

Aṣṭa-mahā-pratihārya (The Eight Great Events) in Buddhist Art of India and Myanmar

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Abstract: Buddhism had a profound influence on the Asian art and culture. Different aspects of Buddha's life and teaching had found tangible manifestation in artistic production across Asia. The present paper intends to study the eight life events of Buddha, which, when depicted as a group, came to be known as the aṣṭa-mahā-pratihārya. The sites where these eight events took place are regarded as the principal pilgrimage sites by the Buddhists and became known as Attha-mahathanani or Ashta Mahāsthāna. While these episodes have been depicted in art since ancient times, the theme came to be frequently represented in a single sculptural panel during the Pala period with precursors in Gupta art of Sarnath. The concept found resonance in the sculptures and paintings of Myanmar and other Asian countries as well. Through the study of the representation of this concept in the art of India and Myanmar, the paper aims to study the composition and iconography of the eight episodes and stresses upon the strong artistic exchanges between these two countries. Pertinent primary Buddhist texts are studied to underscore the context and significance of these episodes.

Keywords: Buddhist Art, Aṣṭa-mahā-pratihārya, Birth, Enlightenment, First Sermon, Mahāparinirvāṇa

Received : 10 September 2024

Revised : 12 October 2024

Accepted : 18 October 2024

Published : 30 October 2024

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Savita Kumari (2024). Aṣṭa-mahā-pratihārya (The Eight Great Events) in Buddhist Art of India and Myanmar. *Journal of History, Archaeology and Cultural Heritage*, 1: 2, pp. 69-82.

Introduction

Part five of the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya, which records the last days of the Buddha at Kuśinagara, provides one of the earliest references on the places of pilgrimage for the Buddhist devotees. Ānanda, the chief disciple of Buddha, raised his concern that once the Tathāgata would leave the mortal world, the bhikkhus would not get the benefit of his audience. Buddha addressed Ānanda's concern by mentioning the four places of pilgrimage that pious monks, nuns, and lay devotees should look upon with reverence. These places include his birthplace at Lumbini, the place of his enlightenment at Bodh-Gayā, the place where Buddha set in motion the wheel of the Dhamma and delivered the first sermon, at Mṛgadāva near Sarnath and where the Tathāgata entered *Mahāparinirvāṇa* at Kuśinagara (Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, 1998, p. 50-51). The text further states that a devotee who dies during such a pilgrimage while maintaining a strong faith will be reborn in a heavenly realm of bliss after their passing. In the later period, four other places were added to the list of pilgrimages and episodes related

to these sites were frequently depicted in the Buddhist art. These included the great Miracle at Śrāvastī, Buddha's descent from Treyastrimśa (Tuṣita in Pali) heaven at Saṅkāśya, Monkey offering honey to the Buddha at Vaiśālī (some texts refer to Koshambi as the site of this episode), and taming of Nālāgiri at Rājagṛha. RatanParimoo observed that, “it took some time for the eight events to be selected from among several more incidents depicted in the different monuments. It seems that significance was attached not only to the event but to the place of the event, indeed the event, even if not too important.” (Parimoo, 2010, p. 3).

The eight episodes were represented as a narrative panel in the early Buddhist art too, when Buddha was represented in his aniconic form at Bharhut and Sanchi. Life events are also depicted in great details in the art of Gandhara and Amravati. In Mathura school, however, representation of the life events is scant. A significant development took place in the depiction of these eight great events during the Gupta period when the artists of Sarnath school started depicting these events as an ensemble in a single stele. Instead of a detailed narrative, the artist depicted the various events in a simplified manner by depicting only the key iconographic features. At Sarnath, each episode was given equal importance. The Pala artists went a step further and added a new dimension to the composition. Instead of showcasing each episode in a neat compartment as was the case with Sarnath, the artists now gave principle position to the episode of enlightenment which was surrounded by seven other life events mentioned above. These events came to be known as *pratihārya* or miracles. RatanParimoo rightly observes, “while not all episodes are actual miracles, i.e. *pratihārya* proper – for example, the Birth by itself is not a miracle – nevertheless, once the Buddha was deified and ceased to be a historical person, all these incidents took on the significance of miracle, or miraculous occurrences were interwoven around them” (Parimoo, 2010, p.1-2).

