Framing the Sacred
Cambodian Buddhist Painting

Trent Walker

Catalog of paintings from the collection of Joel Montague exhibited in
"Framing the Sacred: Cambodian Buddhist Painting"
November 20th, 2013 – March 20th 2014
Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley
A rarely-depicted episode from the Buddha's life, in which the Buddha's stepmother, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī (who cared for the Buddha after his mother's death), weaves a special robe and offers it to him. The Buddha refuses, insisting it be offered to the monastic community as a whole. The episode links her early care for him with her later successful petitioning of the Buddha to form a community of nuns.
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Trent Walker
Group in Buddhist Studies
University of California, Berkeley

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Trent Walker (figure 6)
Foreword

This elegantly crafted and carefully researched exhibit catalog situates Cambodian Buddhist paintings on cloth and glass in their religious and social context, through analysis of visual imagery and translations of dedications. Trent Walker enhances these descriptions with his delightful renditions of Khmer Dharma songs, many of which appear here in English translation for the first time in published form.

Depicting a range of subjects from the earth goddess to white elephants, scenes of birth and passing, and the forces of good and evil, the paintings represented here all have transformative powers through their role as temporary adornments for use in Buddhist ceremonies. The images are vibrant with color and rich with story. The dedications reveal the role of these paintings as vehicles of merit. Photographs of paintings in use in Cambodia complete and enrich the narrative. Readers will find this a vital supplement to the exhibition of collected works from Joel Montague’s private collection, and a useful reference guide in its own right.

Penny Edwards
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Introduction

This exhibit features fifteen Cambodian Buddhist paintings, eleven on cloth and four on glass, from the private collection of Joel Montague. Although portable paintings on cloth and glass are among the most visible and frequently used forms of Buddhist art in Cambodia today, it is rare for such paintings to be collected together in an exhibit. Most scholarship on post-Angkorian Cambodian Buddhist art excludes these media, focusing instead on monastic architecture, statuary, and mural painting. Part of the reason for this focus is that more portable forms of Buddhist art have not survived the ravages of climate, insects, and war. Hence, we should not be surprised that the pieces in this exhibit likely do not pre-date the Khmer Rouge period (1975–1979). The earliest dated painting in this collection bears the year 1981. The faded colors and deteriorating inscriptions on these paintings are not an indication of their age but a testament to their frequent ritual use. Just as aging Southeast Asian manuscripts were continuously recopied and then “cremated” in funeral ceremonies, ephemeral Buddhist images such as paintings on cloth were subject to renewal and respectful destruction.

The iconography of these paintings draws inspiration from earlier works. There is a close relationship between the style and subject matter of these portable works and better-known genres such as temple murals. Indeed, the same artisans who produced these paintings on cloth and glass likely created temple murals as well. Recent studies by Ashley Thompson, San Phalla, Vittorio Roveda, and Sothon Yem highlight the influence of modern Thai artistic styles, South Asian religious prints, and Western painting techniques on Khmer Buddhist painting.¹ The pieces in this exhibit exemplify the iconography and technique typical of this

modern style, which emerged on Khmer temple walls in Cambodia and southern Vietnam in the early twentieth century.

The function of the paintings on cloth and glass in this exhibit, however, are in some ways closer to that of Buddhist textiles in Cambodia, including the woven hol pidan (គោលបុណ្ត៍ hūl bitān) studied by Siyonn Sophearith. Like hol pidan, paintings on cloth and glass are made of perishable materials and are used to create temporary sacred spaces in private homes and village halls or to adorn more permanent structures such as Buddhist monasteries and ancient stone temples. Hol pidan are hung from the ceiling directly above the central Buddha image. In contrast, paintings on cloth and glass may stand in for an absent central Buddha image or be hung from the walls around or behind the main altar.

Due to their perishable nature, the history of paintings on cloth in Cambodia is difficult to trace. The Khmer term for Buddhist paintings on cloth banners—preah bot in phonetic transcription—offers some possible clues. Although published sources in Khmer spell this term ប្រាក្ស braḥ pat’ (or, more rarely, ប្រាប braḥ pad), most works in European languages assert that the bot corresponds to the Pali and Sanskrit term paṭa, meaning cloth. According to Peter Skilling, this same paṭa can be found in reference to Siamese Buddhist paintings on cloth known as phra bot (พระบฏ or occasionallyพระบฎ) as early as 1384 CE. Skilling further argues that the Siamese phra bot and its Cambodian analogue are part of a much broader tradition of Buddhist paṭa paintings that extends to every part of the Buddhist world,

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2 ស៊ីយ៉ុនសុង ិប្ូ។ ិប្ូ ិុញិុញិុញិុញិុញិុញិុញិុញ (ស៊ីយ៉ុន ិុញ, 2008). The superbly-translated but slightly less informative English portion of this trilingual book appears under the following title: Siyonn Sophearith, Pidan (Bitān) in Khmer Culture (Phnom Penh: Reyum, 2008).

