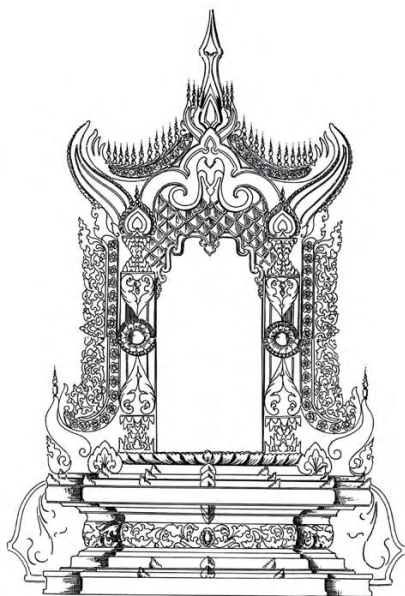


The Journal of Burma Studies



*Volume 10
2005/06*



Featuring Articles by:

Alexandra Green

Chie Ikeya

Yin Ker

Jacques P. Leider

THE JOURNAL OF BURMA STUDIES

VOLUME 10

2005/06

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ISSN # 1094-799X

The Journal of Burma Studies is an annual scholarly journal jointly sponsored by the Burma Studies Group (Association for Asian Studies), the Center for Burma Studies (Northern Illinois University), and the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (Northern Illinois University).

Articles are refereed by professional peers. Original scholarly manuscripts should be sent to: Editor, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115. *E-mail*: seapeditor@niu.edu.

Subscriptions are \$16 per volume delivered book rate (airmail, add \$9 per volume). Members of the Burma Studies Group receive the journal as part of their \$30 annual membership. Send check or money order in U.S. dollars drawn on a U.S. bank made out to Northern Illinois University to the Center for Burma Studies, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115. Major credit cards accepted. **Subscriptions** / *E-mail*: bbjorn@niu.edu; *tel*: (815) 753-0512; *fax*: (815) 753-1776. **Back issues** / *E-mail*: seap@niu.edu; *tel*: (815) 756-1981; *fax*: (815) 753-1776.

For abstracts of previously published articles, visit *The Journal of Burma Studies* Web site: <http://www.grad.niu.edu/Burma/publications.htm>.

The Journal of Burma Studies is abstracted or indexed in the following: *America: History and Life*; *Bibliography of Asian Studies*; *Historical Abstracts*; *MLA International Bibliography*.

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DEEP CHANGE?

BURMESE WALL PAINTINGS FROM THE ELEVENTH TO THE NINETEENTH CENTURIES

Alexandra Green

This article will compare the narrative constructions of early (eleventh to thirteenth centuries) and late (seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries) Burmese wall paintings to determine whether or not “deep change” has occurred. Although many of the same stories were depicted in the murals during both time periods, the method by which the visual stories were portrayed changed from an emphasis upon iconic imagery to an exploration of narrative process. By analyzing the narrative modes employed during the two periods, the emphases of each are revealed. The changes that occurred in the Burmese murals most likely relate to the increasing orthodoxy of Burmese Theravada Buddhism and strengthening crown control over the country. Because the teleological purpose of the murals remains virtually identical, however, it is argued that no “deep change” occurred in the murals between the eleventh and nineteenth centuries.

INTRODUCTION

Upon entering a temple dating to the Pagan period (eleventh to thirteenth centuries), the viewer is greeted with a profusion of images of Gotama and the previous Buddhas, Jataka stories, other tales deriving from Buddhist texts, and figures drawn from Brahmanism and Mahayana Buddhism. If the same viewer entered a temple dating to the seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries, the visual impact of the murals would be just as overwhelming, with long ribbons of colorful stories winding their way around the temple walls crowned by seated images of the previous Buddhas. Do the changes in the manner of depicting the previous Buddhas, the life of Gotama Buddha, and the Jataka stories between the early and late periods represent a significant shift in the meaning and

function of Burmese wall paintings?¹ This paper will compare the narrative constructions of both early and late paintings within their cultural context to determine whether or not “deep change” has occurred. After first defining deep change and the narrative modes used for the analysis of the space-time relationship depicted in the paintings, the characteristics of each period’s murals are explored in detail. A comparison of the paintings of the two eras reveals similarities and differences, as well as specific emphases portrayed in each through the selection of stories and the organization of the narratives. A brief look at religious ideas as espoused in inscriptions and historical developments helps explain the impetus behind the changes in narrative form. Ultimately, the argument in this paper is that deep change, or in other words, an alteration in the teleological purpose of the paintings, did not happen, even though the paintings shift from iconic imagery to extended narrative forms.

DEEP CHANGE

This analysis of Burmese art assumes that the wall paintings constitute a text in themselves, with text broadly constituting an aspect of material culture that transmits a deliberate message. An essential part of interpreting texts as cultural activities, past or present, is comprehending the context. The meaning people assign to an object derives from, and is constrained by, the interpretation of context (Hodder 1986:143,5). What, however, is “context?” It is generally agreed that the discourse surrounding and including a text (including a visual text, such as the Burmese wall paintings) makes it intelligible. In other words, no text exists in a vacuum, and meanings are partially determined by other related texts and information. Because all texts are embedded in culture and language, understanding a work must include an analysis of a variety of material, textual or otherwise (Culler 1981:108; Wang 1992:2). The challenge, however, is how to determine the end point in a potentially

¹ The hiatus is due to a dearth of remaining material from the fourteenth to early seventeenth centuries.

infinite regression of surrounding material (Fewell 1992:17; Beal 1992:27,28; Culler 1992:111). For instance, in A.L. Becker's use of philological methods for interpreting Javanese *wayang kulit* performances, context equals the coherence, degree of repetition/spontaneity, intentions, and the references that occur within a text (Becker 1979:216). The set of relationships between the parts of and contributors to a text constitutes the meaning of that text.