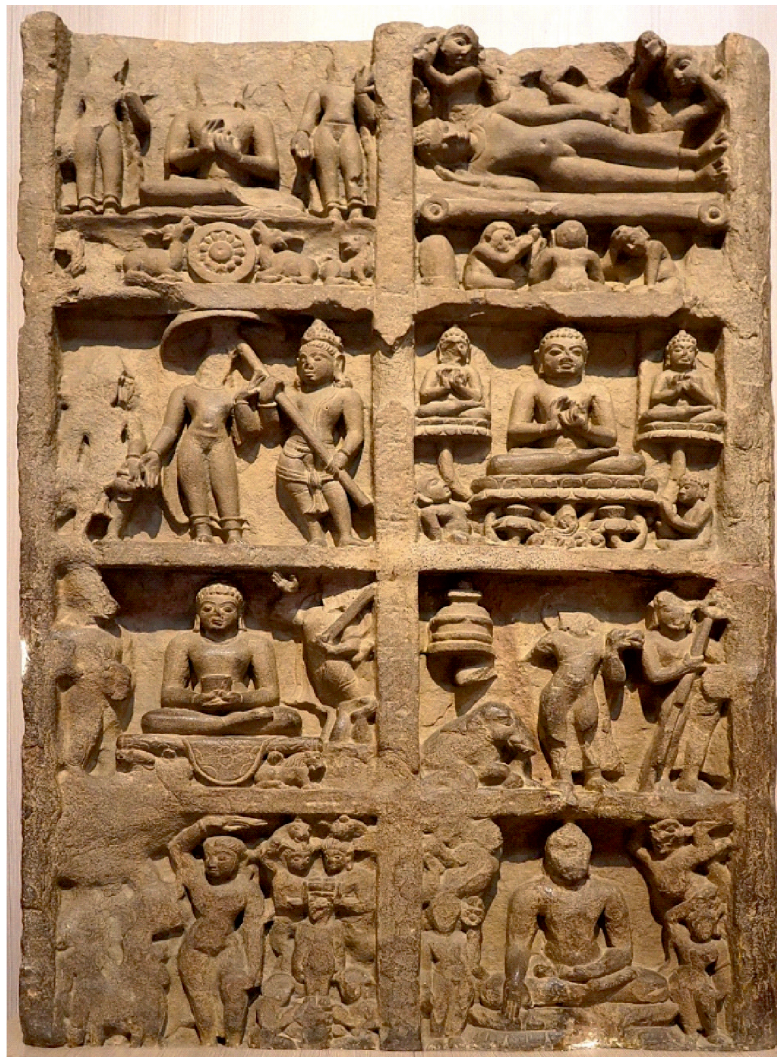
Several scholars have worked on the life events of Buddha. The most detailed and significant work on the representation of these scenes in the Indian context is by RatanParimoo titled *Life of Buddha in Indian Sculpture*. Parimoo studied the stylistic development of life scenes in different regions and underscored the relationship between text and image. So far, however, no work has been done on the study of the *aṣṭa-mahā-pratihārya* as seen in Indian and southeast Asian art where the concept was adopted and further innovations were made in representation of the eight great events of Buddha's life. The present paper aims to fill this gap through a select study of the visual representations of this concept in India, Myanmar and Thailand. The paper also takes into account some of the Buddhist texts to highlight the extent to which these texts have inspired the artistic representation.

Aṣṭa-mahā-pratihārya in the Gupta Sculpture of Sarnath School

It seems that at first, the Sarnath artist devised the method to depict the eight events in a single stele (Fig. 1). A tall rectangular slab is divided into eight sections in which are set the eight events of the Buddha's life. In the lowest two sections, the episodes of Birth and Enlightenment are depicted. The Birth scene is now in bad state of preservation, however, two episodes can be discerned. The centre of the composition is occupied by queen Maya, the mother of Buddha. She stands in *tribhaṅga* with her right hip projecting out. Her right hand is raised in the posture of holding a branch of a tree. This posture is frequently referred in the Buddhist texts. The *Lalitavistara* states, “then MāyāDevī stretched out her right arm like the lightning in the sky, held a branch of the *plaksha*, and, looking playfully at the sky, stood there yawning” (*Lalitavistara*, 2001, p. 84). The details on the right side of this scene are completely gone now. On the left side, a small figure of Bodhisattva can be discerned.

Though completely damaged, the two seated figures on either side of the Bodhisattva could be the two naga kings. *Lalitavistara* further states, “As soon as the Noble Bodhisattva has alighted, a great lotus emerged, piercing the earth. The two Naga kings, Nanda and Opananda, remaining with half their bodies showing from the sky, emitted two streams of water, cold and hot, and bathed Bodhisattva” (*Lalitavistara*, 2001, p. 84-85). Above the Bodhisattva two musicians, one holding a drum can be seen. Two animal like figure hovering over the head of the celestial musician can also be seen. The sculptor tried to capture the essence of the episode given in Buddhist texts in great detail.

