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*"This great earth impartially supports all things,
moveable and immovable, in the world.
According to her measure, there is no falsehood with respect to me.
Take the earth as my witness!"
(Vaidya, 1958: 232, l. 13; 233, l. 16)*

At the fourth *Women in Asia* conference, held in Melbourne Australia in October 1993, Barbara Andaya argued that Southeast Asian societies can be characterized by their ambiguous attitude towards women and the sexual potency they represent. Andaya and others have noted that the introduction of the world religions into the region — first the Indic religions (Hinduism and Buddhism) and later Islam and Christianity — seems to have strengthened deep-rooted fears about the dangers inherent in female sexuality (Andaya 1994; Keyes 1984; Khin Thitsa 1983; Kirsch 1985). While many different schools of Buddhism have been active on the mainland, there seems to be a strong link between the development of gender hierarchy and the ascendancy of Theravada Buddhism in the region. Theravada Buddhism makes it very obvious that women have a religious status below that of men, due to misdoings in a previous life. This karmic inferiority lies behind the prohibitions that forbid physical contact between women and monks, bars women from higher ordination, and in some Buddhist temples, denies women access to the *uposatha*, the sacred area of a Buddhist temple demarcated by boundary markers known as *sīmā* (Giteau 1969).¹ Despite such sanctions against women, the most casual observance of Buddhism in action in Southeast Asia will reveal that the strongest supporters of Buddhism are women. Without the constant material and emotional support of devout laywomen, the Sangha would quickly starve and Buddhist temples would crumble. Why do these women persist in supporting a religion that denies them access to the Buddha? In this essay I suggest that research into Buddhist art works and patterns of art patronage can provide insight into the complex relationship between the Buddha, his female supporters and the orthodox Buddhist hierarchy.

The paradoxical nature of the relationship between Buddhism and women was made very clear to me in Western Burma, Rakhine (Arakan) State, in the old city of Mrauk U. I went to look at a statue of

¹ R. Didham (University of Canterbury, Christchurch, February 2002), the exclusion of women from the *uposatha* (especially noticeable in northern Thailand, Burma and Sri Lanka) seems to be a cultural practice with no basis in the Vinayas.

the Buddha called the Anawma Image, built by Princess Anawma in 1501 (U Shwe Zan 1994:101). The pedestal is covered with beautiful carvings, and in the center of the base of the pedestal is a carving of a small female kneeling in a tiger's mouth and wringing out her hair (detail, Figure 1²). I wanted to photograph the female on the pedestal, but the Anawma Image is encircled by a protective brick wall, and it was difficult for me to get in a good position to take the photograph. Despite my struggles, my guides (two very pleasant and helpful Arakanese men shown standing on the Buddha image in Figure 2) would not let me climb over or touch the statue in any way because women should not have any contact with the Buddha. I succeeded in taking my picture without any transgressions, but I felt there was a certain irony in the situation: because I was a woman, I was forbidden to touch a Buddha image that had been built by a woman to take a photograph of a little woman on the base of the pedestal that the Buddha was sitting on...



Figure 1. Anawma Image (detail), Mrauk U.

Who is the woman on the base of the Buddha image? She has many names. In Burma she is known as Vasundhara or Vasundri, and pronounced something like Withoundaye ("earth"). In Thailand and Laos she is called Mae Thoranee ("mother earth") and in Cambodia *Neang Kanghing Preah Thoranee* ("lady princess earth"). All of her names are based on Sanskrit words for "earth;" she is the earth deity. This is her story: the Bodhisattva was sitting in meditation on his throne under the bodhi tree just prior to his enlightenment. Mara, the evil one, was jealous and wanted to stop him from reaching enlightenment. Accompanied by his warriors, wild animals and his evil daughters, he tried to drive the Bodhisattva from his throne. All the gods were terrified and ran away, leaving the Bodhisattva alone to face Mara. The



Figure 2. Anawma Image, Mrauk U.

