

On some references of the Buddhapādamaṅgala to the Suttapiṭaka and the Abhidhammapiṭaka

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This article compares the Buddhapādamaṅgala, a Pāli work written in the Ayutthaya kingdom probably in the sixteenth century, with the canonical sources (mainly from the Suttapiṭaka and the Abhidhammapiṭaka) that inspired the symbology adopted by the text. The analysis indicates that this symbology, which permeates Buddhist tradition in Thailand, was developed through several stages under the influence of Pāli commentarial literature and of paracanonical texts such as the Milindapañha.

Keywords: Theravāda Buddhism; Pāli-Thai literature; Buddhist iconography

1. Introduction¹

In 2011 there was a particularly significant publication in Thailand: Cicuzza (2011), i.e., the critical edition with the English translation of the Buddhapādamaṅgala, a Pāli work written by an unknown author in Thailand (ca. XVI cent.), which examines in detail the meanings of the symbols appearing on the footprints of the Buddha.

There are sound reasons to see this work as a milestone to understand the spread and development of Buddhism in Thailand in all its cultural manifestations. For instance, it sheds light upon the Buddhapāda symbols on the soles of the feet of the huge reclining Buddha at Wat Pho, in Bangkok, or on the footprints at Sukhothai, so that one may better admire them while appreciating the complex and fascinating symbology they display.²

¹ I express my gratitude to Claudio Cicuzza for providing me with the photographs and for discussing with me some relevant concepts from the Buddhapādamaṅgala, the *Kervan* staff for the accurate editorial work and two anonymous referees for their corrections and advice. Of course, I remain the sole responsible for any mistake.

² Visitors at Wat Pho usually admire the impressive size of the statue, are inspired by its reference to the *parinibbāna*, with all the metaphysical aura it entails, and enjoy the surrounding sense of devotion of the Buddhist followers who circumambulate the statue, the sound of the coins dropped, etc. The symbols beautifully carved on the sole of the feet inspire awe, but their

At the present stage, the understanding of the iconography of the Buddhapādamaṅgala still lacks a comparative study of the images therein described with the canonical sources behind them.³ Therefore, in the present study I would like to examine some of those symbols in the light of the Pāli Tipiṭaka, with a special reference to the Suttaṭīṭaka and Abhidhammaṭīṭaka. The analysis of selected passages will demonstrate how the text draws concepts and lexical features from the Pāli Canon sometimes by quoting passages verbatim and sometimes by elaborating canonical contents in a new fashion.

2. The footprint and its symbols

The list of the symbols occurs in different versions in the early commentarial tradition (D-a CST4 II.33, PTS II.445-446; M-a CST4 II.386, PTS III.375)⁴ and in some later Pāli texts, inscriptions, or recent booklets: the Jinālaṅkāraṭīkā, the Namakkāraṭīkā (Nam-ṭ CST4 97), the Pajjamadhu (Gooneratne 1987), the Paṭhamasambodhi (PTS 32-33), the Samantakūṭavaṇṇanā (vv. 765-770), the Prah Mahāpurusalakkhaṇa, the Buddhapādalakkhaṇa, and stone inscriptions in Thailand, at Sukhothai (Cicuzza 2011: liv-lxiii). Specific symbols are found outside the list in some texts, like the king of swans (*haṃsarājā*, in the Cūḷahaṃsajātaka, Jā CST4 II.44, 45). Other images are typical symbols recurring throughout Buddhist literature in various traditions (the sun, *suriya*, the moon, *candimā*, the elephant, *hatthi*, the horse, *assa*, the lotus, *paduma*, etc.). Even if we narrow down the scope to the Pāli Tipiṭaka, the images thoroughly described in the BPM are meant to inspire those positive qualities that Buddhist teachings consider as crucial in the path to awakening and in the ordinary life of devotees as well. In fact, it is largely due to their complex symbology that the *buddhapādas* need to be examined in the light of canonical and paracanonical scriptures: “... besides offering themselves as pure objects for meditation they also invite significant engagement with the Buddha’s teachings” (Cicuzza 2011: xxxiii).

meanings and their references to the canonical teachings of the Buddha might be lost without a thorough explanation. And without grasping them, one misses a remarkable area of Thai culture, including the embodiment of Pāli Buddhist sources that underpins its religious milieu. It is as if one visits the Christian Catacombs in Rome without knowing that the image of the fish represents a reference to Jesus through the acronym ἰχθύς (*ichthys*), or admires the School of Athens by Raffaello unaware of the twofold identities of the characters portrayed in the fresco.

