

# Brill's Encyclopedia of Buddhism

Volume II:  
Lives

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# Buddhas of the Past: South Asia

One of the most widely shared beliefs across the Buddhist world is the notion that Gautama (Pal. Gotama) or Śākyamuni, the initiator of the “dispensation” (Skt. *śāsana*) known to us, was preceded in this world by former or “past” (*atīta*) “perfectly awakened ones” (Skt. *śākyasambuddha*). Buddhas of the past are commonly encountered at Buddhist sites throughout South Asia, at least till around the 8th century, when groups of present buddhas such as the five Jinas gained prominence. Past buddhas feature in a wide variety of literary sources concerned, in one way or another, with the narrativization of the Buddhist past (Jātakas, biographies of Śākyamuni, autonomous accounts focusing on a set or lineage of buddhas, chronicles), but also in ritual texts (legal-liturgical works such as the *Prātimokṣasūtra*; scriptures pertaining to the “regulation of evil” such as *raṅgās/dhāraṇīs* and *parittas*). Some of the predecessors of Śākyamuni, such as Vipasyin or Dīpaṅkara, are invested with rich biographical traditions, while most remained little more than mere names to whom a few characteristics were attached. Past buddhas occur prominently in sources dealing with the bodhisattva career of Śākyamuni, and those marking key steps in his path are dealt with in more detail. They therefore provide perspective to the portrait of the individual who is often referred to in scholarship as the “historical” Buddha, an etic characterization that goes against emic Buddhist perceptions that history, as it unfolds in the *longue durée*, is blessed by the emergence of perfect buddhas who (re)discover the Dharma and spread it for the sake of the world. Indian Buddhist texts therefore commonly speak of Śākyamuni as “our Buddha” (Pal. *amhākaṃ buddho*; Skt. *asmākaṃ buddhaḥ*), and this practice will be followed here. The number of past buddhas has increased considerably over time, and the development of the lists of these figures constitutes a key indicator of the widening of temporal perspectives among Buddhist communities in South Asia, especially during the so-called Middle Period (c. 1st cent. BCE to 6th cent. CE). While some figures were apparently common to all Buddhist traditions, others are known specifically in narratives transmitted by individual “monastic orders” (*nikāya*) or groups thereof. In past

scholarship, with notable exceptions (e.g., Skilling, 1993, 1996, 2006), narratives that circulated in the Theriya tradition connected to the Mahāvihāra at Anurādhapura (i.e. the so-called “Theravāda”) have been privileged, thereby concealing the impressive diversity of buddhological traditions in other *nikāyas* and their lasting influence. Much work therefore remains to be done to chart this important dimension of the Buddhist *imaginaire* across traditions.

## Traces of Past Buddhas in the Early Buddhist Landscape

With the emergence of Buddhism in the historical horizon, under the rule of Aśoka (c. 270–232 BCE), an existing cult of at least one past buddha is already attested. The pillar inscription of the Indian emperor recovered from Nigliwa, near Tilaurakot in the Kapilavastu district, indeed famously states that, “[w]hen king Piyadasi, dear to the gods, had been anointed for fourteen years, he enlarged the stūpa of the Buddha Konākamana to the double (of its original size [*dutyam vadhite*])” (Hultsch, 1925, 165; Falk, 2006, 187–189). This suggests that, by circa 256 BCE, Buddhists had already invested constituents of the landscape – including, perhaps, pre-Buddhist burial mounds – with narratives about predecessors of Śākyamuni. In a way echoing, to some extent, this epigraphic record, narratives – whose dating has been disputed – transmitted in the Vinayas of the Mahāsāṅghikas, the Mahīśāsakas, and the Dharmaguptakas describe how Śākyamuni revealed from the ground, in a field of Kośala, the stūpa of his immediate predecessor Kāśyapa (Bareau, 1962, 257–261; Schopen, 1985, 18–22; Anālayo, 2012, 225–233). According to the Mahāsāṅghika version of the story, the pious King Prasenajit, learning about this wonder, came with cartloads of bricks to increase (Chn. *guang* [廣]) the stūpa’s size (T. 1425 [XXII] 497b18–498c22).

The notion of trace is essential to the workings of collective memory of early Buddhist communities, as is demonstrated by a telling simile in

the *Nagarasutta* (SN II.104–107) and its parallels (on which see Skilling, 1996, 157n11; Anālayo, 2010, 82n86): like a man who, following an ancient path in the forest, would find an ancient royal capital (Pal. *rājadhānī*), Śākyamuni followed the Noble Eightfold Path to nirvāṇa, already trodden by the former perfect buddhas. In narratives circulating in the canonical scriptures of most Buddhist *nikāyas*, Śākyamuni is further depicted as an interpreter of traces: he reveals to his disciples, as they wander around, the “spots of earth” (Skt. *prthivīpradeśa*) where one (or three) of his predecessors sat down, walked, and resided (e.g. MN II.45: 11–18; Senart, 1882–1897, vol. I, 318:6–13). The three immediate predecessors of Śākyamuni, namely Krakucchanda (variant Krakutsanda, Pal. Kakusandha), Konakamuni (Pal. Koṇāgamaṇa), and Kāśyapa (Pal. Kassapa) are the first whose belief developed among Buddhist communities. While they might have surfaced separately, in many respects they formed a set: all bear brahmanical names and, as their legend developed, were considered to be of brahmanical descent; all preceded Śākyamuni in the same world cycle – later to be called “Fortunate Eon” (Skt. *bhadrakalpa*) – separated from earlier cycles by a destruction and re-formation of our world system (on this cosmological backdrop, see e.g. Nattier, 1991, 15ff.). Hence, even in the Middle Period, when a greater number of past buddhas were known, Buddhist devotees and pilgrims still looked for the hallowed marks left in the landscape by these three buddhas, and of course by Śākyamuni (Tournier, 2017, 125–126). The identification and narrative and ritual investment of such traces constituted a critical device for the “buddhification” of the topography. A stūpa believed to contain the relics of the buddha Kāśyapa was thus revered in the kingdom of Khotan (Emmerick, 1967, 30–31). Manmade reminders of the buddhas’ presence were also included in the monastery precincts. A Sanskrit inscription from Sanchi, dated Gupta year 131 (i.e. 459/60 CE), records various permanent endowments (*akṣayanīvi*) by the rich laysister (*upāsikā*) Harisvāminī. The interest derived from these endowments should serve various purposes, one of which was the lighting of a lamp daily by the “seat of the four buddhas” (*caturbuddhāsana*), thereby pointing to the existence of a cult centered upon the abovementioned group (Fleet, 1888, 261; trans. Schopen, 1994, 532–533) at a time when beliefs about multiple past buddhas were in full bloom.