Bodhisattva stretched down his right hand to summon the earth as his witness in a gesture known as the *bhūmi-sparśa-mudrā* or "gesture of touching the earth." Touched by the Buddha — and I want to emphasize here the fact that the Buddha actually touches her — the earth rose up from underneath his throne in the form of a beautiful woman, and routed Mara and his hosts, leaving the Bodhisattva free to reach enlightenment.³ There are many different versions of the story of the enlighten-ment, and the earth deity does not appear in all of them. Significantly, she cannot be found in the Pali canon. The witness of the earth deity belongs to the Sanskrit Buddhist tradition: texts composed in Sanskrit and preserved in Chinese date her story to the earliest strata of Buddhist literature. Second century CE. Buddhist art works also attest to the ancient and widespread popularity of the story of the earth deity throughout Buddhist Asia.

In Indian art, the earth deity, or deities, are depicted as tiny

² Unless otherwise noted, all photographs reproduced here were taken by the author.

³ Meng Prang (Buddhist Institute, Phnom Penh) first told me this story in 1994.



Figure 3. Stele, Gandhara region, Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin.

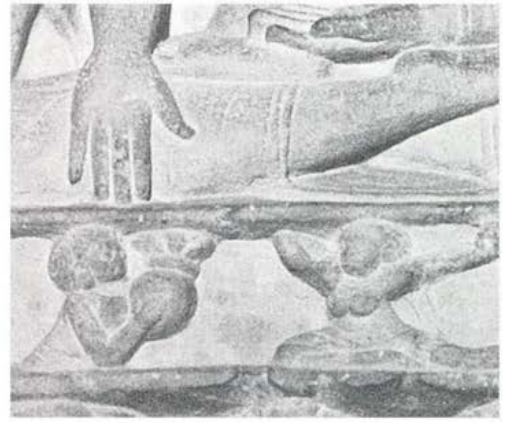


Figure 4. Stele, Sarnath, National Museum, Delhi.

females located under the Buddha's finger (the *bhūmi-sparsa-mudrā*). These little figures make *añjali* (raise their clasped hands in veneration), bear vases or run to the aid of the Buddha (Leoshko 1988). Figure 3, a second century stele from Gandhara, shows the earth deity emerging from the earth under the Buddha's throne with her hands in *añjali*. Figure 4 is a detail of a fifth-century Gupta stele from Sarnath and shows two earth deities, one bearing a pot and the other running to help the Bodhisattva. During the ninth-twelfth centuries, the earth deity enjoyed great popularity in northeastern India where she was regularly incorporated into the throne of Buddha images. Figure 5 is a detail of a late ninth-century stele from Kurkihar; one deity bears a pot and the second is trampling a small Ganesa.

Sometime during this period, forms of Buddhism that used Sanskrit rather than Pali, usually described as Mahayanist or Tantric, became popular in mainland Southeast Asia (Coëdès 1968; Luce 1969-70). Images of the earth deity start to appear in mainland Southeast Asia during the same period, usually on the base of Buddha images under the *bhūmi-sparsa-mudrā* or painted or carved onto temple walls. The Southeast Asian earth deity is (usually) not depicted bearing a vase, running or in *añjali*; instead she wrings water out of a long tress of hair. Sometimes she is shown kneeling, perhaps recalling her emergence from the earth, and sometimes she is shown standing. She is often equal in size to the Buddha and is the focal point of the scene, flanked by Mara's army, while the Buddha is depicted floating serenely up above the fray.

One early image of the Southeast Asian earth deity (Figure 6) can be seen on a bronze pedestal



Figure 5. Stele, Kurkihar, Indian Museum, Calcutta.



Figure 6. Bronze Pedestal Base, Phimai, Norton Simon Museum, L.A.