³ For studies on Buddhist symbols in general and their textual sources, see Bhattacharyya (1959), Karlsson (1999), and Anālayo (2017).

⁴ Pāli canonical references are to Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Tipiṭaka, 4th edition, Igatpuri, Vipassana Research Institute; pages in the PTS editions are indicated too.

The footprint of the Buddha is represented in the Suttas as one of the marks (*lakkhana*) of a *tathāgata* or of a *mahāpurisa* and endowed with the thousand-spoke wheel (*cakka*).⁵ Moreover, its auspicious symbols (*maṅgala*) are variously mentioned and/or described in commentarial literature (Cicuzza xv-xvii). The cases below are exemplary in that regard.

3. The sword that severs defilments



Figure 1. satti ‘the sword’ (from Bunteuen Srivarapoj. 2547 [2004]. Ratanamongkhon kham chan. Bangkok: 15; in Thai).

⁵ See the Lakkhaṇasutta (D 30, CST4 III.204-205, PTS III.148-149) and the Doṇasutta (A CST4 IV.36, PTS II.38-39); cp. Bodhi (2012: 1696, n. 695). For a list of Gāndhārī and Chinese parallels of the Doṇasutta, see Anālayo (2017: 15-17). For more Pāli (and Sanskrit) references, see Cicuzza (2011: xxix-xxxiii).

The BPM contains two references to the image of the blade/sword: one is in the term *satti* and the other one in the term *khagga*. Both terms here explicitly refer to the weapon to defeat the adversaries (*paccaṭṭhika*) or Māra, identified as “all defilements which attach to all beings living in the three worlds” (BPM 3/113). Along these lines, Dhammapāla (D-ptṭ CST4 II.35, PTS II.47; M-ptṭ CST4 II.86) glosses the term *satti* occurring in the same list as *āvudhasatti*, the blade as a weapon (PED: *ā + yudh*). In the case of *satti* (which is the first symbol in the entire list) the BPM also outlines its association with the faculty of deep understanding, or wisdom (*paññā*), distinguishing two kinds of knowledge, the knowledge of the path of Arahantship and the knowledge associated with the fruition of Arahantship.”⁶ In the Suttapitaka, this association is found, phrased in the compound *paññā-sattha* (the sword of wisdom) in the Cīttavagga of the Dhammapada and in the Talaputa Thera of the Theragāthā, as well as in some paracanonical texts included in the Khuddaka Nikāya (e.g. Paṭiṣ CST4 I.109, PTS I.119). With regard to the Abhidhamma sources, it occurs in numerous passages of the Dhammasaṅgani (e.g., Dhs CST4 I.16, PTS I.11) and in two other texts of the Abhidhammapitaka (Vibh CST4 525, PTS 250; Pp CST4 80, PTS 25). The reference to Māra, along with the reference to wisdom and the commentarial exegesis of *satti* as *āvudha*, resonate with the following encouragement in the Dhammapada: “one should fight Māra with the weapon of wisdom.”⁷

It should be pointed out that, in contrast with the meaning of *paññā-sattha* in Abhidhamma passages, in the BPM *paññā* is one of the requisites of the blade and not the blade itself, which is instead equated to the basis subject for meditation (*mūlakammaṭṭhāna*), as in the simile of the hunter and the buffalo (BPM 4-5/114).⁸

The term *satthā* may indicate a sword, a knife, or a scalpel (PED), therefore the blade that severs defilements (*kilesa*), which are by and large fetters (*saṃyojana* or *yoga*). In fact, a common exegesis reads: “In ‘the sword of wisdom,’ wisdom is compared to a sword in the sense that it severs defilements.”⁹ What emerges in the Abhidhamma usage of *sattha*, compared with the role of its synonym *satti* in the path to *nibbāna* as described in the BPM, is a stronger emphasis on the application of a specific tool rather than the sense of a battle that the BPM evokes.

⁶ *Arahattamaggañāṇa-arahattaphalañāṇasaṅkhatam* (BPM 2/112).

⁷ *Yodhetha māraṃ paññāvudhena* (Dhp 40; transl. Norman 1997: 6).

⁸ The numbers before / indicate the location of the Pāli text in Ciczuzza’s work, the numbers following / refer to the translation of the same textual passages.

⁹ *Kilesacchedanaṭṭhena paññāva sattham paññāsattham* (Dhs-a CST4 I.16, PTS 147, Paṭiṣ-a CST4 I.108-109, PTS II.388).