From the 2nd century BCE at the latest, Śākyamuni and his three predecessors were subsumed under a broader group. This, in its classical form, contained seven buddhas, from Vipasyin, believed to have lived 91 eons ago, until our Buddha. This group of seven buddhas is overall stable, and constitutes a pan-Buddhist heritage – which does not necessarily mean it is “presectarian.” The earliest datable evidence of this group, in medallions from the railing of the Bharhut stūpa, however preserves only six buddha names, written under representations of their trees of awakening. These six medallions were recovered from various places of the railing and do not seem to have been part of a clearly conceived set (Cunningham, 1879, 132–137). Moreover, Śikhin, the buddha known by literary sources as the immediate successor of Vipasyin, is missing. While this absence has generally been explained by the lacunae of the archeological artifacts recovered from Bharhut (Lüders, 1963, 82), the fact that the same buddha is sometimes omitted from some of the earliest Buddhist discourses about past buddhas, including a section of the circa 1st century BCE/1st century CE Gandhari *\*Bahubudhaga-sutra* (Sūtra on the Many Buddhas, Skt. *Bahubuddhaka*, on which see below) should invite caution (Tournier, 2017, 126–127, 159n119). The formation of the group of seven buddhas might have been influenced by the group of seven “seers” (*ṛṣi*) to whom the Veda was revealed, among which stand, in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (Weber, 1855, 14.5.2.6), the names of Gotama and Kāśyapa (Windisch, 1908, 97). Some scholars, noticing the occurrences of the term *isisattama* as an epithet of our Buddha in several instances of the Pali canon (e.g. Sn 356, MN II.386:18–20; for parallels to the latter *sutta* see Norman, 1993, 120; Anālayo, 2011, vol. I, 331–332), have speculated that an early Middle Indo-Aryan word corresponding to Pali *isisattama* originally meant “supreme seer” (Skt. *ṛṣisattama*) before being reinterpreted as meaning “seventh seer” (Skt. *\*ṛṣisaptama*; Chn. *qī qian* [七仙], for instance in T. 26 [I] 632b24). This shift in meaning would have led to the expansion of the list of buddhas to fit this number (Magara, 1980; Gombrich, 1992; for a different hypothesis, see Davidson, 2014, 127ff.). Whatever the case may be, the formal affinity between the series of buddhas rediscovering the Dharma and Vedic revelation did not escape later brahmanical polemicists, like the 6th/7th century Mimāṃsaka Kumārila Bhaṭṭa (Yoshimizu, 2015, 48).



The seven buddhas appear as a stable group in the archaeological horizon from around the 1st century BCE onwards. Their trees of awakening and stūpas thus feature prominently on the gateways (*torāṇa*) of stūpa 1 at Sanchi (Vogel, 1954, 809), while seven stūpas likely pointing to the same group are represented on the upper register of Bhaja vihāra cave 22's verandah (Huntington, 1985, 78 & fig. 5.26). The group is also the central focus of the *Mahāvadāna* (*Mahāpadāna*) sūtra tradition. This textual tradition is diverse – it is available in as many as seven different versions (Waldschmidt, 1953–1956, vol. I, 5–6) – composite, and influential: it is given pride of place in sūtra collections and was, for instance, perceived by the 4th/5th century scholar Buddhaghosa as the “king among discourses” (Pal. *suttantarāja*, Sv II.480: 16). In the Pali version of this discourse, the Buddha intervenes in a discussion of his monks about past lives (DN II.11–2, 14; compare Fukita, 2003a, 32–34) to disclose key characteristics about the seven buddhas, including himself. As the text later tells us, the Buddha is able to recall these events through his understanding of the sphere of the Dharma (Skt. *dharmadhātu*). Gods reborn within the “pure abodes” (Pal. *Suddhāvāsa*, Skt. *Śuddhāvāsa*) in the higher spheres of the realm of pure form (*rūpadhātu*), which are not destroyed at the end of a cosmic cycle (e.g. Gethin, 1997, 194), also keep the memory of these past events (DN II.10:16–34; II.50–34; Fukita, 2003a, 158–169). In the first part of the discourse, the eon, social class, clan, human lifespan, tree of awakening, pair of prominent disciples, assemblies of disciples, personal attendants, and finally parents, king, and capital characterizing each of the seven buddhas are successively disclosed, in listlike fashion. There are significant variants in the headings transmitted by the various versions (the Sanskrit version adds, e.g. the son), in their ordering, and in the treatment of each category (on the variants affecting trees, see, e.g. Demiéville, 1929, 90). Key qualities, such as the duration of life and the number of disciples of each buddha, follow a clear decreasing pattern (Rhys-Davids, 1910, 6–7) coherent with a “timetable of decline” (Nattier, 1991). For example, according to the Sanskrit version of the text, Vipasyin had three communities of disciples, including a total of 6,380,000 monks (Fukita, 1997, 2003a, 40–41), whereas Śākyamuni's community had the modest number of 1,250 monks. Later narratives, composed during the Middle Period, had in fact to address the apparent

