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For several years, I have been working on the text and iconography of the Buddhist earth deity, known in Cambodia as *nānī ganbhīnī* ("princess") Braḥ Dharaṇī, or Lady Earth. The earth deity is part of the story of the Buddha's enlightenment: during the Bodhisattva's struggles against the assaults of Māra the Evil One, he calls on the earth with the gesture called the *bhūmisparśamudrā* and asks her to be his witness against Māra. This episode, known as the *māravijaya*, appears in the classic biographies of the Buddha (*Mahāvastu*, *Nidānakathā*, *Lalitavistara*) but the role played by the earth varies. In the Pāli biographical tradition, the earth is rarely personified, and the Buddha defeats Māra unaided.² In the Sanskrit traditions—particularly those preserved in the Chinese Canon—the earth deity is often personified, and aggressively defends the Bodhisattva against the assaults of Māra.

Although the personified earth deity is absent from the extant Pāli Canon, she is present in the *Paṭhamasambodhi*, a biography of the Buddha's life found in mainland Southeast Asia in Pāli, Mon, Khmer, Thai and the Tai languages. In the *Paṭhamasambodhi*, the earth manifests herself as a protectively aggressive female deity who not only witnesses for the Buddha but also defeats Māra and his army by wringing a flood of water from her hair. The *māravijaya* is one of the best-known chapters of the *Paṭhamasambodhi*, and images of the earth deity wringing her hair are common in Buddhist temples throughout mainland Southeast Asia.

Braḥ Dharaṇī has intrigued many scholars, including George Cœdès who worked on the *Paṭhamasambodhi* throughout his life and produced a critical edition of the text recently published by the Pāli Text Society (Cœdès 2001). In 1968, shortly before his death, Cœdès concluded that the *Paṭhamasambodhi* was composed in Pāli in the north of Thailand during the 14th-16th centuries and was based on material drawn from the Sinhalese biographies of the Buddha (Cœdès 1968). This text originally consisted of nine-ten chapters, covering the life of the Buddha until his Enlightenment and First Sermon. Over the centuries additional material—such as the hair-wringing episode—was added to the *noyau primitif* until a *Paṭhamasambodhi* consisting of twenty-nine chapters was "fixed" by the revisions of Paramanujit in the

¹ This essay is a revised version of a paper presented at the conference of the International Association of Buddhist Studies in Bangkok, December 13, 2002. Many thanks to Robert Dilham, Phaitun Dokbukaeco, Jacqueline Filliozat, Anant Lualertvorakul, Justin McDaniel, and Toni Shapiro-Phim for their assistance.

² There are some exceptions to this generalization; during the medieval period some Sinhalese biographies of the Buddha use Pāli to describe a female earth deity who defeats Māra's army with her earth-shaking dance, such as the *Samantakūṭavannanā*, Thera Vedeha (1986: 243-45).

mid-19th century. Recent research on the *Paṭhamasambodhi* supports Cœdès' hypotheses.³ The oldest extant palm leaf manuscripts of the *Paṭhamasambodhi* contain nine-ten chapters (including the hair-wringing episode) and are from northern Thailand and Laos. Based on his analysis of these ancient texts, Lualertvorakul has argued that this "Lao" *Paṭhamasambodhi* was originally composed in Pāli and subsequently translated into the vernaculars (Lualertvorakul 2003).

While this research locates the origins of the *Paṭhamasambodhi* in the Lanna cultural sphere, the earth deity's Indochinese pedigree is still far from clear. Although no textual source for the hair-wringing gesture has yet been identified outside of mainland Southeast Asia, images of the hair-wringing earth deity dated before the 10th century appear in Arakan (Western Burma). Similar images appear at Pagan and Angkor during the 12th-13th centuries.⁴ Based on the evidence of the iconography, it is likely that a *māravijaya* with an aggressive, hair-wringing Buddhist earth deity travelled from Northeastern India into mainland Southeast Asia along the trade routes during the Pāla period (9th–12th centuries) Once she arrived in mainland Southeast Asia, Braḥḍ Dharāṇī found fertile soil and survived the region's transition to Theravāda Buddhism while other Buddhist deities such as Hevajra and Prajñāpāramita were left behind. Today, despite her absence from the extant Pāli Canon, the earth deity can still be found guarding the *vajrāsana* in Arakan, Burma, Cambodia, Kampuchea Krom, central and northern Thailand, Laos, and Sipsong Panna. Her continuing popularity I believe is linked to the importance of the *māravijaya* for Buddhists in these regions.