The second section of the lowest register have representation of the enlightenment scene. Buddha is shown touching the earth seated on a lotus seat in *padmāsana*. Due to the constrain of space the tree is not shown here which was also the case in the birth scene. The Māra army, which tried to stop the enlightenment, is indicated by the presence his daughter and a grotesque figure on the left side of Buddha. This panel is also damaged at many places. In the text such as the *Lalitavistara*, *Buddha Carita* and *Mahāvastu*, Māra’s attempt to stop the enlightenment of Buddha is given in great detail. In the sculptural art, also, the event was shown with great graphic details. In this panel from Sarnath, Māra daughter and a grotesque figure are carved.



Scenes from Life of Buddha (Aṣṭa-mahā-pratihārya), late fifth century CE, Gupta Period, Archaeological Museum, Sarnath. Image Courtesy: Sayantani Dey

The two events, in the second register, are those associated with the animals, i.e., Monkey offering honey to the Buddha and the taming of Nālāgirī. In the Dhammapada commentary, the story of the monkey offering honey is set in a protected forest where Buddha took retreat, all alone, for three months frustrated by the quarrelsome monks of Kosambi. In the forest, he was served by an elephant named Parileyyaka. He performed all major and minor tasks for the Buddha and made his stay comfortable. Inspired by the elephant, a monkey also decided to do something for the Buddha. The story states that one day he found a stick-honey free of flies. He broke the stick off, took the honey comb, stick and all, and offered it on a plantain-leaf to Buddha. He noticed that Buddha accepted it but didn't eat the same. So he carefully examined his offering and discovered some insect's eggs. He carefully removed the insect's egg and offered the honey again to Buddha. This time, he ate it. The story further narrates that, "The monkey was so delighted that he leaped from one branch to another and danced about in great glee. But the branches he grasped and the branches he stepped on broke off. Down he fell on the stump of a tree and was impaled. So he died. And solely because of his faith in the Teacher, he was reborn in the World of the Thirty-tree in a golden mansion thirty leagues in measure, with a retinue of a thousand celestial nymphs" (Dhammapada, 1921, p. 179). The place where the event took place came to be associated with Vaiśālī.

In the sculptural art, the Monkey is shown offering honey in a bowl and not on a leaf. In the Sarnath panel, the Buddha is shown seated on a lion throne covered with a fine ornamental cloth. He holds the bowl. This gesture of Buddha came to be associated with the monkey offering honey episode. The flanking figures are broken and it couldn't be ascertained if the monkey was depicted by the sculptor. The panel besides it is that of the Nālāgirī episode. The storey is Buddha's cousin Devadutta was envious of him. His various conspiracy to kill Buddha failed. On seeing Buddha, Devdutta thought, "Verily no mortal beholding the excellent beauty of Gotama's person dare approach him, but the king's elephant Nālāgirī is a fierce and savage animal and knows nothing of the virtues of the Buddha, the Law, and the Assembly. He will bring about the destruction of the ascetic" (CullahamsaJātaka, Ja 533). Devdutta managed to convince the king of Rajgir (Rājagṛha). The king agreed to let loose the fierce elephant Nālāgirī to crush Buddha to death. It was planned to intoxicate the elephant with a strong drink and wound the elephant with spiked goad so that he furiously attacks and kills Buddha. The news reached to the city and also to the disciple of Buddha who requested the great teacher not to go to the city of Rajgir for alms. Buddha agreed to their request and said that he will not go for alms but to perform a miracle and tame Nālāgirī and crush the heretics.

Next day when Buddha was on the road, Nālāgirī was let loose in his direction. The disciple persuaded him to withdraw for the elephant had no understanding of the greatness of the Buddha. Buddha disagreed. Śāriputra, one of the principal disciples, offered to subjugate Nālāgirī, but Buddha did not allow it. Ānanda, despite being stopped by Buddha, came between the Buddha and the Elephant. Buddha miraculously removed him from the spot and placed him in the middle of other monks.

Meanwhile, a woman carrying a child tried to flee from the place on seeing the elephant and dropped the child. Hearing the loud cry of the child, Nālāgirī moved to his direction. Buddha in his compassion commanded the elephant to stop, saying, "Ho! Nālāgirī, those that maddened you with sixteen pots of arrack did not do this that you might attack someone else, but acted thus thinking you would attack me. Do not tire out your strength by rushing about aimlessly but come hither." On hearing the voice of the Master he opened his eyes and beheld the glorious form of the Blessed One, and he became greatly agitated and by the power of Buddha the intoxicating effects of the strong

drink passed off. Dropping his trunk and shaking his ears he came and fell down at the feet of the Tathāgata. Then the Master addressing him said, Nālāgirī, you are a brute elephant, I am the Buddha elephant.