3 For example, the Khmer sections of Roveda and Yem’s 2010 volume refer to these paintings as ប្រាក្ស, yet the English sections note the connection to Indic paṭa. Their book on Cambodian Buddhist paintings on cloth, incidentally, is a richly-described and lavishly-illustrated portrait of the genre, reproducing nearly 200 pieces. Vittorio Roveda and Sothon Yem, Preab Bot: Buddhist Painted Scrolls in Cambodia (Bangkok: River Books, 2010).
including Tibetan *thangka* and Korean *t’aenghwa* paintings on cloth. Victor Mair, in his classic study *Painting and Performance: Chinese Picture Recitation and Its Indian Genesis*, argues that South Asian traditions of using *paṭa* for sermons were imported to China alongside other Buddhist traditions. When and how *paṭa* paintings were brought to Cambodia remains unknown.

*Figures 1-2: Details of cloth painting #6, The Buddha teaches the five ascetics and enters parinibbāna, showing crease damage*

Although one could criticize the monolingual Khmer dictionary of the Buddhist Institute for giving some indigenous Mon-Khmer words false Indic etymologies, the case of the term *preah bot* may reflect a counterexample: a Sanskritic word with a suspect native etymology. The Buddhist Institute dictionary defines the term

*pueræ braḥ pat’* as ឃើញបត់* braḥ pat’, meaning “a painting, such as [a painting of] a buddha

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4 Skilling’s article, though focused on the Thai tradition, is also an excellent source for the study of Cambodian paintings on cloth. Peter Skilling, “Paṭa (Phra Bot): Buddhist Cloth Painting of Thailand,” in *Buddhist Legacies in Mainland Southeast Asia*, by François Lagirarde and Paritta Chalermmpow Koanantakool (Paris: École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 2006), 223–275.

image, which is painted on a foldable or rollable cloth sheet.”

When spelled ប្រាម ត្រី brah pat’, the term preah bot can be translated literally as a “folding” or “foldable” (pat’) Buddha image (brah). While this most likely represents a folk etymology for the Indic term pata, it is possible that this understanding of preah bot was historically influential in Cambodia. Indeed, while other paintings on cloth in the Buddhist world are typically rolled up when not in use, Cambodian preah bot are just as often folded as rolled, leaving a telltale grid pattern of creases behind. Most of the paintings in this exhibit show some damage from this process of folding and unfolding.

Buddhist paintings on glass have an even more obscure history. Although they appear to be more popular among Khmer communities in southern Vietnam, there is little evidence for Khmer paintings on glass in either Cambodia or southern Vietnam before the mid-twentieth century. These works are typically painted on the reverse side of the glass, a technique long used for religious icons in the West. The handmade paintings that are part of this exhibit exist alongside mass-produced paintings on glass imported from other parts of the Buddhist world that are currently popular for home altars in Cambodia. The four paintings on glass are all roughly 14” x 18” or 18” x 14”, depict a single scene, and may even be created by the same artist. In contrast, the paintings on cloth range in size from 41” x 26” to 81” x 88.5”, often comprise multiple scenes, and represent the work of a number of different artists. In addition to paint, the images on glass use reflective foil to achieve a glittering effect.

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6 ប្រធានាធិបត្រិក, រុក្កុសេសសម្រប, 5th ed. (ភ្នំពេញ: ប្រធានាធិបត្រិក, 1967), s.v. ប្រាម ត្រី.

_Framing the Sacred_ — 9
The primary functions of movable cloth and glass Buddhist paintings in Cambodia are twofold: to generate merit derived from their production, sponsorship, and dedication, and to demarcate sacred space. Most of the paintings in this exhibit include a short inscription. The inscriptions of the paintings on glass and a few of the paintings on cloth simply identify the scene from the Buddha’s biography. For most of the paintings on cloth, however, the inscription may name the sponsors, the dedicatees, the monastery to which the painting is being donated, and the aspirations of the sponsors. For example, some inscriptions include the dedicator, the dedicatee, and the final destination of the painting:

Figure 4: Detail of cloth painting #11, The Buddha is Born and Enters Nibbāna
The great merit [of sponsoring this banner] is offered to our [living] mother, Chea Im, and to the departed consciousness of our father, Hong Hao. [This banner] is for Ampil [Tamarind] Pagoda. [Sponsored by all of Chea Im and Hong Hao’s] sons and daughters, in a merit ceremony on the 13th day of [remainder of date illegible].