In Becker's analysis of the *wayang kulit*, the relationship between context and text in the *wayang kulit* cannot be changed freely. Coherence of the plot is governed by rules dictating the relationship of the parts of the text to the whole; motifs or episodes of the text are constrained in their relationship with their source by permitted levels of invention; the text and its parts suggest meanings to their viewers, but these meanings lie within the intentions (or perceived intentions) of the producers; finally, the text can only refer to the non-text world through metaphor (Becker 1979:239). Deep change corresponds to an alteration in these constraints on the creation of a work, and primarily those associated with plot coherence (Becker 1979:230). In other words, deep change is the radical transformation of the rules defining the construction of a narrative. This does not mean, however, that no alterations can be made at all. Becker notes that each text is a "conjunction of pre-existing constraints . . . with the present, the unpredictable, particular *now*" (Becker 1979:213). Spontaneity expresses the present and repetition the past, and each text reflects a varying set of relationships between the two (Becker 1979:214–15). Becker further argues that language communicates on at least two levels: surface content and relational statements, which are conveyed simultaneously. In the case of the *wayang kulit* performances, ritual language presents the past through the surface material (the known story), but conveys present meanings and intentions in an original fashion through the relational statements (the discourse or interpretation) (Becker 1979:214).

Deep change in the Burmese wall paintings would require a different teleological meaning between early (eleventh to thirteenth century) and late (seventeenth to nineteenth century) paintings. It is argued here that no such total change occurred in the wall paintings, although alterations are evident. The stories represent the past, but the manner in which they are depicted portrays current meanings and intentions, which alter over time. While many of the fundamental ideas and texts behind these meanings and intentions did not change considerably over this time span, secondary changes in the murals reflect a narrower focus in the later period, the development of visual emphases upon kingship and the merit path to enlightenment, and the progression of religious standardization in Burma.

Narrative Modes

In the absence of written texts providing detailed information about the meanings and intentions specifically associated with the murals, it is helpful to look at the narrative organization of the wall paintings to explore text and context. The method of analysis utilized here comprises an examination of the different compositional devices used to portray the narratives in Burmese wall paintings. Narrative modes demonstrate the relationship between space and time in visual stories, and the modes found in Burmese murals include the monoscenic, conflated, sequential, and continuous modes.

The monoscenic mode is composed of an active mode and a static one. Stories presented in the monoscenic mode do not 'tell' an entire story, but function as a referent to the tale. The active monoscenic mode is characterized by a single event taken from a narrative that has been selected to represent the whole. It is frequently, though not always, the one that makes the moral point (Dehejia 1997:10–12). As a single action within the limits of a single scene, the active monoscenic mode is unified in time and place. The static monoscenic mode (also known as "being in state") consists of a single scene which has no action or in which the action is reduced. This mode is used

to depict scenes from the Buddha's life where the supremacy of the Buddha is the main emphasis, and as a result, the shown or implied action itself is not the most important part of the painting (Dehejia 1997:15). The objective of such images is to elicit from the viewer a sense of awe over the Buddha's wisdom and abilities.

The conflated mode is characterized by having one of the characters (usually the protagonist or another important figure) presented only once despite being involved in several closely clustered scenes (Dehejia 1997:25–27). Several moments in the tale are depicted in a single frame, and by so doing, the connection between time and space is distorted (Weitzmann 1947:13–14; Dehejia 1997:26–27). Spatial limitations or the importance of the central character may have been the reasons why this type of mode was utilized (Dehejia 1997:26–27).

Extended narratives consist of both the sequential and the continuous modes, as they share features in common. In the extended format, the protagonist of the story appears several times in successive stages of action within an overall frame. Time and space are equivalent, and therefore these modes are often characterized by a linear format. In Burma, the narratives usually progress from left to right. The difference between the two modes lies in the use (or non-use) of spatial dividers. In the sequential mode, natural features, buildings, and dividing lines are used to mark the boundaries between scenes. In the continuous mode, the dividers are intrinsic. The viewer must decipher the narrative using indications such as people facing different directions or gaps between scenes (Dehejia 1997:15–21; Green 2002:70–73).

Exploring the organization of the visual narratives and the connection between time and space reveals the emphases of the imagery. The narrative modes thus provide a method of structural analysis that assists with the assessment of whether deep change has occurred in Burmese wall paintings.

EARLY PAINTINGS

Pagan-period wall paintings consist of a wide variety of themes that derive from Brahmanism and Theravada, Mahayana, and Tantric Buddhism. The relationships between the religious elements in the paintings have not been explored fully, but the evidence suggests that the wall paintings of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries reflect a syncretic approach to religious ideas rather than a compartmentalized one.²

Some of the Brahmanical imagery consists of the Hindu and Vedic gods, their avatars, and their vehicles. Examples of this material are found at the Abeyadana temple, Pagan, built at the beginning of the twelfth century, supposedly under the direction of King Kyanzittha's wife, a follower of Mahayana Buddhism.³ Images deriving from Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism include Avalokitesvara, the five *Jina*, the goddess Tara, Lokanatha (a form of Avalokitesvara), Mahayanist triads composed of the Buddha, Maitreya, and Avalokitesvara, generalized bodhisattva images as guardian figures flanking entrances, and cave scenes (Luce 1969:321–44, parts B and C). Other Buddhist material in the wall paintings includes depictions of Maitreya, the Jataka stories, the life of Gotama Buddha, other Buddhist texts, Buddhist Councils, a flaming Buddha and the cosmological one, and the twenty-eight previous Buddhas. The depiction of hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of small seated Buddhas in *bhumisparsha* or *dharmachakra mudra* with geometric or floral surrounds, sometimes forming a honeycomb pattern, was also common.⁴ Historical narratives were sometimes incorporated into the wall paintings (Bautze-Picron 2003:27–29).

The previous Buddhas are depicted primarily seated in *bhumisparsha*, *dharmachakra*, or occasionally *dhyana mudras* under a tree, representing the enlightenment, teaching and

² See, among others, Aung-Thwin 1985, chs. 2–3; Galloway 2002; and Aung Thaw 1972 for a discussion of this topic.

