friend snake towards him was precious. This *jataka* is also represented in the Andhra or Amaravati art of Southeastern India. From here one can notice that the tale about the Lord Buddha and the Naga which is full of miracles, can also occur in real life.

Referring to sculptures, Professor Boisselier mentioned that the bas-relief representing the Lord Buddha, protected by the Naga appeared before the creation of the Buddha image in human form. The bas-relief at Pauni or Bharhut in India, which dates back to about the second century B.C., represents a vacant throne protected by a *naga* with many heads. It also bears an inscription of the Naga Mucalinda (Fig. 3).

He therefore adheres to the theory that says, "A text creates a sculpture, not a sculpture that creates a text". Here the writer would like to contest the eminent professor. Because the above theory should not be totally generalised. There were times when sculptures existed before a text was written to document them such as the text entitled Sadhanamala.

In India, the iconography of the Buddha protected by the Naga was popular in southeastern India's Andhra or Amaravati art. This art was prevalent between the third to the fourth centuries A.D. But there is a peculiarity in their representation: Naga is double, and the hoods do not only belong to the Naga Mucalinda. The mentioned sculpture is now pre-

served in the British Museum, London (Fig. 4).

We have to refer to the Sanskrit Mahavastu text. It belongs to the Mahasanghika sect in Mahayana Buddhism which says "the Naga Vinipata joins the Naga Mucalinda in performing merit". Another text, the Lalitavistara, which relates the life story of the Buddha in Mahayana Buddhism, mentions that there is not only the Naga Mucalinda during the scene but "a group of Naga".

It is rather surprising to know that this phrase also appears in the Thai Pathom Sompot text (Pathama Sambodhi which relates the life story of the Buddha in the Thai language). This phrase is also represented in a Bangkok period mural painting in the ordination hall of Wat Ratchasittharam, Thonburi. In the painting, the Lord Buddha is seated and meditating on the snake coils. He is under the hood of the Naga Mucalinda. But two other snakes figure, one on each side of the coils (Fig. 5).

The iconography of the Lord Buddha protected by the Naga was popular in ancient Cambodia. It was probably so because it was believed that their first monarch was born from an Indian brahmin and a Naga princess. The king of the Naga was a maternal grandfather. He built a town for his grandson to rule and was therefore worshipped as the protector of the Khmer Kingdom (ancient Cambodia) as well as the kingdom's numerous shrines.

The Khmer version of Buddha image protected by the Naga appeared about the middle of the tenth century A.D. (the reign of Rajendravarman II). Professor Boisselier thinks that it's place of origin may be probably part of present-day Thailand. An

inscription at Wat Sithor (Sithor Temple) in Cambodia mentions that a Khmer official who wanted to revive Buddhism during the Angkorian period ordered to seek the text "in a foreign land". This foreign land has had a long tradition in the production of the Buddha protected by the Naga. According to the professor, this foreign land is the present-day Thailand.

Many Buddha images protected by the Naga in Dvaravati style have been discovered at U-tong in Suphanburi Province, Western Thailand. One was also found at Ban Fai, Amphoe Lamplaimat, Buriram Province, Northeast Thailand. A Buddhist votive tablet found in the town of Krabi on the western coast of Southern Thailand reveals a very ancient tradition, the iconography of the



Fig. 5. Mural painting representing the Buddha in the attitude of meditation, protected by the Naga Mucalinda and two other serpents. Bangkok style. Wat Ratchasittharam, Thonburi, 19th-early 20th century A.D.

seated Buddha protected by the Naga in the attitude of argumentation. This relates to the Andhra or Amaravati style in Southeastern India and dates back to the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. at the latest (Fig. 6).

From what has been mentioned, one can say that the bronze Buddha image protected by the Naga in the attitude of subduing Mara is not a wrong representation. The artist's work is in accordance with the concept of Mahayana Buddhism, when the Lord Buddha attained his ultimate illumination in the last and seventh week after his enlightenment. As for the iconography of the Khmer Buddha version, which was very popular in Cambodia from the 10th to 13th centuries A.D., the representation was probably derived from the Dvaravati art in Thailand. ■



Fig. 6. Votive tablet representing the Buddha in the attitude of preaching, under the Naga Mucalinda. The tablet shows the influence of the Indian Amaravati style. Clay. Found at Krabi, Southern Thailand. Fourth to fifth century A.D.