

An Introduction to the Bodhisatta Paintings in Bagan

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Abstract

The artists of Bagan have already drawn attention to the paintings in the temples. The painted ornamentation was a fundamental part of the sanctuary. Mahayanism and Brahmanism flourished before the Bagan period. The peculiarity of Mahayanism is the belief and worship of Bodhisatta. The paintings representing Mahayanist Bodhisatta prove that Mahayana creed is still alive in Bagan. The Bodhisatta paintings, however, were secondary depictions supporting the Theravada, and were often merely decorative.

Key words: Jambupati, Merraya, Lokanatha and Bodhisatta

Introduction

The Pyu came into Myanmar through Assam in about the 3rd century BC or earlier. They left quite a considerable number of Mahayanist icons, which would have reached there from the north as well as south India and from the east through Dvaravati and that probably happened as early as the 5th century AD. By the 7th century AD Pali verses appeared on terracottas as excerpts from the Buddhist scriptures and that was due to the change from Mahayanism to Hinayanism. Mahayana, however, never lost its hold on the people of Myanmar until now. Avalokitesvara, Maitreya and Taradevi are also found. Brahmanism, of course, preceded Buddhism in reaching Myanmar.

The coming of Bamar followed soon after the fall of Pyu in AD 832. They became Buddhists in about the 10th century AD, and they learnt to write their own language. They left records of their donation at religious establishments, while they were building up an empire in the 11th century. They also built magnificent pagodas and shrines in Bagan area. Grand buildings were put up by people, perhaps by foreign engineers first. Bagan received her own groups of Indian settlers. Brahmin astrologers had been in the service of Bagan Kings. Although Hindu images have been found, Hinduism never established itself in Bagan. There are probably monks of Mahayana sects for a number of Mahayana deities. There are several series of pictures to show the special subjects like all the Buddhas and all the deities of the Mahayana pantheon with the spread of Buddhism to Myanmar (Than Tun, 2005).

The crowned Buddha

In the Bagan period, crowned Buddhas were rarely used for the main image. However, in later periods large crowned and seated images of the Buddha in bhūmispaśamudra were frequently placed as the main image of a temple (Luce, 1970). The crowned Buddhas are known in Myanmar as Jambupati. Images crowned and royally adorned are often confused with those of Mettaya who may be depicted in a similar manner. The principal difference between these two is in the mudra and type of regalia. The Buddha, though crowned, retains his monk's robe and is seated in a characteristic earth touching pose. Mettaya wears a bejeweled costume, adorned with much finery, and his hands are placed on his lap, in dhyānamudra. In the case of some Mettaya images at Bagan, the posture is Lalitasana (Luce, 1969).

Mettaya, the next Buddha

Mettaya may be confused with the Bodhisatta Lokanatha, a version of the Mahayana Bodhisatta Avalokitesvara. Stone tablets, called andagu, also show an image of the crowned Buddha. The Jambupati image may have come to Bagan through Rakhine (Strachan, 1989). In no temple or shrine does a permanent Jambupati image feature as the central icon. The inscriptions show that it was popular to dress and adorn images with fine royal garments (Than Tun, 1959). The people of Bagan believe that Mettaya would be the next and final Buddha. Anawrahta looked to Mettaya for salvation and wrote on the back of his votive tablets: I, King Anawrahta the Great, have cast this image of the Buddha. May I, by virtue of this act of merit, gain the bliss of nibbana during the dispensation of Arimetaya (Mya, 1961).

Mettaya became a popular cult figure at Bagan, as it had been worshipped by the Pyu who passed the cult on to Bagan. The Dhammayazika, the pentagonal form of architectural ground plan, is the manifestation of the Mettaya cult. Luce (1969) thought that the single Bodhisatta cult is of early origin in Myanmar. Duroiselle (1918) regarded the figure on the left of the Buddha as Mettaya and the Bodhisatta on the right as Avalokitesvara. Hence, the five Buddha arrangements were part of the Mahayana belief system (Duroiselle, 1918).

Lokanatha

The Bodhisatta that was widely portrayed in Bagan was Lokanatha, himself a form of Avalokitesvara, and came to Myanmar from Bengal. Lokanatha was said to be "the Lord of the World" during the interval between the Buddha's parinivana and the coming of Mettaya. The earliest Lokanathas found in Myanmar came from Srikretra. They are tiny oval votive tablets, some with Pyu writing on the rounded reverse. The central figure is the Bodhisatta, who sits in lalitasana. The two finest specimens made by bronze are from Bagan. In each case the right hand is in the varadamudra, and the left gracefully holds the stable of a lotus flower. Lokanatha may also support the Buddha together with Mettaya. In the Mahayanist triads, the Bodhisattas are shown as Mettaya and Lokanatha in Pyu times. The bronze images of Avalokitesvara standing in the tribhanga pose have also been found at Bagan.