Other inscriptions include the aspirations of the sponsors:

Figure 5: Detail of cloth painting #10, King Suddhodana’s Illness

This Buddha image was sponsored by the community association of O Leav village for the continuation of the Buddhist teachings. May we all achieve the three treasures: the treasures of humans, of the gods, and of Nibbāna.

The merit attributed to sponsoring a cloth painting is confirmed by traditional Khmer ānīṣaṃsa texts, short homilies that enumerate the karmic benefits accrued by the performance of various meritorious acts. One such Khmer ānīṣaṃsa text from Surin province, Thailand, reads:

Venerables! This is the exposition of the benefits

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(phalānisamā) of the sponsor (anak kawsī) of a Buddha image that represents the Tathāgata: O great king, even if one person were to take dirt and fashion it into a Buddha image, that person would become a most exalted and excellent wealthy merchant; were a person to fashion it out of lead, that person would become an excellent deity (devatā); should it be fashioned out of silver, then an excellent great wheel-turning king (mahācakkavattin); should it be fashioned out of bronze, that person would be born into an excellent brahmin family; should it be fashioned out of stone, that person would become the excellent Lord Indra (indrādhira); should it be fashioned out of wood, that person would become the excellent king of a sovereign land; should one fashion a painted Buddha image (braḥ buddha ġur) as a preah bot [here spelled braḥ pad], that person would become an exalted and excellent great brahma deity (mahācakkabrahma); should it be fashioned out of gold, that person will indeed awaken as a Buddha. [emphasis added]8

It is perhaps surprising that the merit for producing preah bot is so elevated in the “three worlds” (trai bhūmi) cosmological scheme, second only to nibbāna itself among the boons listed in the excerpt above.9 In other words, only fashioning a Buddha out of gold and thereby becoming a Buddha would be a more exalted destination. Alas, the reason behind why the relatively inexpensive materials required for sponsoring a cloth painting are paired with such excellent karmic fruits is not explained by the ānisaṃsa text.

8 My unedited transcription and translation from a manuscript photographed by Mr. Cheymongkol Chalermsukjitsri, Surin province, Thailand. In the translation, I have regularized the spelling of Khmer and Indic terms appearing in italics.

9 For more on the trai bhūmi cosmology, see Frank E. Reynolds and Mani B. Reynolds, trans., Three Worlds According to King Ruang: A Thai Buddhist Cosmology (Berkeley: Center for South Asia Studies, University of California, 1982).
Figure 6: Small printed buddha image (top center) used for a temporary home altar when making offerings to monk. Ka Yeay village, Kompong Speu province, Cambodia, 2006.

Figure 7: Paintings on cloth (top right) used in a temporary hall erected for a memorial ceremony. The monks sit on an elevated platform, with offerings of flowers, incense, and candlelight before the painted buddha images. Ka Yeay village, Kompong Speu province, Cambodia, 2011.

The inscriptions on the paintings sometimes makes clear that the merit accrued is dedicated by a named person to his or her deceased relative. In other cases, the paintings may serve as a hamlong (បំលុង, paṃluṅ), an anonymous offering literally
“relinquished” to the monastic community in memory of someone who recently passed away. Whether in the form of named or anonymous offerings, paintings on cloth in particular are associated with funerary rites in Cambodia. Their use in death rituals highlights the second primary function of movable Buddhist paintings: the temporary demarcation of sacred space. Since Khmer funerals traditionally begin at the home of the deceased, the layperson’s residence needs to be transformed into a temporary temple before inviting monks to officiate the necessary rituals. This transformation may be as simple as setting up a small altar backed with a single glass painting of the Buddha, or as elaborate as erecting a pavilion outside the home that features a dozen or more paintings on cloth of the Buddha’s biography around a central altar. When the rituals are complete, the paintings are returned or donated to the local monastery.

The individual pieces in this exhibit display a wide variety of episodes from the Buddha’s biography, including his penultimate birth as Prince Vessantara. In addition, there is a single cloth painting that depicts key Buddhist teachings on suffering and death. Five of the eleven paintings on cloth are divided horizontally into two scenes. In some cases these scenes are related, while in others they depict chronologically distant events in the Buddha’s life. I have taken the liberty of providing simple descriptive titles to each painting. In addition to giving a short description of the scene depicted and translating the inscriptions, I have paired each painting to a popular Khmer liturgical poem or “Dharma song” (ធម៌បទ dharm pad) text to help bring the episodes to life.10

10 All translations are my own and most of them appear here for the first time. Two translations, “Formations Fade Away” and “Māyā’s Guidance for Gotamī,” previously appeared on my website/e-book, www.stirringandstilling.org. The translations presented here typically follow the syllabic structure, though rarely the rhyme scheme, of the Khmer originals. Indic terms are standardized to transliterated Pali when possible; Khmer personal names are phonetically transcribed.
1. *Types of suffering and the ages of man*