Clearly, there is not much difference between the function of a surgical device and that of a weapon, as the two approaches are two facets of the same coin. A distinction is in the nuance: the exhortation to a battle probably aims at stimulating a particular set of qualities like faith, effort, and courage in the disciple, whereas the emphasis on cutting off fetters could inspire a desire for freedom.

Whereas the Dhammasaṅgaṇī just mentions the compound, the BPM's description closely resembles the passage in the Milindapañha, and this comes with no surprise, considering the importance of the Milindapañha in Thailand.¹⁰

The term *khagga*, on the other hand, is notoriously found in canonical sources as referred to the sword-horn of the rhinoceros in the Khaggavisāṇasutta (Sn CST4 I.35-75, PTS 6-11). In the Araññāyatanaśisutta the term indicates the sword of the lord of the devas, Sakka: the text says that Sakka gives the sword to his entourage before going to pay homage to wise holy men (*isi*), endowed with moral discipline and living in the forest (S CST4 I.255, PTS I.226). In the Therīgāthā, Sumedhā cuts her own hair with a sword (*khagga*; Therī 482) as a gesture of renunciation, but the commentary does not ascribe any further symbolic meaning to that.

The image of the sword often appears in Suttas that use the analogy of the battlefield to illustrate the path, like the Dutiyayodhājīvasutta of the Aṅguttara Nikāya (A CST4 V.76, PTS III.93-95). In that circumstance, the sword (*asi*), along with the shield, the quiver, and the arrows, are the weapons of the warrior, and the whole sutta describes the personal fight between conducting the life of a bhikkhu and returning to the 'inferior' (*hīna*) life.

¹⁰ Current research on the manuscripts of the Milindapañha circulated in ancient Siam has demonstrated that various recensions were transmitted and preserved by specific Buddhist communities in different times (Eng Jin Ooi 2021: 174).

4. The seven rivers that flow to awakening



Figure 2. *sattamahāgaṅgā* ‘the seven great rivers’ (from Bunteuen Srivarapoj. 2547 [2004]. Ratanamongkhon kham chan. Bangkok: 63; in Thai).

Another interesting simile is the one that compares the seven factors of awakening to the seven great rivers (*sattamahāgaṅgā*), taught by the Buddha “in the hearts of all beings according to their inclinations” (Cicuzza 2011: 159). As pointed out by Cicuzza, the association between the seven rivers and the seven factors of awakening occurs in the *Avijjāsutta* of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*.¹¹ Here the rivers

¹¹ A CST4 X.61, PTS V.113-116; Cicuzza (2011: 158).

are called *mahānādi* and are the last ones in the list of streams that flow into and fill the great ocean (*mahāsamudda*) according to a twofold connotation: in the negative path they are the five hindrances that nourish ignorance (*avijjā*), whereas in the positive one they correspond to the seven *bojjhaṅgas* that flow into knowledge and liberation (*vijjā-vimutti*).

The reference to the inclinations of beings might echo a canonical classification of the *bojjhaṅgas* in accordance with their stimulating or relaxing qualities¹² and the Abhidhamma taxonomy of beings recurring in the *Puggalapaññatti* and in the *Vibhaṅga*.

Throughout the *Maggasam̐yutta* the great rivers (usually five) are also associated with the noble eightfold path, and in the *Parisāsutta* of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* their flowing into the ocean is likened to the meditative and pre-meditative stages that in harmonious communities (*samagga-parisā*) of *bhikkhus* flow into concentration (*samādhi*), or the ocean.¹³

In the well-known *Pahārādasutta*, still in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, the [five] great rivers refer to the *bhikkhus* from the four distinct social classes and specific family names, all losing their names and social statuses in the Dhamma-Vinaya/ocean. Also, all those *bhikkhus* who reach *nibbāna* do not increase or diminish it, like the rivers don't visibly affect the great ocean.¹⁴ Elsewhere, the same rivers symbolize all the wholesome (*kusala*) dhammas, which converge into the ocean of diligent attention (*appamāda*), clearly defining the latter as encompassing the other qualities rather than their goal (A CST4 X.15, PTS V.22).

¹² *Aggisutta*, A V.219, PTS III.256.

¹³ The process includes altruistic joy (*muditā*), bliss (*pīti*), relaxation of the body (*kāya-passaddhi*), ease (*sukha*), and the latter leads to concentration of the mind (A CST4 III.96, PTS I.243-244).

