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Pagpawati Jowo's Rescue Story

Excerpt from Chapter 6 of G. Childs' *The Rising Mist*

Phagpa Lokes'vara of the Potala

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Fig. 1

In The Newark Museum collection is a small ivory figure representing a form of Avalokites'vara of a type that has long puzzled historians of Himalayan art (Fig. 1). Figures displaying the stylistic eccentricities of this bodhisattva are, as evidenced here, relatively common. These stylistic eccentricities can be briefly catalogued as: a high three-lobed crown of rather simple design; the hair in an elaborate chignon which spills in two long buns on either side of the head and crown, and bell-like earrings. The images also show a remarkable lack of ornamentation; they stand on a small, square base in a relatively stiff pose, with, when complete, the right hand in *varada mudra* (gesture of bestowal) and the left close to the thigh in a gesture of holding a (missing) lotus.

Figures of this distinctive type can be found in many private and museum collections and almost every broad-based collection of Himalayan art has an example. Several of these figures are illustrated here and it is worthwhile examining them as a group.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Although the Newark bodhisattva is unusual in that it is made of ivory, it is not the only ivory example known. A larger figure in the Victoria and Albert Museum (Fig. 2) has many characteristics in common with the Newark version. It differs only in being more complete, as the Newark example is missing the left hand, which in the Victoria and Albert figure is present. Spink & Son in London also has a figure of ivory with a face that appears to have been slightly recut (Fig. 3).

More common are figures in wood. One of the most complete, where all the deity's iconographic characteristics are displayed, is in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Fig. 4). Here the right arm in *varada mudra*, missing in the Newark and Victoria and Albert examples, is present. The Los Angeles version also has what would appear to be a standing Buddha or bodhisattva in the central lobe of the crown, the smaller figure's hand gestures mirroring those of the larger. The face of the Los Angeles example is painted in the 'cold-gold' technique, in which a mixture of powdered gold and size is applied, a reliable indicator of the figure's Tibetan provenance (if not necessarily origin).



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

Other wooden examples include a complete and well-preserved figure strikingly painted in gold in the collection of Wesley and Carolyn Halpert in New York (Fig. 5); a figure in the Musée Guimet (Fig. 6), a painted wooden figure at Spink & Son (Fig. 7) and a particularly elegant piece in a private collection (Fig. 8). The Zimmerman Collection in New York contains a torso of the same bodhisattva, unusual for its unadorned crown and worn appearance, suggesting an age greater than the examples already noted (Fig. 9).

Although wood is the most popular material for the manufacture of these images, metal figures are not unknown. The Pritzker Collection in Chicago has a fine example, of a heavy cast copper alloy (Fig. 10), and another, seemingly of later manufacture but with the same stylistic characteristics, is in the National Museum in Kathmandu, Nepal (Fig. 11). The latter is notable in that, unlike the other figures, it has a seated figure of Amitabha in the crown rather than a standing Buddha.

Other examples have been published elsewhere - one in *The Art of Nepal* by Stella Kramrisch (no. 73); another from the Pan-Asian Collection in a Christie's sale catalogue (New York, 1 December 1982, lot 60), and two others in the catalogue *Arte Himalaya* produced by Eskenazi.



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

Because very similar images have been found over a wide geographical area and their archaic style is often accompanied by a condition and technique of carving that would suggest later manufacture, their origin and date have long remained a matter of

conjecture. Study of the evidence suggests that all these figures must be patterned after a single 'ancient type', as noted by Kramrisch in her catalogue entry in *The Art of Nepal*, or a single image rather than a type. The question is: which image or which type? How old and from where? In the case of the figures illustrated here, the question of origin has elicited varying answers, the most favoured being either Nepal or Tibet (Pratapaditya Pal, noting certain Nepalese characteristics, included the Los Angeles example in his *Art of Tibet*, S 14), while estimates of dates have ranged over the entire spectrum of Himalayan chronology.