Thus far I have presented the *māravijaya* as a small part or chapter in the biography of the Buddha. However, in Cambodia the *māravijaya* is often preached, recited and even performed independently of the *Paṭhamasambodhi*, most notably during *buddhābhiseka*, or consecration of a Buddha image. The independent *māravijaya* is, like the *jātakas*, *parittas* and *yantras*, part of Cambodia's "ritual" or "practical" canon: the texts that are actually used on a regular basis by the members of a Buddhist community (McDaniel 2002). Hallisey has urged scholars to study this practical canon and determine how and when such texts are used, in order to "reconceptualize the Buddhist tradition in comparison with other transcultural phenomena" (Hallisey 1995:55). Here I will attempt to reconceptualize Cambodia's *māravijaya* by presenting a brief ethnography of the ritual use of the text during *buddhābhiseka*, locate these rituals within Cambodia's religious history, and offer some suggestions about the significance of the *māravijaya* episode for Buddhists in general.

Buddha images, structures (*vihāra*, *cetiya*, *kuṭī*), newly copied Buddhist texts, the sites used for Buddhist initiation – all these things require consecration before they can be used for Buddhist practice. Bentor, writing about Tibetan Buddhism, makes the point that consecrations consist of a complex series of rituals, drawn from many different traditions, and can be difficult to understand unless their composite nature is recognized (Bentor 1996: 33). The same can be said about Theravāda Buddhist consecration. While there are rules about consecration in the Pāli Canon (such as the prescriptions for the establishment

³ Lualertvorakul (2003) describes two *Paṭhamasambodhi* dated by their colophons 1574 and 1592 CE from Vat Lai Hin (Lampang); see also Rawin (1993) and Von Hinüber (1996:180); Dokbukaeo (SSRI, Chiang Mai University) showed me an incomplete manuscript from the Chiang Mai area dated 1478, but it lacks the *Māravijaya* chapter.

⁴ Gutman, personal communication, 9/7/2001. Duroiselle (1922: 19) found a fragmentary Vasundharā in the ancient city of Wethāli that he dated 10th century; both the sculpture and negatives have since been lost, see Gutman (1976: 260). Two votive plaques in the Pagan Museum from the Buphaya stūpa that depict the hair-wringing earth deity are dated pre-11th century. For Pagan see Bautze-Picron (2003:134, 133). Carved pilasters of Braḥḍ Dharāṇī from Angkor Vat were published in Fournereau (1890) and Roveda (1997:150). Some of the Bayon period images of Braḥḍ Dharāṇī are cited by Giteau (1967:136) and Tes Sothy et. al. (1996).

of *sīmā*⁵) the rites that actually take place are often a mixture of traditions, drawn from many different sources and performed in a great jumble of replication to ensure maximum efficacy. One of the reasons for the eclectic nature of these rituals is that consecration is the business of lay donors as well as the ordained Sangha (Bentor 1996 :74). There is always a main patron, and often lesser patrons as well, who have paid for the image, texts or buildings being consecrated, and provided for the ritual expenses (food, candles, incense, decorations, etc.). The resources of the patrons and their beliefs –usually conservative– inevitably affect the shape and content of consecration rituals as well as the canonical prescriptions.

Cambodian consecration rituals are public ceremonies, and are performed before an audience of lay devotees and donors as well as the Sangha. During these rituals, the experiences of the Buddha on his path to Enlightenment are re-enacted: the Buddha image being consecrated is shaved, bathed and given the monastic prerequisites as if it were Gautama preparing for his career as a religious ascetic. Sacred water is sprinkled in the rite of *abhiṣeka*, purifying the image or the site, while recalling the coronation of kings and the initiation of the student on the path to enlightenment. Meditation, dance and possession are used to evoke sacred powers or forces, which are then transmitted to the image or *ceṭiya* being consecrated (Bizot 1994: 115). Over and over again during the proceedings, protective boundaries –the sacred string that links the Buddha image to the chanting monks, the turning of the *babil* (a ritual candleholder)– are established around the site, both to contain the sacred power that has been evoked, and to prevent evil forces from disrupting the proceedings. And the story of the conquest of Māra is recited and re-enacted.