¹⁴ A CST4 VIII.19, PTS IV.202. The list of the *Pahārādasutta* occurs also in the *Uposathasutta* of the *Udāna* (Ud CST4 45, PTS 51-56). At the end of the *Praśna Upaniṣad*, there is the image of the rivers flowing into the ocean, thus losing their individualities (Pr Up 6.5; cp. Olivelle 1998: 471).

5. The goad of knowledge



Figure 3. aṅkusa ‘the goad’ (from Bunteuen Srivarapoj. 2547 [2004]. Ratanamongkhon kham chan. Bangkok: 23; in Thai).

The BPM also employs the notion of goad (*aṅkusa*), consisting in the “knowledge of the path of arahantship” and in the “knowledge of the fruition of arahantship” (respectively on the soles of the right and left foot of the Buddha). The text offers an alternative interpretation of the symbol, viz., the recollection of the virtues (*guṇa*) if the three Gems (24/133). Another term that can be correctly translated as “goad” and occurs in the Sutta-pitaka is *patoda*, found for instance in the Kakacūpamasutta (M 21, CST4 I.225, PTS I.123) and in the Patodasutta (A CST4 IV. 113, PTS II.114-116). The Patodasutta presents the simile of a horse that follows orders just by seeing the shade (*chaya*) of a

goad, symbolising the wholesome sense of perturbation, urgency (*saṃvega*) that drives a person to the path of liberation. The use of the simile in the Kakacūpamasutta presents a similar meaning, though the goad is therein meant as the instigation to mindfulness (*sati*) and applies to the monastic rule of eating one meal per day. Within paracanonical literature, more specifically in the hermeneutical Nettippakarana, *patoda* is associated to profound understanding or wisdom (*paññā*) with a phrasing resembling the one found in the Dhammasaṅgaṇī.¹⁵

6. The palace of wisdom at the center of awakening



Image 4. *pāsāda* ‘the palace’ (from Bunteuen Srivarapoj. 2547 [2004]. Ratanamongkhon kham chan. Bangkok: 22; in Thai).

¹⁵ Netti CST4 48, PTS 75; Dhs e.g., CST4 16, 20, PTS 11.

Another commonality between the BPM, the Dhammasaṅgānī, and the Milindapañha is represented by the image of the palace (*pāsāda*) to indicate *paññā*. In the following depiction of the city of the Dhamma by the Pāli Milindapañha it refers to the centre of the whole set of teachings of the Buddha:

*bhagavato kho mahārāja dhammanagaraṃ silapākāraṃ hiriparikhaṃ ñāṇadvāraḥṭṭhakaṃ
vīriyaatṭālakam saddhāesikaṃ satidovārikaṃ paññāpāsādam suttantacaccaram
abhidhammasiṅghāṭakam vinayavinicchayaṃ satipaṭṭhānavīthikaṃ*

In the Lord's City of Dhamma the encircling walls are moral habit, the moats are conscience, the ramparts over the city-gates are knowledge, the watch-towers are energy, the pillars are faith, the door-keepers are mindfulness, the palace is wisdom, the cross-roads are the Suttantas, the places where three or four roads meet are the Abhidhamma, the law-court is the Vinaya, the streetway is the applications of mindfulness.

(Mil CST4 V.4.1, PTS 332; transl. Horner 1969: 173)

This complex iconography is creatively mirrored in the BPM:

*pāsādo ti ayaṃ mahānibbānanagarasaṃkhāto ratanapāsādo nāma hoti | taṃ ratanapāsādam
buddhasiri-maṅgalavaḍḍhanaṃ buddhapādadvayatale jātaṃ hoti | yasmā hi bhagavā tasmim
mahānibbānanagarasaṃkhāte ratanapāsādadvāre nisinno anto appavesitum
sabbakilesapaccatthikānaṃ paṭibāhati | tassa ratanapāsādassa ativiya parisuddhatāya kiñci
kilesa-malapaccatthikamalasamaṣaṭṭhassa natthitāya | tasmā idaṃ ratanapāsādam buddharatanan
ti vuccati |
atha vā idaṃ mahānibbānanagaraṃ ratanapāsādan ti vuccati | idaṃ pana heṭṭhā vuttanayeneva
veditabbam |*

The palace is the precious palace reckoned as the great city of Nibbāna. This precious palace exists on the two soles of the feet of the Buddha increasing [the number of] his resplendent auspicious signs. Since the Blessed One sits at the entrance to the precious palace, reckoned as the great city of Nibbāna, in order to prevent any intrusion, he is able to keep out adversaries such as all defilements. [24] Nothing is superior in purity to this precious palace, given the complete absence [in it] of any relationship with the adversaries such as impurities and defilements. Therefore this precious palace is explained as the Buddha-jewel. Or alternatively, the great city of the Nibbāna is called the “precious palace”. This ought to be known from what has been said [just] above.