Figure 7. East Gate, Ta Prohm, Angkor Thom.

base that once supported a Buddha image. The piece originally came from the Angkorian city of Phimai, located today in eastern Thailand (Woodward 1979). The earth deity stands in the middle wringing out her hair; on either side of her, Mara's demon army is attacking. The twelfth-century Angkorian king Jayavarman VII had many images of the earth deity carved on his Buddhist temples. Figure 7 is a lintel from Ta Prohm, a temple built by the king to honor his mother. Although never as popular in Central Burma as she was in Arakan or Cambodia, the earth deity was known in Pagan. She is mentioned in the *Inscriptions of Pagan*, and appears in a few paintings and steles (Luce and Pe Maung Tin 1932).⁴ Her story

is well-known among the Mon people and in the Shan states.

It is still not clear what form of Buddhism was practiced by Buddhists at Angkor or Pagan. But by the fourteenth century a shift had taken place to Theravada Buddhism in the region, a shift accompanied by changes in Buddhist teachings, language, practice and iconography (Brown 1997, Thompson 1997). Despite the fact that the earth deity does not appear in the Pali canon, by the mid-fourteenth century her story, complete with the hair-wringing episode, had been incorporated into a popular biography of the Buddha composed in Pali, Khmer, Mon, Siamese and the T'ai languages called the *Pathamasambodhi* (Swearer 2002). The earth deity's inclusion in the *Pathamasambodhi* provided her with a respectable Pali pedigree, and her image continued to be painted on the walls of Buddhist temples and carved on the bases of Buddha images and independent images that were placed in front of Buddha statues.

The earth deity's relationship with the Buddha came under attack in Burma in the mid-seventeenth century when a leading monk, the Taungpila Sayadaw Tipitakalankara, declared that the earth deity did not exist in the Pali or Sanskrit canon and had her image erased from a temple in Sagaing (Duroiselle 1922:16). Further questions were asked about Vasundhara by King Badon (1782-1819). This pious if obsessive king sponsored many scribes to make copies of the Pali canon, the *Tipiṭaka*, to help propagate the true religion. During the editorial process, it became apparent that there were inconsistencies and mistakes within the Burmese *Tipiṭaka*. When the king tried to find authentic sources in India and Ceylon, he began to realize that everything was a copy of a copy. King Badon's views on Buddhism were recorded in a note dated 23 May 1818 attached to the *Royal Orders of Burma*. One of his many complaints concerned the earth deity: "It is a popular story that Mara came with an army to rob the Buddha his seat under the tree. Vasundre God of Earth came to help the Buddha. It is all rubbish ... It is just a silly talk ... if the Buddha was so generous before in giving things away, he would not refuse his seat under the tree for Mara. Nor would he ask Vasundare [sic] to help him against Mara" (Than Tun 1987:21-2).

There was considerable resistance to King Badon's ideas, and few of his reforms survived his death. However, many people besides the king were thinking critically about Buddhism, and monastic commentaries from the Konbaung and Mandalay periods often discussed the "problem" of the earth deity

⁴ I am grateful to T. Frasch who translated references to the earth deity in the *Inscriptions of Pagan*, vol. 56, portfolio 1, plate CVI and portfolio 2, plate CXLV.



Figure 8. Bell, Mandalay.

deities, located on the periphery of the Mahamuni temple complex in Mandalay, at some distance from the enclosure that contains the Mahamuni Buddha image (a sacred space that women are prohibited from entering). Figure 10 is of a modern shrine located next to one of the Bodhi trees on the southeastern periphery off the platform of the Shwedagon temple in Yangon (Rangoon). Vasundhara, lacking a bosom and flanked by two club-wielding demons, is ambiguous in gender. The presence of these modern images at national monuments like the Shwedagon and the Mahamuni shows that donors are still eager to sponsor images of the earth deity, but the iconography of Vasundhara has been modified to conform to beliefs about gender and Buddhism current in Burma today. The relationship between Vasundhara



Figure 10. Shrine, Shwedagon, Yangon.