There are several reports of Buddhist consecration rituals in Cambodia that mention the performance of the *māravijaya*. One was made by Adhémard Leclère (1853-1917), an administrator of the French Protectorate of Cambodia who rose to the position of the Résident de France at Kratie. An amateur ethnographer, Leclère left detailed descriptions of the events surrounding the consecration of Vat Braḥ Kaev (Silver Pagoda) within the grounds of the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh (Leclère 1906:10). Leclère reported that many people came and occupied the site of the new temple during the consecration proceedings, helping to bury the *sīmā* stones that establish the sacred boundaries around the site and listening and participating in the chanting and recitation of the *Paṭṭhamasambodhi*. He described a pantomime that took place during the night in which "Little children assume the role of divine angels (*thévada*) who witness the proceedings... The monks recite the defeat of Māra." Likewise, Porée-Maspero, who did most of her field work during the 1940s and 1950s, noted that "In Cambodia, the *Pchañmāra* is played by young girls and boys, or by the royal dancers, during the ceremonies called *aphisek preah*, where an image of the Buddha is consecrated at the end of the rainy season, or at the time of the incineration of a monk or a prince, or the consecration of a pagoda" (Porée-Maspero 1961: 923-924). Cravath, in a study of Cambodian dance, noted that a Sri Lankan delegation bearing Buddha relics arrived in Phnom Penh in October 1952. The relics were installed on the main altar of Vat Braḥ Kaev (again the Silver Pagoda) until a *ceṭiya* could be built to hold them. On October 5, 1952, the King's dance troupe performed the *māravijaya*, including the temptation by Māra's daughters and the defeat of Māra's army by the earth deity, in front of the altar and its Buddha image to honor the relics (Cravath 1985, I: 224, II: 345).

Giteau's monograph on *sīmā* rituals contains a detailed description of several consecration ceremonies that took place during the establishment of *sīmā* boundaries in the 1960s.⁶ In addition to Giteau's observations and photographs, her monograph included the transliteration and translation of the

⁵ See Kieffer-Pülz (1997) for an exhaustive discussion on the *sīmā* regulations in the Vinayas.

⁶ Giteau (1969:31) notes that performances of the *Maravijaya* are associated with *sīmā* installations as well as *Abhisek Brah* as the two events usually coincide.

texts used during these ceremonies. One of the texts, written in Khmer on *krāṃṇi* paper⁷ was the *Phcañ' Māra* or "the defeat of Māra." The *Phcañ' Māra* included stage directions for performance as well as verses recounting Māra's challenge, the temptation of the Buddha by the daughters of Māra, the assault of his armies and the defeat of Māra by the hair-wringing earth deity Braḥ Dharaṇī.⁸ The performances witnessed by Giteau took place, like the Enlightenment, in the middle of the night (Giteau 1969:32). Monks, *ācāry* (lay officiants) and lay people gathered in the *vihāra* to hear the recitation of the *māravijaya* chapter of the *Paṭhamasambodhi* written in Pāli on palm leaves. After this recitation was finished, the *Phcañ' Māra* was read aloud in Khmer from the *krāṃṇi* manuscript while it was being re-enacted by amateur players.

