

The Nature of the World in Nineteenth-Century Khmer Buddhist Literature

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REFLECTIONS ON HISTORY, NATURE, AND THE HISTORY OF
“NATURE” IN THE THOUGHT OF MASATOSHI NAGATOMI

THE BUDDHIST HISTORY I learned in classes at Harvard from Mas Nagatomi was rooted in the understandings of people and communities. “Buddhism” moved, crossed borders, was reinterpreted, changed—but never as an abstract “-ism”; Buddhist ideas, texts, images, values, and practices were carried across Asia and through historical moments by different individuals who found these ideas and practices meaningful within the context of their own political, spiritual, literary, and aesthetic circumstances. With his colleague at the Divinity School, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Professor Nagatomi viewed “religion” as a cumulative tradition that was constantly being reinvented. From the standpoint of Mas’ many students, most of whom were trained in the languages and cultures of one particular Buddhist historical complex, what was most staggering about this perspective on the shifting contours of the Buddhist tradition was its breadth, moving through Buddhist histories in India, Nepal, China, Tibet, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, and translating between Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan, Japanese, and Pāli.

During his final years at Harvard and before his death, Professor Nagatomi had begun studying Buddhist conceptions of nature. The project responded both to current scholarly work in the field of Buddhist studies and to more activist concerns about the role of religion in global ecology movements. Characteristically, his approach was a wide-ranging historical examination of shifting Buddhist understandings of “nature” in particular Indian, Tibetan, Chinese, and Japanese texts and contexts. My essay on representations of the nature of the world and of individual identity in late nineteenth-century Cambodian literature grows out of Mas’ influence as a historian of religion concerned with transmissions and reinterpretations of Buddhist values and ideas, and more particularly out of his own

scholarly inquiry into the Buddhist history of “nature.” In his lectures on Buddhist conceptions of nature, Mas Nagatomi insisted that there was not a single Buddhist view of “nature” but rather a series of changing reinterpretations. It may be that his historical methodology, examining the shifts and flows of Buddhist ideas and images across borders and his rejection of “essentialist” formulations of Buddhism, was informed by his own Buddhist intellectual apprehension of the nature of impermanence and reality.

As his student, besides being shaped by this approach, I appreciated his bodhisattva-like kindness and compassion, and his delight in (at least some of) the ideas and interpretations of his students. I particularly recall his appreciation of the unnamed student in the 1960s who had turned in a blank paper for his exam on “emptiness,” a story he related to his students before every exam and which my students now enjoy. I know that I cannot hope to pass on Mas’ broad command of Buddhist histories to my students, but I hope that I can make them aware of the shifting contours of Buddhist ideas and interpretations—which will perhaps also help them to recognize a little of the impermanent nature of the world.

In this essay, I examine the intertwining concepts of merit, power, Buddhist virtue, and the moral rendering of the physical universe apparent in late nineteenth-century Khmer vernacular texts. I argue that literary preoccupation with these themes during this period of heightened French colonial presence in Cambodia represented a Khmer intellectual scrutiny of modern identity in Buddhist terms. The modern absorption with the identification and demarcation of peoples, races, and nation-states, and with the “disenchantment” of traditional religious and social expressions was part of the currents of Buddhist thought in colonial Southeast Asia.¹ As Buddhist thinkers turned their attention to these issues, they persisted in constructing literary images of the world in moral terms. Even when the cosmological, temporal, and physical representation of the world that dominates these texts was downplayed in subsequent decades by modern Khmer Buddhists, the centrality of the law of karma and the moral nature of the universe seen in these literary images remained important to the construction of the new Buddhist orthodoxy that emerged in the twentieth century.

In nineteenth-century Khmer religious literature, the person of the Buddha was regarded as the central figure in the past and future narrative of human beings in the world. That is, the Buddha was not simply an exemplary moral figure; his cosmic biography also demonstrated and made sense of how reality worked. The identity of individuals was determined by action or karma, and the benefit or harm it created. The physical formation and temporal framework of the world itself, in this conception, was linked to the moral development and decline of individuals living in the world, and of the rise and gradual purification of the subsequent Buddhas who taught the Dhamma or Truth in different eras.

THE MORAL COSMOS

Khmer literati, trained and educated during the nineteenth-century in Buddhist monastic schools, learned texts that articulated a vision of a morally constructed universe existing in a cosmic timeframe. The cosmos, with its multiple worlds, moved through continuous cycles of decline and regeneration that mirrored the continuous decline and regeneration of the Dhamma, or Truth, among beings. The identity of individuals was morally derived as well, determined by their kammic status as they moved through a hierarchically ordered cosmos of levels of rebirth, or *gati*,² depending on their accumulated stores of “merit”—derived from good or beneficial actions in past lives. The Cambodian literary scholar Lī Dhām Ten³ has commented on the number of prominent texts from this period that depict similar events and themes, concerning

wicked, savage *yaksa* exacting retribution from humans, and humans who are just persons constantly undergoing cruel and terrible torments from those who are evil. But the evil do not prevail, because in accordance with Buddhist theory, *adhammic* persons always fall prey to the karmic fruits of their (own) wrongdoing, following the laws of nature that require people whose actions are good to realize benefit and find happiness.⁴

Well-known religious texts of the period, some of which were best known outside monastic circles in their oral and visual forms, reinforced and reduplicated a vision of time and world as morally structured. These included versions of the *Trai Bhūm*, a cosmological text, and the *Jātaka*, along with other related Buddhological biographies such as the *Paṭhamasambodhi* and *Bimbānibbān*. In 1848, a new king named Ang Duong was elevated to the Khmer throne through Siamese military patronage. He had been educated in part in Bangkok, where he had spent part of his life as a hostage “guest” of the Siamese monarch. An author of Buddhist literary works himself, one of his early acts as king was to convene a gathering of Khmer religious and literary scholars in order to reconstitute the Khmer literary heritage lost during the preceding decades of social tumult and warfare.⁵ The king reportedly sent to Siam for copies of texts that had disappeared from Khmer monastic libraries, including the *Trai Bhūm*,⁶ which according to French accounts of the period remained a highly influential text throughout the rest of the century.⁷

The *Trai Bhūm* defines human beings in respect to their place in the morally-ordered structure of the Buddhist cosmos with its thirty-one hierarchical levels of existence. Likewise, the development of human communities is described in relation to their inhabitants’ observance of the

Buddhist Dhamma. Because of their inability to control their cravings and desires, human beings are forced to organize their societies under the leadership of kings, the best of whom are known as *cakkavatti*, kings who promulgate and uphold the Buddhist teachings. Implicit in this vision is the notion that the righteousness of kings determines the prosperity of their subjects as well as the abundance of agricultural production and the regular, harmonious functioning of the seasons and other natural phenomena.⁸

Temporally, the three worlds of the text are situated in a universe characterized by continuous cycles of development, destruction, and regeneration, which are divided into temporal periods known as *kappa*, an almost immeasurably long period of time that constitutes the lifetime of the world.⁹ The two major divisions are referred to in Khmer sources as the *kappa*-s of decline and prosperity. The *kappa* of decline, *saṃvaṭṭakappa* or *kappavinās*, is the “devolving” or diminishing *kappa*, in which the human life span grows increasingly shorter as the ten kinds of bad or non-beneficial actions (*dasa akusalakammāpatha*) are introduced. The list of ten actions includes: theft, murder, lying, malicious speech, improper sexual behavior, harsh speech, frivolous speech, jealousy, malice, and wrong view.¹⁰ At the *kappa*’s end, human life becomes desperately short and violent, all moral values are lost, and the world is destroyed by means of fire, water, and wind.¹¹ The *vivaṭṭakappa* or *kappacamma* is the period of time in which the world regenerates, just as it was before. A long while after the destruction of the world, when the universe is still filled with water, a *brahma*-being who has escaped the destruction in the highest levels of the universe looks down into the water. If the being sees one flower, the *kappa* will have one buddha, and is called a *sāra**kappa* (“excellent *kappa*”); if the being sees two flowers, the emerging *kappa* will witness the enlightenment of two buddhas, and is called a *maṇḍakappa* (i.e., “superior *kappa*”), and so on.¹² Shortly after this, other luminescent *brahma*-beings converge and very gradually evolve (or devolve, as the case may be) into solid-bodied, gendered humans living in social groups, who must—as a result of cravings that lead them away from the Dhamma—develop shelters, communities, agriculture, and a system for designating rulers.