Henceforth be not fierce and savage, nor a slayer of men, but cultivate thoughts of charity.” So saying he stretched forth his right hand and coaxed the elephant’s forehead and taught the Law to him.” (CullahamsaJātaka, Ja 533).

These two events associated with animals refers to Buddha’s compassion to all human beings. In no way in Buddhism, human species is considered superior to other species in nature. The episodes also refer to the ability of all creature to have wisdom and possibility of attaining salvation. The central message is that by having faith in Buddha and Dhamma even through a simple act salvation can be attained. Nālāgirī later came to be known as Dhanapalaka (keeper of treasure).

In the Sarnath sculpture, Buddha is shown standing in *tribhaṅga* in a diaphanous drapery. His face is damaged. The standing figure on his left, holding a weapon in his hand, could be Devadutta. The kneeling figure of the elephant, near Buddha’s feet on the right proper is that of Nālāgirī. Interesting is the presence of a stupa above the elephant. This brings forth another identification for the composition. This elephant could also be Parileyyaka who served Buddha in forest during his retreat and died due to grief of parting from the Buddha. The story states that when Buddha decided to leave the forest on the request of Ānanda and other disciples, Parileyyaka came along. Buddha informed the monks of his virtue and asked them to take alms from Parileyyaka. The elephant gave the monks bananas and other fruits in abundance. Buddha told Parileyyaka that he would never return to the forest and the elephant could not accompany him as the world of humans are not safe for him. Hearing the command of the Teacher, “the elephant halted where he was and wept. As the Teacher slowly passed out of sight, he died of a broken heart. Through faith in the Teacher he was reborn in the World of the Thirty-three in a golden mansion thirty leagues in measure, with a retinue of a thousand celestial nymphs. God Parileyyaka was his name” (Dhammapada, 1921, p. 182). It was Parileyyaka who had inspired the monkey to donate honey to Buddha. Hence, it is argued that in this particular depiction, the sculptor at Sarnath suggested two events through one depiction.

The two sections of the third register of the Sarnath sculpture have the representation of the Descent of the Buddha and attendant deities from the World of Thirty-three (TuṣitaHeaven) and the Miracle of Śrāvastī. In order to expound the *Abhidhamma* for the benefit of his deceased mother, Buddha ascended to Tuṣitaheaven. There, he gave a sermon to his mother uninterruptedly for three months. Later he returned at the gate of the city of Sāṅkāśya. With him descends other gods including Brahmā and Indra (Saka) on three ladders. In the Sarnath sculpture, the event is symbolized through the depiction of Buddha in the centre flanked by Saka holding a parasol over Buddha’s head and Brahmā with *kamandalu* (water pot). Brahmā’s figure is damaged and can be identified only by the water pot. The panel beside it is the miracle of Śrāvastī. At Śrāvastī, Buddha performed twin miracles. “...while preaching the Law to multitude, he causes at one and the same time flames to fire and streams of water to proceed forth from every pore of his body.

Moreover, he creates a double, who exchanges question and answer with him, who sits when he stands and stands when he sits” (Dhammapada, 1921, p. 118). In the panel only one miracle is shown. A large image of Buddha is shown in preaching posture on a lotus seat flanked by his disciples. From the same lotus emerges two other stalks of lotus flowers on which are seated duplicates of Buddha in the same preaching posture.

The topmost register of the Sarnath stele depicts the two main life events: the First sermon at Sarnath which marked the turning of the wheel of Dharma and *Mahāparinirvāṇa* at Kuśīnagara, i.e. the demise of Buddha.

In the First Sermon panel, Buddha is shown seated on a stone seat in *dharmacakrapravartanamudrā* (preaching posture) flanked by deities. Detailed description of the episode of the turning of the wheel is given in various text. Post his enlightenment, Buddha decided to first instruct the Dhamma to the five men of good class at the Deer Park (Mṛgadāva) at Rishipatana (Lalitavistara, 2001, p. 368). To give the sense of space, the sculptor carved on the stone seat, the wheel flanked by two deers. There are also two lions depicted on the throne as Buddha was compared with the lion (*Lalitavistara*, 2001, p. 373). Buddha selected the Deer park to give his first sermon as this was the spot where previous Tathāgata also preached (Lalitavistara, p. 373) the Dhamma. The history and significance of Deer Park are given in great detail in the Buddhist text *Mahāvastu* (*Mahāvastu*, 1973, p. 301-311).

