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Donald K. Swearer

HYPOSTASIZING THE
BUDDHA:
BUDDHA IMAGE
CONSECRATION IN
NORTHERN THAILAND

PROLEGOMENA

"In ancient Egypt as in Babylonia, in Sumer, and in Assyria, the final stage in the making of an image of a god—or of a man, in the case of mummies—consisted of the rite of Washing and Opening of the Mouth. This is the rite that *identified the image with the divinity*, and that *invested it with the life of that divinity* (or, in the case of mummies, the human being). . . . Like all consecration rites, it is both a rite of completion and of inauguration; it marks, essentially, the transition from inanimate manmade object to one *imbued with life*."¹

"The very act of consecration indicates that the statue is being brought to life."²

"If the Buddha in nirvāṇa has truly gone beyond, he nonetheless often seems to be remarkably 'present.' . . . The Buddha's nirvāṇa . . . was

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¹ David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 82; italics mine.

² Richard Gombrich, "The Consecration of a Buddhist Image," *Journal of Asian Studies* 26, no. 1 (November 1966): 24.

theoretically considered by the Buddhists as a 'new kind of absence,' but *practically* dealt with by traditional Indian magical techniques . . . 'for overcoming the absence of objects or persons' . . . This magic was accomplished by ritual action directed toward certain objects . . . associated with the absent person."³

"The image of the Buddha captures most effectively the subtle combination of presence and absence that gives Buddhist ritual its distinctive power. . . . Signs of the Buddha almost seem to be more real than reality itself: they turn reality into a shadow."⁴

"It would seem, then . . . that the remains of dead 'images' were ritually treated and permanently housed exactly like the mortuary remains of dead Buddhas, that—in fact—the equivalence of 'image' and 'actual person' . . . held not just during the life of the 'image,' but in its death as well."⁵

"When . . . an image [of the Buddha] is encountered and recognized . . . or when an enshrined relic is venerated, the whole story is implicitly present."⁶

"We participated in Buddhist rituals and ceremonies . . . and listened to many, many Buddhist stories. That was how we learned to be Buddhists."⁷

"In the act of commemoration . . . the practitioners of *buddhānussmṛti* [commemorating or remembering the Buddha] establish a communal identity that links them to other members of the Buddhist faith. But at the same time they call forth a relationship between two persons, themselves and the Buddha, capable of being profoundly catalytic, to the extent that distinctions of self and other dissolve in its luminosity and a new identity comes into existence."⁸

"Ritual is first and foremost a mode of paying attention. . . . A ritual object or action becomes sacred by having attention focused on it in a

³ John S. Strong, "*The Legend of King Asoka*": A Study and Translation of the "*Asokāvadāna*" (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 102–3, with particular reference to Paul Mus, *Barabudur*, 2 vols. (Hanoi: Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient, 1935), 1:89–90.

⁴ Malcolm David Eckel, "The Power of the Buddha's Absence: On the Foundations of Mahāyāna Buddhist Ritual," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 4, no. 2 (summer 1990): 63. The latter statement is a reference to Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Dell, 1977), p. 74.

⁵ Gregory Schopen, "The Buddha as an Owner of Property and Permanent Resident in Medieval Indian Monasteries," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 18 (1990): 203.

⁶ Steven Collins, "Nirvāna, Time, and Narrative," *History of Religions* 31, no. 3 (1992): 241.

⁷ Ranjini Obeyesekere, "Introduction," in *Jewels of the Doctrine: Stories of the Sadharma Ratnāvalīya*, by Dharmasēna Thera (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1991), p. x.

⁸ Paul Harrison, "Commemoration and Identification in *Buddhānussmṛti*," in *In the Mirror of Memory: Reflections on Mindfulness and Remembrance in Indian and Tibetan Traditions*, ed. Janet Gyatso (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 230–31.

highly marked way. . . . Ritual is not an expression of or a response to 'the Sacred'; rather, something or someone is made sacred by the ritual."⁹

"Ritual . . . entail[s] patterns of movement between worlds. . . . In these activities the participant is carried over, is translated from one world to another by means of language and action."¹⁰

The preceding quotations serve two purposes. First and foremost they highlight several interpretative problems at the heart of this study of the Buddha image consecration ceremony in northern Thailand: the image as the form (*rūpa*) of the Buddha; the relationship between the image and the person of the Buddha; the interrelationships among Buddha image, monk-liturgist, and lay congregation; the polarity of presence and absence; and the dialectic between narration and remembrance. Furthermore, they link the particular subject of this essay with a wide range of current studies by historians of religions and Buddhologists that focus on embodiment and emplacement rather than, as Catherine Bell puts it, "disembodied objectivism."¹¹ Using other terms, this study finds a place in the broad range of research on popular, culturally and historically contextualized forms of Buddhist literature, cult, and institutions. In the field of Buddhist studies I have in mind, for example, Gregory Schopen's studies on early Indian Buddhism, John S. Strong on the cult of Upagupta, and Kevin Trainor of Buddha relics.¹²

I am not suggesting that historians of religion and Buddhologists have turned their attention to such subjects as the cult of Buddha images and relics only in recent years. Earlier generations of scholars devoted considerable attention to the development of Buddha cult, although they asked different theoretical questions of this material.¹³ Scant attention has been paid, however, to Buddha image consecration ceremonies in Theravāda traditions. Richard Gombrich's study of the Buddha image consecration ritual in Sri Lanka appeared over twenty-five years ago.

⁹ Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 104–5.

¹⁰ William Schweiker, "The Drama of Interpretation and the Philosophy of Religions," in *Discourse and Practice*, ed. Frank Reynolds and David Tracy (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1992), p. 271.

¹¹ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 95.