inferior characteristics of our Buddha, and glorified his wish to attain awakening in an imperfect world. The second part of the sūtra consists in a detailed narrative of the life of the Buddha Vipasyin, from his birth until six years after the constitution of his community of disciples. Entire portions of the narrative are reminiscent of the last life of Śākyamuni, and for instance the birth cycle – and, in the Sanskrit version, the youth – has the constant refrain that whatever event then characterizing Vipasyin constitutes the rule (Skt. *dharmatā*) for every buddha (Anālayo, 2017, 74, 87–89). This points to the formation of a blueprint for the life of all buddhas (Strong, 2009, 15), which was highly influential for the development of later buddhological traditions. From a temporal perspective, a “matrix of repetition” was woven into a nonrepetitive time (Collins, 1998, 254ff.). This does not mean, however, that “Buddhists admit a perfect identity of legend, of attributes, and of teachings to all buddhas” (Senart, 1882, xxxvii), since many of the biographical narratives about past buddhas play precisely on the variations affecting the common pattern. Hence, under the favorable circumstances of the time of Vipasyin, that buddha reached awakening shortly after his renunciation, without having to endure the exposure to imperfect teachers and the period of austerities that marked Śākyamuni's own quest. Similarly, the recitation of a one-to-three stanza *Prātimokṣa* (Pali *Pāṭimokkha*), at the end of the biographical narrative, appears to be enough to keep his community pure, and contrasts with the circa 250 rules that Śākyamuni had to set forth to ensure the pure conduct of his monastic community. According to the commentary (*vibhaṅga*) to the Pali *Pāṭimokkha*, the fact that Śākyamuni, like his three predecessors, set to teach in detail the *Pāṭimokkha* and the nine categories of scriptures had the positive outcome of ensuring the longer duration of pure conduct (Pal. *brahmacariya*) after their passing (Vin III.7:21–10:25; see also Hu-von Hinüber & Yamanaka, 2017).

The importance of the *Prātimokṣa* recitation by the seven buddhas in the *Mahāvadāna-sūtra* textual family is reflected in the *Prātimokṣa-sūtras* themselves. The epilogue of the text, as transmitted by most Buddhist schools, contains well-spoken verses (Skt. *subhāṣita*) addressing proper conduct in broad terms (Schmidt, 1989). Blocks of one-to-three stanzas among these are often attributed to each of the seven buddhas (Pachow, 1955, 192–197; Hasuiké, 1997; Palumbo, 2013, 124–128). According

to a 6th-century manuscript of the Mahāsāṅghika-Lokottaravādin recension of this text, each buddha would, shortly after his awakening (Skt. *acirābhisambuddha*), have recited such abridged (Skt. *saṃkṣipta*) precepts to his community of monks as first *Prātimokṣa*, implying in this case that he would have recited the fuller version when the need arose (Karashima, 2008, 81–85; Tournier 2017, 56–62; on the concept of “abridged teaching” in China, stemming from this tradition, see Heirman, 2014). Thus, Konakamuni (Kakucchanda, according to [Mūla-]Sarvāstivādin versions) would have recited the following stanza:

As a bee takes nectar from a flower and departs,  
without harming either its color or its smell, thus  
a sage should wander in the village. (Karashima,  
2008, 83; see also Schmidt, 1989, 44–46)

These passages constitute one of the rare instances in the early scriptures of Buddhist *nikāyas* where the teachings of past buddhas are cited. This is also representative of the association of the seven buddhas as a group to ritual performances, beyond the liturgy of the *poṣadha*, where the *Prātimokṣa* was recited fortnightly. From an early period onwards, this group of buddhas indeed features in a variety of protective texts. For instance, the protective verses recited by the great King Vessavaṇa (Skt. Vaiśravaṇa) in the Pali *Āṭānāṭṭiyasutta* open with a homage to the seven buddhas (DN III.195–196; for [Mūla-]Sarvāstivādin versions in Sanskrit, compare Sander, 2007, 139). According to the *Abhisamācārikā dharmāḥ*, a stanza calling upon the protection of Vipāśyin and his successors should be recited as an “assignment of the reward” (Skt. *dakṣiṇādeśana*) to parents making an offering to the community upon the birth of a child (Karashima, 2012, vol. I, 32, 60; see also Senart, 1882–1897, vol. I, 294:19–295:2). The group of buddhas also commonly features in *dhāraṇī* literature, famously in the Sanskrit version of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*, which enumerates their trees of awakening (Takubo, 1972, 13:17–14:1), but also in *dhāraṇī* sūtras and collections influential in China. Thus, according to Davidson “the seven buddhas formed a bridge from the early ideology of Śākyamuni’s predecessors through the *Prātimokṣa* revelation [...], into the Mahāyāna scriptures and the *dhāraṇī* pronouncements” (Davidson, 2014, 158; see also Wang-Toutain, 2007, 103ff.). With its ritual specialization, the group of seven buddhas kept its relevance until at least the 7th century in South Asia. Narratives about past buddhas, however, kept

developing, and Buddhists looked for figures having arisen in an immensely remote past. As a result, the group representing the “common heritage” (Skilling, 1996, 155) was embedded in lineages of great diversity, whose genesis and development is intimately related to that of the bodhisattva career of Śākyamuni.

## Buddha Lineages Initiated by Dīpaṅkara

It has become customary, in surveys about the conceptions of the past buddhas, to turn to the tradition of 24 (+ 3) predecessors of Śākyamuni known from the Pali *Buddhavaṃsa*, immediately after discussing Vipāśyin and his successors (e.g. Nattier, 1991, 19–24; 2004; Zin, 2003, 461–462; Strong, 2004, 25–29). The apparent similarity existing between the motif of 24 buddhas (excluding Gotama) and that of 24 tīrthankaras in the Jaina tradition has led to the assumption that the Buddhist system dates back to as early as the 3rd or 2nd century BCE, and might have been influenced by the rival *śramaṇa* movement (Gombrich, 1980; Ohira, 1994). However, while this buddhological tradition became an influential component of what Collins (1998) called the “Pali *imaginaire*,” even within the Theriya groups competing versions of the *Buddhavaṃsa* circulated (Skilling, 1993). Moreover, the received text is stratified, and its inclusion within the *Khuddaka-nikāya* was not unanimously accepted within the Mahāvihāra tradition itself (Norman, 1983, 9, 93). Comparison with a section, stemming from the same textual family, and preserved in the *Mahāvastu*, moreover suggests that the fixation of the list of buddhas is all but early (Tournier, 2017, 146–149).