³ See Luce 1969:321–44 for a description of the Abeyadana murals. A description can also be found in Bautze-Picron 2003:170–79.

⁴ A mention of the large numbers of Buddha images placed or painted in temples can be found in *Inscriptions of Pagan, Pinya, and Ava* 1899:86.

the first sermon, and meditation respectively (see fig. 1 at end of article). Each of these images is an example of the static monoscenic or being-in-state mode. Sometimes the Buddhas are accompanied by disciples and adorants depicted on either side of or beneath the central figure. Also sometimes connected with these images are short sequences of the lives of the twenty-eight previous Buddhas in strip formats. These are highly formulaic images usually depicting the departure from the palace and the hair-cutting events. Differentiation between these images occurs by showing the Buddhas-to-be as departing by a variety of means—some ride in a palanquin, others are mounted on an elephant or horse, and so forth. Organizationally, the Buddhas are portrayed within an individual square or rectangle or are grouped with other Buddhas within a larger panel. These formats are found on the walls above the Jataka stories and scenes from the life of the Buddha, above other imagery including patterns of tiny Buddhas set within geometric shapes, or even occupy a substantial share of a wall. This type of imagery is evident in temples from the twelfth century and is common in temples constructed during the thirteenth century.

The life of Buddha is depicted in a wide variety of ways during the Pagan period (eleventh to thirteenth centuries). Narratives selected for illustration include his birth, the Enlightenment, the seven stations (see appendix) occupied by the Buddha after reaching enlightenment, his first sermon in the deer park at Sarnath, the twin miracles at Savatthi, his ascent to and descent from and preaching in Tavatimsa Heaven, his retreat to Parileyyaka forest, the taming of the Nalagiri elephant, preaching at Vesali, and the Parinirvana, cremation, and distribution of his relics. Except for the seven stations, the teaching at Vesali, and the events after the Parinirvana, the stories constitute the eight great events of Gotama Buddha's life.

Scenes of the life of the Buddha are portrayed in a variety of ways, but the narrative organization utilized is primarily the static monoscenic mode, with some examples of the conflated

mode. The basic narrative building block is a square or vertical rectangle with a large central image, often with small flanking figures and people kneeling at the base of the throne on which the Buddha is seated. In the instance of the birth, Maya and her sister constitute the central icon. The box within which the event is shown is usually embellished around the edges with decorative borders separating it from other parts of the overall iconographic program, but boundaries are also sometimes depicted more naturally. In these cases, extensive floral and foliage designs may surround an image, or the figure may be located within an environment that enables easy separation. Figures in the landscape are segregated by trees or rock formations, or if located in a building, the walls of the structure maintain the separateness of the imagery. Occasionally, the central image is seated within a building, which in turn is surrounded by lines creating a box structure. The flames found around some Buddhas also function to emphasize the single figure within the delineated space. A more extended version of this box construction shows the Buddha—usually seated—surrounded by small squares or rectangles or registers filled with figures paying homage or depicting scenes associated with the events being narrated. The entire grouping is set within a single large square or rectangle. A variation has small action scenes depicted beneath the central Buddha image.

Many of the eight great events are portrayed in a standard manner that enables easy recognition on the part of viewers, once they have learned the visual vocabulary (fig. 2). The Buddha's life events are often indicated by small accompanying figures, hand gestures, or the location. For example, the first sermon is indicated by the use of *dharmachakra mudra* and two deer. The portrayal is hieratic with the Buddha or the central image painted larger than the other figures in the scene. Or, in conflated scenes of the taming of the Nalagiri elephant, the Buddha is shown as a large, central, standing figure with the palm of his right hand facing towards the elephant(s). The animal is shown twice, once with his body and trunk raised up in anger and once passively kneeling on the

ground with his trunk curled under his neck. The latter image almost covers the former. Although the Buddha is a participant in both the attack and the pacification of the elephant, he is shown only once in large size to emphasize his importance and abilities. This method of depicting the taming of Nalagiri can be found at multiple sites, including the Payathonzu and Lemyethna at Minnanthu, Pagan, and temple 92 at Sale.

An exception to the above narrative organization can be seen in depictions of the Buddha's sermon in Tavatimsa Heaven and his ascent to and descent from the mountain. While many images of these events are depicted as in single-scene narratives with the Buddha descending a ladder, often depicted as a horizontal line, there are some instances, including at the Lokahteikpan and temple 1150 at Pagan, of the story being portrayed in a continuous fashion. In the latter, continuous narratives, the Buddha is shown climbing the mountain ranges around Mount Meru, preaching under a wooden *pyatthat* (a wooden roofing structure emblematic of kingship) in Tavatimsa Heaven, and descending flanked by the gods Brahma and Sakka (Indra). In each case, the Buddha images are larger than other figures in the scenes, and all three activities take place within a single panel or register without internal dividing lines.

Scenes of the life of the Buddha are found in various configurations with other temple elements and sculptures. Monoscenic and conflated versions of the eight great events are found surrounded by or above squares depicting the Jataka stories or in an arch around niches, arches, or the main Buddha image of the temple, which reflects an Indian Pala-Sena influence. Some image panels are shown occupying arches or the walls of temple corridors and entrance halls. These forms can be found in early temples, such as the Myinkaba Kubyaukgyi, which dates to 1113 CE, and later structures, such as the Minnanthu group, which was built in the thirteenth century.

The Jataka tales are primarily portrayed as single scenes in squares, which are set in rows on the walls of temples (fig. 3).

Often these illustrations include all or most of the 547 stories of the previous lives of the Buddha. Each story is allocated one square, except for the last ten Jataka tales, the *Mahanipata*, which are often presented in a series of squares. Most of the squares show the story in an active monoscenic format, with a single event standing for the whole. Occasionally, a story is portrayed in the conflated or static mode.