Giteau found that the scope of the performances varied depending on the resources of the sponsors and the availability of local talent, but the cast usually consisted of two adult men (played by *ācāry* or monks) who performed the roles of the Buddha and Māra, and the *kūn devatā*, young boys and girls dressed in their best clothes and wearing paper crowns. The boys played male roles (the *lokapāla* and *mārasenā*) and the girls played female roles (Sujatā, the three daughters of Māra: Rāgā, Taṅhā and Arati, and Braḥ Dharaṇī). In one performance witnessed by Giteau, when the Bodhisattva changed the three daughters of Māra into hags, three old women were substituted for the young girl actors. In another elaborate production, masked dancers dressed like the classical dancers performed the role of the soldiers of Māra. In the final scene of one performance, a girl representing Braḥ Dharaṇī held a vessel full of water, which she flung on Māra and his henchman, causing them to flee (note that she does not twist her hair). In another re-enactment, Braḥ Dharaṇī threw water on the *mārasenā* before forcing them to bow down before the main Buddha image.

While such performances were commonplace in pre-war Cambodia, they are rare today. However, the *māravijaya* was performed in a rural vat in the village of Kbenk Kpuos in Kompong Chhnang province in 1998. The vat of Kbenk Kpuos had been badly damaged during the war and Khmer Rouge period, and was rebuilt. During the renovations, a married couple donated money to construct a *cetiya* to hold their parents' remains and a *kuṭi* for the monks. They had the consecration ceremony videotaped to show friends and relatives in New Zealand.⁹ The two-hour long videotape (made by a Khmer cameraman whose business is the recording of such ceremonies) was a presentation of the highlights of an event that unfolded over several days and nights. While the footage was heavily edited by the production laboratory to fit onto a videotape, their final footage still shows that consecration is a cooperative effort by lay people, *ācāry* and monks.

The ceremony in Kompong Chhnang was similar to those documented by Giteau in the 1960s. The most noticeable feature of the ceremony is its relaxed and informal nature: rather than being a solemn occasion, the members of the audience never stop talking to their neighbors. When they pay attention to the rituals unfolding before them, they interrupt the proceedings by shouting advice and criticism to the performers. Blaring music and the beating of gongs punctuate the action. Two *ācāry* dressed in white robes play the Buddha and Māra. Most charming are the *kūn devatā*. They take their roles seriously but at the same time are children: one young girl who plays the temptress Rāgā is overwhelmed by the microphone, and must be prompted by the Buddha to say her lines. The boys who make up army of Māra stand in a motley row, wiggling, grinning and pulling their ears as Māra challenges the Buddha for his throne. When

⁷ *Krāṃṇi* manuscripts are made from large sheets of mulberry paper, folded like an accordion, and inscribed with black ink. See Becchetti 1991.

⁸ Giteau (1969) includes in her appendix a transliteration and translation from Khmer into French of the *Phcañ' Māra*. In addition to mss. 1562, Giteau also used information from the archives of the *Commission des Moeurs et Coutumes du Cambodge*.

⁹ Many thanks to Mey Poen and Phoung Soeung for telling me about this ceremony and allowing me to copy their videotape.

Brah̄ Dharanī flings water on the *mārasenā*, Māra's troops fall to the floor, scrambling for a tray of sweets set out as a reward for the young actors. Despite the informal nature of the performance, the process of acting out the story brings the text alive in a way that the recitation by a monk of a chapter of the *Paṭhamasambodhi* (especially in Pāli) could never do. Such ritual performances are clearly an efficient and effective way to transmit textual information to an audience of lay people.

The seventh of the ten precepts, obligatory for monks and often followed by pious lay people is an injunction against watching dramatic performances. Therefore it is not surprising to find that today, many people are not comfortable with the idea of the performance of Buddhist stories in the *vihāra*. Recently, dancers belonging to the Royal Dance Troupe stated in interviews that such performances do not take place because they are "against the Buddhist practice."¹⁰ However, ritual performances have been part of Cambodian religious expression since the pre-Angkor period. The earliest Khmer inscriptions tell of the donation of dancers and musicians to a temple and a Bayon period inscription reports that the Queen Jayarajadevi sponsored the performance of the *jātakas* by a troupe of nuns. Cambodia's version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Rāmākerti*, is a Middle Period religious text that has always been performed (Pou 1977). As late as the 19th century it was reported that monks were paid to chant the Mahājātakas and the *Brah̄ Mālay*, "beating time on the ground with the big fans that they held in front of them. Some of them danced in the style of the theatrical representations of the *Yike*..." (Bizot 1976 :6). A series of decrees passed in Cambodia by the *Ministère de l'Intérieur et des Cultes* at the beginning of the 20th century forbade monks to participate in performances in Buddhist temples showing that such performances were still common at that time (Bizot 1976: 12). Even today, ordination ceremonies preserve the memory of these performances. The candidates for ordination are dressed like princes and ride on horseback to the *vihāra*, escorted by their family and friends. Masked players representing the hordes of Māra harass the procession to the *vihāra*, attempting to dissuade the candidate from embarking on the Noble Path in a dramatic re-enactment of the Buddha's abandonment of his life as a prince for the life of a religious ascetic (Phim and Thompson 1999: 55).