The discovery of a kharoṣṭhī manuscript transmitting a 1st century BCE or 1st century CE Gandhari version of a *\*Bahubudha(ga)-sūtra* (Skt. *Bahubuddhaka-sūtra*) sheds, moreover, important new light on the development of discourses about past buddhas (ed. Salomon in progress; trans. Salomon, 2018, 285–293). This text forms part in a little-studied family of narratives (but see Shiraishi, 1988), represented by four sections in the *Mahāvastu* (Senart, 1882–1897, vol. I, 46–63, vol. III, 224–250) and three sections in the *Fo benxing jī jīng* (佛本行集經; T. 190 [III] 655a–672a). This textual family was transmitted in a variety of milieux,

including at least those of the Mahāsāṅghikas, the Kāśyapīyas, and the Mahīśāsakas, which coexisted in the northwestern part of South Asia. Its stories and lineages served as building blocks for several sūtras of the Bodhisattvayāna, and it also impacted (Mūla-)Sarvāstivādin (and perhaps Theriya) traditions on Śākyamuni's predecessors (Tournier, 2017, chapter 2.1). The old version of the *Bahubuddhaka-sūtra* is available in three versions (the abovementioned kharoṣṭhī manuscript, Senart, 1882–1897, vol. III, 241–250, and T. 190 [III] 663b12–672a1). Like the nonrevised version of the *Buddhavaṃsa* – before the addition of the last two chapters – it described a lineage inaugurated by Dīpaṅkara. This buddha, whose legend and cult must have originated in the centuries immediately preceding the turn of the Common Era, developed into a pan-Buddhist figure and a fundamental point of reference for narratives dedicated to the description of past buddhas. The old *Bahubuddhaka-sūtra* focuses on a lineage of 15 to 17 buddhas bounded by Dīpaṅkara and →Maitreya, a lineage that is also known from the *Mahākaruṇāpūṇḍarīka* and the *Mahāśītavana* (on the latter, see Skilling, 1992, 141–142), and that has close parallels beyond this limited group of sources (see Table 1). Attributes of the members of the lineage are discussed in thematic sections that, for the most part, echo those of the *Mahāvadāna-sūtras*. This thematic structure was generally not kept in more developed narratives dealing with past buddha lineages, and it is thus indicative of the earliness of this textual tradition. In the *Fo benxing jijing*, these thematic sections are listed as follows, in the summary-verse (Skt. *uddāna*) preserved at the end of the narrative:

[The Buddha Śākyamuni] stated the homage [he paid to buddhas of the past], the span of time [between each of them,] their social class and lifespan, their assemblies of disciples, and [finally] the duration of their Dharma and of the pseudo-Dharma (Chn. *xiangfa* [像法]). (T. 190 [III] 672a8–9)

The first section dealt with in this text is concerned with the homage (Chn. *shi* [施], here corresponding to Skt. *adhikāra*) that the future Śākyamuni paid to each of his predecessors in earlier lives. For instance, under the Buddha Sarvābhibhū, who was the successor of Dīpaṅkara and lived 100,000 eons ago, the Bodhisattva showered golden flowers upon him. Immediately after this meritorious act of devotion, the Bodhisattva made an aspiration

(Skt. *praṇidhāna*) to reach awakening and, in some versions of the story, received a prediction (Skt. *vyākaraṇa*) confirming that he would indeed reach the goal he had set for himself (passage lost in the Gandhari version; see T. 190 [III] 669a4–12 and Senart, 1882–1897, vol. III, 248:4–5; compare vol. I, 38:2–40:5). The inclusion of this thematic section is indicative of a significant shift in the tradition about past buddhas, and might be related to the development and diffusion of the notions of *praṇidhāna* and *vyākaraṇa* (on which see Binz, 1980; Konczak, 2014, chapter 2.3) as the key acts involved in a buddha–bodhisattva encounter. The *locus classicus* where these two acts converge and are combined with that of *adhikāra* is the story of the encounter between Dīpaṅkara and the Bodhisattva, in this context a brahmin variously named Megha, Sumedha, or Sumati. In most if not all versions – the *praṇidhāna* being sometimes replaced by a truthful declaration (Skt. *satyavacana*), and more rarely omitted – they constitute three major steps in the plot (on this complex narrative tradition, see Matsumura, 2010, 2011; Konczak, 2014, 66–74). This story was especially popular in the Northwest, as testified to by the great popularity of the reliefs from Greater Gandhara depicting this encounter (Taddei, 1974, 1992), and by the later localization of this scene in Nagarahāra (modern Jalalabad, cf. Deeg, 2005, 252–254), but it is also commonly represented in 5th/6th century Ajanta (Fig. 1). From this influential story, the notions of *praṇidhāna* and *vyākaraṇa* might have spread and been inserted into narratives depicting the Bodhisattva's meeting with other buddhas that succeeded Dīpaṅkara in the lineage (Tournier, 2017, 143ff.). A generalization has also been suggested (e.g., Anālayo, 2010, 88, 129) from the bottom up, that is, from the stories involving Kāśyapa and the future Śākyamuni (then the brahmin Jyotipāla), on the one hand, and Śākyamuni and Ajita/Maitreya, on the other hand, on to narratives of earlier buddhas.