In a few temples, such as the twelfth-century Lokahteikpan at Pagan, the last ten Jataka stories are depicted in an extended, horizontal strip format (fig. 4). Both the sequential and the continuous forms of narration are used, with some spatial divisions created with landscape and architectural elements. The positioning of figures primarily produces intrinsic divisions. Often there is little background material at all, and trees, water, and buildings (primarily single story *zayat* or rest house-like structures with one or two roof layers), which are similar to those found in the life scenes, comprise the background settings of the narrative action. Such imagery is standardized and not highly differentiated from scene to scene, making comprehension of the narrative difficult. Specific, easily identifiable scenes and the captions beneath the imagery are necessary for the identification of Jataka stories depicted in the extended narrative mode.

Jataka stories are found in a variety of locations throughout Pagan-period temples. They are not usually located in the central shrine area, but can be found in the main cella of temples composed of a single room. The representations of the Jataka stories are most often found where the viewer would be moving, either when entering the building or while circumambulating, and thus, are in circumambulatory corridors and entrance halls.

Eleventh- to thirteenth-century stories of the twenty-eight previous Buddhas, the life scenes of Gotama Buddha, and the Jataka stories are rendered in a fashion that privileges the image of the Buddha over narrative process. This is made evident by the types of narrative structure, monoscenic and conflated with limited examples of extended, chosen

to portray the Buddhist material. The often large size of the Buddha compared with other figures and the relegation of the narrative action to the sidelines through the selection of modes that do not emphasize process, by indicating scenes through hand gestures or images (such as the deer at the foot of the throne signifying the first sermon at the deer park in Sarnath), and by compressing stories into single panels, suggests that the narrative process was not as significant as the icon of the Buddha himself. In addition, the incorporation of a wide variety of material from Buddhist texts shown in an iconic format suggests that the material functions together as a whole. Combined with the multiplication of images of the Buddha, this material heavily emphasizes the all-encompassing nature of the Buddha.

SEVENTEENTH- AND EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PAINTINGS

From the late seventeenth century onward, the focus of mural subject matter is almost entirely upon the last ten Jataka tales, the life of Gotama Buddha, and the twenty-eight previous Buddhas. Scene selection and narrative organization become highly standardized, although there are some variations from village to village and area to area. In general, the paintings are characterized by an extended mode of narration, with the stories illustrated in strips laid out around the temple walls. Usually, the previous Buddhas are shown near the ceiling with the life of the Buddha beneath them. The Jataka stories are most often beneath the latter. Natural and artificial dividers are incorporated into the imagery to organize the narrative space, and background details compose a significant portion of the visual stories. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, the introduction of a perspectival organization and the expansion of the width of the strips allowed for an increase in the amount of detail, resulting in the reduction of the total number of bands. Over the course of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, strips varied in width from about eight inches (approximately twenty centimeters) to about three feet (one meter) high.

The twenty-eight previous Buddhas are shown as single images organized into a series. These Buddhas are portrayed at the top of the walls seated in *bhumisparsha mudra* under their respective trees of enlightenment. Sometimes, they are accompanied by kneeling disciples and devotees (fig. 5). Each functions as a single-scened narrative by reminding the viewer of the story that gives it significance; though, viewed as a whole, the previous Buddhas contribute to a cohesive narrative sequence. These iconic images contrast strongly with the life of the Buddha and the Jataka stories that are shown in an extended format.

Exceptions to this layout occur at a few sites, including the Shwezayan Pokala, east of Mandalay, and a temple at Anein village in Sagaing Division. Here, sculptures positioned in painted niches at a height easily reached by worshippers represent the twenty-eight previous Buddhas. A few temples, such as the Mipaya temple at Po Win Daung, have painted on the walls a summary version of the lives of the previous Buddhas. These are shown in a maximum of five scenes, including the prince living in luxury in a palace, his departure from the palace, being stopped by Mara and offered *chakravartin* status, his hair-cutting, and his Enlightenment. Spatial organization and background details are identical with those used in depictions of the life of the Buddha and the Jataka stories (fig. 6). These brief scenes stand separately, unassociated with any iconic figure.

Below the images of the previous Buddhas are scenes from the life of Gotama Buddha. These scenes are portrayed in an extended and standardized format (fig. 7) with the stories progressing linearly from left to right with occasional digressions into a serpentine organization. Scenes are often separated by natural features in the landscape, such as buildings, rocks, or trees, and also by wavy green and white lines. If the story occupies more space than is available in one band, then it is continued in the strip above, resulting in an overall narrative that moves upwards.

Episodes of the Buddha's life have been favored for representation in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century murals. The enlightenment is shown by illustrating the Buddha seated in *bhumisparsha mudra* under the Bodhi tree, the attack of Mara, and the Earth Goddess wringing out her hair. The seven stations that the Buddha occupies during the seven weeks after enlightenment are sometimes also shown. The renunciation sequence comprises the four sights; Siddhartha viewing his wife and child while Channa the charioteer and Kanthaka the horse wait behind him; Siddhartha leaving the palace with the horse's hooves being held by *devas*; Mara obstructing his retreat from worldly life and promising the prince *chakravartin* status within seven days; Channa weeping over the dead body of Kanthaka; and Prince Siddhartha cutting off his hair. The birth is shown with the Buddha-to-be taking his first seven steps; being held aloft in a cloth with *devas* pouring water over him; being transported to his parents' palace; and placing his feet on the head of the sage, Asita. The sequence of events associated with Sujata include the gods cooking rice in milk, Sujata offering the bowl of food to the Buddha, and the Buddha setting the bowl afloat on a river, where it rouses the *naga* who in the past gathered the bowls of the previous Buddhas.