This large (80" x 53.5") painting is divided into two related panels by a rainbow. In the upper panel, the inscriptions, clockwise from top right, read: “The suffering of death, the suffering of old age, the suffering of birth, the suffering of illness, the suffering of cyclic existence.” The right side of the upper panel shows a man progressing through birth, old age, sickness, death, and rebirth, emphasizing Buddhist teachings on the omnipresence of suffering in its manifold forms. On the left side of the upper panel sits Yama (យមHជ Yamarāja), king of hell, surrounded by his horned henchmen. In popular Buddhist cosmology, the departed are summoned before Yama by his lackeys soon after death to be judged on the ethical character of their deeds. Yama, in turn, dispatches them to a suitable rebirth destination for their next life.

The lower panel depicts a similar theme: the process of aging and the inevitability of death. The main inscriptions in the lower panel, clockwise from bottom left, read, “1 month old, 7 years old, 15 years old, 20 years old, 50 years old, 60 years old, 70 years old, 80 years old, dead.” The viewer is presented with a couple who progresses together through birth, childhood, marriage, old age, and eventual death. The center of the lower panel shows an urn, a bloodied corpse, and a skeleton, perhaps a reference to the “meditations on the foul” (អសុភ%វ= asubhabhāvanā), in which the practitioner contemplates the states of human decomposition.¹¹ At the very bottom of the painting the inscription indicates the sponsors: “The laypeople belonging to Prei Khlong Pagoda sponsored this banner.”

¹¹ The prominence of more explicit depictions of asubhabhāvanā practices on *preah bot* is discussed in Roveda and Yem, *Preah Bot: Buddhist Painted Scrolls in Cambodia*, 92–99.
Figure 8: Types of suffering and the ages of man
A number of liturgical texts performed at Buddhist funerals in Cambodia are intended to aid reflection on suffering and death. “Formations Fade Away” (អនិច្សង្ anicca saṅkhāra), a twentieth-century composition, is one of the most popular of these texts:

**ANICČĀ SAṄKHĀRA** we are born
With bodily form that can’t last
We’ll never be free or get past
The shadow cast by suffering.

**ANATTĀ SAṄKHĀRA** all is void
All is devoid of essence
Fame, rank, even your parents
Nothing remains for you to keep.

All those who were born before
All you call your family
Your body too is empty
Listen to these words I intone.

In the silence of the forest
With none to trust you’ll be alone
With wild beasts who grunt and groan
There you’ll be thrown away too.

Your wealth the worst poverty
You can’t take anything with you
You’ll lie there like an old shoe
The body’s truly empty.

Your merit gone in your wake
They will come take your carcass
To the woods cloaked in darkness
You’ll lie useless; they’ll go home.

Thus beings are discarded
Bones, flesh, and blood thrown away

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Your body will soon decay
Even your name will be destroyed.

Contemplate this and be stirred
Don’t be deterred but instead
Seek refuge in what’s well-said
Hear this and tread the right course.

DĀNA SĪLA BHĀVANĀ
Practice this Dharma with force
Clear your heart of all remorse
Don’t do what’s coarse lazily.

Do deeds of body and mind
With perfect kindness to reach
All beings and make your speech
Match the well-preached words of the Buddha.¹²

2. Prince Vessantara giving away the white elephant

This medium-sized (46.5” × 36.25”) painting is one of two in this exhibit that narrate an episode from the Vessantara-Jātaka, the story of the penultimate life of the Buddha-to-be (bodhisatta) Sākyamuni. After the story of his final existence as Prince Siddhattha Gotama, the narrative of the ever-generous Prince Vessantara is the most important Buddhist narrative in the Theravāda world. The Pali version of the Vessantara Jātaka is divided into thirteen chapters (कण, kanda), though in Cambodia a fourteenth, the ānisamṣa chapter on the benefits of listening to the entire narrative, is sometimes added.¹³ This painting depicts an episode from the second chapter, “Hemavān,” in which Prince Vessantara gives away his kingdom's auspicious white elephant to eight brahmins from a drought-stricken neighboring kingdom.

¹² ជ័យ ឃុន, ឆ្នាំងសាកម៉េង (សម្រាប់, 2492), 84–85.
¹³ For an edition of the fourteenth chapter, see ឃុន ឃុន, យោគស៊ីម្មួសវិល សុំសាប់ រេស្សនី, vol. 14, 14 vols. (សុច្កា, 2509).
Figure 9: Prince Vessantara giving away the white elephant
As punishment for this treasonous act of generosity, the prince and his family are driven into exile in the Hemavān (Himālaya) mountains. The simple donative inscription reads: “Hemavān, the second chapter [of the Vessantara-jātaka]. [Sponsored by] the laywoman Pey Ea along with her children.”