The world in which these beings develop has Mount Meru standing at its center, surrounded by a ring of mountains and four continents inhabited by different classes of humans, of which human beings inhabit the Jambu continent. The larger universe containing this realm is divided into three morally hierarchical worlds containing thirty-one realms of varying levels of experience, perception, and formlessness. The lowest realms are the experiential ones, in which beings are reborn into hells, the human and animal world, or the heavens, experiencing the combinations of pain, sorrow, and happiness that are their karmic due. At higher levels, more

spiritually advanced beings, those with material remains and those without, advance toward the cessation of the cycle of birth and rebirth. The conditions, events, and places of past worlds are reduplicated, as different bodhisattvas are born, perfect themselves, become enlightened, and preach the Dhamma, which other beings embrace. Again, in this regenerated world, the ten non-beneficial actions gradually emerge, with poverty giving rise to theft, theft giving rise to a need for weapons, the possession of weapons giving rise to murder—until human life expectancy has devolved once again to an individual life span of ten immoral and violence-filled years.

Even this brief description of the *Trai Bhūm* cosmology makes clear the extent to which the nature of the world, its inhabitants, and its temporal cycles reflects the moral behavior of human beings in this nineteenth-century conception. This interplay is clearly represented, for example, in the image of the Bodhi tree, always the site of enlightenment for buddhas, which is the first physical element of the new world to spontaneously regenerate after the frothy waters from the end of the last *kappa* gel and harden again into earth. Resuming its place at the very beginning of the new *kappa*, the re-emergence of the Bodhi tree anticipates the perfection of one or more new buddhas.¹³ The inter-identification between corporeality and morality is also evident in the physical evolution of the world's inhabitants from luminescent *brahma*-beings into hard-bodied humans, a progression that is clearly correlated with their development of cravings, first for food and then for sex, and which ultimately motivates them to erect shelters, build communities, and elect a king.

The movement of time is likewise inscribed in moral terms, with cycles of *kappa* that correspond to the establishment and loss of Dhammic ideas and values. The temporal and spatial progress of human beings through the world, as they are born and reborn into the various *gati* or realms of existence,¹⁴ is determined by the ripening of their *kamma*, the result of beneficial and non-beneficial actions performed in the past. Ultimately, what identifies and differentiates individual human beings from each other and from the many other classes of sentient beings with whom they share this world, including animals, ghosts, deities, demons, as well as the more morally-perfected beings who inhabit the other three continents of the universe, is their capacity to escape the incessant death and rebirth of *samsāra*, to move beyond morally-constructed, conditioned temporality to *nibbāna* through moral perfection, a state that only humans are able to attain.

The *Trai Bhūm* construction of the nature of the world, time, and the individuals inhabiting it functioned as an idealized conception dominating the religious imagination of nineteenth-century Cambodia. Its influence is evident in popular *Jātaka* (birth stories) from the end of the nineteenth-century that convey individuals living and progressing through

the three-tiered cosmos. While some *Jātaka* texts are explicit about reduplicating this cosmology, in others, the three tiers and thirty-one realms of the morally-structured universe remain as the setting or background for stories that focus their main attention on chronicling the moral development of various righteous and malevolent characters.

THE MORAL WORLD OF THE JĀTAKA

The *Trai Bhūm* representation of the world as morally structured and hierarchically organized is borne out in other texts of the period that follow the same broad outlines of its assumptions about cosmology, temporality, and morally-constructed identity. Many popular stories from the period are concerned with the theme of individual development as characters progress toward either moral perfection or kingship (and in some cases both). Joseph Guesdon, a Catholic missionary who surveyed and studied Khmer language and literature at the turn of the twentieth century, commented that Khmer were obsessed with depicting the cosmic biography of the Buddha to the extent that “authors represent only characters in which the Bodhisat (or future Buddha) is the hero.... It is always a bodhisat who is reborn, suffers and who triumphs over all with miraculous aid.”¹⁵

Canonical and non-canonical vernacular *Jātaka* were in general the best known and most widely-collected texts in monastic schools and libraries in nineteenth-century Cambodia.¹⁶ These texts construed identity in terms of the cosmic cycle of the Buddha’s births, rebirths, and moral development. Especially ubiquitous in Khmer collections were the stories of the last ten births, detailing the Buddha’s cultivation of the ten *pāramī* or perfections: generosity, moral behavior, freedom from passion, wisdom, energy, patience, truth-telling, self-determination, loving-kindness, and equanimity.

Jātaka existed in a variety of literary forms and included recognizable versions of the birth stories from the *Khuddakanikāya* of the *Suttantapiṭaka* of the Pāli Canon, versions of the Khmer *Paññāsajātaka* (*Fifty Birth Stories*),¹⁷ and stories only loosely connected to one or both of these collections. One *Paññāsajātaka* story that was well-known at least at the end of the nineteenth-century (and probably before, since it was composed at the end of the eighteenth century) was the *Pañāsā Sīrasā*.¹⁸ It relates the story of two youths (one of whom is a prince and bodhisatta) who are banished to the forest and later, after numerous travails, become the kings of two different kingdoms. As kings, they make visits to various realms on earth and in the heavens.¹⁹ An excerpt of the original text offers descriptions of the physical landscape and human inhabitants of the three other continents in the earthly realm, similar to those appearing in the *Trai Bhūm*. The text tells of the “majestic Mount Sūmairu,” encircled by seven oceans and seven

mountain ranges, whose slopes in all four directions are “gilded with gold, studded all over with shining and shimmering...precious gems” or “shining with the splendor of inlaid sapphires.”²⁰ Outside the rings of concentric oceans and mountains, the four continents of Jambu, Āmakoriyā, Udarakaro, and Pūdsīdī are inhabited by beings of different types. Aside from our continent, Jambu, the other three lands are “so beautiful they resemble the realms of heaven” and are inhabited by beings whose lovely visages reflect their moral purity:

Āmakoriyā, Udarakaro, the continent of Pūdsīdī,
are so beautiful they resemble the realms of heaven,
and all the men and women who inhabit them
are as lovely as *devadā*.

[In Pūdsīdī] the men and women have round faces
like full moons,
clean and pure, without defects,
their life spans are one hundred years.

The faces of the inhabitants of Āmakoriyā,
the continent to the west,
are like crescent moons,
and they live five hundred years.

The people inhabiting Udarakaro
have vividly beautiful faces
with four equal sides,²¹
and they live one thousand years.

All of the sentient beings in these three continents,
the men and the women alike,
follow the five precepts, always guarded,
never faltering, never taking the lives of other beings.

They are [all] happy,
lacking the troubles associated with farming;
they know nothing of business or trade
[but] only of gathering together for enjoyment and pleasure.

Their bodies never experience pain, illness, or injury;
there are no mosquitoes, wasps, flies, or centipedes at all;
[since] anger does not exist,
their hearts and minds are free of suffering.²²

As this passage from the *Pañāsā Sīrasā* makes clear, the beauty, ways of life, and life spans of the inhabitants of the other continents are more desirable in many ways than the conditions in the human world of Jambu, particularly during its periods of declining prosperity. It seems, however, that in these worlds of greater perfection and purity, the absence of suffering is tied to a lack of corresponding moral development. By contrast, human beings in the Jambu continent, like the heroes of the *Pañāsā Sīrasā*, have to endure exile, countless battles with magical creatures, mistaken identities, and separations from loved ones before finding happiness or peace. Along with the entertainment value provided by these narrative episodes, the struggles of characters such as the Bodhisatta-prince move them farther along on the path toward purification. The other continents provide a Buddhist vision of felicity, as Steven Collins has termed it, but the conjoined sorrows and happiness of human experience in the Jambu continent make sense in light of the *Trai Bhūm* assertion that only through birth as a human do beings have the opportunity to become enlightened and escape the whole cycle of rebirth.²³ If human identity necessarily entails suffering, so does nibbāna.

While the *Pañāsā Sīrasā* draws on the spatial landscape of the *Trai Bhūm*, the *Nemirāj*,²⁴ another of the most important *Jātaka* of the period, vividly depicts its moral hierarchy of graded levels of heavens and hells. This text is one that makes particularly clear the nineteenth-century theme of moral cultivation as central to the formation of human identity.²⁵ The *Nemirāj* story of one of the last ten human rebirths of the Bodhisatta, was widely-known by lay persons as well as literate monks, and besides being read or chanted by monks, its contents were depicted on one of the gallery panels in the royal palace in Phnom Penh as well as in numerous temple murals.²⁶ This *Jātaka* story focuses around the journey of a virtuous king named Nemi through the hells and heavens, where he graphically learns the lesson that all kamma or actions bear fruit—which eventually ripen.