Scenes shown in less detail or at fewer sites include the Buddha begging at Bimbisara's palace, Siddhartha living in luxury with his wife Yasodhara, walking in the Anupiya forest, receiving instruction from Alara and Uddaka, receiving grass from the grass cutter to build the throne on which the Buddha sits and reaches enlightenment, lecturing the *Pancavaggi*, and receiving Tapussa and Bhallika's homage. The five monks, the *Pancavaggi*, of Sakka encouraging the Buddha to follow the middle way by demonstrating its advantages on a harp while the Buddha reclines surround another less common scene. A few sites, such as Zedi Daw Daik in Anein village, Sagaing Division, depict the Buddha passing the rainy season and teaching at various monasteries. The eight great events are rarely depicted, except as part of the extended narrative, as the emphasis in the paintings is on the events leading to the Enlightenment.

The Jataka stories are organized in the same way as the scenes of the life of the Buddha. As mentioned, the Jataka stories are depicted below the twenty-eight previous Buddhas and scenes from the life of the Buddha. Most locations that have these tales as part of the narrative program depict the last ten Jatakas or just the Vessantara Jataka (figs. 8a-e). Few temples have Jataka tales other than the last ten depicted on their walls; the main exceptions are Tilokaguru in Sagaing and the Ananda Ok-kyaung at Pagan.

Scenes are divided primarily by wavy green and white dividers, and are selected to maintain a bare narrative thread. Only the most important events are portrayed. The message of the story is therefore transmitted through a minimum of narrative incidents. The standardization of episodes of the *Mahanipata*, which occurred during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, resulted in many temples of this period containing the same imagery. Generally, though not always, the first tale of the *Mahanipata* is shown closest to the floor, and the Vessantara Jataka is portrayed directly beneath the scenes of the life of the Buddha. Some of the stories are shown in greater detail than the others, with the Candakumara, Mahanaradakassapa, and the Khandahala being given the least amount of wall space. The Vessantara is usually shown in the largest number of scenes and is the most extensive of any of the Jataka tales. Overall, the Jatakas occupy the most wall space when compared with the coverage given to the life of the Buddha and the twenty-eight previous Buddhas.

On temple walls the twenty-eight previous Buddhas are closest to the ceiling, and below them are scenes of Gotama's life and the Jataka stories. Scenes of hell, if they are included, are in close proximity to the floor. This vertical organization reflects Buddhist concepts of hierarchy by providing a structure that moves from either scenes of hell or the first Jataka stories to the enlightenment of Gotama Buddha or the twenty-eight previous Buddhas. In this manner, the Jataka stories and the enlightenment are incorporated into a single narrative, which reveals the concept of cause and effect and demonstrates

the importance of the *paramis* (the virtues represented by the Jataka stories—see appendix) to the process of attaining enlightenment. The order of the stories is hierarchical and mimics the progression of an individual from sentient being to one who has perfected all ten *paramis* and ultimately reaches enlightenment. This hierarchical organization reflects ideas that are an integral part of the Buddhist belief system and Burmese social organization. Rebirth in the samsaric cycle is the result of actions that place a being in the hierarchically arranged thirty-one planes of existence (Ferguson 1975:15). The quality of an individual's existence improves as one's position rises in the hierarchy, and by implication one's karma is better than those lower on the scale of being. Consequently, social status and position are associated with merit or demerit and correspond to an appropriate rebirth in some part of the cosmos (Schober 1989:126). The vertical organization of the paintings expresses this world view and the hierarchical organization of the universe.

The size of a scene and the frequency with which it is repeated also contribute to an understanding of what is significant in the wall paintings. Palace scenes and, occasionally, military processions are given primacy in the paintings. While registers are sometimes divided into two sections, an upper and a lower, palace scenes always fill the entire register, and tend to occupy more lateral space than other painted scenes. Compared to other scenes, those of a palace are the largest and most visually dominant (fig. 9), and the scale of the portrayal bears little relationship to the extent or complexity of a scene's action. Military, processional, music and dance, and carriage scenes are similarly emphasized. This expansive use of space could be attributed partially to the necessities and strictures inherent in depicting such images, particularly a royal figure with a retinue seated in obeisance on each side. While this may be the case, such scenes were so frequently selected for portrayal during this period that mere logistics cannot account for the inequitable spatial distribution.

The repetitive nature of these large scenes further emphasizes their significance. Repetition of motifs is a creative redundancy that emphasizes the meaning of the passage and enhances reception by the viewer.⁵ The scenes from Jataka tales are frequently located in palaces and carriages, or otherwise celebrate pomp and circumstance through processions or military scenes. The imagery promotes the status of royal figures seated under the wooden *pyatthat* and those involved in the various scenes. The emphasis on such material is in part due to the nature of the Jataka stories, particularly the last ten, but it further suggests the luxury and power derived from good karma. Not all the repetition focuses upon worldly advantage, however. The repetition of the theme of enlightenment, represented by the ubiquitous twenty-eight previous Buddhas at the top of the walls, demonstrates that, despite one's desire for material and social success, nirvana is still the highest and final goal.

CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES

The subject matter and method of depiction in seventeenth- to nineteenth-century murals reflects the increasing centralization and religious standardization of Burma. Orthodox practices within the *sangha* and cultural and religious integration were encouraged by a variety of means. Texts and sources of authority from elsewhere—Sri Lanka for example—were valued over local traditions. The court managed the interpretation of texts and religious communication by controlling access to religious authorities. A religious hierarchy and an examination system were established to supervise provincial monks, and missionary monks were sent out from the capital to promote the standardization process of texts and rituals (Lieberman 1991:26; 1993:242–43). The monkhood was also subjected to financial and personnel controls (Lieberman 1993:238), and the use of a common vocabulary simplified administration of the *sangha* (Lieberman 1993:247). Finally, what enabled the monarchy to increase control over religious standards was

⁵ For further discussion of this aspect of narrative, see Genette 1980:ch. 3; Eco 1979:119–22.

the improvement of the road networks. The establishment of export-import routes facilitated the emergence of domestic trade routes, and goods in general became easier to move between regions (Lieberman 1991:15). People utilized the new roads, and peddlers, migrant workers, monks, and pilgrims, among others, traveled more extensively than before. This had the effect of diffusing lowland culture, language, and customs to peripheral areas (Lieberman 1993:236,245). The ease of moving materials around the country also aided the transfer of literary, religious, and artistic ideas and knowledge, among other social information. The result of these measures was the expansion of textual, ritual, monastic, and doctrinal norms into peripheral areas (Lieberman 1991:26), at the expense of animist, Hindu, local, and syncretic elements (Lieberman 1993:248). These trends are reflected in the standardization of scene selection, the extended narrative organization emphasizing narrative process, and the extensive portrayal of scenes of pomp and circumstance in Burmese wall paintings between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.