¹² See, e.g., Gregory Schopen, "On Monks, Nuns and 'Vulgar' Practices: The Introduction of the Image Cult into Indian Buddhism," *Artibus Asiae* 49, no. 1/2 (1988/1989): 153–68; John S. Strong, *The Legend and Cult of Upagupta* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992); and Kevin Trainor, "The Relics of the Buddha: A Study of the Cult of Relic Veneration in the Therāvada Buddhist Tradition of Sri Lanka" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1990).

¹³ For example, Sukumar Dutt, *The Buddha and Five-After Centuries* (London: Luazc, 1957), interpreted the development of Buddha cult from an evolutionary, historical perspective.

More recently, Hans Reulieus has challenged Gombrich's interpretation, Stanley J. Tambiah included a description of a Buddha image consecration ceremony in his study of the Buddhist saints of the forest and the cult of amulets in Thailand, and François Bizot has analyzed the image consecration ritual in Cambodia as part of his extensive research on Southeast Asian Buddhism.¹⁴

The following essay is a study of the Buddha image consecration ritual (*Buddhābhiseka*) as currently performed in the Chiang Mai valley of northern Thailand.¹⁵ Complex and compelling in its own right, its significance extends far beyond the confines of the ceremony itself. Buddha images figure prominently in virtually all Theravāda rituals conducted by monks in temples and in homes. Consequently, although the content of a particular Theravāda ritual—for example, ordination into the monkhood, a funeral, the beginning and end of the rains retreat (*vassa*), a new house dedication—reflects its context, the presence of the image signifies a shared meaning, one grounded in the transformation of a “manmade object [in]to one imbued with life.” Similarly, “consecration” (*abhiseka*), literally the “pouring of water,” as a ritual act or gesture has a ubiquity that extends well beyond a particular ritual or ceremonial context.

For the purposes of this essay, the extended implications of the Buddha image consecration ceremony have less to do with the postmodern project to deconstruct a general and, hence, limiting theory of ritual¹⁶ than to acquire a deeper insight into Ranjini Obeyesekere's statement that she and her childhood Sinhala peers learned how to be Buddhists by participating in rituals and listening to stories. That is, I am less interested in ritual theory or ethnographic thick description than I am in finding out what the Buddha image consecration ceremony can tell us about how northern Thai Buddhists construct their world, in particular their understanding of the Buddha and their relationship to the Buddha and to their community of fellow Buddhists.

¹⁴ Gombrich, “Consecration of a Buddhist Image” (n. 2 above); Von Hans Ruelius, “Netrapratisthāpana—eine singhalesische Zeremonie zur Weihe von Kultbildern,” in *Buddhism in Ceylon and Studies on Religious Syncretism in Buddhist Countries*; ed. Heinz Bechert (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1978), pp. 304–34; and Richard Gombrich's reply, “The Buddha's Eye, the Evil Eye, and Dr. Ruelius,” in Bechert, ed., pp. 335–38; Stanley J. Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), chap. 17; François Bizot, “La consécration des statues et le culte des morts,” *Étude de matricule: Recherche nouvelle sur le Cambodge* 1, no. 1 (1994): 101–34.

¹⁵ My fieldwork on the Buddha image consecration ritual in northern Thailand was conducted between October 1989 and May 1990. During that period I attended five consecration rituals in Chiang Mai, Lamphun, and Chiang Rai.

¹⁶ See Bell (n. 11 above), “Introduction,” for a brief discussion of these issues.

INTERPRETING THE BUDDHA IMAGE CONSECRATION RITUAL

The northern Thai Buddha image consecration ceremony provides a richly multiplex context in which to explore a wide range of meanings ascribed to the person of the Buddha, the Buddha image, and Buddhist ritual within a cultural setting long associated with Theravāda Buddhism.¹⁷ Ordinarily lasting from sunset to sunrise, the *Buddhābhiseka* offers a ritualized, aural setting in which monks preach and chant episodes and events from the mythic, legendary life of the Buddha. All of the texts chanted and/or preached during the ceremony have connections with Pali canonical and commentarial material on the life of the Buddha, including biographical *suttas*, *jātakas*, the *Buddhavaṃsa*, the *Cariyāpiṭaka*, and the *Nidāna Kathā*. One of the standard preaching texts, the Buddha's First Enlightenment (*Paṭhama Sambodhi*) may have been written in Chiang Mai in the sixteenth century.¹⁸

The content of the particular texts chanted and preached during the Buddha image consecration ritual reveals several levels of Theravāda buddhology. Embodying the text within an aural, liturgical context provides a more complete and nuanced portrait of the Buddha as the center of a living Buddhist tradition. This picture calls into question normative, often stereotypical, textbook distinctions among Theravāda, Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna definitions of the nature of the Buddha. In particular, the view of the Buddha derived from the image consecration ceremony contrasts with the "rational renouncer" Buddha constructed by modern so-called protestant Buddhists.¹⁹ Within the consecration ritual, three distinct but interrelated constructions of the Buddha emerge: the one who came to an understanding of the impermanent, dependent co-arising nature of things and who taught the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Noble Path, the miraculous Buddha of myth and legend, and the Buddha of a seemingly timeless Buddha lineage.

The meaning of the Buddha story is enhanced as various portions of the sacred biography recalled during the ceremony are correlated with

¹⁷ For the most recent discussion of the historical development of Thai Buddhism, see François Bizot, *Le Bouddhisme des Thaïs: Brève histoire de ses mouvements et de ses idées des origines à nos jours* (Bangkok: Editions des Cahiers de France, 1993).

¹⁸ George Coedès, "Une vie indochinoise du Buddha: La Pathama Sambodhi," in *Mélanges d'indianisme: A la mémoire de Louis Renou* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1968), pp. 217–27.