(Duroiselle 1922:16). The use of the masculine ending for the name of the earth deity, Vasundre instead of Vasundri, dates from this time. A perception that it was inappropriate for a beautiful female to be in such close contact with the Buddha meant that the earth deity's breasts and other female characteristics were de-emphasized or removed, and images of Vasundhara were moved from the Buddha's throne to areas outside of the consecrated boundaries, or *sīmā*.⁵ Her role was diminished: instead of an active participant in the Enlightenment, she became a door guardian, or the passive witness of meritorious deeds in a tableau in which Indra was the main deity. Sometimes she was placed next to a bell that people could strike when they made donations (Figure 8).

Figure 9 is a small shrine, guarded by two "male" earth



Figure 9. Shrine, Mahamuni temple, Mandalay.

and the Buddha has been changed, she has lost her gender and her active role, and has been placed outside the *sīmā*.

In contrast with the Burmese, the Khmer and the Thai have never seemed to worry too much about the gender of the earth deity known as Neang/Nang Thoranee: in these countries the earth has always been conceived of a beautiful, scantily-dressed young woman. However, Buddhist reform movements have questioned her right to be included in the Buddha's biography. The Chakri monarchs have always supported critical research into Buddhist texts with an eye to "demythologizing" and standardizing them, and the

⁵ Personal communication, U Win Maung (Tanpawady, Mandalay, August 2001).



Figure 11. Fountain, Sanam Luang, Bangkok.

Pathamasambodhi has received its share of attention (Reynolds 1973). A re-edition of the *Pathamasambodhi* was produced in 1926 by Supreme Patriarch Vajirañanavarorasa (one of the sons of King Mongkut) and is currently included in the national Buddhist studies curriculum for novice monks; it does not include the story of Thoranee (Wachirayanawororot 1926). A more recent example, Buddhadasa's biography of the Buddha, also omits the witness of the earth deity (Swearer 1996).

Fortunately for Thoranee, enthusiasm for Buddhist reform in Thailand has always been tempered by Buddhist devotionalism, and she has remained popular with her devotees. Freed from her textual anchor, Thoranee has developed into an independent deity with her own cult, perhaps on the margins of orthodox Buddhist hierarchy, but always maintaining close links with the Buddha himself. As John Strong observed, condemnation by an orthodox elite can often be counterproductive. Certain beliefs and practices may owe their popularity and prestige to their ostracism from official orthodoxy.

"They are, in other words, representations of a counterculture, reflecting another side of Buddhism in Theravada lands, a complement and antidote to orthodoxy" (Strong 1992: 185). I suggest that the counterculture Thoranee represents is that of Buddhist women.

An illustration of how this counterculture operates is a statue of Thoranee, located on the corner of Rajadamnoen and Rajini Roads next to the Phipopli Bridge on the northeast corner of the Sanam Luang in Bangkok (Figure 11). The statue, which is also a water fountain, was built in 1917 on the occasion of the 50th birthday of Queen Saovapha, the favorite consort of Rama 5 and the mother of Rama 6 and Rama 7. Queen Saovapha donated money from her personal wealth to build the statue of Thoranee, and ordered her sons and a brother-in-law to design and engineer the fountain apparatus. Archives have preserved a letter from the queen about her statue (Oudumaphra 2527:454-455; *Phra Kruang* 2542:24).

...tomorrow I will make merit on my birthday by voluntarily performing a meritorious act. The water fountain of the statue of Nang Phra Thoranee, which is the remedy for disease, for which I have donated (my) affluence to allow the casting to take place, has been established at the foot of the Phan Phipopli and is now ready to be opened. I ask that the merit for the fountain be reassigned to be a gift for the public good, for the sake of all sentient beings to drink to help sickness and to relieve from heat and to increase health according to the great solicitude of the triple gems...

— signed Saovapha

I do not know what the King thought of his consort's statue-fountain of the earth deity on the Sanam Luang outside the Royal Palace, but today her statue-fountain — often glossed in guidebooks as a Brahmanic shrine — is a popular site, brightly gilded and covered with the flowers and offerings of the (mainly) female devotees who come to pray for Thoranee's help.

