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# Contents

Contents	3
List of Contributors	5
Editorial. RICHARD GOMBRICH	7
Brahmā's Invitation: the <i>Ariyapariyesanā-sutta</i> in the Light of its <i>Madhyama-āgama</i> Parallel. ANĀLAYO	12
Ambitions and Negotiations: The Growing Role of Laity in Twentieth-century Chinese Buddhism. EYAL AVIV	39
A comparison of the Pāli and Chinese versions of the <i>Devatā Saṃyutta</i> and <i>Devaputta Saṃyutta</i> , collections of early Buddhist discourses on <i>devatās</i> "gods" and <i>devaputras</i> "sons of gods". CHOONG MUN-KEAT	60
Some Remarks on Buddhaghosa's use of Sanskrit Grammar: Possible Hints of an Unknown Pāṇinian Commentary in Buddhaghosa's Grammatical Arguments. A.M. GORNALL	89
The Legend of the Earth Goddess and the Buddha. PAISARN LIKHITPREECHAKUL	108
Ven. Walpola Rahula and the politicisation of the Sinhala Sangha. SUREN RAGHAVAN	114
A Buddhist ballad from Bangladesh: the <i>Sambhūmitta Pālā</i> . An apocryphal <i>jātaka</i> from Southeast Asia to an Indian tune. PAOLA G. TINTI	134
An Early Korean Version of the Buddha's Biography. SEM VERMEERSCH	197

**Book Reviews**

*Greater Magadha: Studies in the Culture of Early India* by Johannes Bronkhorst. Reviewed by Richard Fynes 212

*The Genesis of the Bodhisattva Ideal* by Anālayo. Reviewed by Richard Gombrich 216

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## The Legend of the Earth Goddess and the Buddha<sup>1</sup>

*Paisarn Likhitpreechakul*

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A piece of Buddhist iconography which is widely found throughout mainland Southeast Asia is the Earth deity wringing out her hair to drown Māra and his army at the time of the Buddha's enlightenment. This feature of the enlightenment story, however, is not found in the Tipiṭaka. The author offers an interpretation of the iconography as an allegorical visualization of the Buddha's way to attain enlightenment.

One of the most marvellous murals in Thailand is painted on the wall facing the Emerald Buddha.

The soon-to-be Buddha is seen seated under the Bo tree with his left hand cradled in his lap and his right hand placed next to the right knee with fingers touching the ground. On both sides, Māra – the evil one – and his army are seen attempting the final assault to prevent him from attaining enlightenment, but they are being engulfed by a flood of water.

The story, as given in the introduction to the collection of *Jātaka* stories, is that the Buddha was sitting all alone in meditation when Māra with his host confronted him. Having failed to frighten the Buddha with weapons, Māra began a verbal assault. He claimed that he had attained the moral perfection of generosity, and his host all roared that they bore witness to that; but who, cried Māra, could bear witness to the Buddha's having done the same? The Buddha said that in his birth as Vessantara he had attained the perfection of generosity. He said, "You

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<sup>1</sup>This is a much revised version of an article published in *The Nation* (Bangkok) on 17 May 2011, Visākha Pūjā day. The author is indebted to Professor Richard Gombrich and Professor Peter Skilling for advice and assistance.

have sentient witnesses, while in this place I have no sentient witness... But to my gifts this solid earth, though insentient, is a witness.” At this he withdrew his right hand from inside his robe, extended it towards the earth, and asked her whether or not she was his witness. With the words “I was your witness then” the Earth made so great a noise that Māra’s elephant mount knelt before the Buddha and Māra’s forces fled in every direction.<sup>2</sup>

