

1182 CE. What is more, Tribhuvanāditya was a Buddhist attached to the late esoteric wave we associate with Tibet. Sūryavarman's predecessor Jayavarman VI also followed the esoteric doctrine, as did Jayavarman VII. This line of religious and lineage affiliation does not however rule out political differences between these kings. With the help of the contemporary Cham inscriptions and K. 1297, we will explore an obvious major political difference between Jayavarman VII and his predecessor – a difference that has led historians hitherto to grossly underestimate king Tribhuvanāditya.

The supreme Khmer Buddha enthroned on a *nāga*, of which the Bánh Ít Buddha I opened with is a classic, has been one of the predominant representations of the Buddha in Cambodian sacred art from the 10th century until the present. It is usually called a *nāga*-protected Buddha, which wrongly, in my view, associates the classical Khmer icon with the Theravada story of the *nāga* Mucalinda, which in Theravada mythology protected the historical Buddha from a storm after his enlightenment. As the Mucalinda myth does not exist in the Mahāyāna, let alone the esoteric Mahāyāna, this can only be a misreading of the main icon of the Buddhist Khmer empire and a reading of the classical sacred art through a contemporary Theravada lens. Art historians who have tried to align the Khmer image with the ancient Khmer Mahāyāna have recently seen the Buddha on the *nāga* coils as the Khmer Vairocana or sun Buddha of the middle (*yoga*) Tantras of the Tibetan classification. Vairocana's mount is usually a lion, but from the 10th century the Khmer supreme Buddha was placed on a throne formed by a giant, coiled *nāga* whose multiple heads and hood rise up behind him to form a throne-back. Wibke Lobo proposes persuasively, that the *nāga* here is also representing the *kuṇḍalīnī* serpent. This is imagined as asleep at the base of the spine of the *yogin* who seeks to arouse it to achieve spiritual detachment from the body. Modern medicine has sometimes associated sensations of energy moving up the spine with the functioning of the parasympathetic nerve system beside the spinal column. Lobo describes it thus:

He is sitting on the *nāga* in the posture of meditation, while the serpent rears up, rising above his head: this action can be associated with yoga techniques for raising the sleeping energy of *kuṇḍalīnī* in order to use it for spiritual enlightenment. This is the primal, vital energy

with which it is possible to achieve the highest state of spiritual perfection.⁷

The *nāga*-Buddha first appeared in Khmer iconography in the mid-10th century, at the same time that the root *Yogatantra* text *Compendium of the truth of all the Tathagathas* (*Sarvatathāgatātattvasaṃgraha*) reached Cambodia, according to the Wat Sithor inscription K. 111.⁸ In this Tantra Gautama Śākyamuni is seen as achieving the state of Buddhahood by becoming part of Vairocana in this supreme deity's Akanīṣṭha heaven. Wat Sithor is dated to the enthronement year of Jayavarman V (r. 968-c.1000 CE). It says the king's Buddhist guru Kīrtipaṇḍita imported the *Sarvatathāgatātattvasaṃgraha* (*STTS*) and its 8th century commentary by Śākyamitra and launched a revival of Buddhist study in many new monasteries and sanctuaries. The Tantra maps the evolution of the Buddhist Mahāyāna (Great Vehicle) into the later Vajrayāna (Diamond Vehicle) that was to dominate the Buddhism of Tibet, Nepal and Yuan China, as well as Java, Srivijaya, Champa and Cambodia from the 9th to the 13th centuries. The text portrays Śākyamuni as struggling to achieve full enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. Śākyamitra says Śākyamuni then left his earthly body beside the river to fly up to Vairocana's paradise in order to learn the necessary five final 'enlightenment-revelation' stages (*pañca abhisambodhi*). The historical Buddha is said to attain the 'Five Wisdoms' (*pañca-jñāna*) under Vairocana's instruction and achieve perfect enlightenment as a part of Vairocana Sarvavid ('all-knowing'). He then ascended Mount Sumeru to proclaim the *STTS*, before returning to his earthly body under the Bodhi tree. The Wat Sithor inscription refers to Vairocana as 'Sarvavid', said to be the head of the august Buddha lineage.

It seems reasonable to look for a direct link between the appearance of the *nāga*-enthroned Buddha in Khmer iconography, and the coincident arrival of the *STTS* Tantra in Angkor. The icon of a crowned Buddha seated on a *nāga*, credited in Indic and Cambodian myth with being capable of traversing the heavens and the oceans, may indeed represent the key moment in the Tantra when Śākyamuni is transformed into an indivisible part of the supreme Vairocana. With this identification, the Buddha is more accurately called the *nāga*-enthroned rather than the more common *nāga*-protected, because a *nāga* throne suggests Vairocana's universal ubiquity in the Mahāyāna, whereas a