The last scene on the Sarnathstele is of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*. Upon reaching the Śāla grove of Malla in the vicinity of Kushinagar, Buddha asked Ānanda to prepare him a couch between the two Śāla trees with the head to north. Buddha lay on his right side one foot above the other (*Mahāparinibbana Sutta*, p. 48). Buddha gave his last preaching to Ānanda and others and informs him also of the past glory of Kuśīnagara where his *parinirvāṇa* was to take place (*Mahāparinibbana Sutta*, 1998, p. 54-55). The last words of Buddha, as recorded in *Mahāparinibbana Sutta*, was, “all compounded things are subject to vanish. Strive with earnestness!” (*Mahāparinibbana Sutta*, 1998, p.61). In the sculpture, Buddha is shown on the stone couch in the posture as prescribed in the *Mahāparinibbana Sutta*. His five disciples are shown lamenting his demise. The artist has shown them in different postures from rear view, side profile and three quarter-view.

In order to capture the eight-great events in a single stele, the artist discarded all the details and depicted only the iconic elements to identify the scenes.

Aṣṭa-mahā-pratihārya in Pala Sculptures

During the Pala period, the artists have devised an innovative composition for the depiction of the *aṣṭa-mahā-pratihārya* concept. In a miniature stele, the eight great events were composed so that the pilgrims who frequently visited the sacred sites associated with Buddha particularly in Bihar, could easily take with them the memorabilia of their sacred journey. A fine example of Pala sculpture depicting *aṣṭa-mahā-pratihārya* (fig. 2) is in the National Museum, New Delhi. Measuring around 14 cm in height dated to 10th century, the sculpture has a *triratha* plan i.e. the central part projects from that of the sides. The sculpture of Buddha, in the central part in the *bhūmiśparśa-mudrā*, is given the pride of place. Other seven episodes are systematically arranged, six on either side of the central sculpture and the seventh above it.

The enlightenment scene in the centre is depicted with great care. Buddha sits on a lotus seat mounted on a high lion throne with a back support. His face is framed by a plane halo with border which springs from above his shoulder. Above the halo is the Bodhi tree under which Buddha attained the enlightenment. Artist particularly paid attention in delineation of the Māra's army who tried to stop Buddha's enlightenment. On the face of the throne, the muscular figure of Māra is shown with a bow in his hand. Along with him are also shown his three daughters in various dancing posture to seduce Buddha. Aśvaghoṣa compared Māra with the Hindu god Kamadeva and described his bow to be of flower-made and had five infatuating arrows (Buddha-Karita, 1894/1977, p.138). His daughters were

called Lust, Delight and Thirst. Around Buddha's halo Māra's army is shown attacking Buddha with various weapons. The grotesque army of Māra with various forms, faces and weapons were described in great detail in Buddhist texts.



Fig. 2: Scenes from Life of Buddha (Aṣṭa-mahā-pratihārya), tenth century CE, Pala Period, National Museum, New Delhi. Image Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi

The drapery of Buddha only covers his one shoulder and is shown with folds (*ekansiksanghati*). His round face has a prominent smile. His curly hair is shown with an *uṣṇīṣa*. The urnāmark in the centre of his forehead and three lines on his short neck are *mahāpuruṣalakṣaṇa* (mark of greatness).

From bottom up, on the right side of Buddha episodes of his birth, first sermon and descent from Tūṣitaheaven are shown. In the birth scene, queen MāyāDevī is shown holding a branch of tree. Modelling of her form recalls, Gandhara idiom. The infant Siddhartha is jutting out of her waist. There is also a water pot referring to his first bath. Above the birth scene, Buddha is shown delivering his first sermon seated on a throne in a preaching gesture. The scene can be identified by the wheel depicted on his lotus foot-rest. The topmost scene on this side is the descent of Buddha from Tūṣitaheaven to Śaṅkāsya after teaching *Abhidhamma* to his mother. In this sculpture Buddha is shown under a parasol carried by a deity. This is a standard iconographic depiction of the Descent of Buddha episode in Pala art.

The three episodes on the left side of the main icon is that of the gift of honey from a monkey, the taming of Nālāgirī, and the miracle of Śrāvastī. The standard feature of the gift of honey by monkey in Pala art is presence of a bowl in Buddha's lap which can be seen here also. A small figure near Buddha's halo could be that of the monkey. Above this, the episode of miracle at Śrāvastī is shown. Artist has done away with all the detail. The scene is to be identified by the Buddha's preaching posture. This is identical to the first sermon scene except that here wheel is not shown. By the Pala period various episodes of *aṣṭa-mahā-pratihārya* became formulaic and even if the key features were missing, the devotee could identify the story. The taming of Nālāgirī scene again duplicates the Descent of Buddha from Tuṣitaheaven episode except that here instead of an attendant, a miniature sculpture of elephant Nālāgirī is carved.