King Nemi is part of a long line of kings whose custom it was to abdicate their thrones to their sons in order to become world-renouncers on the day on which each discovers his first gray hair. One day, when King Nemi wonders out loud which is more beneficial, generous giving of alms or world renunciation, Braḥ Indra (the god Indra) comes to reassure him that while the latter is ultimately greater, the combination of moral behavior and generous alms-giving in lay persons is both meritorious and indispensable to the well-being and further development of oneself and the Sangha. When Indra returns to heaven, the other gods long to meet this moral king as well and hear him preach. When Indra sends his charioteer Mātali to fetch Nemi, the driver offers to show Nemi the heavens and hells, leading him on a journey that also serves to clearly illustrate the importance of moral behavior and generosity. Nemi's journey through the multiple levels of hell and heaven is elaborated in great detail. Several short excerpts

convey both the representation of a hierarchical universe structured by merit and the imagery of the ripening of good and bad actions, particularly (in the passages below) in connection with the exercise of power and authority.

The journey begins in the hells, where Nemi witnesses the torturous ripening of the fruits of wrong actions:

[King Nemi]: Driver Mātali, charioteer of the gods; will you please guide me along both roads: the road belonging to beings who have performed acts of wrongdoing,²⁷ as well as the road belonging to beings who have performed good actions.²⁸

The Teacher then said: Mātali, charioteer of the gods, showed the king a river named Vetaraṇī, which few beings can cross, filled with painful, boiling, churning water hot as tongues of flame.

King Nemi watched beings falling into the River Vetaraṇī, a river that very few beings can cross, and asked Mātali, charioteer of the gods, “Driver, Son of Gods, now I am afraid, after watching [these beings] fall into the River Vetaraṇī. Driver Mātali, charioteer of the gods, I ask you: what acts of wrongdoing have been performed by all of these beings falling into the River Vetaraṇī?”

Mātali, charioteer of the gods, of whom the king asked this question, described [the ripening of] the fruit of wrong actions, which is already understood, informing the king of what he did not yet know, saying, “they were beings who possessed power [but] whose ways of exercising it were disgusting.²⁹ They oppressed, criticized, and derided beings less powerful than themselves. In worldly life, that group of beings performed these disgusting actions, accumulating demerit,³⁰ and now they must endure falling into the River Vetaraṇī.³¹

After witnessing more scenes of this sort, King Nemi is transported to the levels of the heavens, where his sensations become markedly more pleasant and where he learns of the wonderful celestial rewards experienced by people who have given generously and created benefit for others:

King Nemi: This palace, with the appearance of meritorious actions,³² splendid with glittering walls made of diamonds and crystals, divided into symmetrical sections! It resounds with celestial music for dancing, with drums and tambourines, accompanied by singing [so exquisite] that to hear it transports one to glad-heartedness. This music is so beautiful that until arriving here, I

had never before heard anything comparable. Heavenly driver, such delight I am experiencing because of coming here! ... [W]hat kind of beneficial acts³³ did these sons of gods perform so that they reached this level of heaven and now dwell so happily in this palace?

Mātali, charioteer of the gods, of whom the king asked this question, described [the ripening of] the fruit of meritorious actions, which is already understood, informing the king of what he did not yet know, saying, "These were all people who behaved morally.³⁴ During their lives in the world they were *upāsak* [lay Buddhists] who built gardens, lakes, wells, and bridges; with pure-heartedness, they supported all serene monks, they respectfully offered robes, food, beds, and chairs, and the requisites of medicine to all genuine and true monks. These people all observed *uposath* [the holy day], taking eight precepts every fourteenth, fifteenth, and eighth days and at celebrations and [other] holy days as well. Concentrated in moral behavior, these were individuals who directed their comportment toward generosity and almsgiving, and as a result, they now dwell so happily in this palace.³⁵

These passages are embedded in longer, similarly evocative descriptions of torture-ridden hells and glittering heavens replete with jeweled palaces and lovely celestial handmaidens. Analyzing sources from the period, it is difficult to know exactly how this graphic imagining of the world in terms of moral rewards and retribution was understood in the minds of end-of-the-century individuals, whether literally, symbolically, or both simultaneously. The extent to which the imagery of a multi-tiered, morally-constructed universe and the meritorious individual pervaded everyday life, however, is suggested in ritual performances that reduplicated the *Trai Bhūm* cosmology. The representation of beings moving through a hierarchically-structured moral cosmic time frame was articulated in various ritual contexts, including the daily act of providing support for monks, which transferred merit to the donors. Rituals of merit-transference to ancestors performed at funerals and on many other occasions as well also emphasized the place of the person in the moral cosmological scheme.

One text that was widely recited at funerals and often used in sermons connected with merit-making was the *Vessantara-jātak*, the narrative of the Bodhisatta's penultimate birth as a human being. Writing from the turn of the century, French sources report that the *Vessantar-jātak*³⁶ was one of the "most highly esteemed" of all Khmer texts, not only the "most important" and "most beautiful" text, but also "the most popular of Cambodian books," one that was known by everyone, through recitations at temples,

through murals that filled numerous temple walls, and through theatrical productions. Well-known and important throughout Theravādin South-east Asia in addition to Cambodia, the story concerns the birth of the Bodhisatta as a prince of the Sivi kingdom named Vessantara (Vessantar in Khmer versions), son of King Sañjaya (in Khmer, Sañjay) and Queen Phusatī. A radiant and virtuous youth dedicated to giving alms, he is married to the *almost* equally beautiful and virtuous Princess Maddī. Vessantar and Maddī have two children, variously known in Khmer texts as Jāli and Kresna or Jāli and Kaṇhājīnā. When the prince gives away his magical rain-making elephant to the neighboring kingdom of Kāliṅga, whose inhabitants are experiencing a drought, his angry subjects banish him to the forest. Because their love for each other is so great, Maddī and the two children make the fateful decision to accompany Vessantar into exile. Meanwhile, an old brahmin named Jūjaka, who is married to a beautiful, conniving, and much younger woman, is instructed by his young wife to go and obtain Vessantar's children as slaves. Jūjaka travels to find the Bodhisatta, and making sure that Maddī is absent, asks Vessantar to give him the children as alms—to which Vessantar readily assents.

After giving the gift, Vessantar must struggle to transform his pain at the suffering of his children into equanimity. He eventually informs Maddī of the gift, and through his example, she too moves from inconsolable grief to insight and acceptance. While Vessantar also gives away Maddī (and she is subsequently returned to him), it is the gift of the children that furthers the substantial moral development of Vessantar. As a result of the gift, Vessantar is understood to have finally perfected the *pāramī* or virtues necessary for future rebirth as a buddha, an enlightened teacher who can spread his Dhamma or Teaching of the Truths to others, and thus lead them to enlightenment and the cessation of future births.

For those who knew the trajectory of the Bodhisatta's perfection of giving, as Khmer audiences of the period would have, this moment in the text is not simply the climax of one story, but of many. Other *Jātaka* stories reveal the Bodhisat's many gifts of alms, wealth, food, his eyes, other body parts, or his entire body; others depict the Bodhisat giving away himself and his wife as slaves. As Vessantar, he has also given away his auspicious rain-making white elephant. While in various *Jātaka* stories these gifts of body parts, wealth, and possessions are often given quite blithely, the gift of the children is by contrast portrayed as far more difficult—because “children are the very best gift.”³⁷ In a Khmer verse version of the story³⁸ the depth of Vessantar's grief is conveyed with the line,

Then, Prince Vessantar the Ksatriya, having given his gift, went inside the leaf hut, and sad, pitiful weeping could be heard.³⁹

Another prose vernacular manuscript of the story⁴⁰ expands on the allusion to Vessantar's grief in this passage, drawing out the description of his pain and detailing the development of his emotions and thoughts before and after he gives the gift of the children. For instance, in one passage Vessantar is shown caressing his children and saying,

Oh my precious children, you do not know your father's heart. If he gives you as alms to the brahmin, it is for nothing less than the aspiration to be one day the Lord Buddha himself. Oh my children, if your father can become a Buddha, he will deliver the condemned who are in the hells and he will give them the means of taking birth in the heavens.⁴¹

As he finishes this speech, Vessantar takes the hands of his two children and stretches them out to place them in the hands of Jūjaka, the brahmin. Then he picks up a container of water and sprinkles some of it on the earth. At this moment, the earth quakes, trees tremble, the waters of the oceans churn, form into whirlpools, and rise up in the air, and Mt. Sumeru bows down, touching its summit to the peak of Mt. Vongkot (near to where Vessantar and his family are living).⁴² As he listens to the laments of his children being led away and beaten by Jūjaka, Vessantar then cries:

Alas! I am like a great fish, caught in a net, like a fish that cannot come or go, cannot advance or retreat. Now that I have given my children as alms, I can not take them back. I cannot....