(BPM 23-24/133)

It is noteworthy that, while the image of the palace of wisdom is present in the Dhammasaṅgaṇī, the city of Nibbāna (*nibbāna-nagara*) in the BPM has the Milindapañha as its only antecedent. This reinforces the hypothesis that the influence of the Milindapañha was crucial in the composition of the BPM, which is one of the various reasons to devote studies on the Thai redactions of the text.¹⁶

In the Ariyapariyesanāsutta, there are these two recurring *pādas* within Brahmā Sahampati's request to teach:

tathūpamaṃ dhammamayaṃ sumedha

pāsādam āruyha samantacakkhu

So, o Wise One, All-seeing,

Ascend the palace of the Dhamma.

(M 26, CST4 I.282, PTS I.168; transl. Ñāṇamoli-Bodhi 2001: 261)

The BPM uses the image of the palace for one of the descriptions of the golden body of the Buddha:

Or alternatively, the physical body of the Blessed One is of a golden colour, like a golden palace (*suvaṇṇapāsāda*) bounded by a railing (*vedikā*) and adorned with jewels, and shining forth, glistening very brightly, when it comes into contact with the splendour reflected by the jewels of the railing. Therefore the Blessed One is called a “golden palace” surrounded by a railing adorned with jewels. (Cicuzza 2011: 126)

7. Conclusion

This study on specific terms employed in the Buddhapādamaṅgala in the light of their possible Pāli canonical sources indicates that:

- The text represents a late exegesis wherein layers of influence from commentarial works are evident. To which extent the exegetical function was intentional or just inherited from its usage of the sources is not perfectly clear, as it may reflect both commentaries and contemporary vernacular works.
- The Buddhapādamaṅgala is a precious witness of Thai Buddhism in the time of the composition of the text and of the familiarity of the author/s with the Tipiṭaka and its commentaries.

¹⁶ Relevant research in that respect has been conducted by Ooi Eng Jin (Transmission of the Milindapañha, unpublished PhD thesis).

- The references to specific passages suggest that the text was meant to popularize the teachings of the Buddha therein expressed as well as to inspire devotional and meditative practices. In this light, we may talk of a performative symbology.
- Canonical references seem to be filtered through the lexicon and philosophical reflections of the Milindapañha, whose impact on Thai Buddhism requires further investigation.
- Comparative studies with unedited Pāli/Thai manuscripts may hopefully outline a relationship between the complex symbolism of the Buddhapādamāṅgala and Thai meditative tradition as well as its interrelation with other Pāli and vernacular works.

Abbreviations

| | |
|---------|---|
| A | Aṅguttara Nikāya |
| BPM | Buddhapādamāṅgala |
| CST4 | Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Tipiṭaka, 4th edition |
| D | Dīgha Nikāya |
| D-a | Sumaṅgalavilasini (Dīgha Nikāya-aṭṭhakathā) |
| D-pt | Līnatthapakāsini I (Dīgha Nikāya-purāṇa-ṭikā) |
| Dhs | Dhammasaṅgaṇī |
| Dhs-a | Atthasālinī (Dhammasaṅgaṇī-aṭṭhakathā) |
| Jā | Jātaka |
| M | Majjhima Nikāya |
| M-a | Papañcasūdanī (Majjhima Nikāya-aṭṭhakathā) |
| M-pt | Līnatthapakāsini II (Majjhima Nikāya-purāṇa-ṭikā) |
| Mil | Milindapañha |
| Nam-ṭ | Namakkāraṭikā |
| Netti | Nettipakaraṇa |
| Paṭis | Paṭisambhidāmagga |
| Paṭis-a | Saddhammapakāsini (Paṭisambhidāmagga-aṭṭhakathā) |
| PED | Pali-English Dictionary (Rhys Davids - Stede) |
| Pp | Puggalapaññatti |
| Pr Up | Praśna Upaniṣad |
| PTS | Pali Text Society edition |
| Sn | Suttanipāta |
| Therī | Therīgāthā |

| | |
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| Ud | Udāna |
| Vibh | Vibhaṅga |

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