Another fountain statue of Thoranee is located in a traffic roundabout near the Psar O'Russey in Phnom Penh (Figure 12). This statue was built along with many other monuments in the early 1960's during a period of urban beautification in Phnom Penh. In an interview, Vann Molyvann, one of the architects involved with the construction of the nearby Stade Olympique complex, recalled that the Mayor of



Figure 12. Fountain, Psar O'Russey, Phnom Penh.

Phnom Penh, Tep Phon, commissioned the construction of the Thoranee statue as part of the general re-development of the area before the 1966 Olympics.⁶ The statue is an important landmark in Phnom Penh, located near several important temples and markets, and is well-maintained, but today's traffic makes pedestrian access difficult and except for a few lotuses and incense sticks, Thoranee seems largely ignored. However, during the civil war period the statue was the focus of mediumnic activity. An article in the newspaper *Koh Santapheap* reported that early one morning in 1972, a medium named Kyae climbed onto the statue and went into a state of possession. She danced, sang and trans-

mitted messages to the people who gathered around until the crowds grew so large that traffic was stopped, and the police were summoned to take the woman away.⁷ Although there are few traces of cult activity at the site today, recent fieldwork shows that the close association between Thoranee and Cambodian's female mediums has continued.⁸

So far, I have suggested that images of Thoranee have a special significance for women because they symbolize the close relationship that exists between the Buddha and his female supporters. There is additional information to be found in these Buddhist art works: they were all commissioned and donated by pious Buddhists with the expectation that the donor will gain merit from the gift. This is not novel in itself; some of the earliest Buddhist records we have are the donative inscriptions on Buddhist art works and buildings (Schopen 1997). The act of the earth deity in ratifying the past donations of the Buddha is clearly a powerful model for Buddhist donors, one that has persisted despite the vagaries of Buddhist reform. Queen Saovapha's letter leaves no doubt that she expected to receive a lot of merit from her donation of the statue of Nang Thoranee, and as we have seen, the Burmese continue to donate images of Vasundhara even when they must be confined to the periphery of religious buildings.

The conservative process of Buddhist art patronage has also had an effect on popular conceptions of the *māravijaya* (Victory over Mara). There have been changes in the image of Thoranee, but these changes have been relatively minor and slow to develop; the overwhelming impression when looking at the images of the earth deity, even those confined to the outskirts of Burmese temples, is the continuity of her iconography. Figure 13 is of a mural

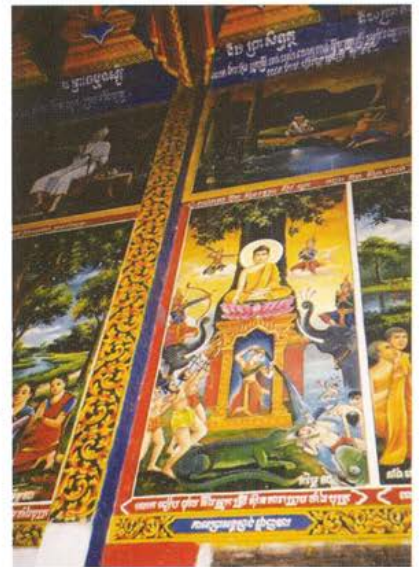


Figure 13. Mural, Vat Tonle Bati.

⁶ H.E. Vann Molyvann, Executive Director-General of APSARA (Phnom Penh, June 2000), explained that despite the apparent similarity between the two structures, the Phnom Penh fountain was not directly inspired by Princess Saovapha's fountain on the Sanam Luang; the concept of a Thoranee fountain is the result of Cambodia and Thailand's common cultural inheritance rather than derivation.

⁷ *Koh Santapheap*, January 4, 1972, p. 4.

⁸ D. Bertrand, personal communication, 1999.



Figure 14. Phra Khru Dewa Postcard, Bangkok.

postcards in Thailand, and they have filtered into Laos, Cambodia and even Burma as well. These familiar images, considered to be modern and realistic, are preferred by many people in rural areas to traditional regional styles of art, and artists have learned to copy them.