Whatever might be the precise trajectory followed by these key notions, they contributed to define the centrality of buddha–bodhisattva encounters for the path to awakening, and as such were critical for the genesis of the bodhisattva ideal. Indeed, while the *Mahāvadāna-sūtra* tradition juxtaposes data about the seven buddhas without being primarily concerned with the weaving of a lineage (comp. Dhammajoti, 1987; Walshe, 1987, 199; Anālayo, 2017, 73–74), focusing instead on establishing a recurring pattern for the lives of buddhas, the

Table 1: Buddha lineages in the old *Bahubuddhakasha li* and related lists<sup>a</sup>

<i>*Bahubudhaga</i>	<i>Mahāvastu</i> & T. 190	<i>Mahāśītavana</i>	<i>Mahākaruṇā-puṇḍarika</i>	<i>Bhaiṣajyavastu</i> <sup>b</sup>	<i>Lalitavistara</i>	<i>Buddhavaṃsa</i>
Divakara	Dīpaṅkara	Mar me mdzad	Mar me mdzad	燃燈(II.1)	Dīpaṅkara (3)	Dīpaṅkara
Sarvaviho	Sarvābhibhū	Thams cad gnon	Thams cad zil gyis (3)	悉供(III.3)	Sarvābhibhū (11)	–
Padumutara	Padumuttara	Padma'i bla	Padma'i bla ma (2)	上蓮花(III.5)	Padmottara (1)	Padumuttara (8)
Acucagami	Atyuccagāmin	Rab 'thor gshegs	Shin tu mthor bzhud	–	Atyuccagāmin (13)	–
Yaśutara	Yaśottara	Grags pa'i bla	Grags pa bla ma	上稱(III.6)	–	–
Śakamuni	Śākyamuni	bDe mdzad	Śākya thub pa	釋迦(II.12)	–	–
–	Arthadarśin	Don gzigs	–	見義(III.15)	–	Atthadassi (14)
Tiśa	Tiṣya	rGyal	rGyal	底沙(III.18)	Tiṣya (31)	Tissa (17)
–	Puṣya	sKar rgyal	sKar rgyal	晨宿(III.19)	Puṣya (32)	Phussa (18)
Vivaśi	Vipaśyin	rNam par gzigs	rNam par gzigs	毘婆尸(III.20)	Vipaśyin (53)	Vipassi (19)
Śikhi	Śikhin	gTsong tor can	gTsong tor can	尸棄(III.21)	Śikhin (54)	Sikhi (20)
Veśaho	Viśvabhū	Thams cad skyob	Thams cad skyob	*Viśvabhū <sup>c</sup> (III.22)	Viśvabhū (55)	Vessabhū (21)
Kravasudha	Krakutsanda	Log dad sel	'Khor ba 'jig	迦留村陀(III.23)	Krakucchanda (56)	Kakusandha (22)
Koṇagamuṇi	Konākamuni	gSer thub	gSer thub	迦耶迦牟尼(III.24)	Kanakamuni (57)	Koṇāgamana (23)
Kaśava	Kāśyapa	'Od srung	'Od srung	迦葉(III.25)	Kāśyapa (58)	Kassapa (24)
Śakamuni	Śākyamuni	Śākya seng ge	–	(釋迦)	–	Gotama (25)
Metrea	Maitreya	Byams pa	–	彌勒	–	Metteyya <sup>d</sup>

a See Tournier, 2017, 156–169 and table 2.4 for detailed references and commentary.

b The roman number indicates the *asaṅkhyeya-kalpa* in which each buddha appears, and the arabic number its respective position within the series.

c The Taishō edition mistakenly reads 毘婆尸. Restored on the basis of the Tibetan version, reading Thams cad skyob.

d Added on the basis of Bv 27.19.





Fig. 1: The encounter between the Bodhisattva and Dipaṅkara, façade of cave 19 (photo V. Tournier).

newer textual genre ties the series of his predecessors as a string of pearls, whose running thread is the account of Śākyamuni's quest towards buddhahood. Besides being gifted with extraordinary characteristics, the primary function of past buddhas, in these multi-life narratives, is to witness and confirm the commitment of Śākyamuni, and to mark the major steps of his career. This might also explain why the biographical traditions of specific buddhas developed, while others remained elusive, since the former owed their interest to the fact that they were "known" to have marked turning points in Śākyamuni's career.

## The Insertion of Maitreya into Buddha Lineages

Even if the focus of the narratives under discussion was retrospective, the emergence of Maitreya (see, e.g. Anālayo, 2010, chapter 3) and its profound impact on Buddhist aspirations led to his inclusion within discussions and representations of buddha

lineages. The oldest versions of the *Bahubuddhaka-sūtra*, as well as the *Buddhavaṃsa*, betray the fact that Maitreya's presence constitutes a secondary graft onto narratives in whose framework he did not easily fit (Tournier, 2017, 162–169). This inclusion sets the ground for the development, from around the 2nd/3rd century CE onwards, of buddha lineage narratives primarily oriented towards the future, such as the *Bhadrakalpika-sūtra* (see e.g. Skilling, 2010; Baums, Glass & Matsuda, 2016). This influential sūtra indeed presents a reversed perspective to that of the *Bahubuddhaka-sūtra*, including only Śākyamuni and his three predecessors before dwelling on the 1,000 buddhas who, from Maitreya onwards, are due to arise during our Fortunate Eon. At around the same time, the iconographic group of seven buddhas tends to mutate into a series of eight characters, including Maitreya. The group is common in Greater Gandhara, from which it likely spread to the Northern Silk Road and China (Foucher, 1905–1922, vol. II, 329–332; Zin, 2003, 460–469; Luczanits, 2013, 4ff.; Durt *et al.*, 1985). Most of the time, the next buddha in the lineage appears as a princely figure, representing the Bodhisattva in his quality of heir to our Buddha, currently residing in Tuṣṭita heaven (Fig. 2, see also Foucher, 1905–1922, vol. I, fig. 77; vol. II, fig. 457). In a 2nd/3rd century set of eight images, commissioned for the Kanaganahalli stūpa's upper circumambulatory pathway (Skt. *pradakṣiṇāpatha*) by the lay brother (*upāsaka*) Viśākha of the Vāgādhica family, Maitreya is however represented under the traits of a buddha and is identified by inscription as "the Bhagavant Bodhisattva Ajita, future Buddha" (MIA *bhagavā bodhisato ayito anāgata budho*, cf. Poonacha 2011, 433, pl. CXXVIIID; Nakanishi & von Hinüber, 2014, 75–80; for later instances of sets of eight images, see Barrett, 1956–1957; von Hinüber, 2007). So far, no representation of the lineage of buddhas inaugurated by Dipaṅkara has been identified in early South Asian art. Given that many variants affected the number and identities of the buddhas within this lineage, one might suppose that, by recurring to the more stable group of eight figures, artists made a choice inspired not so much by fidelity to texts than by "legibility" of the visual medium: the sequence from Vipāśyin to Maitreya was enough to represent the succession of buddhas, in dynastic mode, and the prospective arising of the future buddha. The triad Dipaṅkara–Śākyamuni–Maitreya likely featuring on reliefs from Greater Gandhara (Taddei, 1974, figs. 2, 13), and which might have later underpinned the