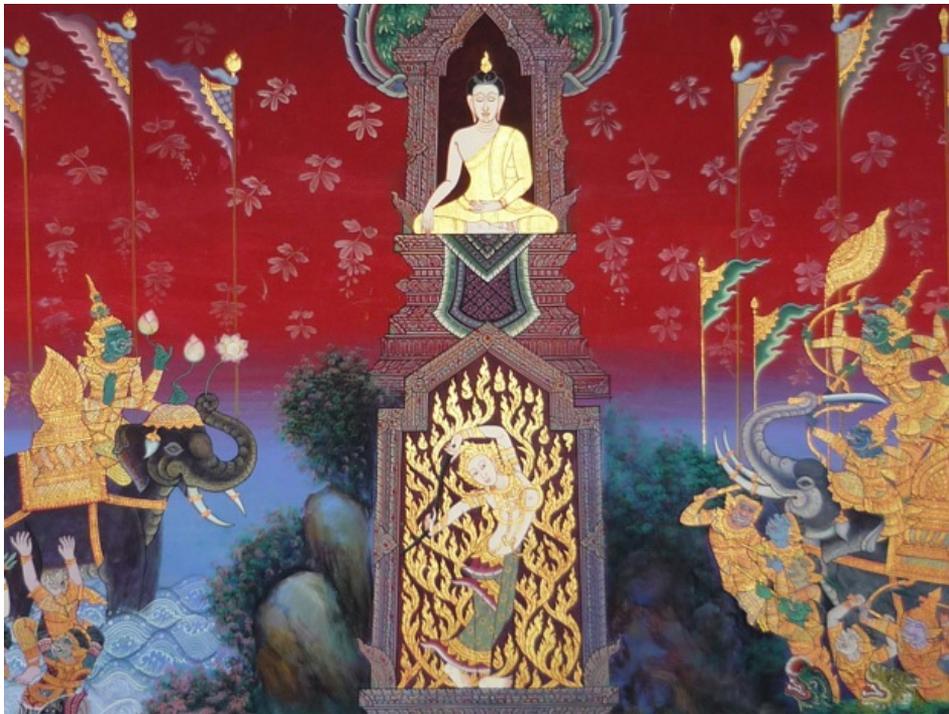


Figure 1: *The scene of the Buddha’s enlightenment and the Earth Goddess (Wat Phra Yeun Yukollabat, Uttaradit)*

There is no flood in this version. The Earth Goddess, who is called Mae Thorani<sup>3</sup> in Thai, loudly proclaimed her assent, and her roar alone was enough to scatter Māra’s army. In the Indian tradition the Buddha’s gesture as he calls her to

<sup>2</sup>The Jātaka, ed. Fausbøll, I, 74.

<sup>3</sup>This corresponds to the Sanskrit word *dhāraṇī*, one of the many words for “the earth”.

witness is known as the *bhūmisparśa mudrā*, “the gesture of touching the earth”; in Thailand it is called *Māravijaya*, “the conquest of Māra”, because this was the decisive moment at which Māra was defeated. As Māra is the personification of death (*maraṇa*), triumph over Māra is triumph over death. Nirvana is also known as “deathless” – freedom from rebirth and re-death.

In Buddhist iconography the Earth deity is usually shown as a female figure. In Sri Lanka she is normally shown as very small and depicted only down to the waist. In Thailand, on the other hand, she stands as a graceful figure in the sinuous pose known as *tribhaṅga*, “doubly bent”. Most strikingly, she is wringing out her tresses, and the torrent of water from them is drowning Māra’s army.

This scene is portrayed in countless temples across Thailand. I reproduce here two typical murals: from Wat Phra Yeun Yukollabat in the author’s hometown of Uttaradit (Figure 1), and from Wat Phra That Doi Suthep near Chiangmai (Figure 2).

Given the popularity of the tale, it will come as a surprise to many that this particular story cannot be found in the *Tipiṭaka*. Although there are stories in other Buddhist traditions of the earth bearing witness in various ways to the Buddha’s merits, the Earth Goddess’s wringing out her hair to drown Māra’s army is unique to mainland Southeast Asia.

In her comprehensive thesis on the subject, Elizabeth Guthrie wrote, “Although no textual source for the hair-wringing earth deity has yet been identified outside of mainland Southeast Asia, her iconography and story are too ancient and widely distributed across the cultures of the mainland to be attributed to one particular location.”<sup>4</sup>

She went on to conclude: “Many different stories, images and rituals about the deeds of the Buddhist earth deity at the time of the Enlightenment emerged in India during the first centuries of the Common Era in conjunction with the biography of the Buddha. These were then disseminated, along with Buddhism, throughout Asia during the first millennium of the Common Era, probably in successive waves, but most definitely from northeastern India, during the Pāla period.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Guthrie, Elizabeth (2004). “A Study of the History and Cult of the Buddhist Earth Deity in Mainland Southeast Asia”. PhD thesis. University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand, p.ii.

<sup>5</sup>Guthrie, p.186.

She attributes the popularity of the hair-wringing episode to its incorporation into the *Paṭhamasambodhi*,<sup>6</sup> composed in the Lanna kingdoms during the 15th or 16th century, adding that, “This text was disseminated in both Pāli and the vernaculars throughout mainland Southeast Asia and eventually became the standard Life of the Buddha in the region.”

In these popular versions, the torrent from the Earth Goddess’ hair is said to be the mass of libation water poured by the Bodhisattva in his previous lives. Although this makes good sense as a reaction to Māra’s claim of his own generosity, it leaves to be explained why the flow of generosity should have the effect of drowning Māra and his army. Therefore, the author would like to propose an alternative interpretation of this iconography with a stronger canonical relevance.