In the past, many of the artists who decorated temples in rural areas were artist-monks. This next image (Figure 15) is from Vat Athvea at Siem Reap, Cambodia. I have no information about the donor, but all the images decorating the newly refurbished temple were made by a resident



Figure 16. Artist's studio, Wat Athvea, Siem Reap.

painting from a modern Buddhist temple located near Prasat Ta Prohm, Tonle Bati. The names of the donors — Mr. Chiep Thol, his wife, Sundara and their five daughters and sons — have been inscribed on the painting, because they want to advertise their meritorious deed. I was told by the achar (lay ritual officiant) of the vat that the story of the earth deity was a special favorite of Chiep Thol's wife, Sundara. One of the epithets of the earth deity is Sundari ("beautiful one") and because of their shared name, she — Chiep Thol's wife, Sundara — had chosen to donate this particular image to make merit.

This style of image can be found today, painted in bright acrylic colors, wherever there are Southeast Asian Buddhists. The style originated more than fifty years ago with a Thai artist named Phra Khru Dewa, who designed a series of Buddhist images for lithographic production (Figure 14).⁹ Phra Khru Dewa's mass-produced images are still being produced on posters and



Figure 15. Mural, Wat Athvea, Siem Reap.

monk-artist who was obviously familiar with the reproductions of Khru Phra Dewa's paintings (Figure 16). In urban areas, the artists who decorated Buddhist temples were more likely to be hereditary craftsmen, attached to the court. Over the past century there has been a change in this tradition, and artists trained at art schools located in urban areas have begun to supplant traditional craftsmen and monk-artists. These artists go from temple to temple with a photograph album of images they can reproduce, quoting a price per square meter.¹⁰ The donors who pay for the work are usually older people, often widows who want

⁹ I am grateful to Panya Vijithanasarn for explaining the influence of Khru Phra Dewa to me, personal communication, July 2001.

¹⁰ Panya Vijithanasarn (Silpakorn University, Bangkok, July 2001): in Thailand the basic price for mural painting is 5000 Thai baht per square meter. Srey Bandol (Siem Reap, July 2000) told me that in Cambodia, the cost is about US\$300 per square meter.

to make merit for themselves and family members. They tend to choose images they remember from their youth. Once the image is selected by the donor, however, the style is left up to the individual artist. The models used by the artists are other art works rather than Buddhist texts. The artists I spoke with make great efforts to visit temples, museums and archaeological sites to look at images. They take photographs and carry around notebooks full of sketches. When called upon to do a commission, they use these visual archives to create an image. Less sophisticated and less skilled artists are limited to reproducing the poster images of Phra Khru Dewa in garish acrylics, while more successful and talented artists create new masterpieces. The maravijaya episode has remained a popular if challenging subject for artists and donors alike.

This next image (Figure 17) is from Vat Buddhapadipa, a Thai temple in London. When its *uposatha* was built in 1982, Thai artists volunteered to come and paint its walls. One artist was Panya

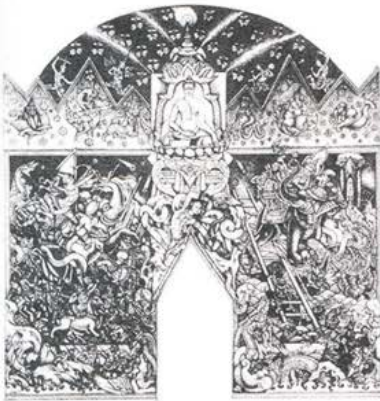


Figure 18. Draft for mural, *Vat Buddhapadipa* (Hoskin, J., 1984, *Ten Contemporary Thai Artists*, Graphis Co., Ltd, Bangkok, fig. 10.14).

Vat Suwannaram in Petchburi.