In examining religious dedicatory inscriptions, however, it becomes apparent that the Burmese, from at least the Pagan period on, appropriately took a long-term view of the path to enlightenment or nirvana. They understood that individual beings pass through countless lives before coming to an end of the cycle of rebirth. This was expressed in dedicatory inscriptions through requests to reach Buddhahood, to generate merit for themselves and other people, to be reborn during the time of Maitreya, to understand the Buddha's teachings more thoroughly, to be free from sin and vice, and to not fall back into a less favorable existence. Included in some of these inscriptions is the desire to be reborn well with wealth, beauty, and a high social status.

Michael Aung-Thwin, examining religious beliefs in Burma in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, and Melford Spiro, who investigated beliefs in Burmese villages in the mid-twentieth century, found that most Burmese people followed what has been termed karmatic Buddhism (Aung-Thwin 1985:

chs. 2–3; Spiro 1982:chs. 3–5).⁶ In this practice the goal is not immediate enlightenment, but the maximization of pleasure while remaining in the cycle of rebirths. Here, beings do not wish to extinguish their karma immediately, but to develop it to ensure successful future lives. The generation of merit as a means of improving one's karma is consequently an important part of religious practice, and because *dana* (charity) and the precepts are the primary methods of producing merit, they are considered to be methods of soteriological achievement (Schober 1989:67–93; Than Tun 1959:75; Lieberman 1984:71).⁷ The Burmese thus contribute to the religion in order to improve their store of merit in the expectation that their material desires will be gratified in future lives (Spiro 1982:99–109). The reciprocal relationship between merit and *dana* is fundamental to Burmese ideas of social status, power, influence, and religious aspiration (Schober 1989:71). One's material goods, religious nature, and worldly success reflect an individual's status within the community, but one's spiritual success is based upon the amount given away in meritorious activities (Aung-Thwin 1985:44). By connecting merit with rank, power, and money, this system indicated that those who were higher in rank could obtain enlightenment more quickly, and thus, social rank and wealth also placed one in the hierarchy of the cosmos and indicated one's relative distance from enlightenment (Aung-Thwin 1981:47,49). Merit and worldly success functioned as cause and effect. For example, the wife of the Minister Manawya dedicated land in 1273, noting in the inscription that:

⁶ Part of the desire for happy rebirths may stem from the fact that people know that their time in *samsara* is extremely long and nirvana is almost impossibly distant. As a result, people are initially more concerned with being reborn well, which in addition to providing many worldly pleasures also aids them in eventually reaching nirvana.

⁷ Than Tun notes that the practice of charity was the most popular means of achieving merit. Lieberman notes that popular thought, in contrast to canonical Buddhism, conceived of nirvana, like *samsaric* states, as a condition one could enter by building up one's good karma.

May all those, including my relatives, who destroy my offering, come under the wrath of the king and live miserable lives as human beings. . . .

On the other hand, may those who support my offering share its merits equally with me. May they live long and glorious lives and may they enjoy every happiness as men and *nats*, and may they ultimately become Buddhas and attain the bliss of Nirvâna. (*Inscriptions* 1899:117)

Inscriptions from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries also corroborate the findings of Spiro and Aung-Thwin. Some inscriptions do simply record the request that the donor reach enlightenment, but many others, in addition to asking for enlightenment ultimately, also pray for pleasurable rebirths. Donors frequently listed the exact style of life desired and delineated the lives that they would like to experience. For instance, in the Ananda Ok-kyauing inscription of the 1780s, the donor says:

For the benefit of being free from the threefold cycles of birth and for the benefit of realising *nibbàna*, and having given up a large amount of wealth and treasure and having aspired after *nibbàna*, this Brick Monastery was caused to be erected. . . .

On account of this meritorious deed, may I attain the peaceful and supreme *nibbàna*. . . . Before I attain *nibbàna*, in successive existences, may I take conception (in the mother's womb) as a *tihetuka* being (i.e., a person who is born with three causes of non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion) in a family that possesses righteous views

and wealth and that is noble and respected by others. If I remain a householder, may I become a Universal Monarch. If I become a recluse, may I be endowed with five kinds of supreme knowledge in all existences. May I be free from four kinds of destructions, endowed with four kinds of attainment, four kinds of blessing and seven kinds of wealth of the Good Law. May I possess wealth which is unlimited, inexhaustible, vast and incomparable and which cannot be harmed by five kinds of enemy. May I possess intelligence which is sharp, profound, light, quick, massive like the earth, penetrating and capable of solving all questions. May I be endowed with all kinds of splendid features, the complexion of gold and the sweet voice of a *karavika* bird which is of eight qualities. Never may I commit deeds condemned by the wise, but may I always perform deeds praised by the wise. May I associate with the virtuous; may I be away from the vicious. May I have adoring love for the Three Gems; may I be aware of others' virtues. May my mind be away from evil like a cock's feather that is thrown into fire; as regards good, may my mind be willing to perform spontaneously in all existences like a spread canopy. By virtue of this act of merit, may all wishes and plans of mine be rapidly fulfilled as much as I want in all my existences. In future, only in good births, may I be endowed with retinue and wealth. May I have wisdom so that I can work for my benefits as well as others. In the presence of Metteyya the Buddha, may I become (an arahat), endowed with knowledge and

(good) conduct, and be declared foremost in wisdom and supernormal power. (Tin Lwin 1976:106–09)