Bodhisattas in Abeyadana, Myinkaba Kubyaukgyi and Aloyi-gu

The Bodhisattas painted in the entrance of temples had the function of welcoming the worshippers. In the Abeyadana, identifiable Bodhisattas are painted in the entrance hall on either side of the passage to the shrine (Figure 1). There are Bodhisatta paintings on the outer walls of the corridor. In the first tier, each Bodhisatta sits alone in ardhaparyankasana on low platform with triple-arching reredos. Each has two arms with distinct attributes. Each has a pointed crown and lotus-corn of hair, ear-tubes and royal ornaments (Figure 2). All wear striped loin cloths of various colours. The ornamentation of the outer wall differs completely from that of the inner wall. The spandrels between the recesses are longer than those on the inner wall and contain images of male divine characters. They all sit on leg on the ground and the other rises up. Most of them are booted and carry weapons to protect the figures above them (Fabri, 1930).



Figure 1. Bodhisatta and attendants, in lower row on the exterior wall of the corridor in Abeyadana.

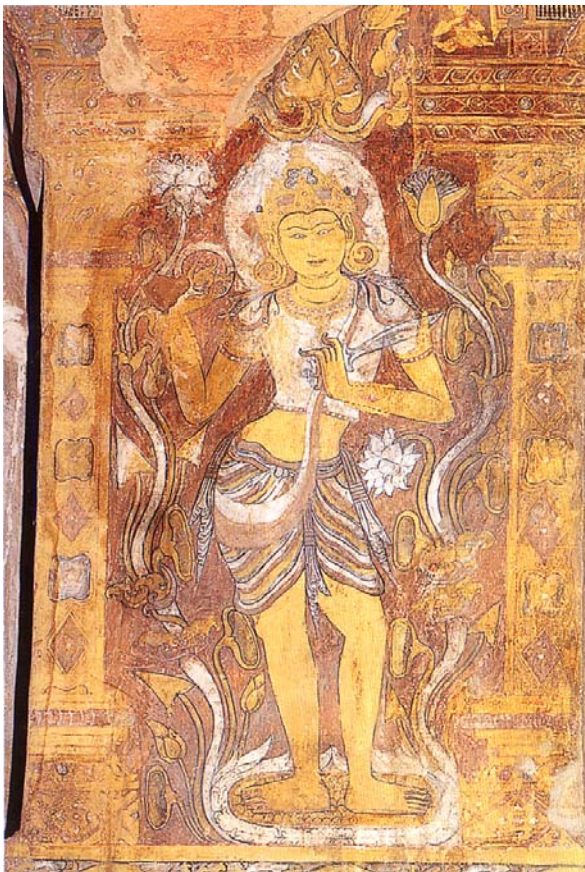


Figure 2. Bodhisatta as protector in the upper row on the exterior wall of the corridor of Abeyadana.



Figure 3. Manjusri in the lower row on the exterior wall of the corridor of Abeyadana.

The second row includes Bodhisatta images seated on large lotus flowers, attended by two figures. Manjusri is repeatedly shown here, holding the blue lotus *utpala*. Two Bodhisattas stand on either side of the passage to the ambulatory around the shrine. They can be identified as Manjusri and Avalokitesvara by their flowers and attribute (Figure 3). Both Bodhisattas embody particular aspects of the way to Buddhahood. Another row of Bodhisattas is painted on the upper part of the walls. They stand with heels of both feet touching each other and are surrounded by lotus flowers. These Bodhisattas appear as keeping on the way to the Buddha depicted as a teacher above them. Four-armed Bodhisattas are painted in the narrow space between the niches of the interior wall in the Abeyadana. The eighteen tondi are distributed between the upper part of the niches and divine creatures. Here Luce notes the Bodhisattas painted on the outer wall of the corridor of the Abeyadana (Luce, 1969) (Table 1).