The suffering in my heart is immense. I cannot aspire to become Lord Buddha now, because my suffering is too great. I will shoot an arrow at this brahmin, I will kill him, and I will retrieve my children and bring them back here.⁴³

As he considers this course of action further, Vessantar reflects on the giving of gifts, and then recalling the four kinds of gifts that every buddha in every *kappa* has given—the gift of his person, the gift of his life, the gift of his children, and the gift of his wife—he is able to collect himself and calm his mind, finally becoming “beautiful like a true Lord Buddha.”⁴⁴

Several pervasive identity themes emerge from Khmer versions of this story: the moral construction of individual and world; the model of moral cultivation as a key component of who a person is; the morally hierarchical structure of the world's spatial landscape; and a perception of power as tied to moral virtue. The climactic moment in the text in which Vessantar gives away his children brings to the forefront a nuanced conception of identity in which all beings in the three realms, and even the “world” itself, are

shown to be joined by moral action. Within the text, Vessantar's act of moral purity triggers a response of awe and astonishment with its imagery of the earth shaking, a reaction that it also wants to project onto its audience:

Then the Bodhisat who had brought prosperity to the kingdom of the Sivis gave his two children, Jāli and Kaṇhājīnā, to the brahmin. Then, the prince, with his heart glad, gave his two children, Jāli and Kaṇhājīnā, to the brahmin, for children are the very best gift. Because of this, you should feel awestruck; your skin should be crawling and your hair standing on end because of that moment in which the prince gave his two children as a gift and the earth trembled and shook. The reason why you should be awe-struck with your skin crawling and your hair standing on end is because the prince who brought prosperity to the kingdom of the Sivis, with his hands together [in a gesture of respect], offered his two thriving and happy children as a gift to the brahmin.⁴⁵

The enormity of this moment, with its cosmic reverberations, is reiterated again in terms that extend to and include the celestial world of the *Trai Bhūm* cosmography as well, delighting the gods, as Vessantar's wife Maddī recounts:

My Lord [Brah̄ Aṅg] has caused the earth to reverberate, your fame⁴⁶ reaching all the way to the *deva*-world, unusual lightening spreading across the sky of the Hemavānt Forest, an echoing voice resounding as if from the mountains [themselves].

Gods in both realms, Nārada and Pabbata, together with Brah̄ Indr and Brah̄ Brahm, Pajāpati and Soma, King Yama and King Vessavāṇ, all rejoice because of you; all the gods who were born in the Tāvatiṃsa heaven, together with Brah̄ Indr, rejoice.⁴⁷

Again, in this scene, in which Vessantar's perfection of *dāna* causes the celestial beings to rejoice and the earth itself to quake and rumble, the images employed by the text offer a glimpse of its assumptions about the underlying nature of reality: Vessantar's act has moral reverberations for all other beings, because moral action gives meaning and order to the universe. Because the practice of Dhamma (the teaching that Vessantar will give once he is a buddha) shapes the nature and passing of time, the implications of this moment extend into and influence beings in the future and the past as well.

POWER AND IDENTITY

The representations of the morally-constructed universe and individual progression through its cosmic time frame were joined by a third identity-related theme: the intertwining of merit and power. To examine the importance of this theme during the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century period, I will return briefly to my consideration of the *Vessantar-jātak*, and then move to a reading of portions of a vernacular poem on the enlightenment of the Buddha, composed at the close of the century by Ukñā Suttantapriṇā Ind, which exemplifies this theme.

Returning then to the *Vessantar-jātak*, the prince's sojourn in the forest had come about after his angry subjects had banished him for giving away his auspicious rain-making elephant to a neighboring drought-stricken kingdom. After the gift of the children is given, Vessantar continues to live in the forest with his wife Maddī. Meanwhile, his children are discovered and redeemed by their grandfather, King Sañjay, who with the children and a large retinue of followers travels to the forest to find Vessantar and Maddī. When Vessantar is reunited with his parents and children, accompanied by the roar of the earth and a rain shower from the *deva*-s, his subjects become aware of his virtue and implore him to come back and take his rightful place as their king:

When the royal family was reunited, a loud thundering sound arose, all the mountains made a noise, the entire earth trembled. At that time, the very moment when Prince Vessantar was reunited with his family, rain was compelled to fall in a shower. The reunion of the grandchildren, daughter-in-law, the prince, and the king and queen at that point in time would make your skin crawl and your hair stand up. All of the townspeople who had come together into the forest arranged their hands together [in a gesture of respect] toward Prince Vessantar, weeping, their faces awe-struck, and implored the royal Vessantara and Maddī. The entire populace of the kingdom spoke all together, saying "Brah̄ Ṃg, our Lord and Lady. Please, both of you, rule over our kingdom."⁴⁸

Here again, the earth quakes and the mountains roar (causing everyone's skin to crawl) as a testimony to the store of merit required to reunite the royal family. Realizing their past mistake—their inability to recognize Vessantar's merit—the same townspeople who caused him to be exiled beg him to become their king. The recognizable superiority of his power is clearly linked to his asceticism, purity, generosity, and merit.

Vessantar, it is clear, is not only filled with merit (signified by the roaring and quaking of the natural phenomenon) but is also indifferent to

worldly kinds of power. If Vessantar can give away his precious children, his rain-making elephant, and live serenely in the forest, he is obviously impervious to the means through which power can corrupt. His indifference, his merit, and his recognition of the higher truth of Dhamma makes him an ideal ruler.

Aspects of this same logic about merit, power, and kingship pervade many other texts of the period. *Ryān Jinavaṇṣ*⁴⁹ and *Ryān Rājakuḷ*,⁵⁰ for instance, both provide models of the kind of highly vernacular adventure story in which a bodhisatta-prince is lost or exiled or has his identity otherwise obscured. After many travails in which he always prevails because of his merit and virtue, he is returned to his kingdom to take his rightful place as ruler. When his life is threatened, he always survives, he always wins the beautiful, virtuous princess, he is always dutiful, respectful, and wise, and furthers the cause of justice. The *Devadatta-sutta*, another well-known text, presents similar values concerning power and merit, drawing on personages and stories from the life of Gotama-Buddha.⁵¹ This text is a compilation of several *Jātaka* excerpts concerned with the character of the Buddha's heretical cousin Devadatta who gains influence over the young son of the Buddha's great lay supporter King Bimbisāra. He corrupts the prince, foments his patricide of his father, and obtains his aid in assassination attempts on the Buddha. Prince Ajātasattu's moral decay under the tutelage of Devadatta is contrasted with his father's moral purification under the spiritual guidance of the Buddha. Bimbisāra, who gave generously to the Sangha and brought about the ordination of 110,000 of his subjects, "had attained the highest degree of perfection that can be attained by a lay person."⁵² This text ends, of course, with all of Devadatta's efforts to harm the Buddha coming to nothing. He is swallowed by the earth and, according to the prediction of the Buddha, spent the next 100,000 million years being tortured in Avici Hell.⁵³

Perhaps the most highly idealized vision of power and merit is found in the biography of the Buddha in his last birth as Siddhattha, born into the Sakyān Gotama clan, in which he finally attains moral perfection and the knowledge of awakening. A Southeast Asian rendering of the biography is found in the *Paṭhamasambodhi*, a text composed in Bangkok by the Supreme Patriarch of the Thai Sangha in the mid-nineteenth century.⁵⁴ The Khmer translation of this biography appeared in various versions in Cambodia, at least by the end of the nineteenth century. One French ethnographer of the period referred to the *Paṭhamasambodhi* as "the principal text of religious education" among the Khmer,⁵⁵ and as in the case of the *Vessantar-jātak*, noted the enraptured silence of the audience, including children, as they listened to recitations of the text.⁵⁶

One Khmer version of the *Paṭhamasambodhi* is an epic poem entitled the *Ryān Paṭhamasambodhi*, written between the 1880s and the early part of the twentieth century by Ukñā Suttantaprijā Ind. The text offers a

distinctive Khmer verse elaboration of scenes from the life of the Buddha. Like some of Ind's other poems, the *Ryāṅ Pathamasambodhi* was intended as a literary work but seems to have circulated in oral as well as manuscript (and later printed) forms. The poem's intertwining notions of merit, kingship, and buddhahood—with the the three worlds cosmography as its backdrop—illustrates the Buddhist literary engagement with depictions of identity and power at the close of the nineteenth century.