The central action of this painting shows Prince Vessantara, astride his royal mount, pouring water onto the waiting hands of a white-clad brahmin below. This particular water libation episode is absent from the Pali version of the narratives in the Jātaka-attakathā.\(^\text{14}\) In vernacular Khmer versions, however, a variant of this episode can be found in texts such as Nhok Thaem’s popular edition of a homiletic version of the Vessantara inscribed on palm leaf:

Prince Vessantara, his heart pellucid in faith, having [decided to give] the gift of the royal pachyderm, descended from the neck of the auspicious jeweled elephant. He circumambulated the animal three times and inspected its body for any place that had not yet been adorned. Any part lacking ornaments he had completely decked out. He then instructed the brahmins to come forward. The prince grasped the jeweled elephant’s trunk, which comparable to a garland of silver flowers, and placed it on the brahmins’ hands. He then poured perfumed water from a gold vessel onto their palms, completing the gift of the auspicious jeweled elephant to the brahmins.\(^\text{15}\)

This painting differs slightly from Nhok Thaem’s edition in that the painting shows the Prince pouring water while he is still


astride the elephant rather than after having dismounted. Nevertheless, its inclusion of the libation rite reflects the importance of pouring water in Cambodian and indeed all Theravādin Buddhist rituals of giving.

3. Maddī in the forest

This painting illustrates a scene from the ninth chapter of the Vessantara-jātaka, “Maddī.” The emotional climax of the entire Vessantara-jātaka, this chapter follows the travails of the Prince’s wife Maddī, who faithfully follows her husband into the forests of the Hemavān mountains together with their two small children. One evening when Maddī is in the woods gathering fruit, Vessantara gives their two children away to the wicked brahmin Jūjaka in an act of extreme generosity. In order to prevent Maddī from interfering with Vessantara’s gift, three gods take the form of wild animals and block her path home from the forest. Startled by this strange apparition, she drops her basket.

This small (35” x 18.25”) painting depicts that very moment, complete with the relaxed poses of the divine felines, Maddī’s swooning surprise, and the spilt contents of the basket. The inscription indicates it was a pious laywoman who sponsored this depiction: “The laywoman Thieng Sothea, known as Thien, along with her daughter, Srey Leakkhena, sponsored [this depiction of] the Maddī chapter [from the Vessantara-jātaka].” Although it may be more typical for a complete set of paintings of the Vessantara-jātaka to be displayed, the ninth chapter is one of the most popular and frequently excerpted chapters in liturgical performance in Cambodia. Maddī’s bereavement from her homeland and her children is vividly evoked in Khmer Dharma songs such as “Maddī’s Lament”:

With the wane of day’s red rays
Stirring starts in every heart
Thunder, lightning and fierce winds
Might they too cause this anguish?

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Figure 10: Maddi in the forest

Framing the Sacred — 22

© Trent Walker 2013
Until the rooster’s hour comes
I listen to noisy doves
Other birds send out their call
The crane cries out piercingly.

Calling for mates, cicadas chirp
The duck grieves for a lost love
The heartsick forest gibbon
Pities himself in the tree.

Why me? why must I suffer?
Why must I be wrenched apart?
I worry for my children
And pine for a distant land.

Having wandered far away
How this anguish gnaws at me!
I cannot bear night nor day
With charnel woods for a home.16

4. The Buddha performs austerities and retreats to the Pālileyya forest

This large (71”x 44”) painting brings together two distinct scenes not typically presented in tandem. The upper panel—whose short inscription reads, “Performing austerities. Sponsored by grandmother Kong in Teuk Thla”— depicts a scene in which the bodhisatta, shortly before his awakening, practices extreme asceticism in the forest before recognizing the futility of such austerities. The bodhisatta sits in meditation at the foot of tree, his body wasted away by the rigors of fasting and other ascetic practices. To his left sits the god Indra plucking a lute. A mid-twentieth-century Khmer verse retelling of the Buddha’s life narrates this moment:

16 អាជីព សុវណ្ណ, ព្រួត្តិសាលាកើត និងវិភាគកើត (ភិព្យាសាខ្មែរ, ១៩៦៦), ៥៣.

Framing the Sacred — 23
Figure 11: The Buddha performs austerities and retreats to the Pālileyya forest

Framing the Sacred — 24

© Trent Walker 2013
One day Indra, Lord of the Gods
From Tāvatiṃsa did he, Thousand-Eyed, descend
With a magnificent triple-strung lute
To strum and sing for the Great Man.