Is the re-enactment of the Grand Départ and the *māravijaya* in the Buddhist temple just "skillful means," a way to teach Buddhism to illiterate lay people, or is there an additional religious significance behind such performances? Brunet, who called this religious theatre a *danse sacrée*, noted that such performances are not unique to Cambodia but originated in India and are related to the *wayang beber* of Indonesia and the *pien-wen* of China.¹¹ Common to all such performances is that the story is known to everyone, and its re-enactment constitutes worship, or a meritorious deed. The aim of the performance is to elevate players and spectators alike out of their ordinary existence to a higher realm using a combination of the recitation of texts, chanting, dialogues, music and dancing.

Within the context of Brunet's comments, it is significant that the *māravijaya* episode has long been associated with *buddhābhiseka* in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism (Bhattacharya 1981 and Skorupski 1998). Since the time of Padmasambhava, ritual dances re-enacting the events of the original *māravijaya* are used to transform the site to be consecrated into a representation of the cosmological sphere, or *maṇḍala* (Cantwell 2000 and Schrempf 1999). During these performances, the earth deity is summoned and installed in the site to act as its guardian, the site is purified of malevolent forces, and its boundaries are established. There is a conceptual parallel between the ancient Indo-Tibetan consecration rituals and the

¹⁰ T. Shapiro-Phim, personal communication, 15/9/02, and R. Didham, personal communication, 18/9/02.

¹¹ Brunet 1969, see also Mair 1988.

activities that take place during Cambodian *buddhābhiṣeka* today, where a sacred *maṇḍala* must also be ritually delimited and the *māravijaya* re-enacted in front of the main Buddha image to destroy the obstacles to Enlightenment (the daughters of Māra and Māra's army). The contemporary performance of the *māravijaya* during *buddhābhiṣeka* links Cambodia's Theravāda present to its pre-Theravadin past, and to Buddhism generally.

Unlike the canonical prescriptions for establishment of *sīmā* in the *Mahāvagga* that involve only the ordained Sangha, these traditional consecration rituals allow lay sponsors and devotees to participate in some way in their dedication and consecration of Buddhist foundations. The northern Thai authors of the *Paṭhamasambodhi* may have chosen to retain the non-canonical *māravijaya* in their Pāli biography of the Buddha to ensure that lay people continued to make merit by donating *vihāra*, *ceṭiya*, and Buddha images. Or perhaps Braḥ Dharaṇī was considered an essential component of site consecration, regardless of whether she was "canonical" or not. More interesting is that the decision to include the earth deity episode in the *Paṭhamasambodhi* preserved an ancient Buddhist story, one of the few that have survived from Angkor and Pagan, and sanctioned the continued presence of Braḥ Dharaṇī at the foot of the *vajrāsana* when Theravāda Buddhism became ascendant on the mainland.

And finally, there needs to be some recognition of the religious meaning of the *māravijaya* episode for Buddhists. While part of its popularity is due to the interest that Buddhists have in the life and career of the Buddha, the episode has a further significance. Unlike the texts that discuss how reality is constituted (or not), and codes of moral or mental disciplines that are difficult to follow, the *māravijaya* episode contains specific information in simple language about how the Buddha himself overcame the obstacles to salvation. Witnessing the performance of the *māravijaya*, whether by the Tibetan saint Padmasambhava, Cambodia's royal dance troupe, or a group of village children, offers all Buddhists a taste of Enlightenment.

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