In Arakan, I spoke with sculptor Kyaw Tha Nyunt about his sandstone carving of the earth deity (Figure 19). He told me that the carving is part of a large Buddha image commissioned by a wealthy male donor for a Buddhist temple in Maung Ni Byin village, near Sittwe township and will eventually be slotted into the niche in base of the pedestal when the Buddha image is assembled in the temple. The Vasundhara is modeled after the Vasundhara carved on the base of the Anawma Image discussed in the beginning of this essay (Figure 1). The drawing he is holding

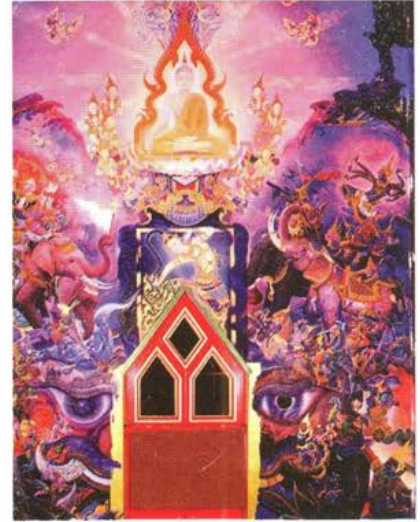


Figure 17. Mural, *Vat Buddhapadipa*, Wimbledon (Kositpipat, C., Vijnthanasarn, P., Budrat, S., 1987, *Mural Paintings of Wat Buddhapadipa*, Amarin Printing Company, Bangkok, p. 55).

I asked Acharn Panya about his painting and he told me that for many years he had planned the details of a mural painting of the maravijaya that would include contemporary war imagery. When the opportunity to paint at Vat Buddhapadipa came along, he submitted a draft sketch of his mural plans to the vat committee, and despite its controversial nature (Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher can be seen among Mara's soldiers, deploying nuclear weapons) they agreed to his design (Figure 18). He painted the image in its traditional place in the *uposatha* — facing the main Buddha image — but the painting differs from traditional Thai art in its technique, color, fine details and dimensions. Despite all his technical innovations, the model he used for Nang Thoranee was an Ayutthayan painting from



Figure 19. Sandstone sculpture, Mrauk-U.



Figure 20. Kyaw Tha Nyunt and sketch pad, Mrauk-U.

(Figure 20) is the working sketch that he used to carve the sandstone. Like Acharn Panya, he said that when he is commissioned to do a sculpture, he does not refer to texts. The donor tells him what to make, but the final creative decisions are his, based on his own ideas and on other images that he has seen.

To illustrate this essay I have gathered many different images of the earth deity from Arakan, northern India, Burma, Cambodia, Thailand, London. Hopefully, several points can be made from this jumble of images. The first is the earth deity's longevity and persistence. Although she only plays a minor role in the story of the Buddha's enlightenment, she begins to appear at a very early date in Indian Buddhist iconography and has remained

important for Southeast Asian Buddhism for many centuries. The second point is that there have been sporadic attempts by the Theravada orthodoxy to get rid of the earth deity, or to change her relationship with the Buddha by altering her story and iconography. This is most clearly illustrated in Burma, where Buddhist reforms have resulted in the earth deity losing her gender and being exiled to the outskirts of Buddhist temples. The third point is that despite these attempts at change and reform, the earth deity has survived, largely due to traditional systems of Buddhist art patronage. Pious donors (who are often female) have ignored Buddhist reforms and continued to commission traditional images of the earth deity, and even the most innovative artists look back into the past for their models.

In conclusion, I suggest that the earth deity, who ceaselessly guards and supports the Buddha in his quest for enlightenment, provides a potent if unorthodox model for women in Theravada Buddhist societies, one that they are happy to perpetuate through the donations of traditional images of the *māravijaya*. As long as the Buddhist Sangha continues to rely on women for support, the earth deity will keep re-emerging from the soil, a irrepressible witness to an enduring relationship between the Buddha and his female supporters, one that bypasses and even undermines the teachings of the Theravada orthodoxy.

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