The text opens with a brief description of the kind of magnificent worldly (*lokiya*) power possessed by the Buddha in his life as Siddhattha, a prince of the Sakyān tribe:

We will illuminate from the beginning
the time in which our Lord and King of the World
experienced the peace and wealth of a *khattiyā*
in the great city of Kapilabastu.

His royal lineage
conferring glorious, noble and exalted position,
he [conferred] glorious and delightful paternal joy
on the *Mahā Purus* [king] ruling the city.

Tranquilly, he slept with his concubines,
occupied with playing music;
his royal consort
was a princess called Bimbā.

The chief of women was a jewel of a maiden,
her body endowed with beauty;
she had a flourishing son
whose name was Prince Rāhul.

Noble merit, glorious merit without end,
splendid beyond compare in all respects;
one hundred and one in his entourage
offering tributes to the precious prince.

In ten directions there was awe of his great power,
there were none whose power could rival his;
the prince who ruled from the palace,
little more than twenty-nine years old.⁵⁷

In the poem, Siddhattha quite suddenly leaves his royal palace and position behind after apprehending the inevitable suffering of human existence in the form of illness, aging, and death. The rest of the text is

devoted to a depiction of the Bodhisatta's progress toward attaining "bodhi-knowledge"⁵⁸ or enlightenment. While the poem presents Siddhattha as one who never waives from his goal of "seeking out the fruit of his own path, a Noble Way / to the peace of *nibbāna*, which is happiness,"⁵⁹ the jealous god Mārā attempts to deter him with threats, force, and reminders of the wordly pleasures, emotions, and powers he will have to renounce. Once it becomes clear that the Bodhisatta will soon become awakened, a crowd of "large and small gods" gather to observe him. Mārā, informed of the Bodhisatta's impending achievement, vows to prevent him from attaining purification. He leaves the *deva*-realm to confront the prince in the forest and tries to cajole him back to his palace:

"Oh Prince Siddhattha, son of Sudhodan,
don't be stupid, leading a renouncer's life!
In seven more days, a gem-wheel⁶⁰ will appear
signifying that a *cākkavattin*⁶¹ will arise.

"This is why you should return to your kingdom;
don't go falling in love with the *Buddha-cakra*.⁶²
It is far more fitting that you love your position and rank;
a *mahācakra*⁶³ is a great power in the world!"⁶⁴

At that, Lord Glorious and Splendid Prince of Men,⁶⁵
He who was to be Enlightened,⁶⁶
after hearing Mārāmāyā speak,
gave this reply:

"Hail Mārāmāyā; do not come here to obstruct me;
I will not follow your advice.
I have no desire to become a *mahācakra*
as [impure as] saliva and urine."⁶⁷

I have come here desiring *bodhi*-knowledge⁶⁸
as a bridge for other beings to cross over;
Mārā, don't come here to try and tie me
with a fetter that can never be joined.

Will you please get away from me, Mārā;
my cart of impurities⁶⁹
has only one broken axle remaining,
I will soon open a pathway for beings to tread."⁷⁰

Mārā's speech evokes well-known episodes of the Buddha's biography that are left out of this poetic version of the story but which the Khmer

audience knew from other accounts. Here, the passage alludes to the prophesy given to Sudhodan upon Siddhattha's birth that his son was destined to become either a world-renouncing Buddha or a wheel-turning world emperor. Preferring the latter destiny, Sudhodan had, as the well-known story recounts, sequestered him away behind palace walls and surrounded him with the lavish beauty and comfort that his son had now sought to renounce. The gem-wheel to which Mārā refers in the poem is connected with the iconography of the *cakkavattin* king. According to the *Trai Bhūm* and the *Cakkavatti-sihanāda-sutta* (from the *Dīgha Nikāya*), the *cakkavattin* is accompanied by seven signs, including a jewel-encrusted gem-wheel that rises into the sky glowing like a second moon.⁷¹ In this latter text, studied and translated by Steven Collins, the *cakkavattin* is depicted in alternating terms of his greatness and righteousness. On the one hand, he is a world-conquering hero, with his armies, seven emblems of power, and one thousand virulent sons, "crushing enemy armies." On the other hand, he will rule the world "without violence," relying on the power of the Dhamma rather than that of a sword.⁷²

The righteousness of a wheel-turning king is dependent on his understanding of, practice, and propagation of the Dhamma or, as Collins has translated it, "what is right":⁷³

Depend on what is right (Dhamma), honor and respect it, praise it, revere and venerate it, have Dhamma as your flag, Dhamma as your banner, govern by Dhamma.... Let no wrongdoing take place in your territory; if there are poor people in your territory, give them money.⁷⁴

The sutta goes on to admonish the king to seek out teachings on what is right from brahmins and ascetics, and follow their teachings, and then concludes,

Avoid what is bad....; you should take up what is good and do that. That is the noble turning of a Wheel-turning king.⁷⁵

As Collins has pointed out in his analysis of Buddhist felicities, different inter-related texts evoking the *cakkavattin* imagery make somewhat different claims about the relationship between *cakkavattin* kings and the appearance of buddhas.⁷⁶ In the *Trai Bhūm*, for instance, a *cakkavattin* is said to arise only in *kappa*-s in which there are no buddhas.⁷⁷ According to the *Cakkavatti-sihanāda-sutta*, however, the Buddha Metteyya will arise *during* the reign of the *cakkavattin* king Saṅkha, who, under the influence of his teaching, will give up his throne and become a world renouncer himself.⁷⁸ While kings in Buddhist literature are often depicted as possessors of almost unlimited power, righteous kings like the future Saṅkha and

King Nemi of the *Nemi-jātak* recognize the intrinsic limitations of worldly power and the superiority of the path of world renunciation. Righteous kings, in this idealized conception, always defer to buddhas.

It is this relationship between kings and buddhas that the poet of the *Ryān Paṭhamasambodhi* wants to convey. The struggle between Siddhattha and Mārā that forms the dramatic action is over possession of an emblem of kingship, the jeweled throne spontaneously generated in one of the Bodhisat's past lives, when already "filled to the brim with perfections,"⁷⁹ he made a vow to teach others a path toward nibbāṇa. Yet while the poem takes pains to accentuate the majesty of kingship, even the immense splendor and power of a great king who is destined to become a *cakkavattin* appears as repulsive as "saliva and urine" when compared to the power generated by a buddha through the cultivation of moral purity. The full contrast between these two forms of power is strikingly rendered in the last dramatic stanzas of the poem, which again evoke the inexorable connections in this world conception between human action, merit, and the nature of the world itself. In this poem, as in other central texts examined in this chapter, the imagery of the world and the three-tiered cosmos is deployed to indicate significant moral revelations in the texts. When the earth shakes and quakes, the mountains roar, the earth wrings out ritual water from her hair, or the unseen heavens, hells, or other continents are on view, these are always the moments in which the text is working to reveal the underlying nature or identity of the world: its moral construction, its cosmic temporality connected with the gradual cultivation of perfection by buddhas, and the rebirth of individuals according to their accumulation of merit. In this case, Mārā appears as a king at the head of his forces, but as a deity, his power as a king is hyperbolized even beyond that of a human king. His soldiers are not mere soldiers, but *yakka*⁸⁰ who have the ability to transform themselves into monkeys, *nāga*,⁸¹ *garuḍā*,⁸² snakes, and savage tigers in order to "display the power of all the three worlds;"⁸³ their mounts are not mere horses and elephants, but the offspring of mythical beasts and wild animals.⁸⁴ As they surround Siddhattha, Mārā begins his campaign to unseat Siddhattha from his jeweled throne:

Thinking, "Siddhattha possesses merit.
Seeing an enemy with merit is very strange indeed;
that being the case, the only course for me is to distort the truth,
to accuse him of seizing my throne."