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

The possibility that all the known examples were patterned after a single, particularly sacred image is strongly suggested by the fact that certain peculiarities have been reproduced almost exactly in images of divergent materials and levels of craftsmanship. Such patterning after a physical (rather than theoretical) original is not common in Himalayan art, but there is at least one other known example of such a custom. The sacred image of Avalokites'vara popularly known as Bumga dyah of Bungamati and Patan in the Kathmandu valley has often been copied in various materials for household altars and shrines. The peculiar mask-like visage of this figure (Fig. 12) and the related Avalokites'vara image of Jambaha dyah of Janbahal in Kathmandu (Fig. 13) is instantly recognizable in the copies (Fig. 14; see also Slusser, *Nepal Mandala*, Fig. 596). It is not entirely coincidental that these images share similar iconographic peculiarities with the others under discussion, notably the *mudras*, as well as stylistic peculiarities, such as the unusual head-dresses, lack of ornamentation, and small, square or rectangular bases.



Fig. 15

On a trip to Tibet in the summer of 1986, this author encountered similar bodhisattva figures in many of the major monasteries in the Lhasa valley, including Drepung ('Bras spungs), Sera (Se-ra) and various *lhakhangs* (shrines) in the Potala Palace. The answer to the riddle became clearer when a monk attending one of the *lhakhangs* in Sera provided the information that an image on display in that *lhakhang* was known as 'Potala Lokes'vara'. A visit to the Potala appeared to confirm that the central image of Avalokites'vara known as 'Phagpa Lokes'vara' ('Phags-pa Lo-ke-svara, Sanskrit., 'Arya Lokes'vara'; 'Noble Lord of the World') of the Phagpa *Lhakhang*, the oldest and most sacred of the Potala shrines (Fig. 15), is the original of which all the known examples are copies.



Fig. 16



Fig. 17



Fig. 18



Fig. 19

This deduction might have been obvious to the first visitor with an interest in art history to the Phagpa *Lhakhang* were it not for the Tibetan custom of draping and decorating images, particularly sacred images, to the point of entirely obscuring everything but the face; in this case even the figure's peculiar earrings were concealed. Unfortunately, according to Gyatso, the monk attending the *lhakhang*, the vestments and late repoussé crown are never removed from the image of Phagpa Lokes'vara except when the image is to be repainted, an event that occurs only when a donor comes forward with the requisite gold and an artist to perform the repainting; this was subsequently confirmed by the scholar Lobsang Lhalungpa, who worked in a nearby office in the Potala in the mid-1940s and remembers this ceremony. Although it was impossible to view or photograph the image unencumbered, parts of the high-peaked crown and unique hair-style were still visible. Further, Gyatso confirmed that the central image, when disrobed, does very closely resemble several reproductions kept in the same *lhakhang* (Figs 16 and 17) and in other shrines in the Potala, including an ivory figure in the Dukhor (Dus-'khor) *Lhakhang*. Copies of the Phagpa Lokes'vara are in fact widespread throughout the Tibetan cultural domain and not confined to the Lhasa valley; two examples have been found on an altar in Chemre (ICe-'bre) monastery in Ladakh (Fig. 18) and another was photographed at Nako monastery near Tabo in an area culturally part of western Tibet (Fig. 19).

Who is Phagpa Lokes'vara? How old is his image and where was it made? For the answer to the first question we must turn to Tibetan religious history; for answers to the other two, we must attempt a stylistic analysis without, alas, a direct view of the figure itself, working only with the shadows left by countless pious copyists. (Indeed, until we have a clear view of the Potala Phagpa Lokes'vara, the authenticity of this image must remain uncertain, for it is clear that since 1959 many important images have been destroyed or lost and replaced in latter years by reproductions.)

The *Gyalrab Salwai Melong* (*rgyal rabs gsal ba'i me long*, *The Clear Mirror of the Royal Genealogies*, probably written by Sakyapa Sonam Gyaltzen [Sa-skyapa Bsod-nams-rgyal-mtshan; 1312-75], although some authorities consider the work fifteenth century) recounts the histories of various sacred images, including that of Phagpa Lokes'vara. The following account is taken from the eleventh chapter of this work as translated by Mimi Church.

During his reign, the great Tibetan emperor Songtsen Gampo (Srong-btsan sGam-po; c. 617-47) decided that he must 'construct a tutelary deity to work on behalf of the sentient beings' in his snowy realm. In meditation buddhas and bodhisattvas revealed to him that in southern India there existed a 'self-originated' Avalokites'vara of sandalwood who was the emperor's tutelary deity. From the hair between the emperor's eyebrows there emanated a mendicant on whose head the Buddha Amitabha dwelt. The mendicant, who was sent to fetch the tutelary deity, found it in the form of

an eleven-headed Avalokites'vara which he brought back to Tibet and presented to the king who was very pleased. Immediately thereafter the king reflected that:

'At present, in the southern part of Nepal, there is [yet another] hidden emanated form. It will be an astonishing support for the benefit of later generations of sentient beings.'