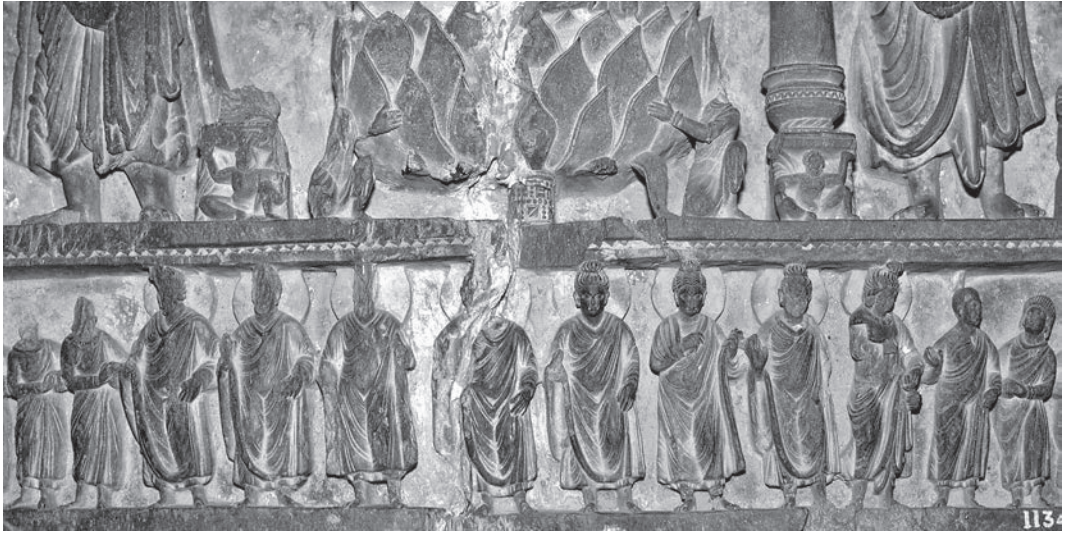


Fig. 2: The seven Buddhas and Maitreya: detail of the lower register of a Palace-type Buddhafeld stele from Mohammed Nari, Chandigarh Government Museum and Art Gallery, Inv. No. 1134 (photo C. Luczanits).

iconographical program of the two main niches at Bāmiyān (Klimburg-Salter, 1989, 114ff.), perhaps pursued a similar aim.

Some scholars have argued that a group containing the first five buddhas of the Fortunate Eon was known from Indic sources dating from the turn of the Common Era, and symbolically represented in the art of Āndhradeśa (Bénisti, 1971; Nattier, 1991, 21–22). The earliest secure allusion to a group of five buddhas is, however, found in Buddhaghosa's 4th/5th century commentary to the *Mahāpadānasutta* (Sv II.410:21–411:21). The iconography of the group is not securely established for India, and it appears to have gained popularity only in countries influenced by the Mahāvihāra tradition (Martini, 1969; Skilling, 2006, 101). In cave sites of Maharashtra, the seven buddhas commonly appear along with Maitreya (in princely garb), from the 4th/5th century onwards. There, the group is commonly represented on the threshold of the sacred space, and, in particular on the lintels over the doorways of sanctuaries (Zin, 2003, 468–469, figs. 1–3). This position of the iconographic group has been compared with that assumed by the nine planetary deities (Skt. *navagraha*) in medieval Hindu temples (Vogel, 1954, 81). In a Buddhist context, representations of past buddhas decline during the Pāla period, and door lintels commonly feature a single buddha (generally in preaching gesture) surrounded by eight bodhisattvas (Bautze-Picron, 1997, 23–26; Mitra, 1998).

## More Past Buddhas: Expanding Horizons

From around the 2nd century CE till the 4th/5th century CE, narratives building upon the earlier tradition about the many buddhas fully bloomed. We can trace a growing interest for past buddhas and buddha lineages within the canonical scriptures, within scholastic texts reflecting upon the bodhisattva career, and within the scriptures that increasingly take on the label “Mahāyāna-sūtra” towards the end of that period. Narratives specifically dedicated to buddha lineages, drawing to varying degrees on the earlier *Bahubuddhaka-sūtra* tradition, envision a considerable number of predecessors that marked Śākyamuni's past. For instance, a verse section of the *Bhaiṣajyavastu* of the Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya and named, according to its Tibetan version, “[Section] on the Homages Paid to the Many Buddhas” (*Sangs rgyas mang po'i skabs* < Skt. *\*Bahubuddhādhikāra*), enumerates some of the 228,000 predecessors encountered by Śākyamuni over the three “incalculable eons” (*asaṅkhyeyakalpa*) of his career, since his first conception of the aspiration to become a buddha (D 1, *'dul ba, kha*, 275a7–279b4; see also T. 1448 [XXIV] 73c6–76a1). In these three major periods of his progress towards buddhahood, he would have thus honored successively 75,000, 76,000, and 77,000 buddhas. The popularity of this narrative is suggested by the spread of so-called “*praṇidhi*-scenes,”

Table 2: Past buddhas and periods of Śākyamuni's career, according to Mūlasarvāstivādin, Sarvāstivādin-Vaibhāṣika, and Sāṃmitīya sources.