The Last scene is of *Mahāparinirvāṇa* of Buddha which is depicted above the *Enlightenment* episode. Buddha is shown lying on his right side as prescribed in texts on a well-furnished couch. He is flanked by two disciples seated on cushions. Behind the disciple near Buddha's feet, a branch of a tree can be seen which refers to the two śāla tree between which Buddha asked Ānanda to place his couch for *Mahāparinirvāṇa*. The other tree is effaced. The stupa flanked by drums above Buddha also refers to his demise and significance of stupa as an object of worship. The sculpture certainly reveals artist's understanding of the eight episodes associated with Buddha as prescribed in the text. The Pala artist was also well versed in previous artistic idioms. Reflections of both Mathura and Sarnath schools can be seen in the treatment of draperies in various episodes. Hints of Gandharan art is there in the rendering of MāyāDevī.

Large number of Pala sculptures on the theme of *aṣṭa-mahā-pratihārya* are found. The composition became formulaic and the degree of detailing varied in different panels. Buddha in *bhūmiśparśa-mudrā* remained the central figure, however, in some sculptures he is shown with crown and jewelry as a king. The order of other events changed sometimes except for the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* scene which found the top position as a rule.

Apart from smaller images, *aṣṭa-mahā-pratihārya* continued to be sculpted as large relief panel (fig. 3). One such example is from Jagadishpur near Nalanda in Bihar. Dated to late 10th century, the image is more than three meters in height. The centre is occupied by Buddha in *bhūmiśparśa-mudrā*. He wears a diaphanous drapery with folds. Heavy eye lid, broad smile and short neck are all typical to the Pala idiom. The halo is comparatively small. Arched shape hairline separates the face from the head which has symmetrically arranged curls and an uṣṇīṣa. The Bodhi tree under which Buddha is seated is shown in a stylized manner and not shown prominently. The availability of space provided the artist opportunity to depict the Māra army in great detail. Multitude of miniature figures forming the Māra's army in different kind of faces are shown attacking Buddha. The features of the army adhere to the textual references. For instance, Aśvaghoṣa mentions about the Māra's army as, "having their faces of bows, fishes, horses, asses and camels, of tigers, bears, lions, and elephants, -one eyed, many faced, three-headed, with protuberant bellies and speckled bellies" (Buddha-Karita, 1894/1977, p.139-140). Above Buddha's head, on either side of the Bodhi tree, Māra can be seen. On the right side he is approaching on an elephant along with his daughter, two of them already ahead of him. On the left side of Buddha Māra is shown yet again on the elephant retreating after his defeat.

While the scene of *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, remains on the top, the order of other six scene reverses in this particular panel. Monkey offering honey, first sermon and Descent from Tuṣitaheaven is on the right side of Buddha whereas Birth scene, miracle of Śrāvastī and Taming of the elephant Nālāgirī are on the left side.



Fig. 3 Scenes from Life of Buddha (Aṣṭa-mahā-pratihārya), c. eleventh century CE, Pala Period, Jagadishpur (Near Patna). Image Courtesy: Wikipedia.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Eight_Great_Events_in_the_Life_of_Buddha#/media/File:Jagdispur_Buddha_Begley.jpg

Aṣṭa-mahā-pratihārya in the Art of Myanmar

An interesting composition of aṣṭa-mahā-pratihārya theme is from Pagan art of Myanmar. The walls of a small but significant temple called Loka-Hteik Pan (Fig. 4) Temple is decorated with mural painting associated with Buddhism. Of plethora of paintings found from the temple, the most significant in the present context is those on the rear wall which depicts seven of the aṣṭa-mahā-pratihārya, the eighth and the main scene of the Buddha touching the earth to symbolize his enlightenment is a monumental sculpture in round.



Fig. 4: Scenes from Life of Buddha (Aṣṭa-mahā-pratīhārya), Loka-Hteik Pan Temple, c. twelfth century CE, Pagan Period, Pagan, Myanmar. Image Courtesy: Prof. Chedha Tingsanchali

The gilded sculpture of Buddha has a round face. His eyes are open. A hair fillet separates his symmetrically arranged curly hair tied in an *uṣṇīṣa*. Wide smile on the lips, short neck with lines and elongated earlobes are other characteristic features of this sculpture. The drapery is without fold and covers only one shoulder. The sculpture is mounted on a lotus seat and placed against the painted *prabhāmaṇḍala* with monks at the bottom. Stylistically, the sculpture seems to be of a later date as its features are very different from Buddha represented in the other scenes. The painted panels on Buddha's left are of Birth, Miracle at Śrāvastī, Descent from Tuṣita Heaven (Fig. 5). The scenes on Buddha's right side are of Monkey offering honey bowl to Buddha (in damaged state), Dharmacakra-pravartana (First Sermon) and Subduing of Nālāgiri.

