THE BUDDHA'S RADIANCE

by

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It is well known that in most Thai Buddha images the Buddha's usnīṣa is surmounted by a flame-like projection. This is an attribute which came into prominence at Sukhothai in the 12th or early 13th century. The bronzes of Nāgapatīṇīm on the coast of southern India and the Buddhas of Ceylon have similar projections, and earlier versions can be found in Pāla bronzes from Kurkihar (10th-11th century), in the reliefs of the upper galleries of the Barabudur (9th century) and in some older "Amarāvatī" bronzes from Southern India or Ceylon, like the one from Dong-dzu'o'ng which is now in Saigon. There is a another type of Buddha image, however, in which the object on top of the usnīṣa is not recognizable as a flame at all. It looks instead more like a bulb, a lotus-bud, or a gem. Images of this type were made, among other places, in northern Siam and in Tibet. No one has ever worked out the formal relationships among the different sorts of crowning elements, and no attempt to do so will be made in this brief note, which is concerned instead with the question of what they were called.

The flame-projection is described in the Thai-language version of the Pathmasambodhi, a life of the Buddha special to Siam, Laos, and Cambodia. At the request of King Rāma III (1824-1851), Prince Para-

mānujit revised the Pali edition, in which there is a passage that can be traced back to Dvāravatī times, and produced a version in Thai. According to it, the eightieth of the eighty minor marks (anuvāṇī) of the Buddha is “the ketumālā, a trail of brightly-ascending rays (raṃī) upon the uppermost part of His Head.” The proper name for the projection is therefore ketumālā, an Indic word which means ‘a garland (or crown) of flames’ (ketu, a word that can also refer to a banner or to a comet, in which case it is numbered among the planets). A convenient substitute would be ‘radiance’, and this term can be used to indicate the actual projection as well. The Pathamasambodhi also uses the Indic word raṃī [sic], which is today the more common expression for the ketumālā and probably was in the last century too, for only it is used in a Third Reign text on the proper proportions of Buddha images.

Ketumālā appears in no canonical Buddhist scripture, and the compiling of the eighty secondary marks occurred after the canon had been put together. The word’s most notable appearance in a Pali-language text is in the Mahāvamsa, the Sinhalese history of Buddhism. In Chapter V the serpent king Mahākāla responds to a request of King Asoka. “The nāga-king,” says Geiger’s translation, “created a beauteous figure of the Buddha, endowed with the thirty-two greater signs and brilliant with the eighty lesser signs (of a Buddha), surrounded by the fathom-long rays of glory [byāmappabha] and adorned with the crown of flames [ketumālā].” As Burnouf pointed out over a century ago, the inclusion of the word ketumālā suggests a relationship between the description and Buddha images with a radiance. It is not likely that either the verbal

6) Ibid., 225.
7) Phrapatlawmsninhtkathtt, Rongphimkāññātanā (Bangkok, 2505 [1962], 85. H. Alabaster’s account of the life of the Buddha ([The Wheel of the Law, London, 1871]) is based on the Pathamasambodhi, but his rendition of this passage (p. 115) appears to be not only based on a different edition but inaccurate as well.
8) Tam,·J., Rongphraphuttharitp (cremation volume for Sanñākhu Luang Prüangkha- dirāt (Ring Khathawanit), 2463 (Bangkok, 1920), 12. Copy in the Yale University Library.
10) E Burnouf, Le Lotus de la Bonne Loi, Paris, 1852, 609-610. Burnouf’s eighth appendix is devoted to the thirty-two characteristics and eighty lesser marks of a mahāpuruṣa.
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The concept or the plastic form long existed alone. When exactly the word ketumālā did first come into use is uncertain, however. It does appear in the commentary on the Vimāṇa-Vatthu as well as in the Mahāvaṃsa.11 This commentary is attributed to Dhammapāla, a Tamil monk who is thought to have lived in the late fifth century.12 All that can be said is that from the archaeological point of view this date is a possible one.