Period	Characteristic	<i>Bhaiṣajyavastu</i> (Mūlasarvāstivādin)	<i>Abhidharmadīpa</i> (Sarvāstivādin- Vaibhāṣika)	<i>Samśkṛtāsamśkṛta- vinīśaya</i> (Sāṃmitīya account)
1st asaṅkhyeya	No. of buddhas	75,000	75,000	77,000
	First buddha	Śākyamuni	Śākyamuni	Śākyamuni
	Last buddha	*Rāṣṭrapāla	Ratnaśikhin	–
2nd asaṅkhyeya	No. of buddhas	76,000	76,000	76,000
	First buddha	Dīpaṅkara	[Ratnaśikhin]	–
	Last buddha	Indradhvaja	Dīpaṅkara	–
3rd asaṅkhyeya	No. of buddhas	77,000	77,000	75,000
	First buddha	Kṣemaṅkara	[Dīpaṅkara]	–
	Last buddha	Kāśyapa	Vipaśyin	Indradhvaja
Additional 91 <i>kalpas</i>	No. of buddhas	–	[6]	?
	First buddha	–	[Vipaśyin]	?
	Last buddha	–	[Kāśyapa]	?

some of which containing label inscriptions quoting from the *Bahubuddhādhikāra*, representing the Bodhisattva in the presence of predecessors of this particular lineage, in sites of the northern Silk Road (Lüders, 1940; Pinault, 1993–1994; Konczak, 2014). Scholastic texts also demonstrate that variants of this tradition were widely known among Sarvāstivādin and Sāṃmitīya milieux. In particular, they identify the buddhas honored by the Bodhisattva at the beginning and end of each *asaṅkhyeyakalpa* (Pradhan, 1967, 266:18–267:2; Jaini, 1977, 199:1–7; Lamotte, 1944, 248–255; Skilling, 2006, 103; see table 2).

Other buddhological traditions, such as those reflected in later *Bahubuddhaka-sūtras* preserved in the *Mahāvastu* and the *Fo benxing ji jing*, do not attempt to systematize the number of buddhas encountered by the Bodhisattva, or the exact duration of his career. They insist, however, on the impossibility of conceiving both the origins of Śākyamuni's career and of the number of predecessors he revered. Hence, even the longlived Śuddhāvāsa gods, resorted to in the *Mahāvādāna-sūtra* as a source of information about the lives of past buddhas, are considered to be of limited knowledge for “wholesome roots have been planted for countless and innumerable eons, and under innumerable tathāgatas, arhants, and samyaksambuddhas by those who initially seek perfect awakening” (Senart,

1882–1897, vol. I, 57:6–7; reedited in Tournier, 2017, 441; T. 190 [III] 655c4–5). Both versions of the text, and a third version preserved in the *Buddhapitaka* (*-Duḥśīlanigrahi*), a Mahāyāna sūtra transmitted in Chinese (T. 653) and Tibetan (D 220), go on to enumerate the great many predecessors that he honored, without receiving in return a prediction of future buddhahood. This enumeration starts with the mention of no less than 300,000,000 buddhas named Śākyamuni and 8,000 (variant: 8,000,000) named Dīpaṅkara, interestingly reduplicating the names of key predecessors of our Buddha.

Narratives envisioning a wider temporal perspective no longer recognize Dīpaṅkara as marking the beginnings of Śākyamuni's career, but instead his entrance into the last leg of his long journey towards buddhahood. In the Introductory Homages of the *Mahāvastu* (*Nidānanamaskāra*, Senart, 1882–1897, vol. I, 1–2; reedited in Tournier, 2017, 405–410), composed as an attempt to put some order into the confusingly varied buddha lineages transmitted in this work, Dīpaṅkara marks Śākyamuni's entry into the fourth and last phase of his career (*caryā*), while the former Śākyamuni is associated with the beginning of the second phase. In Mahāyāna sūtra literature, Dīpaṅkara's prediction is tied to the realization of the fact that phenomena are not produced (Skt. *anutpattikadharmakṣānti*) and to the impossibility of advanced, “irreversible” (Skt. *avaivartika*)



bodhisattvas lapsing from their goal (Tournier, 2017, 218–219n313). In the *Āryadīpaṅkaravyākaraṇa* (D188), for instance, the young Megha is described as follows, after he has been granted his predecessor's prediction: “[a]t that time he attained the recognition of the non-arising of all phenomena. Having attained this recognition, he leapt into the sky to the height of seven *tāla* trees, realized six thousand [types] of meditative absorption (*samādhi*), and visualized Tathāgatas numerous as the sands of several Ganges River” (Matsumura, 2011, 81–80).

Thus, even if Dīpaṅkara lost his place as the fountainhead of Śākyamuni's spiritual descent, his importance for his career was not systematically diminished in later forms of Buddhism. Dīpaṅkara's legacy in Nepal, for instance, where the Mahāyāna and esoteric traditions flourish till this day, is considerable, as testified to by the active survival of narratives in Sanskrit and Newari, the great number of iconographic representations of that buddha dating from the Malla period onwards, and its central place in festivals (Vergati, 1982; Gellner, 1992, 180–186; Brown, 2010).