In the Birth scene, Queen Māyā is shown holding a branch of a tree in full bloom. Her slender and sensuous form has resonance with the style of Pala manuscript painting. Her importance is highlighted by an oval halo and a pointed crown. She wears a single string necklace. Oval face, inward gaze and gentle smile speak of a refined aesthetics that flourished during the Pagan period in Myanmar. Māyā Devī gently leans towards her sister Mahāprajāpati taking her support while from her right side, Bodhisattva is shown coming out. The rejoicing of celestial beings can be seen on the top on either side of the Bodhi tree. Though faded, the finesse and delicacy in rendering of the event can clearly be seen.

In the middle panel showing the Miracle of Śrāvastī five images of Buddha are shown referring to his multiplying himself. Three Buddha figures are shown in preaching position seated on a lotus seat under a tree. Flanking this group, are two standing Buddha images, touching sun and moon. All of them are wearing Kāśyapaśra covering both the shoulder.

The topmost scene is that of the Descent from Tuṣita Heaven (fig. 6). Buddha is shown descending from the ladder. According to the text, the ladder was made of jewels. The deities who accompanied



Figs. 5 & 6: Details, Scenes from Life of Buddha (Aṣṭa-mahā-pratihārya), Loka-Hteik Pan Temple, c. twelfth century CE, Pagan Period, Pagan, Myanmar. Image Courtesy: Prof.ChedhaTingsanchali

Buddha could not be seen due to damages at various parts. The kneeling figure of his disciple Śāriputra can be seen near Buddha's feet. Śāriputra was the first to greet the Buddha on his descent (Synopsis of the Stories of Book 14, p. 114). Buddha is shown blessing Śāriputra in *varadamudrā* while his left hand is near his chest. Kāṣāyavastra of Buddha covers only one of his shoulders whereas Śāriputra is fully covered in his monastic robe.

On Buddha's right side (fig.7), the bottom panel of the episode of Monkey offering honey bowl to Buddha is in bad state of preservation. The middle section depicts Buddha surrounded by his disciple in the monastic robe under a tree in the dharmacakra-pravartanamudrā. Kāṣāyavastra of Buddha and his disciple cover them completely.

In the topmost panel, Subduing of Nālāgirī is shown. Buddha in his *ekasṇshiksanghati* is shown giving command to Nālāgirī. The elongated figure of Nālāgirī is in sharp contrast of the miniature form of Nālāgirī kneeling at Buddha's feet. He is surrounded by his three disciples. *Arhat* can be distinguished from the monks through their robes. The Arhat is in Kāṣāyavastra whereas the monks are in white coloured robe, each holding a bow.

Above the seven scenes, in a rectangular register the army of Māra can be seen. Though in bad state, the defeated Māra is shown leaving the site of enlightenment on his white elephant. Large section of the upper wall may have been devoted to the episode of Mahāparinirvāṇa depicted in great detail. However, at present, it is in a bad state.

Small steles depicting the life events of Buddha were also carved in Myanmar during the Pagan period. These sculptures are known by the term Andagu. One such example (fig. 8) is from the National Museum of Myanmar, Yangon. In a small stele measuring 11.5 cm in height, the Pagan sculptor devised a new way of depicting the life scene. Instead of eight, more scenes associated with Buddha's

life are now depicted. The small space didn't allow the sculptor to draw the iconographic details. As a result, the events are challenging to identify. The two prominent self-explanatory themes are Buddha in *bhūmisparśa-mudrā*, which occupies the centre of the composition and *mahāparinirvāṇa*, which is depicted at the top of the stele in the manner of Pala sculptures. Buddha sits on an elaborate double lotus pedestal supported by divine figures. The modelling of Buddha is heavy and his neck is hardly visible. His left hand is on his lap, and his right hand is in the earth-touching gesture. He wears an *ekansiksanghati*. Instead of *prabhāmaṇḍala*, the sculpture is composed in an alcove with its outer rim carved with faces of the serpent, reminding of the episode of *naga* Muchalinda. The divinities flank Buddha. On either side of Buddha, episodes are depicted in two instead of one column. In the outer column are the six standard events. The lowest outer panel on Buddha's right depicts MāyāDevī holding the tree. Above this is Buddha in preaching gesture, symbolizing the first sermon at Sarnath, . The topmost scene of the outer column is broken. It could be that of the Subduing of Nālāgirī. On the left side of Buddha, from the bottom to the top, are episodes of the Monkey offering a honey bowl to Buddha. In the depiction, Buddha is shown in *pralambapādasana* holding the bowl in his lap. Above it is Buddha in preaching posture, which refers to the Miracle of Śrāvastī. There is no distinct iconographic feature, and the depiction mirrors the composition on the right side. The topmost panel probably depicts the Descent from Tuṣita Heaven. Here, Buddha is shown seated as in the bottom panel. However, the umbrella above his head hints it is the miracle of Śrāvastī.