Thinking thus, Prince Mārā readied his speech,
and processed to the royal prince named Siddhattha;
"You there, sitting upon the jeweled throne;
it is not at all suitable for you to be seated there.

“The jeweled throne is mine
and exists to elevate me in the world;
why have you come to take as yours a throne
unsuitable to the level of merit you possess?”⁸⁵

At that time, all during that time,
the Lord Buddha endowed with Royal Rank⁸⁶
listened to his enemy Mārā-māyā accuse him
and lay claim to the Throne reserved for One who Possesses the
Qualities of a Teacher.

Then a smile lit his lovely royal face
and in a friendly manner toward the *yakkha*, not at all perturbed:
“Greetings, Mārā; why are you negotiating,
falsely claiming ‘this jeweled throne is mine’?”

“This throne arose by means of the merit
I firmly established in previous lives.
Why, Mārā, have you appeared to reprimand me?
I have only to call forth a witness.”⁸⁷

Menacingly, Mārā draws his forces closer and challenges him to produce
a witness. The text continues:

At that time, that very time,
the Lord Prince of Men Supreme in Wisdom⁸⁸
answered Mārā so as to bar him from seizing the throne,
“I call upon Dharaṇī [Goddess of the Earth] as my lovely *yāna*.⁸⁹

“When I established holy perfections
I took the earth as my authority,
pouring water to commemorate celestial knowledge,
I then received this very throne.”

Having spoken, the prince called forth Nān Dharaṇī
the earth goddess as his truth-teller.
“Please arise quickly and come forward
to give witness concerning my *bodhi*-knowledge.”⁹⁰

When Mārā realizes whom the Buddha has called as his witness, he
switches tactics and begins to make rude insinuations:

Prince Mārā spoke derisively
mocking and leering at the Lord Supreme Master of the Three,⁹¹

“Hey Siddhattha endowed with moral behavior⁹²
Why are you taking a woman as your witness?

“Aren’t you One who has Established Progress?
And you have a woman as such a very close friend
that you’re willing to depend on her as your witness,
to set up a woman as your representative?!”

At that moment, that very moment,
the lovely celestial maiden Nān Dharaṇī,
hearing Mārā’s lewd mockery,
to Mārā quickly directed her reply.

“Hey Mārā, you worthless heap of shit!
If you are going to speak don’t be vulgar.
You yourself are calling on your army to witness;
since when do demonesses comply with ancient law?

“Yes, I am the Lord’s woman witness
and I support that he has cut passion away;
as he gained *bodhi*-knowledge bit by bit,
I knew of each action he made.

“One time, filled to the brim with perfections,
he sprinkled water on the earth and solemnly [vowed]
once enlightened, to become a Teacher
and the jeweled throne clearly arose [from that vow].

“And you, have you not established something
to which any dare testify?!”
Having spoken thus, she untied her long tresses
and taking them up [with her arms upright], handful by handful,
wrung them out on Mārā’s horde.

The power and force of Nān Dharaṇī
flowed out magnificently [from her hair],
arising immense as an ocean
engulfing entirely the army of Mārā.

Pity the forces of Mārā drowning in the River Ganga;
such suffering and misery is beyond compare.
Some die by drowning, others’ bodies slashed apart by swordfish,
some, contorted and dismembered by the force of the water,
simply disappear.

Others are trampled by horses and elephants,
 legs and arms broken off, stomachs pierced through;
 some become victims of *nyak*,⁹³ *nāga*-s, and sharks,
 their blood flowing across the surface of Lady Water and
 Lady Earth.

Flood water reaching up to the level of the atmosphere,
 the dead soldiers of Mārā spread across the earth's globe,
 only the king of the *asura*-s himself remained
 with Father Mountain and Mother Sea.

During the time these events unfolded
 Mārā King of the *Asura*-s,
 understood his forces were utterly spent
 as he watched the horrible suffering of his army 200,000-strong.

Fearful he grew that the Lady of Water
 would unleash the flood against his life [too];
 the *asura* became soft-hearted toward the Bodhī,
 his powerful aggression toward the Teacher all gone.

“Please younger brother, I press my hands together in earnest
 in front of [Father] Mountain and Mother Sea;
 I will write a sutra enumerating the qualities
 of the Jewel-Lord, the Fully-Enlightened *Arahant*.”

Thus, Prince Mārā, defeated by merit,
 established respect for the Buddha-*gūṇa*,⁹⁴
 accepted going-for-refuge⁹⁵ [as the means] for bringing an end to
 existence,
 and returned to the dwelling-place of the gods.⁹⁶

This scene in the poem, visually well-known from its many artistic representations in Southeast Asia,⁹⁷ presents the final test of the Bodhisatta's single-minded concentration on his goal of purification. Having already tried and failed to tempt the Bodhisatta with seductions by his three lovely daughters, Mārā, who is jealous, has turned to the use of force and deception to unseat the Buddha from the jeweled throne, even though, as the poet has him note, “seeing an enemy with merit is very strange indeed.”

The last portion of the poem exemplifies conceptions of the two-tiered structure of power, the intertwining of power and merit, and the nature of the world as inexorably shaped by human action. The linking of religious and royal authority in these passages is quite clearly articulated, first with the dual possibility of world domination or world renunciation, joined in

the figure of Siddhattha, and second, with the contest for power between the two princes. Like a worldly king—but again to a hyperbolized extent—Mārā is himself a morally ambivalent figure who is at once powerful, potentially malevolent, duplicitous, and selfishly jealous. In Khmer vernacular usage, he is understood abstractly as an “obstacle to progress or movement” or as death itself; he is also referred to as “the enemy of the Lord Buddha” and one who actively prevents others from “allowing merit and benefit to arise.”⁹⁸ Yet he is also clear-sighted enough to be able to recognize the superior merit of the Bodhisatta and he is sufficiently intelligent and merit-filled to concede defeat and take refuge in the spiritual power of the Buddha.

The Bodhisatta rejects Mārā’s offer to become a *cākṛavartin* because “it is impure, like urine and saliva.” A Buddha’s power, derived entirely from merit and purification, is far more potent than a king’s power, overwhelming the kind of violent force (even in its hyperbolized form) that kings are able to generate. But in spite of the clear hierarchy in this two-tiered conception of power, the inter-linking also ends up affirming the meritorious identity of kings, as scholars of the Theravāda have long noted. Kings may have to undertake some nasty actions in order to fulfill their duties as kings, but they are still regarded as meritorious beings in order to have taken rebirth as kings.

The poem’s depiction of the comparative rankings of worldly and spiritual power asserts the “traditional” mores of Theravādin ideas concerning kingship, authority, and merit. Worldly power was supposed to be exercised, albeit reluctantly, by a virtuous prince who ruled according to Dhammic principles. His rule was just and created harmony and prosperity for his kingdom’s inhabitants. Dhammic power, greater than any form of worldly power, was the ultimate authority, giving order and meaning to existence. The harmony and prosperity of individuals in the world thus depended on the Dhammic linking of merit and power to create justice.

Nineteenth-century Khmer representations of the world privileged a depiction of the individual, world, and time itself as interconnected, morally charged, and created by moral action. Embedded in a social and political context in which the map of a world containing the inverted Mount Meru was being contested by the introduction of new colonial geographies of identity,⁹⁹ works like the vernacular poem *Ryāñ Pathamasambodhi* and the *Jātaka* surveyed in this essay served as literary sites in which Khmer intellectuals and scribes could articulate a vision of modern identity inscribed in Buddhist terms. The poem *Pathamasambodhi* affirms the image of a world that makes sense according to Buddhist theories of how reality functions, with the present, past, and future determined by moral actions that predictably but unexpectedly ripen and bear fruit, much like the spontaneous generation of the jeweled throne formed

through the Buddha's enormous accumulation of merit. At the same time, the ephemeral image of the jeweled throne—representing *bodhi*-knowledge—that Mārā claims but is unable to capture, also conveys what Buddhists have, in different times and places, and through varying methods and language, sought to teach. This jeweled throne of *bodhi*-knowledge can only be attained through recognition of the impermanence of existence and of identity as the true nature of the world, a knowledge that cannot be represented at all, since it is beyond the grasp of human imagination.