¹⁹ I believe that the term "protestant Buddhist" was first coined by Gananath Obeyesekere in his study of the Anagarika Dharmapala ("Personal Identity and Cultural Crisis: The Case of Anagarika Dharmapala of Sri Lanka," in *The Biographical Process*, ed. Frank E. Reynolds and Donald Capps [The Hague: Mouton, 1976]). The term appears as a chapter title in Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), chap. 6. It refers to a "rationalized" reconstruction of the tradition associated with an urban constituency educated in a modern Westernized context.

successive phases of the image consecration ritual. From a myth and ritual perspective, the ceremony actualizes a mythic legend. Within the liminally charged all-night ceremony, the story of the Buddha assumes an extraordinary, true-to-life meaning: mere words on a page come to life; spoken words become instantiated. The story of the Buddha materializes in the setting of the ritual; the sacred biography takes a concrete, visual form in the very image of the *Tathāgata*. In making present the life story of the Buddha, moreover, the *Buddhābhiseka* contemporizes other characters in the Buddha story, from the mythic Māra to the legendary Sujāta, whose food offering to the Buddha as he sat under the Bodhi tree is recalled through dramatic reenactment.

In the manner of two other northern Thai rituals, the ceremonial preaching of the *Vessantara Jātaka* (*desanā mahājātaka*) and initiation into the monastic order (*pabbajā* and *upasampadā*), the consecration of a Buddha image recalls a story. It is noteworthy that each of these three ceremonies reenacts a transformational passage in the life of the *Tathāgata*: the Buddha's previous existence as Prince Vessantara, Prince Siddhattha's renunciation of worldly life, and the attainment of *nibbāna* (i.e., becoming the *sammasambuddha*). Furthermore, as Vessantara's abandonment of worldly wealth and power is requisite for the prince's kingship and the temporary ordination as a novice monk marks a youth's transition to adulthood, so too in the consecration ritual a material object is transformed into the living presence of the Buddha.

The story of the first Buddha image lends general support to the view that the image literally makes present the absent Buddha. According to a medieval Pali text from Sri Lanka, "The Laudatory Account of the Kosalan Image" (*Kosala Bimba Vaṇṇanā*), Pasenadi, king of Kosala, calls upon the Buddha for two consecutive days when the Blessed One is away.²⁰ The king then asks the Buddha if he will allow an image of himself to be made to assure his presence whenever he is absent: "Your reverence," asked the king, "yesterday many of the inhabitants of Sāvatti went to the monastery . . . but did not see the fully Enlightened one, and so returned to the city exceedingly dissatisfied. So for the benefit of the whole world I would like to have made an image in the likeness of the *Tathāgata*."²¹ The Buddha acquiesces to the request, observing that building an image produces great merit. An earlier version of the story appears in *Taishō daizōkyō* (II), "Sermons in Ascending Numerical Categories" (sermon 28).²² In this tale the Buddha ascends to the

²⁰ The account is taken from Richard Gombrich, "Kosala-Bimba-Vaṇṇanā," in Bechert, ed., p. 281.

²¹ Ibid., p. 296.

²² The account is from Alexander C. Soper, *Literary Evidence for Early Buddhist Art in China* (Ascona: Artibus Asiae, 1985), p. 259. See also Lewis R. Lancaster, "An Early

Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods to preach to them and to his mother. King Prasenajit (Pasenadi) of Kosala and King Udyāna of Vatsa have images of the Buddha made to compensate for his absence, one of sandalwood and the other of gold. As in the Pali text, the Buddha legitimates the building of the image by promising that such an act will be meritorious, in this case resulting in rebirth as a Lokapāla.

The northern Thai *Buddhābhiseka* reveals what “presencing” the absent Buddha means. The ritual re-presents not only the story but also the person of the Buddha seemingly unavailable because of the Buddha’s *parinibbāna*. The *Buddhābhiseka* compensates for this loss by actualizing the presence of the Buddha in two primary ways: by encoding the statue with the Buddha’s life story and by infusing into the image the power the *Tathāgata* accrued during his lifetime, variously indicated by such terms as *pāramī*, *ñāna*, and *guṇa*. This power becomes available much as it did during the Buddha’s lifetime when, as in the case of King Pasenadi, the Buddha’s followers perform ritual acts in his presence or in the presence of his surrogate, namely, the Buddha image.

The physical presence of the image in virtually all Buddhist rituals makes the consecration ceremony determinative for understanding the meaning and function of not only the image but also Theravāda ritual in a general sense. Although rituals are defined by particular contexts or occasions (e.g., an ordination or a sabbath meeting), the omnipresence of the image in these settings provides a common referent much as the Buddha himself was the focus of every occasion at which he was present during his lifetime. The image re-presents the Buddha—his life and teaching as well as his person replete with the powers of lifetimes of moral perfections (*pāramī*) and extraordinary states of consciousness (*ñāna*).

In Thailand a Buddha image is referred to as *phutarūp* (Pali: *Buddharūpa*), that is, an embodied form of the Buddha. As the story of the production of the first Buddha image suggests, the Buddha’s absence provides the occasion for constructing the image. In the *Kosala Bimba Vaṇṇanā* the Buddha is still alive but is temporarily absent from the monastery. In all probability the story is a post-*parinibbāna* pious invention legitimating the building of a Buddha image by the Buddha’s own authority. The Buddha’s absence in the *Kosala Bimba Vaṇṇanā* can be interpreted as a metaphor for the far more profound problem of whether the Buddha’s *arūpa* reality can be given a material form. This interpretation becomes even clearer in these stories where the absence of the Buddha occasioned by his *parinibbāna* justifies the construction of

his image. The Buddha's death is not simply his absence. Correlatively, the Buddha image is not merely a physical likeness of this great teacher, the Enlightened One. Rather, the Buddha is the "thus-gone one" (*Tathāgata*), and the image is an embodiment of this thus-gone truth.