At first he tuned one string too taut
And soon that cord plain snapped in twain
Another string, tuned lax, lacked a crisp twang
So he tightened the slack to retune it again.

The moderate way, neither too tight nor too loose
Silenced all to listen to the strains
Strung together in melodies extended or brief
The lute sounded sweetly in honed harmony.

After Indra had completely vanished away
The prince remained in careful contemplation
“To inflict austerities misses the mark
And I’ve yet to taste the true Dharma.

“Toils and trials cannot relinquish conceit
The crooked path leads to distant diversions and despairs
Just like the lute string Indra overstretched
Exertion without ease cannot be persevered.”

Once the prince has pondered thus
He set off to beg for alms in the village
Having nourished himself with food as is natural
His physical form soon regained its old shape.17

In other words, Indra’s music leads the future Buddha to
discover the “middle way” between hedonism and asceticism,
between laxity and severity. Soon after accepting food again,
Prince Siddhattha attains awakening under the Bodhi tree and
becomes the Buddha.

17 មន្ត្រី អ៊ូ ប្រុស សូត្រ និង ក្រុងក្រោយ (ែះែះ, n.d.), 32.
The lower panel, by contrast, presents an episode relatively late in the Buddha’s life, identified by the simple inscription, “[The Buddha] in the Pālileyya forest.” Dismayed by dissension in the monastic community, the Buddha retreats for the duration of the rainy season to the Pālileyya forest, where he is attended upon by an elephant, who offers him water and fruit every day. A monkey later offers honey to the Buddha, though out of elation it falls from a tree to a grisly end. The elephant also dies, out of grief when the Buddha departs at the end of three months. Both creatures are reborn in Tāvatīṃsa heaven as a result of their meritorious deeds. In Cambodian Buddhist art and liturgy, the Pālileyya episode is often included in lists of important events in the Buddha’s life. One of the most famous of these lists is the so-called “Eight Great Sites” (aṭṭhamabhātthāna), which emerge as a prominent theme in Indian Buddhist art of the Pāla period.18 The complete list, which includes the episode depicted in this painting as well as seven other paintings in the exhibit, is enumerated in the following Khmer Dharma song:

All the great sites, eight in number  
Evoke calmness for all beings  
First the garden, the peaceful woods  
With jeweled sal trees, where he was born.

Second the place where the Buddha  
Awoke under the Bodhi tree  
Third the place where the Supreme One  
Preached the Dharma called Dhammacakka.

And taught five monks, the Pañcavagga  
Who used to serve and attend him  
The Lord never forsook those friends  
From that fig tree they all set out.

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18 For an example of a piece of Pāla art depicting the Eight Great Sites that was discovered in Southeast Asia, see George Coedès, “Note sur une stèle indienne d’époque Pāla découverte à Ayudhya (Siam),” Artibus Asiae 22, no. 1/2 (1959): 9–14.
Fourth the place where the Buddha stayed
  In the deep woods of Pālileyya
  Where no men lived, only beasts like
  The elephant who served the Lord.

The fifth place is called the jeweled throne
  Where the Lord fought Nālāgiri
  People scattered out of the way
  And witnessed the Lord's victory.

The sixth where the omniscient Lord
  Once performed the twin miracle
  Defeating the heathen Nigranatha
  With famed splendor still unsurpassed.

Seventh where the Ten-Powered Lord
  Sat on the stone seat of Indra
  And there preached the Holy Dharma
  Which is called the Abhidhamma.

  Paying his debt to his mother
  To whom he was greatly in debt
  The eighth is where the Arahant
  Lay down under the two sal trees.

The time when the omniscient one
  The teacher entered nibbāna
The place where now gods and humans
  Bow in homage and reverence.

I bow down in humble worship
  Of the great places, eight in number
  May happiness always arise
  May pain, fault and sorrow be gone.  

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*Framing the Sacred — 27*

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5. The Buddha Defeating Māra under the Bodhi tree

This large (77” x 55.5”) painting depicts a single scene near the climax of the Buddha’s awakening. The inscription reads, “The laywoman Lim Lay-[remainder of name illegible] along with her sons. Buddhist era 2545 [2001-2002 AD]. The Defeat of Māra.” Māra, a high-ranking deity sometimes considered a personification of evil in Buddhist literature, constantly tempts the Buddha to abandon his quest for awakening. In this scene, the Buddha-to-be, sitting in meditation under the Bodhi tree just before his awakening, calls the earth goddess to be witness to his merit. The earth goddess wrings out her hair, flooding the armies of Māra as they recognize the superiority of the Buddha’s power.