It is a good deal more difficult to determine what the Buddha's radiance was called in northern India and in the Sanskrit or Buddhist-Sanskrit tradition, and no dates can be conjectured at all. There are plenty of lists of the eighty minor marks, but in none of these is there a mark equivalent to the ketumālā.13 In the Lalitavistara, the life of the Buddha which in its present form dates from no earlier than the fourth century A.D.,14 and in the Mahāvastu, a compendium of about the same time, the final mark is a most peculiar one. The Buddhists, according to the Mahāvastu (where the final mark is actually the eighty-first), "have well-shaped heads and their hair bears the figures of [literally, 'is like to'] the Svastika, Nandyāvarta, and Muktika signs."15 The Lalitavistara puts the Śrīvatsa, the Svastika, the Nandyāvarta, and the Vardhamāna in the hair.16 It makes little sense for these auspicious symbols to be connected with the Buddha's head when they properly belong on his hands or, especially, his feet, where they are in fact placed according to the eightieth characteristic of other enumerations, like the one in the Dharmasamgraha, a text comprised of lists of various technical terms,17 and the one in the Mahāvyutpatti, a later Sanskrit-Tibetan-Chinese glossary.18

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18) Ryosaburo Sakahi, Mahāvyutpatti, Kyoto, 1916, 348 (XVIII, 80).
impossible that the compilers or editors of the lists in the Lalitavistara and the Mahāvastu were aware of a tradition in which the eightieth and last mark had something to do with the Buddha’s radiance. Wishing to end their lists with the head rather than with the feet or hands, and aware of this other tradition but unable to accept it in its entirety, they shifted the auspicious symbols from the Buddha’s hands and feet to his hair.

Regardless of whether the absurdities of the Lalitavistara and the Mahāvastu were inspired by a list in which the ketumāla (or something like it) was the eightieth member, there is some evidence that in northern India the radiance was called by a term which in part consisted of the word ketu. The Tibetan equivalent of ketu is tog.19 A Tibetan-English dictionary defines tog as “the top of anything, a top ornament; esp. the button on the cap of Chinese dignitaries, as a mark of distinction.”20 It is hard to see how this conjunction of meanings could have come about (except, of course, by chance) unless the Tibetans were familiar with Buddha images in which the radiance was in fact known as a ketu or a ketu-

There is a Pali list of the eighty minor marks in which number eighty is ketumālaratana/ṇaratiṣāla ‘the quality of being brightened with the gem (Skt. ratiṣa) of the garland of flames (ketumāla).’21 It was once pointed out that there is probably a relationship between ketumālaratana

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21) This text, the Dharmaprātipāhā, late in date, is generally known only from Burnouf’s quotation from a manuscript of it (Burnouf, op. cit., 557, 608). (In the bibliography of the Copenhagen Critical Pali Dictionary, a text of the same name is described as Guruñugomi’s Sinhalese commentary on the Mahābodhi
carita, Colombo, 1915.) R. Spence Hardy, A Manual of Buddhism (sic), London, 1860, gives a list of the eighty minor marks according to a 13th century source; the ketumāla either does not appear or is omitted in the translation, and the last mark is the byāmapphāla. These two are the only Pali or Sinhalese lists with which I am familiar. The Dharmaprātipāhā passage was discussed by Sten Konow in The First Two Chapters of the Dokaṣṭhānathā Pratīcārāparāmiṇī (Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi, Oslo, Aarhandlingar 1941, III, Oslo, 1942, 65-66. His translation of the passage is “to be beryll-coloured.” I take ratiṣa here as a synonym of amarājita in Buddhavaṃsa I, 45, “byāmapphāla/amarājita” (P. T. S. vol. 2, London, 1882).
and classical Sanskrit keturatna. Keturatna means 'the gem of (the planet) Ketu.' The major gems corresponded to the planets, and Ketu's gem was vaidūrya, which is thought to be "cat's eye" because all colors were said to be present in it through reflection. Keturatna is indeed a plausible hypothetical name for the radiance in northern India, and perhaps at one point images actually had vaidūrya radiances. One of the Tibetan names of the Buddha of healing, Bhaisajyaguru, is sMan-gyi-bla-ba-dtser-yi-'od-kyi-rgyal-po, 'lord of medicine, king of the light of the vaidūrya,' perhaps this means the light is present in the radiance, which is shaped like a gem and made of vaidūrya or keturatna. There is apparently no record of what the similarly-shaped radiance of northern Siam was called, but possibly its name was comparable.

In this journey from Siam to Ceylon, through India to Tibet and back to Siam, the unifying artifact has been the object on the Buddha's ugya and the unifying word, ketu. This word has not, it seems, been used in a single sense, any more than the radiance has had a single shape. Behind the varying usages and forms, however, has lain a remarkable unity of conception and intent.

22) Konow, op. cit., 66.
25) D. Barrett, "The Later School of Amaravati and Its Influences," Art and Letters, (N.S.) XXVIII, 2 (1954), 41-53, became available to me only after this article had gone to press, and so I was unable to take into account Mr. Barrett's arguments that the flame radiance did not appear before the second half of the 8th century at the earliest.