The inner column has eight figures, four on either side. The lowest figures are those of devotees. The six other Buddha figures, along with Buddha in *bhūmisparśa-mudrā*, are considered to represent



Fig. 7: Details, Scenes from Life of Buddha (Aṣṭa-mahā-pratihārya), Loka-Hteik Pan Temple, c. twelfth century CE, Pagan Period, Pagan, Myanmar. Image Courtesy: Prof.ChedhaTingsanchali

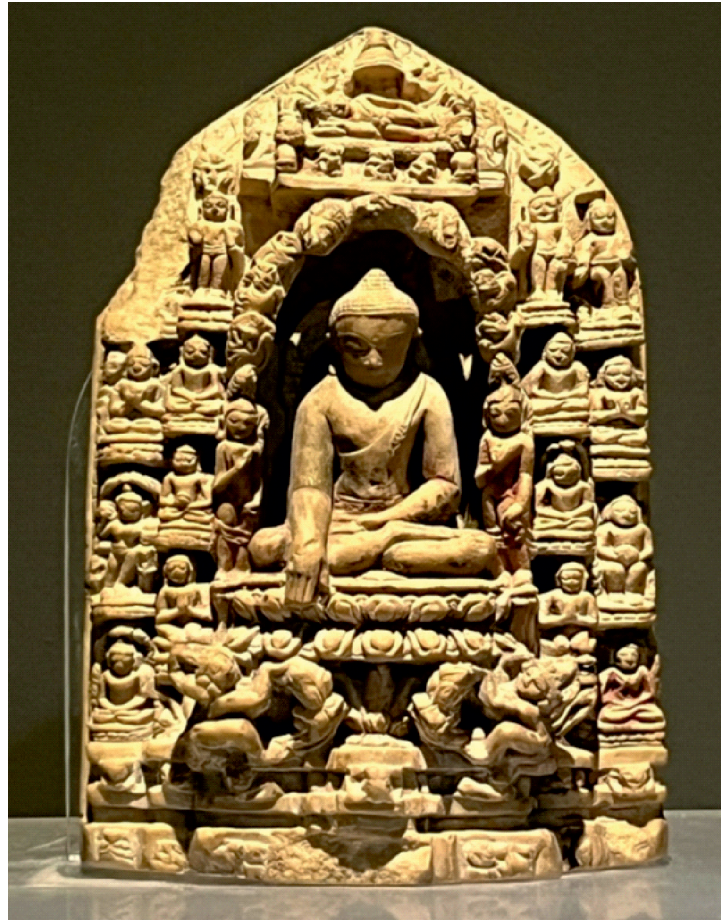


Fig. 8: Andagu, Bagan Period, c. eleventh century CE, National Museum of Myanmar, Yangon, Myanmar. Image Courtesy: Author

his meditation during the seven weeks (Parimoo, 2010, p. 209). The upper two standing figures seem to represent Buddha in *Animesh Lochan* (He spent week two gazing at the Bodhi tree in a standing position) and *Chankramana* (He meditated while walking in the third week). The middle two seated Buddhas represented weeks four and five of meditation when he meditated at the jewel house and under a Banyan tree. Of the bottom two figures, the one on Buddha's left can clearly be identified as Buddha meditating under Naga Mucalinda. The scene parallel to this could be an icon of his meditation under the Rajayatana tree. There are two other Buddha figures flanking the deities beneath the lotus seat.

An analysis of Aṣṭa-mahā-pratihārya (The Eight Great Events) in Buddhist Art of India and Myanmar suggest that artists of the two country experimented with both small and large format to represent the theme which held great religious significance. The experimentation to represent the eight episodes as one coherent composition had its beginning during the Gupta period in the Sarnath school. Later on, Pala art further sees its development, and eight scenes began to be depicted in a unified composition. Presence of the large number of small easy portable sculptures facilitated the artistic exchanges with other Asian countries. The theme particularly became popular in Pagan art of Myanmar where it reached another dimension. While betraying connection with Pala art, the Pagan artists produced work in large mural format which when combined with the sculptural art yielded a highly sophisticated format. Equally significant is Pagan artists contribution in combining the Aṣṭa-mahā-pratihārya concept with the seven weeks that Buddha spent meditating in Bodh Gaya.

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