I propose that in a more abstract, philosophical sense, the consecrated image can be interpreted as a material representation not only of the absent Buddha but also of the Buddha whose reality is ultimately immaterial (*arūpa*). A similar polarity between the material and the immaterial is represented in the *dharmakāya* section of a northern Thai Buddha image construction text that overlays twenty-seven *dharmas* like an invisible template on twenty-seven bodily parts of the image. In an even more esoteric manner, northern Thai Buddhism also has *yan phraphuta rūp*, Buddha image yantras that forge a similar correlation between the bodily form of the image and the *dhamma* using yantric cryptograms.²³ From this perspective, the Buddha image consecration ritual materializes that which, although eternally present, may not be available to sense experience. By this transformation, as David Eckel put it, the sign almost becomes "more real than reality itself."

I suggest that the coordinant poles of absence/presence, material/immaterial, *rūpa/dhamma* lie at the heart of the *Buddhābhiseka* and northern Thai Buddhist ritual in a more general sense and are also central to the northern Thai Buddhist worldview. The question of whether these polarities reflect proto-Mahāyāna (viz. Sarvāstivāda) influence is intriguing. For the purposes of this study, however, the more relevant historical questions are whether Buddha images (*a*) from the beginning of their production (which may have been as early as the second century B.C.E.) made the Buddha present after the manner of my interpretation of the northern Thai image consecration ceremony, (*b*) necessitated a consecration ritual of some kind to make the image sacred, and (*c*) by their very nature embodied the interrelated polarities of absence/presence, material/immaterial, *rūpa/dhamma*.

The concept of presence may be further illuminated by two related concluding observations.

1. The image as the presence of the living Buddha is a central feature of a genre of northern Thai texts known as *Buddha-tamnān*, which chronicle in a legendary manner the Buddha's visit to northern Thailand. Within the *Buddha-tamnān* narratives, the living Buddha creates

²³ Translations of the *dharmakāya* text and a Buddha yantra are included in my forthcoming monograph (see unnumbered note on first page of article). For the *dharmakāya* text, see François Bizot, *Le Chemin de Laṅka* (Paris, Chiang Mai, Phnom Penh: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1992), pp. 293–300. A book on Buddha image yantras in Southeast Asia by François Bizot and Oskar von Hinüber is scheduled for publication by the end of 1994.

a sacred geography by being at particular places in the region known as Lān Nā (land of a million rice paddies) and by naming them. It is noteworthy, furthermore, that the Buddha establishes his ongoing presence at each locale by leaving a footprint, allowing an image to be built, donating a hair relic, or predicting that after his death a bodily relic will be enshrined in that place. Buddha images, in particular, are explicitly justified in terms of the Buddha's parinibbanic absence. For example, the northern Thai legendary chronicle, the *Tamnān Ang Salung* (Chronicle of the Water Basin), which may date from the sixteenth century, relates the story of a wealthy potter who sponsored the making of 3.3 million Buddha images after the Buddha had preached a sermon at his home on the merit of constructing Buddha images: "[After they were made] the images were put in an appropriate place and everyone worshiped the Buddha. . . . The Buddha blessed the people saying, 'Sādhu . . . it is good that you have made these images of me because I will not always be here with you.'"²⁴

2. It seems probable that references to an image being a likeness of the Buddha do not intend an actual, physical similarity but rather that the image mirrors the Buddha's presence or is the Buddha's surrogate. In his study of northern Thai Buddha images Alexander Griswold observes, "Usually life and miraculous powers are transfused into new images from an older one—the chief cult image of a monastery which in turn has received them from a still older one and so on back to one of the original likenesses."²⁵ By Griswold's own account the Buddha's presence is mediated through the chief cult image of a monastery, which in turn is part of a regression extending back not simply to the first image but to the Buddha himself. It seems probable that the Buddha image, as in the story of King Pasenadi in the *Kosala Bimba Vaṇṇanā*, is like the Buddha himself being present rather than a portrait likeness of the *Tathāgata*.

THE NORTHERN THAI IMAGE CONSECRATION RITUAL

Buddha image consecration ceremonies in northern Thailand can be held at any time of the year. Generally speaking, however, they occur after the end of the monastic rains retreat (*vassa*) and prior to *Visākhā Pūja*, the celebration of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and death. Consequently, even though there is no stipulated season for the consecration of

²⁴ *Tamnān Ang Salung* (Social Research Institute, Chiang Mai University), microfilm, my translation.

²⁵ Alexander B. Griswold, *Dated Buddha Images of Northern Siam* (Basel: Artibus Asiae, 1957), p. 47; quoted in Tambiah (n. 14 above), p. 230. See Tambiah's discussion of the Phra Buddha Sihing image, chap. 16. Griswold makes the same point in Alexander B. Griswold, *Towards a History of Sukhodaya Art* (Bangkok: Department of Fine Arts, 1967), although he also suggests that images may reflect idealized portraits of kings (p. 33).

a Buddha image, the ceremonies tend to occur more frequently between November and May. Although Buddha image consecration ceremonies in northern Thailand may be held at almost any time of the year, to the best of my knowledge they always take place within the precincts of a monastery (Thai: *wat*). I have never heard of a Buddha image consecration ritual's being held in a home, which is the common practice in Burma for a home shrine image. Northern Thai consecration rituals may vary considerably in specific details: the length, the specific texts chanted and preached, the number of images or other sacred objects (e.g., amulets) being consecrated, the number of monks involved, the number and status of lay sponsors, and the building in the monastery compound where the ceremony is conducted. Although image consecrations may occur at virtually any time of the year and can extend over more than one day, the northern Thai consecration ritual takes place during the night with the climax occurring just before sunrise. The timing of the ceremony homologizes the event with the episode of the Buddha's enlightenment, which progressed through the watches of the night and culminated at sunrise. Furthermore, although the rituals may vary greatly in specific details, they contain four basic components: chanting, preaching, meditation, and presentation of gifts to the *sangha*.