NOTES

1. Stuart Hall, David Held, Don Hubert, and Kenneth Thompson, eds., *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p. 175.
2. I follow the transliteration system originally developed by Saveros Pou (Saveros Lewitz, "Note sur la transliteration du Cambodgien," *Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient*, vol. LV [1969]: pp. 163–169), and slightly revised by Franklin Huffman (Franklin E. Huffman and Im Proum, *English-Khmer Dictionary* [New Haven and London: Yale University Press: 1978], p. 685).
3. Sometimes transliterated as: Ly Théan Teng.
4. Lī Dhām Teñ, *Aksarsāstr Khmaer* [Khmer Literature] (Phnom Penh: Sen Nuon Huot, 1961), p. 121.
5. Lī Dhām Teñ, *Aksarsāstr Khmaer*, p. 147.
6. Judith Jacob, *The Traditional Literature of Cambodia: A Preliminary Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 49. I refer to the Reynolds and Reynolds translation of the Thai text (Frank E. Reynolds and Mani Reynolds, trans., *The Three Worlds According to King Ruang* [Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, Motilal Banarsidass, 1982]).
7. Joseph Guesdon, "La littérature khmère et le Bouddhisme," *Anthropos*, vol. I (1906): pp. 92, 94–96, 101–103; Adhémard Leclère, *Le Bouddhisme au Cambodge* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1899). See also Khing Hoc Dy, *Contribution à l'histoire de la littérature khmère: littérature de l'époque "classique" (XVème-XIXème siècles)* (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 1991), pp. 47, 205; Judith Jacob, *The Traditional Literature of Cambodia*, pp. 36–41, 49; George Coedès, "The *Traibhumikatha*, Buddhist Cosmology and Treaty on Ethics," *East and West*, vol. VII.4 (1957): pp. 349–352; Frank E. Reynolds, "The Many Lives of the Buddha: A Study of Sacred Biography and Theravāda Tradition," in *The Biographical Process: Studies in the History and Psychology of Religion*, eds. Frank E. Reynolds and Donald Capps (The Hague: Mouton, 1976); Forrest McGill, "Painting the 'Great Life'," In *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia*, ed. by Juliane Schober (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), pp. 200–202.
8. Reynolds and Reynolds, *The Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, pp. 135–172. A version of the story is found in Suñ S'iv Siddhattho [Brah Paḷāt' Uttamalikhit], *Kappa-kathā* (Phnom Penh: Pannāgār Pīo Híat, B.E. 2495/C.E. 1952), pp. 24–34, which was composed in the 1940s, using older versions (apparently) of the *Visuddhimagga*, the *Cakkivattisutta*, and

other unspecified sources. See also Thongchai Winachakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), pp. 20–36; Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 357–375, 414–496.

9. A complete listing of the divisions of a *kappa* into categories of two, three, four, and six are found in *Suñ S'iv, Kappa-kathā*, pp. 17–19.

10. *Adinnādāna, pāṇatipāta, musavāda, pisuṇāvācā, kāmesumicchācāra, pharusavācā, samphappalāpa, abhijjhā, byāpāda, micchādītthi*. *Suñ S'iv* alternates uses of Khmer and Pāli in his list of the *dasa akusalakammāpatha* and in his narrative; I have given the Pāli here. *Suñ S'iv, Kappa-kathā*, pp. 40–42. In most cases, I follow Collins' translations of the terms, which appear in different order in Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, p. 488 (which he describes as the “normal order” of the list), but in the same order as pp. 606–609, in his translation of the *Cakkavatti-sihanāda Sutta*. *Suñ S'iv* refers to the *Cakkavatti-sutta* from the *Dīgha Nikāya* (*Suñ S'iv, Kappa-kathā*, pp. 34, 44) as one of his sources.

11. *Suñ S'iv, Kappa-kathā*, pp. 17, 19–24; Reynolds and Reynolds, *The Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, pp. 305–327.

12. *Varakappa* (splendid *kappa*) with three buddhas, *sāramaṇḍakappa* (superior and eminent *kappa*) with four buddhas, *bhaddakappa* (auspicious, glorious, fortunate *kappa*) with five buddhas. An epoch with no buddha at all is termed a *suññākappa*. *Suñ S'iv, Kappa-kathā*, pp. 25–26; Reynolds and Reynolds, *The Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, pp. 312–313.

13. Reynolds and Reynolds, *The Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, p. 317.

14. I.e., in the *gati* or realm of hell-beings, animals, ghosts, humans, *asurā*-s (a category of lesser, somewhat malevolent deities), or *devā*-s (celestial beings). Rhys Davids suggests that earlier texts delineate five *gati* (omitting the *asurā*), while later texts differentiate six (T.W. Rhys Davids and William Stede, eds., *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary* [London: Pali Text Society, 1921–1925], pp. 242–243). See also L. Feer, ed., “*Pañcagatidīpana*,” *Journal of the Pali Text Society* (1884), pp. 152–161, and translator, “*Pañcagatidīpana*,” *Annales du Musée Guimet* vol. V (1884), pp. 514–528.

15. Guesdon, “La littérature khmère et le Bouddhisme,” p. 101.

16. Guesdon, “La littérature khmère et le Bouddhisme,” pp. 101–103. Leclère's presentation of Khmer Buddhism gives great prominence to the *Trai Bhūm* in particular, but he refers to the *Jātaka* as the most valued, popular, and well-known texts to Khmer monks and lay audiences (Leclère, *Le*

Bouddhisme au Cambodge, pp. 188–189, 193, 213–214, and *Les Livres Sacrés du Cambodge* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1906), p. 117. The extent to which versions of *jātaka* and the Buddhological biography dominated the Khmer literary imagination is made evident in Jacob’s discussion of literary plots and themes in *The Traditional Literature of Cambodia*, pp. 36–41 and 148–181, and Margaret Cone and Richard F. Gombrich, *The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara: A Buddhist Epic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. xv.

17. This text (or texts, since it existed in multiple versions) was connected with the *Paññāsa-jātaka* found in Laos, Siam, and Burma, but by the nineteenth century, the texts in all of these regions had developed into distinct versions, and these versions also developed variations. A Khmer prose *saṃrāy* version of the first twenty-five of the Khmer *Paññāsa-jātaka*, drawn from a palm-leaf version of a text that had been previously deposited in the Buddhist Institute library, was edited and published by Braḥ Dhammalikkhit Lvī Em, Braḥ Uttamamunī Uṃ Sūr, and Braḥ Ñaṇavīriyā Luṅ, apparently beginning in the early 1940s (*Paññāsa-jātakasaṃrāy*, 4th edition, volumes 1–5 [Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, B.E. 2504/C.E. 1961], pp. 1–12). A Khmer Pāli version was edited by an Acary S’uman at the École Supérieure de Pāli in 1942 (*Paññāsa-jātakapāli*, 2nd edition, vol. 1 [Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, (1942) B.E. 2495/C.E. 1953]). Still other variations of the stories were published separately, also copied from earlier manuscript texts, such as the 1968 poetic version of the *Ryaṅ Braḥ Sudhanakumār*. The editor of this latter text explains that it was copied from a manuscript found in 1962 at Vatt Nigrodhārām in Kampong Cham province (*Ryaṅ Braḥ Sudhanakumār* [Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, B.E. 2512/C.E. 1968], pp. vi–vii).

18. Guesdon’s manuscript gives the title above but Jacob cites other manuscript titles: *Paññāsār Sīrsā* and *Sāstrā Puññāsār Sīrsā* (Jacob, *The Traditional Literature of Cambodia*, p. 122).

19. Guesdon, “La littérature khmère et le Bouddhisme,” pp. 278–295; Jacob, *The Traditional Literature of Cambodia*, pp. 167–168; Khing, *Contribution à l’histoire de la littérature khmère*, pp. 166–171.

20. Guesdon, “La littérature khmère et le Bouddhisme,” pp. 280–282. Guesdon reproduces the Khmer text of the manuscript.

21. Here, the Khmer text is obscure, suggesting both that they have triangular faces and square faces: “three *jrūncatura*-s.”

22. Each stanza in the Khmer manuscript is divided into seven strophes, which translates too awkwardly. My translation is literal rather than poetic. Guesdon gives an alternate French translation which differs from mine in some details. Guesdon, “La littérature khmère et le Bouddhisme,” pp. 283–285.