He beseeched the tutelary deity, and from the breast of the self-originated one a light ray emerged. The king turned towards it and followed it with his eye. In a large dense forest on the border of Nepal and India, he saw a tree of white sandalwood. It emitted light rays to the ten directions and in it the four self-originated brothers appeared. The emanated mendicant was sent to bring these supports.

After several adventures the mendicant found the sandalwood tree:

He chopped the tree with a hatchet.

The four images spoke. The upper said 'cut slowly. I will go to the settlement of Mang-yul.' When the voice that said this was heard, from within that which had been cut, that called the noble Wa-ti appeared.

A sound emerged from that which was under him. 'Cut slowly. I will go to the city of Yam-bu [or Yam-bha] Ya-gal.' When the voice that said this was heard from within that which was being cut, that called the noble dBu-gang appeared.

A sound emerged from that which was under him. 'Cut slowly. I will go to the border of India and Nepal.' A voice saying this arose, and from within that which had been cut that called the noble IJa-ma-li [or IJang-ma-li] appeared.

A sound emerged from that which was under him. 'Cut slowly. I will go to the snowy kingdom of Tibet as King Srong-bstan sGam-po's tutelary deity.' A voice saying this arose.

After that, the noble Wa-ti dwelt in the city of Mang-yul. The noble dBu-gang dwelt in the city of Yam-bu Ya-gal. The noble IJa-ma-li dwelt on the border of India and Nepal. Through the blessings of the presence of those three images, the inhabitants of the settlements are freed from the fear of various untimely deaths.

The emanated mendicant invited this noble Lo-gi-s'va-ra, the Kha-rsa-pa-ni that now dwells at the top of the Po-ta-la. Going to the country of Tibet, the mendicant presented it to the religious king Srong-bstan-sGam-po, who was quite pleased. Having met the tutelary deity, he thought, 'Now there is no difficulty in acting on behalf of sentient beings.' (Church translation, pp. 87-88 from the Lhasa edition edited by Kuznetsov, 1966)

This story of the 'four brothers', found with variations in many Tibetan histories, is a fascinating glimpse into the legend/history of the origins of Buddhism in the Himalayas. Two of the other figures are relatively easy to identify. The noble 'dBU-gang' is Bumga dyah/Karunamaya/Rato Macchendranath of Bungamati/Patan, a figure which has been copied in much the same way as Phagpa Lokes'vara; the noble IJa-ma-li' is Jambaha dyah, the so-called 'White Macchendranath' of Janbahal in Kathmandu, who in some Nepalese origin stories is said to have been stolen at one point and carried away by a rival king, perhaps to the 'India-Nepal border' mentioned in the story, before being returned to Kathmandu. One Tibetan version of the four brothers' story places IJa-ma-li in the temple of Khojarnath, on the Karnali river at the western border of Nepal and India (Wylie, p. 14, n. 20). It may have been to here that IJa-ma-li was temporarily taken from his home in Kathmandu, perhaps by one of the audacious Malla kings of medieval western Nepal/western Tibet.

Bumga dyah and Jambaha dyah are the two most important representations of Avalokites'vara in the Kathmandu valley. In a process typical of Newar culture, their identities have become obscured over time with the accretion of non-Buddhist elements. Both are known popularly by Newari names - Bumga dyah and Jambaha dyah - which do no more than locate them within the valley: 'the god of Bumga' (the town of Bungamati) and 'the god of Janbahal' (a monastery in Kathmandu). Bumga dyah, whose yearly chariot festival takes him from one home in Bungamati to a second in Patan, is also often called Karunamaya, a Sanskrit epithet for Avalokites'vara meaning 'full of compassion'. Both gods have also been revered for several centuries by the non-Newar Hindu population of the valley as images of the great *siddha* (perfected being) Macchendranath or Matsyendranath, Bumga dyah as 'Rato' ('Red') Macchendranath, and Jambaha dyah as 'Seto' ('White') Macchendranath. It is ironic that these names have become the standard appellations used by those unfamiliar with the actual Newar Buddhist cults of these two gods, and they are found in countless popular interpretations of Nepalese culture and tourist guidebooks.