Consecration rituals usually take place within a specially constructed sacred enclosure inside the *vihāra*, the image hall where most public meetings are held. A royal fence (*rājāvati*) demarcates the perimeter. A string strung from the principal *vihāra* image (previously consecrated) intersects over the *rājāvati* to form a virtual ceiling of 108 small squares. This is the same sacred thread (Thai: *sai siṅcana*, or water-pouring thread) held by monks as they chant during all types of religious services. It plays a crucial role in transferring or conducting sacred power from a particular source, especially a Buddha image, to animate or inanimate objects and is essential in making holy water, that is, water sacralized through the chanting of mantras (Thai: *suat mṇ*). Numerous distinctive objects are situated in and around the *rājāvati*, including four clay jars filled with water, four nine-tiered umbrellas, stalks of bamboo and sugarcane, bunches of coconuts, pedestal tables (Thai: *khan wai khṛū*) piled high with small cone-shaped banana leaf containers of fragrant flowers and incense, betel nuts and betel leaves, and husked and unhusked rice. Also to be found are a table with a monk's bowl and other monastic requisites and a stand with emblems of the eight royal requisites (sword, spear, umbrella, banner, etc.). The images to be consecrated are placed in the center of the *rājāvati* on small beds of grass, eyes covered with beeswax and heads hidden by white cloth.

The extent and variety of objects suggest different but interrelated levels of meaning. Several symbolize the story of Prince Siddhattha's

renunciation of his royal status in quest of a higher enlightenment. The emblematic requisites of both kingship and monkhood denote Siddhattha's mythic journey from his royal household to the attainment of Buddhahood. The grass on which the images rest represents the gifts of eight tufts of coarse *kusha* grass given to the Buddha prior to his enlightenment by the Brahman Sotthiya; the grass magically became a crystal throne.²⁶

The central event of the Gotama Buddha story is Prince Siddhattha's enlightenment, or attainment of Buddhahood. The crucial referent for the Buddha image consecration ritual is the description of the course of the attainment of enlightenment through the watches of the night. The beeswax closing the eyes and the white cloth covering the head suggest the Buddha prior to his enlightenment. Mouth, nose, and ears may also be sealed with beeswax, perhaps to guarantee that none of the fiery power (*teja*) being charged into the image will escape. Such a sealing off of the image would also appear to safeguard the sacralization process as well as to protect those present at the ceremony from the intensity of the energy being generated within the image.²⁷ Three small mirrors mounted on a cruciform stand facing the images symbolize the Buddha's attainment of the three knowledges (i.e., enlightenment): *pubbenivāsānussati-ñāna* (knowledge of the recollection of his past lives), *cutūpapāta-ñāna* (knowledge of the coming into being and passing away of all beings), and *āsavakkhaya-ñāna* (knowledge of the destruction of mental intoxication). Reversing the mirrors at the conclusion of the ritual represents the completion of Prince Siddhattha's spiritual journey and the attainment of omniscience (*sabbāññuttaya-ñāna*).

The structure of the *rājāvati*, furthermore, suggests a second level of meaning imbedded in the ritual. The ceiling of 108 squares is referred to as a magical cosmos. It resembles a geometric maṇḍala touching the earth through the conduits of sacred cord hanging from its perimeter. The objects at the entrances represent objects basic to traditional village existence—sugarcane, bamboo, coconuts, bananas—elements used in ceremonies to ward off evil and engender good (i.e., Thai: *phithi sadq khrq*, *phithi sū'pjāta*). The clay jars filled with water, various candles, and a peacock fan represent the four constitutive elements, or *dhātu*—earth, water, fire, air. The *rājāvati* also fuses the polarity between the religious and royal realms, so central in the sacred biography of the Buddha. The royal fence establishes the horizontal perimeter of the sacred

²⁶ In contemporary Thai Buddhist practice, the whisk used by monks to sprinkle holy water (Thai: *nām mṇ* [mantra]) is made from stiff blades of *kusha* grass.

²⁷ Protection from the power embodied in the image and the nature of the potential risk to officiants and congregants is at the heart of the disagreement between Gombrich, Ruelius, and Tambiah.

enclosure within which the images are consecrated. Yet, reminiscent of Siddhattha's journey beyond the walls of the royal city, when the "training" of the images is complete, the *rājāvati* no longer serves a useful function and is dismantled.

The evening's events begin around 7:30 P.M. with monks and assembled laity paying respects to the Buddha, taking the precepts, and asking forgiveness for transgressions. Lighting a victory candle (Thai: *tien chai*), constructed of a wick of 108 strands (the combined cosmic powers of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha)²⁸ and made to the height of the chief sponsor, initiates the consecration ritual proper. The officiating monk chants: "By the power of the Omniscient Buddha, the supermundane Dhamma, and the highest virtue-attaining Sangha may all suffering, calamities, and dangers vanish. May all beings live without injury." The chief sponsor then lights a large candle, *tien vipassi*, invoking the Buddha Vipassin, the first of the last six Buddhas preceding Gotama,²⁹ and two candles on either side symbolizing the *lokiya* (mundane) and *lokuttara* (transmundane) dimensions of the Buddha-dhamma.

The evening's main activities alternate among chanting, preaching, and meditation. Chanting (Thai: *suat*) includes *paritta* (protection) *suttas* from the standard Theravāda repertoire as well as texts unique to the northern Thai ritual context.³⁰ In most image consecration rituals throughout Thailand, the Pali *Buddha Abhiseka* will be chanted. At that time nine or more monks sit in meditation around the *rājāvati* with the *sai siñcana* cord extending from alms bowls placed in front of them to the Buddha images and amulets being consecrated. The monks invited to meditate for this occasion are often renowned for their attainment of extraordinary powers associated with trance states (*jhāna*). By recalling or recollecting these attainments during their meditation, the monks transfer them to the image. At the same time many of the lay congregants sit in meditation, some having encircled their heads with *sai siñcana* cords hanging down from the linked squares forming a ceiling over the images. While the assembly meditates, bronze Buddha images reflect the flickering light of burning candles, and the hall reverberates

²⁸ Also the sum total of the valences of the four elements—earth, water, fire, and air.