While the earth goddess (known as nāṁ gāñbhīṉ ḍharaṇī នគង្កីងធណី in Khmer) is common in artistic depictions of this episode in Cambodia and Thailand, she is not always included in Khmer liturgical accounts of the Buddha’s awakening.20 The following Khmer Dharma song conveys many of the rich details included in the painting, with the notable exception that the Buddha simply calls the non-personified earth to be his witness instead. The excerpt below begins with the Buddha and Māra contesting the former’s right to sit on the seat of awakening.

“Right now a vajra throne
Rises up to
Me without contention.

“If you should think it’s yours
Māra, then come
Show me your alibi.”

Furious, he furrowed
His brow and cried,

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Figure 12: The Buddha defeating Māra under the bodhi tree
“My troops are my witness.”

The Lord said, “It’s not right
It’s not correct
To take your troops as proof.”

Then the prince took his hand
Out from his robes
And pointed to the earth.

“My perfections are complete.
I have only
The earth as my witness.”

The earth seemed to rise up
By confirming,
“I am the Lord’s witness.”

Then the Omniscient One
Thought back to when
He gave an elephant
To those eight brahmin priests
When the Victor
Was Prince Vessantara.

By the force of that gift
The elephant
Girimekhala fell.

King Māra was afraid
Shaking in fear
He raised his palms in praise.

In honor of the fund
Of all merits
He led his troops away.

_Framing the Sacred_ — 30

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The gods from all around
The universe
Strove to proclaim their praise.

Their shouts and cries echoed
They played drums, gongs
Bells, trumpets and conch shells.

They crowded all around
With hands ready
To offer oblations.21

6. The Buddha teaches the five ascetics and enters parinibbāna

This two-panel (75” x 43.5”) painting depicts two unrelated scenes, the Buddha’s first sermon and his passing away into nibbāna. The upper inscription simply reads, “[The Buddha] teaching the five ascetics.” After his awakening, the Buddha is at first reluctant to teach, thinking the Dharma he discovered is too subtle for others to grasp. A deity, Sahampati Brahmā, descends to implore Buddha to change his mind. The first to receive the Buddha’s teachings are the five ascetics with whom the Buddha practiced austerities in the forest before his awakening. Sahampati Brahmā’s beseeching words as well as the Buddha’s response are ritually reenacted in Cambodia each time a monk is invited to give a sermon.22 A layperson typically recites the following Dharma song:

Sahampati Brahmā
Having sung these verses
Bowed to the Buddha
Inviting him to teach.

21 ឈឹម ស៊ុម, ោ9តម្បតិ (ភ&'េ(ញ: សុមនសុត@ិ៍, 1940), 20–21.
22 For more on the textual origins of the ritual in a Thai context, see Peter Skilling, "Aradhana Tham: Invitation to Teach the Dharma," Manusya 4, no. 88 (2002).
Figure 13: The Buddha teaches the five ascetics and enters parinibbāna

Framing the Sacred — 32

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The Lord then agreed  
And showed his consent  
With perfect silence  
Imbued with compassion.

Thence the Lord arose  
And walked towards the Deer Park  
He strode still knowing  
Every step, one by one.

The five ascetics  
Joined the buddha-wheel first  
They drank the pure taste  
Of nibbāna’s nectar.

From that moment on  
The Lord taught the Dharma  
Forty-five years in all  
He did a buddha's work.

Never relenting  
Over all those long years  
His work gave blessings  
To all in the three worlds.

This is why right now  
We are filled with great joy  
Precious teacher, please  
Save us with the Dharma!

Rescue us here who  
Are stuck in delusion  
That we may yet find  
Wisdom right in this place!23

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_Framing the Sacred_ — 33
The lower panel depicts what is often considered the final episode in the Buddha’s life: his passing away. In this painting, we see the Buddha as he passes away into parinibbāna laying down between two sal trees and surrounded by his disciples. The inscription reads, “[The Buddha entering] parinibbāna. [By the painter] Sarat. The Venerable Lay Lap, along with [name illegible], sponsored [this painting]. Bakong Pagoda.” The scene of the Buddha’s parinibbāna is vividly captured in the following Dharma song:

The Lord Buddha, wisdom-filled
   At last entered nibbāna
   In a grove of great sal trees
   With followers all around.

   On the fifteenth waxing day
     Of the month of Visākha
     Fifth cycle of the snake year
     Tuesday morning in bright sun.

Monks young and old all were there,
   Save the precious Arahant
   Together they cried and wailed
   In lament for the Victor.

Some recalled words of guidance
   Others recalled the alms rounds
   Still more recalled sermons preached
   No one could but feel sorrow.