The basis of the metaphor of karma is growing plants. The act which produces karma is called a seed (*bīja*), the end result a fruit (*phala*). The *Tīpīṭaka* is full of passages referring to the karmic jungle, which one is urged to radically demolish. The *Ratana Sutta* of the *Sutta Nipāta* says of those who attain nirvana: *te khīṇabījā avirūhichandā*, “Destroyed are their germinal seeds; their desires no longer grow.”<sup>7</sup>

This metaphor is extended when the moisture which allows plants to grow is compared to the desire/craving which creates (bad) karma. Verse 340 in the *Taṇhā* (“Craving”) section of the *Dhammapada* reads: “Everywhere flow the streams, Everywhere the creepers sprout and stand. Seeing how the creeper has grown, Cut it off at the root with your understanding.” (*Savanti sabbadhī sotā, latā ubbhijja titṭhati. Taṃ ca disvā lataṃ jātaṃ mūlaṃ paññāya chindatha.*) The Pāli word *sota* literally means stream/flood/torrent and is often used metaphorically to refer to streams of cravings. Its double meanings point to the use of water as a metaphor for cravings in the context of karmic growth. The word *paññā*, “wisdom/understanding”, is often said to cut through or cut off.

This reading is further supported by Bhikkhunī Selā’s response to Māra in *Samyutta Nikāya*: “As when a seed is sown in a field / It grows depending on a pair of factors: / It requires both the soil’s nutrients / And a steady supply of moisture: / Just so the aggregates and elements ...”<sup>8</sup> The Pāli word *sineha*, here translated as “moisture”, also has the meaning of affection/love/desire/lust – the

<sup>6</sup>Ed. George Coedès and Jacqueline Ver Eecke, Pali Text Society, 2003.

<sup>7</sup>Sutta-nipāta 235.

<sup>8</sup>I, 134, verses 550–1, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi.

same as its principal usage in the Thai language. The simile here is thus built on a pun.

In a *sutta* called “Seeds” the Buddha says: “The four stations of consciousness should be seen as like the earth element. Delight and lust should be seen as like the water element. Consciousness together with its nutriment should be seen as like the five kinds of seeds...”<sup>9</sup> And elsewhere he says: “Kamma is the field, consciousness the seed, and craving the moisture to establish the consciousness of beings obstructed by ignorance and fettered by craving in a low (middling, superior) cosmic stratum. This is how future renewed existence is produced.” (*Kammam khettaṃ, viññāṇaṃ bījaṃ, taṇhā sineho hīnāya (majjhimāya, paṇitāya) dhātuyā viññāṇaṃ patitthitaṃ; evaṃāyatiṃ punabbhavābhinibbatti hoti*).<sup>10</sup>

It is, therefore, plausible that the Buddhist iconographers may have given this analogy visible expression. Nirvana means eradicating karmic growth. The rest of the world drowns in the moisture (*sineha*) of the desire which leads to continual rebirth. This fatal flood is visualized as emerging from the Earth, just as in the above metaphors and similes the earth is where the seeds of karma are planted and receive the moisture which allows them to grow. At his enlightenment, the Buddha has escaped all that forever; he is sitting there high and dry.

This interpretation may also explain why one of the epithets for an *arahant* (enlightened one) is *khīṇāsava*. As *khīṇa* means “waned away”, and *āsava* literally means “influx”<sup>11</sup> an *arahant* is therefore one who no longer experiences the stream of cravings.

The iconography thus carries two messages at once. On the one hand, the Earth is the Buddha’s decisive ally who help him at the crucial moment to win the battle against Māra. On the other, she does so in a way that vividly illustrates that the Buddha’s victory is not only over Death but also over Desire; those who stand against him are overwhelmed by a form of death which symbolises their own desires.

The scene of the Buddha’s enlightenment is, therefore, given a stronger interpretation, which not only depicts the Buddha’s triumph over death, but also the particular way in which he attained it: cessation of cravings leads to cessation of death and rebirth.

<sup>9</sup> *Samyutta Nikāya* III, 54, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi.

<sup>10</sup> *Anguttara Nikāya* I, 223–4, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought*, pp.55–6.

If this interpretation of the Earth Goddess is correct, it reinforces the emphasis Buddhism places on freedom from cravings. It is, therefore, unfortunate that many Thai Buddhists blindly believe in swindlers who dream up various outrageous methods to “cut the bonds of karma” for a fee, when all they need to do is work on their own desire.



Figure 2: *Wat Phra That Doi Suthep near Chiangmai*