²⁹ See *Dīgha Nikāya* ii.2 ff.

³⁰ On standard Theravāda *suttas*, see Lily de Silva, *Paritta: A Historical and Religious Study of the Buddhist Ceremony for Peace and Prosperity in Sri Lanka, Spolia Zeylanica*, vol. 36, pt. 1 (Colombo: Bulletin of the National Museums of Sri Lanka, 1981); and Lily de Silva, "The Paritta Ceremony of Sri Lanka: Its Antiquity and Symbolism," and Hammalawa Saddhatissa, "The Significance of Paritta and its Application in the Theravāda Tradition," in *Buddhist Thought and Ritual*, ed. David J. Kalupahana (New York: Paragon House, 1991). Several different printed editions of chants (Pali and northern Thai) used in northern Thailand are readily available. For one of the most widely distributed in the Chiang Mai valley, see Bunkhit Wacharasāt, *Suat Mqn Muang Nū'a* (Northern Thai chants) (Chiang Mai: Tharathong, 1985).

with the cadence of monks chanting the story of the Buddha's enlightenment. In such a numinous, liminal environment, the transformation of material object into living reality seems palpably true. By this sustained, focused act of attention, the image as ritual object becomes sacred.³¹ Furthermore, as Paul Harrison observes, this act of commemoration of recollection (*buddhānussati*) calls forth a profound sense of communal identity linking the assembled congregants and the Buddha.³²

In northern Thailand monks frequently preach the *Buddha Abhiseka* in northern Thai as well as chant the text in Pali. Other northern Thai sermons will invariably include the Buddha's First Enlightenment (*Paṭhama Sambodhi*) as well as one or two other traditional favorites of this occasion, such as Siddhattha's Renunciation (*Siddhattha Q'k Buat*).³³ As we would expect, all of the sermons recount the life of the Buddha, especially the events of his renunciation and training, his conquest of Māra, and the night of his enlightenment. In addition to recounting the Buddha story, the texts also impart the seminal teachings of the Buddha's *dhamma*, for example, the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Noble Path, Dependent Coarising, and so on. The most dramatic teaching event occurs at the end of the ceremony. At sunrise, when the images have been duly consecrated, the monks chant the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* in reenactment of the Buddha's first discourse to the five ascetics.

Prior to the conclusion of the ceremony several other important events take place: the cloth and beeswax coverings are removed from the heads of the images, the images are fanned with a long-handled peacock fan, they are presented with forty-nine bowls of milk and honey-sweetened rice, and, finally, images and congregants are blessed with holy water.

The removal of the headcoverings symbolizes the completion of the training of the image or, as it were, the Buddha's attainment of enlightenment. Coincidentally, of course, the assembled congregants have also been "trained." The fanning of the images and the presentation of sweetened rice reenact two events in the legendary life of the Buddha: the god Sakka's act of respectful veneration toward the Buddha after his enlightenment and the offering of sweetened rice presented to the Buddha under the Bodhi tree by the young woman Sujāta. Fanning the image also "cools" the heat generated by the transformation of a material object into a living reality. The sweetened rice is cooked in the early morning

³¹ See Smith (n. 9 above), p. 104.

³² Harrison (n. 8 above), p. 230.

³³ Today this text is seldom preached, although the frequent occurrence of the text in palm leaf manuscripts collected in northern Thai monasteries supports Mani Payomyong's claim that the text was often included in the repertory of sermons preached on the occasion of the *Buddhābhiseka* ritual (personal communication).

hours over a wood fire stirred by young, prepubescent girls and then divided into forty-nine bowls symbolizing the seven days the Buddha spent at each of seven sites after his enlightenment.

Much of the *Buddhābhiseka* ritual has mimetic or performative significance.³⁴ As the very presence of the absent Buddha, the image must be coded with the right story much as an alias is coded with the life story of the person the alias represents, or the actor becomes the role she or he plays, or, from a somewhat different perspective, as we are our particular stories. That is, in being the Buddha, the image is the Buddha's story. Since a crucial component of the Buddha's story is the Buddha's teaching (*dhamma*), the image and the congregants are instructed in the *dhamma*. Furthermore, the chants, sermons, and monk meditators infuse into the images the powers of higher meditative states of consciousness. What is said, in particular what is chanted, and what is done, both in terms of meditation and various ritual movements, is intended to accomplish something, to make something happen, to be efficacious. The image becomes a living representative of the person, career, and power of the Buddha as well as the person, story, and power of charismatic monks.

It will be instructive to look briefly at the two principal texts preached during the consecration ritual. One, the *Paṭhama Sambodhi*, rehearses the Buddha's attainment of thirty perfections (*pārami*) from his birth as Prince Vessantara, though his incarnation in Tusita Heaven, his descent into the womb of Mahāmāya, his appearance as Prince Siddhattha, his passage through the four sights (old age, suffering, death, mendicancy), his renunciation, his temptation by Māra, attainment of enlightenment, the forty-nine days after his enlightenment, and the preaching of the *Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta*.³⁵ Virtually a quarter of the text focuses on the Buddha's attack by and defeat of Māra:³⁶

Māra's forces numbering several hundred thousand were fearsome. With Māra in the lead they came in a procession eighty-five miles in length and breadth and

³⁴ I use "mimetic" in the sense of "to make like," "to bring to presentation," "to present." See Schweiker (n. 10 above), p. 273, referring to Christoph Wulf, "Mimesis," in *Historische Anthropologie: Zum Problem der Humanwissenschaften heute oder Versuch einer Neube-gründung*, ed. Gunter Gebauer et al. (Hamburg: Rowohlt Aschenbuch, 1989).