23. Reynolds and Reynolds, *The Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, p. 135.
24. Pāli (hereafter P.) Nimi. Buddhist Institute, “Nemijātak,” *Brah Traipiṭak Pālī nyñ Seckdībrae Khmaer, Suttantapiṭak Khuddhakanikāy Jātak*, vol. 62 (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 2503), pp. 67–101.
25. In notes to his translation of a nineteenth-century manuscript version of the story, Leclère reports comparing the manuscript he used to that of a *Trai Bhūm* text. He found its descriptions of various levels of hells to be identical to those in the *Trai Bhūm*, while its accounts of the heavens were more highly embellished. Leclère, *Les Livres Sacrés du Cambodge*, p. 221.
26. Leclère, *Les Livres Sacrés du Cambodge*, pp. 120, 221. See also Jacob, *The Traditional Literature of Cambodia*, p. 51.
27. Khmer (hereafter K.) *pāpakamm*.
28. K. *puññākamm*. BI 2503, vol. 62: 73 (stanza 143).
29. K. *mān kaṃḷāṃṇ mān t’a lāmak*.
30. K. *pāp*.
31. Buddhist Institute, “Nemijātak,” p. 74 (stanzas 146–148).
32. K. *puññākamm*.
33. K. *kusalakamm*.
34. K. *mān sīl*.
35. Buddhist Institute, “Nemijātak,” pp. 90–91 (stanzas 184–185).
36. P. Vessantara; K. Vessantar.
37. Cone and Gombrich, trans., *The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara*, p. 74.
38. The Khmer *Tripitaka*, containing Pāli and Khmer on alternate pages, was published in its entirety in the 1960s, but many of the editions and translations were produced much earlier. The printed *Tripitaka* was largely based on Khmer palm-leaf manuscripts collected during the nineteenth century (many from Siam), and edited and translated under the auspices of the Royal Library and later the Buddhist Institute from the 1920s through 1960s. Many of the *Jātaka* texts were edited and printed as separate texts prior to the 1960s.
39. Buddhist Institute, “Vessantar-jātak,” *Brah Traipiṭak Pālī nyñ Seckdībrae Khmaer Suttantapiṭak Khuddhakanikāy Jātak*, vol. 63 (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, B.E. 2503 / C.E. 1959), p. 166 (stanza 343).
40. This was a nineteenth-century manuscript version translated by Leclère, (*Le Livre de Vésandâr, le roi charitable* [Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1902]).
41. Leclère gives only his French translation of this text. Leclère, *Livre de Vésandâr*, p. 62.

42. Leclère, *Livre de Vésandâr*, p. 63. The earth quake appears in other versions of the text as well, one of which I quote later.

43. Leclère, *Livre de Vésandâr*, p. 65. A similar passage appears in the Khmer canonical version of the story. Leclère's manuscript version of the text follows the canonical version of the story closely, but in general expands on the canonical verses.

44. Leclère, *Livre de Vésandâr*, p. 66.

45. Buddhist Institute, "Nemijātak," p. 166 (stanza 338). I use the standard Khmer translation, part of a corpus of work produced, edited, and printed from the 1920s through 1960s in Cambodia. Later editors often relied heavily on manuscript versions of the texts carried from Bangkok beginning in Ang Duong's reign.

46. Note that the Khmer word *kittisabd*, "fame" or "good repute," contains the word "sabd," or "sound," "voice," "word." This type of poetic allusion appears often in Khmer literary writing but is not easily translated.

47. Buddhist Institute, "Nemijātak," p. 188 (stanzas 367–368).

48. Buddhist Institute, "Nemijātak," p. 210 (stanza 424).

49. Jacob, *The Traditional Literature of Cambodia*, pp. 37, 156–59; Khing, *Contribution à l'histoire de la littérature khmère*, p. 121; Lū, *Aksarsāstr Khmaer*, p. 118. Lū says the story was composed in 1856; he includes it among a list of well-known literary works of the late Middle Period in Khmer literature.

50. Guesdon suggests that is a long popular story, "particularly in the north of Cambodia" (Guesdon, "La littérature khmère et le Bouddhisme," p. 813). He gives a French version on pp. 804–813. See also Khing, *Contribution à l'histoire de la littérature khmère*, pp. 121, 193–95; Jacob, *The Traditional Literature of Cambodia*, p. 170.

51. Leclère places the *Devadatta-sutta* among the most well-known texts. Whether he means that in reference to the different individual *Jātaka* stories of which this text is composed or as a composite is not clear. He received a manuscript of the sutta from a monk at Vatt Bodumvadey in Phnom Penh who had studied previously in Bangkok. Leclère, *Les Livres Sacrés du Cambodge*, pp. 1–2.

52. Leclère, *Les Livres Sacrés du Cambodge*, pp. 121–144.

53. Leclère, *Les Livres Sacrés du Cambodge*, pp. 141–42.

54. Reynolds, "The Many Lives of the Buddha," pp. 51–53. This Siamese text appeared in different versions in the nineteenth century, and was in turn connected to an older northern Thai biography of the Buddha, probably composed in the fifteenth or sixteenth century. Donald Swearer, *The Buddhist World of South-east Asia* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1995), p. 182, n. 70.

55. Leclère, *Les Livres Sacrés du Cambodge*, pp. 7–8.
56. Leclère, *Les Livres Sacrés du Cambodge*, pp. 9–10.
57. Ukñā Suttantaprijā Ind, “*Ryañ Paṭhamasambodhi*,” *Kambujasuriyā* (1934): 5–6 (stanzas 1–6).
58. K. *bodhiñāna*.
59. Ind, “*Ryañ Paṭhamasambodhi*,” p. 6 (stanza 9).
60. K. *cākra-ratan’*.
61. K. *cākra-batra*.
62. I.e., the wheel of the Buddha, or the *Dhamma*.
63. “Great king.”
64. K., P. *lokiya*.
65. K. *Brah camanarind ryañ rañsī*.
66. K. *Cakri ka’ trās’*.
67. I.e., with the connotation of “necessary but impure.”
68. K. *bodi-ñāna*.
69. K. *asubā*. I take this as P. *asubha*, or “impurities,” or possibly more specifically, *asubha-kamma hāna*, or “objects of meditation impurities,” which may refer to meditation exercises on decomposing bodies in a cemetery.
70. Ind, “*Ryañ Paṭhamasambodhi*,” p. 11 (stanzas 45–50).
71. Reynolds and Reynolds, *The Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, pp. 140, 160–170; Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, p. 612. It remains difficult to document how well individual *Tipiṭaka* texts such as this latter were known during this period but I include this text under the general rubric of *Trai Bhūm* cosmology that becomes evident in other texts. A version of this text is later used by Suñ S’iv in the 1940s (Suñ S’iv, *Kappa-kathā*, pp. 34, 44).
72. Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, p. 612.
73. Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, p. 604.
74. Collins’ translation. Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, p. 604.
75. This is Collins’ translation. Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, p. 604.
76. Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, pp. 373–374.
77. Reynolds and Reynolds, *The Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, p. 139.
78. Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, pp. 612–613.

79. Ind, "Ryāṅ Paṭhamasambodhi," p. 36 (stanza 255).
80. Demons or ogres.
81. A kind of water serpent.
82. A kind of giant, mythical bird.
83. Ind, "Ryāṅ Paṭhamasambodhi," p. 31 (stanza 210).
84. Ind, "Ryāṅ Paṭhamasambodhi," pp. 31–32 (stanzas 206–211).
85. P. *puññādhikāra* or K. *puñña-adhikār*.
86. *Brah Buddha paṅs damraṅ sakti*.
87. Ind, "Ryāṅ Paṭhamasambodhi," pp. 34–35 (stanzas 235–240).
88. *Brah camanarind bin muni*.
89. I.e., "vehicle" or "means of transport."
90. Ind, "Ryāṅ Paṭhamasambodhi," p. 36 (stanzas 244–246).
91. I.e., the three worlds. *Brah Aṅg Cam Trai*.
92. K. *Sil*.
93. A kind of sea creature that feeds on human blood. Robert Headley, ed., *Cambodian-English Dictionary*, vol. II (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1977), p. 455.
94. The qualities of a buddha.
95. K. *Saraṇa-gamaṇa*.
96. Ind, "Ryāṅ Paṭhamasambodhi," pp. 36–38 (stanzas 250–264).
97. Elizabeth Guthrie, "Outside the *Sima*," *Udaya: Journal of Khmer Studies* 2 (November 2001): pp. 7–12.
98. Buddhist Institute [1938] 1970: p. 883.
99. Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1994), pp. 37–80.