Bodhisatta paintings in the Myinkaba Kubyaukgyi are of interest. On either inset of the east porch is painted a colossal ten-armed standing Bodhisatta, attended by two seated *Saktis* (Luce, 1970). Two of his hands are raised in prayer, two hands in gesture of charity, two clasp stems of lotus, the rest hold discuss, wheel, elephant-hook, etc. High above him, in their lotus paradise, a pair of Brahmas sits in *padmasana* on lotus-cushions, their hands sustaining lotus-buds. In the Aloyi-gu, ten-armed Bodhisattas are painted on the side walks of the entrance. They stand to left and right and larger ones are painted on the arch. In the Nandamanya, Bodhisattas are distributed at the bottom of the bands running along the walls and the vault of the vestibule. Two Bodhisattas are painted on the eastern part of both recesses, standing on a monstrous face equipped with arms. In the Hpayathonzu, the Bodhisattas in the central shrine are slender whereas those in the other shrine present a proportionally large head, the legs being excessively shortened below the knee. Eight-armed Bodhisattas are also introduced in the ornamentation of the dummy pillars in the Hpayathonzu.

The Bodhisattas are drawn with a clear line against deep red background and in position as well as in distribution of attributes. Some paintings do not fit in with the Theravada Buddhism, which was then being actively introduced in Bagan. Nonetheless, they were considered to be important to occupy a position that would later be taken by *Sakka* or *Brahma* or *Pancasikha*. The attributes are clearly illustrated, but do not constitute sufficient evidence for precise identification of these figures. The presence of numerous weapons among the attributes clearly stresses their nature as protectors of the way to the shrine.

Conclusion

The idea of Bodhisatta surrounding a central Buddha image is well known in Indian art. As Bagan lies on the fringe of northeast India, in some aspects the early murals of Bodhisatta relate to the north and south Indian schools of painting, whereas the following period reflects the local stylistic and iconographic tendencies. The most notable Bodhisattas of Bagan are Avalokitesvara and Manjusri. A striking feature is the portrayal of figures in royal costumes adorned with princely ornaments and attended by females. It seems from the Bodhisatta figures that the Mahayana cult was probably in vogue in Bagan period.

Table 1. The description of the Bodhisattas painted on the outer wall of the corridor of the Abeyadana (Luce, 1969).

Cave	Left	Right
North Wall (East of entrance arch)	(at top of cave)	
1. Bodhisatta in <i>ardhaparyankasana</i> , right knee raised. Left hand in <i>vitarkamudra</i> .		Large crested Bird facing out (on East wall).
East Wall		
2. Dark brown Bodhisatta in <i>ardhaparyankasana</i> , right knee raised, right elbow on knee, hand in <i>vitarkamudra</i>	Bearded Hunter with topknot, facing out, sword in left hand.	Bearded Hunter with topknot, facing out, shooting with bow and arrow.
3. Bodhisattas in <i>lalitasana</i> right leg hanging, right hand on knee in <i>varadamudra</i> , left before body in <i>mantramudra</i> .	Dark brown Horse, facing out.	Black Bear facing out.
South Wall		
4. Bodhisatta seated in <i>lalitasana</i> , left leg hanging, left hand on knee in <i>varadamudra</i> . Deity kneels on left, human figure on right, in worship.	Hoopoe facing out.	Hoopoe facing out.
5. Whitish Bodhisatta, on lotus, in <i>lalitasana</i> right leg hanging. Small animal on his raised right hand.	Deer running out.	Tusked Elephant with extended trunk, facing out.
6. Bodhisatta sits half-front on rich lotus mat in <i>dharamacatramudra</i> , between half-blown lotuses, looking askance but kindly at kneeling lady on right, with offering hands.	Monkey facing stork.	Tusked Elephant head with trunk raised to a banana leaf.
7. Bodhisatta seated in <i>latitasana</i> on lotus, left leg hanging, left hand holding lotus stem, another stem passing crook of right elbow.	Bird turned inward, with reverted head.	White animal with horns, turned inward.
8. Bodhisatta in <i>lalitasana</i> , left leg hanging. Fingers on his right hand touch shoulder. Left hand holds stem of lotus. Another lotus on left side; both half blown.	Archer facing in, and shooting at.	Hare and Monkey.
9. Bodhisatta seated on lotus in <i>latitasana</i> , right leg hanging, right hand on knee in <i>varadamudra</i> , left in <i>abhayamudra</i> , with jewel in palm.	Flaked Deer facing in words.	Thin figure on roof, facing in.
10. Bodhisatta seated in <i>lalitasana</i> , right leg hanging, right hand on knee in <i>varadamudra</i> . Half blown lotus passes crook of left elbow. Black striped loincloth.		Short horned Deer facing in.

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