The 'noble Wa-ti' of Mang-yul, is, according to the Tibetan scholar Lobsang Lhalungpa, the Avalokites'vara of the Kyirong Samten Ling (skyid-rong-bsam-gtan-gling) in Kyirong (skyidrong; the central town of the region referred to as 'Mang-yul') near the Nepal-Tibet border, referred to by Wylie's sources as 'skyid-rong-jo-bo-wa-ti'. (Please see accompanying appendix, [Pagpawati's Jowo Rescue Story](#), by G. Childs for further information)

This story links several of the most important Buddhist icons of both Tibet and Nepal - the Phagpa Lokes'vara of the Potala, the great Bumga dyah and the related Jambaha dyah of the Kathmandu valley. There is a parallel between the story of the bringing of Phagpa Lokes'vara by Songtsen Gampo aided by the mendicant and the Newari tale of the bringing of Bumga Dyah by the Nepalese king Narendradeva and his priest, the Vajracarya ('vajra master') Bandhudatta. It is possible that these stories reveal a profound truth about the history of Buddhism and the blossoming of the Avalokites'vara cults in Nepal and Tibet during the time of these two great kings.

Songtsen Gampo and Narendradeva have often been linked and it is known that they were contemporaries. Some historical sources suggest that Narendradeva was helped by Tibetan forces to reclaim his usurped throne, and that Nepal entered a period of vassalage to Tibet during his time. *The Clear Mirror of the Royal Genealogies* recounts the well-known story of a Nepalese princess becoming one of the brides of Songtsen Gampo. If this story is true - and there is no overwhelming reason to believe it is not - the most likely father of the bride is considered by some historians to have been Narendradeva. Certainly, the Nepalese king 'De-ba-lha' of *The Clear Mirror of the Royal Genealogies* could be Narendradeva ('de-ba' is the Tibetan transliteration of the Sanskrit 'deva', meaning 'god' added to the Tibetan 'lha', also meaning 'god'; thus 'de-ba-lha' is equivalent to 'narendra', which is Sanskrit for 'lord of men', added to 'deva'). Moreover, as we have seen, religious tradition links the figures by assigning to them similar deeds: Narendradeva bringing Bumga dyah to Nepal, Songtsen Gampo bringing Phagpa Lokes'vara to Tibet, thus introducing two of the most widely revered manifestations of the central Mahayana bodhisattva to the Himalayan stage, probably at the same time. The story of the four brothers may commemorate the installation of several important Mahayana images of common or closely related origin in various centres of Himalayan Buddhism at about the same time. If the story does in part reflect the historical facts, it must be accepted that the original images of Phagpa Lokes'vara and Bumga dyah date from the time of Songtsen Gampo and Narendradeva, and that all the images of the story are of Nepalese ('Nepal-India border') origin. Do the stylistic characteristics of the Phagpa Lokes'vara support such a conclusion?

There is no doubt that, as Kramrisch pointed out, the copies of Phagpa Lokes'vara examined here 'adhere to an ancient type'. There is no telling argument why we should reject, on stylistic grounds, a seventh-century date for the Phagpa type (until there is an opportunity to view the image uncovered we must refer to the 'type' rather than the image itself). Certainly the simplicity of the figure, similar in many respects to the earliest known figures of the standing bodhisattva, would suggest such a date. An examination of South Asian sculpture from this period clearly shows that the early figures that most resemble this type are Nepalese. One of the earliest known bodhisattva figures from Nepal, a seventh-century bronze Vajrapani in The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Fig. 20), exhibits a similar simplicity of design (Lerner, Fig. 16).