³⁵ An outline of the central Thai version of the text can be found in Wat Haripuñjaya, *A Study of the Royal Temple of the Buddha's Relic, Lamphun, Thailand*, American Academy of Religion Studies in Religion, no. 10 (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1976), pp. 43–46. For the earlier and shorter northern Thai version recently published in Thailand, see *Paṭhama Sambodhi Samnuan Lānnā*, ed. Bumphen Ravin (Bangkok: Odian Store, B.E. 2535/C.E. 1992). An English language translation of the northern Thai text is being prepared by Sommai Premchit and Donald K. Swearer.

³⁶ My free translation of the *Paṭhama Sambodhi* is based on a palm leaf manuscript transcribed at Ban Noi monastery, Chiang Mai Province, in 1842 (Social Research Institute, Chiang Mai University), microfilm.

sixty-three miles in height. The divine beings (*devatā*)—Indra, Brahma, Yama, the Nāgas, and the Garudas—were apprehensive but waited for the Great Being (*mahāsattva*) to defend himself and attack the forces of Māra.

Then by their magical powers Māra's army assumed awesome forms that aroused great fear. They carried spears and swords, bows and arrows, and raised a deafening cry. They surrounded the Great Being and then launched their attack, but no harm came to the Blessed One due to his great merit.

Then Māra mounted Girinandamekkha, an enormous elephant 1,500 miles tall. Māra himself, standing on the elephant's neck, was four miles tall. By his magic power he generated a thousand hands, each holding a weapon, and charged the Great Being intent on killing him.

The spears and arrows Māra's army hurled at the Buddha were transformed into flowers and fell as an offering at the feet of the Blessed One. Māra's forces then looked up and saw the Buddha sitting like a lion king (*rājāsīha*) on a lotus in the midst of a wheel, unafraid of the army arrayed before him.

The Blessed One reflected, "I embarked on the mendicant path (*pabbajjā*) and became a Buddha. I attained the thirty perfections (*pāramī*) through perseverance (*virīya*).³⁷ In a previous life I was Prince Vessantara. The generous sacrifice of my wife and children caused the divine beings (*devatā* and *devaputta*) Indra and Brahma to bless my great gift (*dāna*) with celestial waters. From that time such a blessing is a witness to my enlightenment. I gained this diamond throne through the store of my great merit (*puñña*).

The text's conclusion transfers the Buddha's conquest of evil and subsequent attainments to the assembled congregants.

All people who listen to the sermon called the *Paṭhama Sambodhi* about the Buddha's way to and attainment of his final supreme enlightenment (*sabbāññuta-ñāṇa*) and who follow its teachings will attain three kinds of happiness of which the deathless state (*amata*) of Nibbāna is the highest. Whether you copy the text on your own or hire someone to do it, give it as a *pūja* offering or just listen to it, you will receive a blessing (*ānisaṃsa*) and will be reborn in heaven or as a human being greatly beloved by both *devatā* and human beings.

Ānisaṃsa texts constitute an important genre of northern Thai Buddhist literature since the majority of Buddhist rituals are classified as meritoriously efficacious (Pali: *puñña*; Thai: *tham pun*). Although merit-making rituals can be justifiably interpreted—as this text suggests—in "magical," consequentialist terms, when contextualized as the conclusion to the *Paṭhama Sambodhi*, a principal text of the *Buddhābhiseka* ritual, the *ānisaṃsa* fits into the "actualizing" intent of the ritual. That

³⁷ The moral and spiritual perfection (*pāramī*) acquired by the Buddha through his many previous incarnations and Buddhahoods is one of the principal subjects of popular Theravāda literature, e.g., *Jātaka*, *Buddhavaṃsa*, *Cariyāpiṭaka*. The thirty perfections refers to the last section of the commentary on the *Cariyāpiṭaka*.

is, within the ritual context the blessing follows from the actualization of the Buddha in the experience of the congregants.

The *Buddha Abhiseka* text, which is chanted and/or preached, only briefly summarizes the Buddha's birth and enlightenment quest.³⁸ The bulk of the text focuses on the Buddha's various supernatural or jhanic attainments, for example, *abhiññā* (psychic powers), realization of the states of stream-enterer to *arahatta-phalañña*, attainment of the three knowledges, and transcendence of rebirth:

The Blessed One (*Tathāgata*) reached the supermundane state (*lokuttara-dhamma*) through perseverance and effort. As one in whom the passions are extinct (*khināsava-brāhmaṇa*), the *Tathāgata* burned up all demerit (*pāpa*), and through his wisdom realized the *dhamma* of cause and not-cause. During the first watch of the night all of the *Tathāgata*'s doubts disappeared.

At that time the Buddha was able to recall his previous lives. His heart was pure. Devoid of defilements (*kilesa*), he overcame the eight worldly factors (*loka-dhamma*).³⁹ In the middle watch he was able to see the death and birth of all beings through the divine eye superior to all human and divine beings.

In the last few pages these attainments are infused into the image:

The Buddha, filled with boundless compassion, practiced the thirty perfections (*pāramī*) for many eons (four *asankheyya* and 100,000 *kappa*), finally reaching enlightenment. I pay homage to that Buddha. May all his qualities (*guṇa*) be invested in this image. May the Buddha's boundless omniscience be invested in this image until the religion (*sāsana*) ceases to exist. . . .