Predecessors other than Dīpaṅkara, also conceived to have delimited the major steps in the Bodhisattva's progress towards buddhahood, are invested with rich narrative traditions. The figure of the former Śākyamuni, whose characteristics fully mirror that of our Buddha, is a case in point. Indeed, in various textual traditions, this figure becomes associated with the concept of “root-aspiration” (Skt. *mūlapraṇidhāna*, also *ādyā-* and *pūrvapraṇidhāna*). By this kind of *praṇidhāna*, which is not followed by a prediction to future buddhahood, a bodhisattva commits to becoming a buddha endowed with the very same characteristics as the tathāgata in the presence of whom he formulates the aspiration (Fukita, 2003b; Tournier, 2017, 182–191; for representations in Kizil, see Zin, 2007, 46–51). Similarly, Ratnaśikhin – variant: Ratnagarbha; known to late Theriya sources as Porāṇa-Dīpaṅkara – is important on at least two accounts: he not only witnesses the last female existence of the future Śākyamuni, he is also the buddha who first imparted a prediction to future buddhahood to Dīpaṅkara, who himself was to grant a prediction to the future Śākyamuni (Skilling, 2009; Tudkeao, 2012; Konczak, 2014, 63–66; Anālayo, 2015; Dhammāinnā, 2015).

This second dimension of this story reflects a tendency to explore the individual bodhisattva careers – and thus the distant predecessors – of those playing a key role in Śākyamuni's own path.

The compiler(s) of the *Fo benxing ji jing* thus interpolated into the early version of the *Bahubuddhaka-sūtra* an independent narrative, transmitted by the Kāśyapīyas and called the *Randeng pusa benxing jing* (然燈菩薩本行經, Sūtra of the Bodhisattva Career of Dīpaṅkara, T. 190 [III] 659c22–663a18; cf. Matsumura, 2011, 128ff.). A separate narrative, also known to the (Mūla-)Sārvāstivādin tradition, situates a past birth of the Bodhisattva Maitreya and of the future *cakravartin* Śaṅkha at the time of Ratnaśikhin (see Cowell & Neil, 1886, 62–66, reedited in Tudkeao, 2004, 75–82; T. 1448 [XXIV] 25b11–26a29, D 1, *’dul ba, kha*, 33a1–36b3). Yet other narratives endeavor to weave together more explicitly the bodhisattva careers of Śākyamuni and Maitreya. They situate the arising of the thought of awakening of Maitreya before that of Śākyamuni, and explain how the latter surpassed the former on the path to buddhahood (Tournier, 2017, 169–174, 191–194). A story widely spread within (Mūla-)Sārvāstivādin scriptures depicts how the Buddha Puṣya (or Tiṣya) set to “mature the individual series” (Skt. *santatiparipācana*) of the future Śākyamuni, who until then lagged behind Maitreya (La Vallée Poussin, 1928). According to the version preserved in the *Avadānaśataka*, Puṣya climbed the Himavanta mountain and sat crosslegged in a jeweled cave, entering the “attainment of the element of fire” (Skt. *tejodhātusamāpatti*). The brilliance of the buddha struck a wandering ascetic searching for roots and fruits so much that, out of devotion, he stood on one foot for seven days and nights, chanting one single stanza of homage. As a result of his earnest vigor (Skt. *vīrya*), the ascetic – who was no other than the future Śākyamuni – subtracted nine eons from the hundred eons usually necessary to reach buddhahood, once bodhisattvas have completed the three incalculable eons (Speyer, 1906–1909, vol. II, 176–177, trans. Feer, 1891, 412–414; cf. Pradhan, 1967, 266:6–7).

As suggested above, the story of the past Śākyamuni – or, for Maitreya, that of Suprabhāsa – proceeds from the wish to determine the first buddha in the presence of whom these bodhisattvas first aspired to buddhahood. A similar logic led to the identification of the spiritual ancestors of other buddhas as well. Hence, the last major section of the *Bhadrakalpika-sūtra* is entirely devoted to the notion of “first aspiration” (Tib. *sgnon gyi smon lam* < Skt. *pūrvapraṇidhāna*). It mostly consists of the brief mention of the name of the past buddha, the name and condition of each of the 1,000 individuals that



became and will become the buddhas of the Fortunate Eon, and the nature of the homage rendered by the latter to the former, before they formulated their aspirations (Skilling & Saerji, 2014–2017). Similarly, the flourishing in Mahāyāna scriptures of legends surrounding buddhas presently active in distant buddha fields leads to the development of narratives about their predecessors. In such narratives, these buddhas-to-be commonly cross paths with the individual who became our buddha. Thus, in an extensive story of the past found in the *Karuṇapūṇḍarīka*, many characters including those who would become Amitābha, Akṣobhya, Śākyamuni, and Maitreya receive a prediction to buddhahood from the Buddha Ratnagarbha (Yamada, 1968, vol. I, 53–355). The occasion of the formulation of the *prañidhānas* of prominent buddhas of the present time also attracts the close attention of Mahāyāna authors. Hence, the “great aspirations” (Skt. *mahāprañidhāna*) of the future Amitābha and Bhaiṣajyaguru under their predecessors (respectively: Lokeśvararāja and Bhaiṣajyaguruvaṛḍḍīyaprabha) are key to the narrative and doctrinal frameworks of scriptures such as the Larger *Sukhāvātīvyūha* and the *Bhaiṣajyaguru-sūtra*. In the former work, Lokeśvararāja is situated in time in relation to a broader succession of buddhas (80 in the Sanskrit version, 53 in Saṅghavarman’s Chinese translation, T. 360), understood as either his predecessors (in T. 360) or his successors (in all other versions, cf. Gómez, 1996, 64–65, 161–162, 246n8): in all cases, the starting point of the enumeration is none other than Dīpaṅkara. This last example illustrates how past buddha lineages were readily devised to provide a buddhological background to a given figure, and how such lineages were deeply fluid, with Dīpaṅkara remaining a constant point of reference for discourses about the past.

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