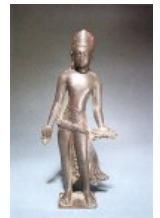


Fig. 20



Fig. 21

The stylistic peculiarities already mentioned seem so archaic as to further support an early date, for often in images that predate the formation of a mature tradition experimental features are found. As examples of such experimentation we may cite the mitre-type crown on the seventh-century figure of Vajrapani noted above; another unusual crown on a sixth-century stone figure of Avalokites'vara (Fig. 21) near Gana Bahal in Kathmandu (this image also displays the simplicity and lack of ornamentation that bespeak its considerable antiquity, and has the same Buddha figure found in the crown of Jambaha dyah), and the elegant and unique hair-style displayed by a small, early image of Vajrapani (Slusser, vol. 2, Fig. 464). The mitre-like crown appears to be characteristic of Bumga dyah and a modified, three-lobed version appears on Jambaha dyah in Kathmandu, although the crown of Phagpa Lokes'vara is very different. Mary Slusser notes the occurrence of this mitre-like crown, which she mentions was normally reserved for Indra, on several later Nepalese portrayals of Avalokites'vara, and it may well be that these were patterned after the crown-type of Bumga dyah (see Slusser, vol. 2, Figs 462 and 463).

The location of Phagpa Lokes'vara is consonant with an early date for, although the present Potala Palace was not built until the time of the Great Fifth Dalai Lama (1617-82), there is little doubt that certain parts of the site are far older, including both the Phagpa *Lhakhang* and the cave containing images of the great emperor and his two queens. When *The Clear Mirror of the Royal Genealogies* was written, the Phagpa *Lhakhang* may well have been situated 'at the top of the Po-ta-la'.

If we do accept a seventh-century date for the original Phagpa Lokes'vara, this does not mean that the numerous, widely dispersed copies are of this early date. Any attempt to date these images without the benefit of scientific analysis would be an exercise in futility. It is also evident that, although the original Phagpa Lokes'vara may well be of Nepalese origin, the majority of the copies would logically be Tibetan, a dichotomy which has added considerably to the confusion surrounding these figures.

This article has been little more than a brief introduction to a subject rich in unexplored possibilities. There are still many questions regarding the Phagpa Lokes'vara, including the implications of his specific iconographical identity as Khasarpana, a youthful form of Avalokites'vara (the authoritative *Sadhanamala* notes that Khasarpana 'resides in the womb of Mount Potalaka'; Bhattacharya, p. 129). His relationship to the two figures on either side of him in the *lhakhang* is also mysterious. (According to Lobsang Lhalungpa, the three together are known as 'phags-pa-sku-mched-gsum' ['three noble brothers'], somewhat confusing the story of four brothers found in *The Clear Mirror of the Royal Genealogies*).

His relationship to the two great Lokes'varas of the Kathmandu valley is also unclear, and, as mentioned earlier, unfortunately stylistic analysis of the figure of Bumga dyah is considerably complicated by its present almost amorphous shape; even the material of the image and its weight are highly controversial, although the thirteenth-century Tibetan traveller Dharasvamin claimed that the image is definitely of sandal-wood, and the related Jambaha dyah is also said by his attendants to be of wood (cf., Slusser, p. 377, ff.). The Nepalese tale describes Bumga dyah being brought from Kamarupa, which corresponds to the present state of Assam in India, adding a further geographical canard to the story, although the story recounts that the god was brought in the form of a bee, from which he was transferred to an image, implying that the image was already in place. In addition, the cult of Bumga dyah is probably syncretic, representing an amalgam of an ancient indigenous deity with the bodhisattva brought by Narendradeva. The figure of Jambaha dyah also raises questions. Nepalese stories link his origins with the early medieval king Gunakamadeva, and most historians agree that the evidence suggests the god post-dates Bumga dyah, whom he may in fact emulate (Slusser, p. 380). There is insufficient historical information to definitively corroborate or disprove Jambaha dyah's inclusion among the seventh-century four brothers. As for the last of the brothers, 'skyid-rong-jo-bo-wa-ti', he remains an enigma. (Please see accompanying appendix, [Pagpawati's Jowo Rescue Story](#), by G. Childs for further information)

In spite of the mystery which shrouds these figures, the legend and history surrounding Phagpa Lokes'vara and the available stylistic evidence suggest that Phagpa Lokes'vara, and at least one of his brothers in Nepal, are indeed precious relics of the early years of Mahayana Buddhism in the Himalayas. These two at least share characteristics unique to their cults: stories of royal introduction, peculiarities of iconography and style, and the otherwise unknown custom of manufacturing copies not of an iconographical type but rather a specific sacred image.

Ian Alsop has published extensively on the cultural history of Nepal and is currently working on a lexicon of classical Newari.

The author would like to thank Mimi Church for supplying a copy of her unpublished translation of *The Clear Mirror of the Royal Genealogies*.

Suggested further reading

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