May the Buddha's boundless virtue (*guṇa*) acquired during his activities immediately after his enlightenment be stored in this image forever. May the knowledge contained in the seven books of the *Abhidhamma* perceived by the Buddha in the seven weeks after his enlightenment be consecrated in this image for the rest of the lifetime of the religion (*sāsana*). May the power acquired by the Buddha during the seven days under the Ajapāla tree, the seven days at the Mucalinda pond, etc., be invested in this Buddha image for 5,000 rain-retreats. The Buddha then returned to Ajapālanigrodha where he preached the 84,000 verses of the *dhamma*. May they also be stored in this Buddha image. May the Mahābrahma who requested that the Buddha preach come into this image.

The Buddha image consecration ritual concludes at sunrise. The image has been instructed in the life story of the Buddha and empowered with his supernormal attainments. The presence of the Buddha principle rep-

³⁸ This translation of the *Buddha Abhiseka* is based on a version currently preached during the Buddha image consecration at monasteries throughout the Chiang Mai valley. The text is a redaction edited by Bunkhit Wacharasāt, a major publisher of sermons (*desana*) presented to the *sangha* on various auspicious, merit-making occasions. The complete translation is included in a forthcoming volume of Buddhist texts, *Buddhism in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995).

³⁹ The eight worldly factors (*loka-dhamma*) are gain and loss, fame and obscurity, blame and praise, happiness and pain (*Anguttara Nikāya*, iv.157).

resented by previous Buddhas has been invoked in symbolic action as well as chant. Assembled monks and laity “feed” the image with forty-nine small bowls of milk and honey-sweetened rice. As dawn breaks, the monks chant the verses of the Buddha’s victory over the realm of samsaric grasping (*anekajati saṃsāra*), his enlightened penetration of the truth of dependent coarising, and the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*. Monks remove the head coverings from the images and respectfully fan them with a peacock feather fan. Finally, the laity feed the monks as they had earlier “fed” the Buddha. The *sangha* sprinkle consecrated water (*abhiseka*) on images and people and chant a final blessing: “Just as overflowing rivers make the ocean full, so *dāna* given from this world reaches the dead. May all of your wishes be successful. May all your wishes be as complete as the full moon and the bright, shining diamond.”

The Buddha image consecration ceremony establishes a common thread of meaning inherent in most Buddhist rituals, and in doing so it connects the founder with past and present, the dead and the living. Three terms applied to the northern Thai ceremony illustrate this generalized significance: “eye opening” (*berk pranetra*), “training the image” (*oprom phra buddha-rūpa*), and “consecration” (*abhiseka*). To open the eye of a Buddha image is to enliven it, to bring it to life, to make it present, to instill it with power. To train the image is to instruct it in the life history and teachings of the person the image represents. Within the context of Buddhist ritual and ceremonial practice, to *abhiseka* means to consecrate by pouring water or lustrating. At its deepest level, *abhiseka* means not only to make sacred in the sense of purify but to re-create and make new as represented by the life-giving force of water. To *abhiseka*, then, is to focus and disseminate power, the power of the sacred, the holy, indeed, the power of life. An *abhisek*-ed image or an amulet, be it of the Buddha, a king, or a holy monk, is a locus of such power. But *abhiseka* also permeates all aspects of life, much as water itself does: a teenager pouring water on the heads or hands of relatives at Thai New Year, a monk using a bamboo whisk to sprinkle water in blessing on an assembled congregation, a lay practitioner anointing a *cetiya* enshrining sacred relics at a monastery’s annual celebration. Beyond the images or the rituals themselves, *abhiseka* expresses a weltanschauung: on one level, a belief in the magical power or potent efficacy of particular material objects such as Buddha images and amulets, but on another, and one too often overlooked, a sense of reality that unifies and makes meaningful an otherwise arbitrary and chaotic world.

POSTSCRIPT

In writing about Vedic ritual, Frits Staal makes the provocative claim that ritual is meaningless.⁴⁰ With this characterization Staal proposes to

⁴⁰ Frits Staal, “The Meaninglessness of Ritual,” *Numen* 16 (June 1979): 2–22.

problematize various ritual theories, for example, that ritual reenacts myth (“why should anybody wish to re-enact a myth?”),⁴¹ reflects social structure, transmits cultural and social values, or effects a transition from the profane to the sacred. Staal argues that ritual is primarily self-referential: ritual is pure activity; it follows a particular set of rules or syntax; it is not symbolic; it has no goal [outside itself?].⁴² Staal’s characterization of ritual is more applicable to the *Agnicayana* than to the *Buddhābhiseka*, but his view suggests a relevant concluding reflection: ritual should not be seen primarily in an instrumentalist sense as a means to an end, for example, to legitimate or reinforce social hierarchy, or as secondary to the primacy of interpretative theory, whether constructed by traditional pandits or by postmodern academics. To see the *Buddhābhiseka* as pure activity emphasizes the meaning of the ritual as an expression or enactment of that which is already the case. In this sense the *Buddhābhiseka* is an act of truth (*saccakiriya*). The Buddha, like the *dhmma*, is eternally present. The ritual enacts this truth, locating it in a particular form.

For Ranjani Obeyesekere and her childhood friends the abstractions of Buddhist doctrine were given “immediacy, concreteness, and ethical saliency” through ritual and story.⁴³ In the *Buddhābhiseka* ceremony the Buddha and the *dhmma* are experienced with an immediacy and concreteness as simultaneously both present and absent, as both form (*rūpa*) and beyond form (*arūpa*).

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⁴¹ Ibid., p. 7.

⁴² Catherine Bell challenges the construction of the autonomy of ritual in her notion of “ritualization”: “If we take seriously the idea that even the exact repetition of an age old ritual precedent is a strategic act with which to define the present, then no ritual style is autonomous.” That is, ritual cannot be understood apart from its immediate situation (Bell [n. 11 above], p. 101).

⁴³ Obeyesekere (n. 7 above), p. x.