While this is one example of the desire to reach nirvana only after having passed through multiple felicitous births, many others express similar desires. It is evident that while nirvana is the ultimately desired state, it is not the only goal of merit-generating activities. Some inscriptions also describe what the donors do not wish to become. For example, people do not want to be physically deformed, and they want to be free from lust and other evil desires. Furthermore, donors also express the desire to promote the Buddhist religion and help others free themselves from *samsara* (for example, *Inscriptions* 1899:6,8,21,78). What best summarizes the feelings of Burmese Buddhist laity is the concept of the Three Blisses, as G.H. Luce and Pe Maung Tin term them. The Three Blisses are the best of the human world, the best of the world of the *devas*, and nirvana (Pe Maung Tin and Luce 1963:69). Burmese Buddhists from both the Pagan period and the seventeenth to nineteenth century wanted to experience all three, and it was this desire that contributed to the production of the wall paintings during both the early and late periods of artistic endeavor.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the early paintings are composed of a wide variety of imagery, indicating a syncretic approach to religion during the early period of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. Depictions of the twenty-eight previous Buddhas, scenes of the life of the Buddha, and the Jataka stories were primarily portrayed within a particularly demarcated space, usually a square or a rectangle. Monoscenic narrative constructions, with the occasional use of the conflated mode within a panel, were the norm. These formats contributed to the seemingly iconic nature of the Buddha and the stories associated with him. Use of an extended, and therefore processual, format was rare. In comparison, the mural paintings of the seventeenth to early

nineteenth centuries focus heavily on relating the story, rather than emphasizing the iconic nature of the Buddha. The extended narrative format was the dominant one for the illustrations of the last ten Jataka stories, the life of the Buddha, and the short sequences of the lives of the previous Buddhas. The previous Buddhas are primarily shown reaching enlightenment under their respective trees in the static monoscenic mode (being in state) at the top of the walls, providing a concluding point for the extended narratives, physically and narratively.

Despite this seemingly radical shift from extensive iconic imagery to a narrative style that shows a sequence of events, there are suggestions that the roots of the later paintings can be seen in the earlier ones. The painters of the later period retained many of the narrative portions of the earlier murals while eliminating most of the iconic imagery characteristic of the early period. The placement of the twenty-eight previous Buddhas in squares at the top of the walls initially occurred during the early period, and short sequences of the lives of the previous Buddhas were also portrayed at this time. Extended representations of the last ten Jataka stories can be seen, for example, at the Lokahteikpan and at temples 92 and 95 in Sale. The most significant change in narrative is in the representations of the life of the Buddha. These changed from primarily, though not entirely, the eight great events in the early period to life events that mostly occurred prior to the enlightenment in the later. The extended narrative construction of the Buddha's life scenes during the later period emphasizes the process of reaching enlightenment, which fits well with the way in which the Jatakas are represented at the same time. The use of comparable subject matter in both periods reflects the continuous use of similar texts, but overt Mahayana, Tantric, or Brahmanic imagery was abandoned between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries.

To return to the original question: did deep change occur in the paintings between the early and late periods of Burmese wall paintings? In summary, the early period emphasizes iconic imagery, while the later one depicts

the narratives in a processual fashion. The material of the seventeenth- to nineteenth-century period—the twenty-eight previous Buddhas, the life of Gotama Buddha, and the last ten Jataka stories—can also be found in the earlier period, but the later paintings exhibit a narrower topic range than the earlier. The purpose of the paintings as donations to the religion also remains the same throughout the nearly one thousand-year history of Burmese wall paintings. Despite the apparent shift in emphasis from iconic imagery to narratives that focus upon karmic hierarchy and worldly benefits, both sets of paintings illustrate the importance of the Buddha and enlightenment, present the viewer with images to emulate, and, most importantly, generated merit for the donors, artists, and viewers. Regardless of the different appearances of the early and late murals in Burma, specific elements of the subject matter and the intentions behind the production of the wall paintings remain constant. Contemporary concerns, such as the supremacy of the Buddha and the representation of kingship and merit, are revealed through the discourse and the significant, mythological ‘past’ is expressed through the stories utilized. The shift in narrative representation over time reflects the increasingly orthodox Theravada Buddhism that came to dominate Burma and the strengthening crown control. Both were facilitated by improved communication and transportation networks. Thus, no deep change occurs in the paintings because there is no change in plot—here defined as progress towards enlightenment via the acquisition of merit. The art of invention occurs in the level of detail, but the ultimate goal of enlightenment reflected in the murals remains the same whether the paintings were produced in the thirteenth century or in the nineteenth, in Pagan or near Monywa.

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Fig. 9. Palace scene from the Bhuridatta Jataka (no. 543), Laung U Hmaw, Ywathitgyi village, Sagaing Division (18th century).



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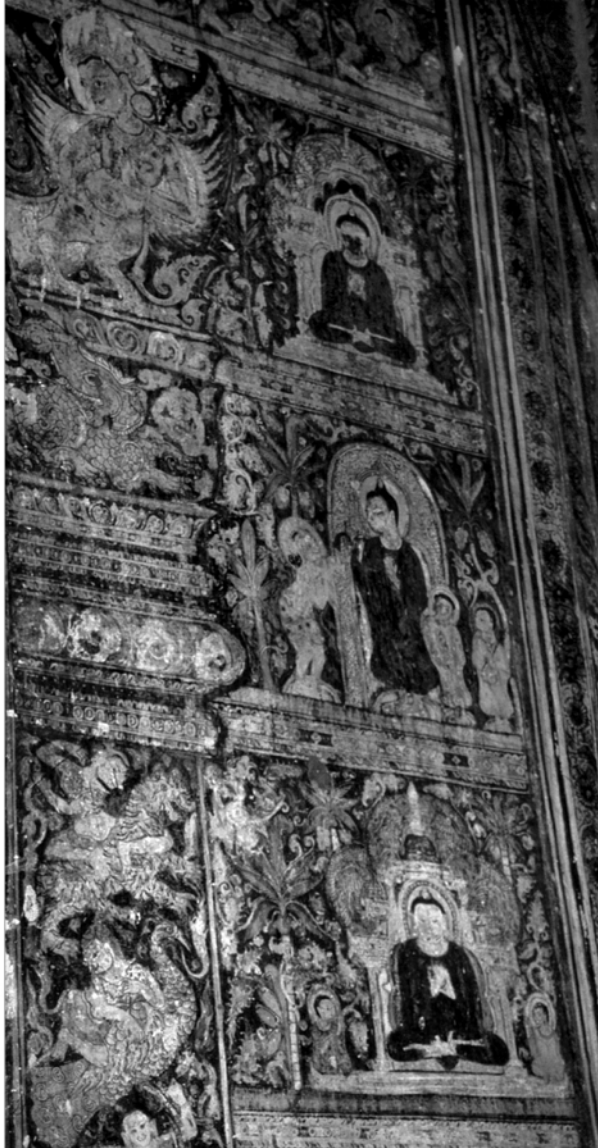


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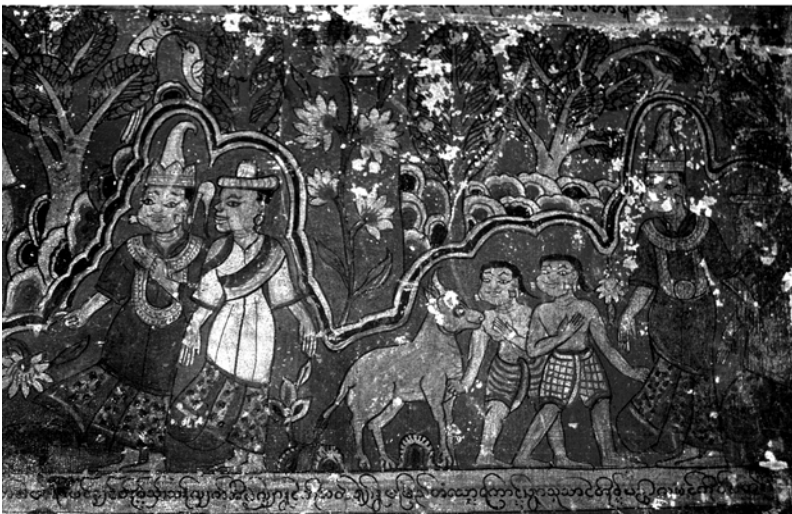
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Fig. 8a. Gandatindu Jataka (no. 520),
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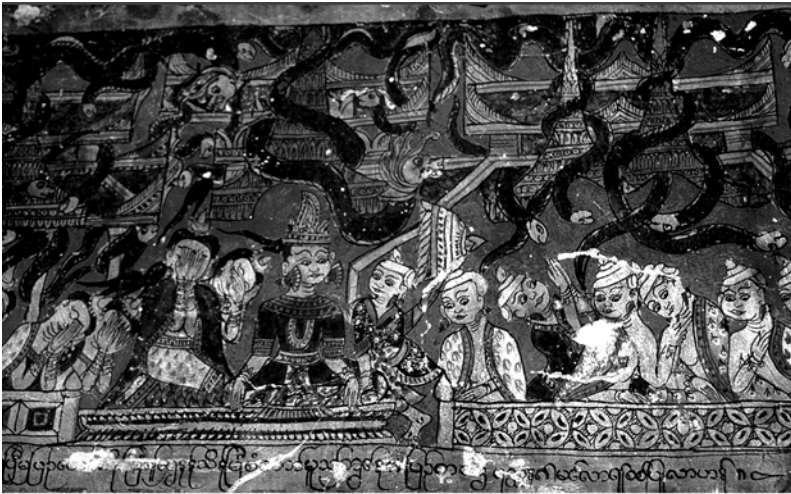


Fig. 9. Palace scene from the Bhuridatta Jataka (no. 543),
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APPENDIX

The Mahanipata

The Mahanipata: the last ten Jataka stories, composed of the Mugapakkha (no. 538), Mahajanaka (no. 539), Sama (no. 540), Nemi (no. 541), Khandahala (no. 542), Bhuridatta (no. 543), Mahanaradakassapa (no. 544), Vidhurapandita (no. 545), Maha-ummagga (no. 546), and Vessantara (no. 547). Each represents one of the Ten Virtues.

The Ten Virtues

The Ten Virtues or *paramis* (*paramitas*) include generosity (*dana*), moral conduct (*sila*), renunciation (*nekkhamma*), wisdom (*panna*), energy, effort, or perseverance (*viriya*), patience or

forbearance (*khanti*), truthfulness (*sacca*), resolution (*aditthana*), loving-kindness (*metta*), and equanimity (*upekkha*).

The Seven Stations

The Buddha occupied these seven stations after his Enlightenment. In the first week the Buddha remained under the Bodhi tree meditating on the chain of causation. During the second week he was under the Ajapala Nigrodha (a banyan tree) in Uruvela where the Brahmin 'Huhunka' and Mara's daughters accosted him. The third week he spent at Lake Muchalinda. It was here that the Muchalinda *naga* protected him from the rain. During the fourth week, the Buddha meditated under the Rajayatana tree, and at the end of the week he converted Tapussa and Bhallika to the creed.

The Vinaya account only gives these four, but the Jataka extends the period to seven weeks with an additional three being added between the first and second weeks. Thus, the second week is spent at Animisa Cetiya, the shrine built on the spot where the Buddha spent a week gazing unblinking at the seat at the foot of the Bodhi tree. The third week is spent at Ratanacankama Cetiya, the shrine near the Animisa Cetiya built to mark the spot where the Buddha spent a week after his enlightenment on the Jeweled Walk. The fourth week was spent at Ratanaghara Cetiya, the shrine on the site of the Jeweled Hall created by the gods. The Buddha contemplated the *Abhidhamma Pitaka* here. The fifth week was spent at Ajapala Nigrodha, the sixth at Lake Muchalinda, and the seventh at Rajayatana.