The Sālavan woods echoed
   With thunder and howling roars
   Pure sal blossoms fell like rain
   Blessing the Lord of the World.²⁴

²⁴ ឈុយ ឈុុ, ពូវុទ្ធរឿសុុំស្រែ, ធម្មិត, 35.
This small (41” x 26”’) painting depicts two scenes blended into one. The upper scene takes place in the Tāvatimsa Heaven and the lower scene depicts a staircase that connects with the Earth at Saṅkassa. Both scenes are part of one of most frequently-depicted episodes in the Buddha’s biography. For three months, the Buddha teaches the Abhidhamma to his late mother and other denizens of Tāvatimsa Heaven. Each morning, he descends from Tāvatimsa back to earth to gather alms. On his descent down to Saṅkassa, he is flanked by the powerful deities Indra on his right and Brahmā on his left. A poem by the contemporary Khmer Buddhist teacher But Savong delineating the thirty characteristics of all buddhas includes these scenes:

Nineteen: there in Tāvatimsa  
To repay debts to his mother  
He preached the Abhidhamma  
Which granted her eternal bliss.

Twenty: he returned from heaven  
Descending down to Saṅkassa  
That spot which all came to worship  
As the Acalacetiya.25

Before the twentieth century, the narrative of the Buddha’s repaying his debt of his mother was transmitted through bilingual Pali-Khmer texts such as the Mātuguṇa sūtr, the “Discourse on the Debt to Mothers,” which focused on Buddha’s teachings in Tāvatimsa. In contemporary Cambodia, however, the theme of repaying one’s filial debts is centered not on the biography of the Buddha but on one’s own mother. The following Dharma song, “Asking for Parents’ Forgiveness,” focuses on enumerating the debt owed to our own mothers for carrying us in their wombs and repaying this debt through a gift of the sacred teaching:

25 ប៊ុតវង្ដុទ្ 23.  

Framing the Sacred — 35
Figure 14: Teaching the Abhidhamma and descending from Tāvatiṃsa

Framing the Sacred — 36

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I now ask your forgiveness
For all I have done to you
And for all my careless words
O mother, please forgive me!

My debt to you is immense
I offer my body and speech
And bow in respect to you
O mother, please forgive me!

I bow down in respect to you
Hands raised in prayer, head lowered
To touch your feet, O mother
Please forgive me for my sins!

When I was inside your womb
I put you through constant pain
Walking, standing, or sitting
And made you eat simple food.

Salty, spicy, hot, or cold
These you eschewed for my sake
You suppressed your desires
To protect me in your womb.

This toil lasted for ten months
The pain soaked through your body
Without a moment’s relief
To bring you joy, ease, or peace.

I offer you the merit
That may arise from this gift
Of the Teaching, so lucid
Receive, mother, and rejoice.

I dedicate this merit
To my mother and father
May the Three Treasures be theirs
And may they be free from pain.²⁶

²⁶ ដុំ ស្លុក និង ស្លុកសង្ឃឹម បង្ហាញឃុំ បស្តី (ឆ្នាំ១៩៥៧), ៦២–៦៣.
8. The Buddha converts his family and wife

This two-panel (74” x 38.25”) painting depicted two sequential episodes in the Buddha’s life. In the upper panel, the inscription reads, “The Buddha returns to defeat [i.e. convert] his relatives.” The Buddha’s father, King Suddhodana, sends out his ministers to invite the Buddha to visit his homeland in Kapalivastu for the first time since his awakening. Each delegation dispatched by the king, however, upon seeing the Buddha, is stunned by his presence, asks for monastic ordination, and fails to return to the king. Eventually, a messenger named Udāyī succeeds in remembering the king’s wish. The following excerpt from a verse narrative of the Buddha’s biography recounts the episode depicted in the painting, the miracle of the *pokkharavassa*, a “lotus rain” in which only those desiring to be rained on get wet:

Udāyī said that the great king
Pined for his son for many years
Still today the dear monarch waits
Having invited him back home.

The Teacher accepted the king’s wish
And led his twenty thousand monks
One *yojana* each day they walked
With Udāyī always ahead.

Udāyī brought alms from the king
For the Teacher, the Three-World Lord
Until they arrived in the city
After sixty days of travel.

He stayed at Nigrodha temple
Built by his kin in offering
There he displayed miracles
Defeating the pride of his clan.
Figure 15: The Buddha converts his family and wife
He conjured a drizzle in which
Only the rain-wanting got wet
His kith and kin marveled at this
And humbly bowed down to their knees.27

The lower panel continues the same narrative seen in the upper panel. The inscription reads, “The Buddha teaching [his former wife Yasodharā] Bimbā.” After his and his clan’s conversion, King Suddhodana sends for Yasodharā Bimbā, the Buddha’s wife whom he abandoned in his search for awakening. Yasodharā Bimbā, beset with grief, is at first reluctant to meet the man who forsook her and their son Rāhula. One of her servants pleads with her and eventually convinces Yasodharā Bimbā to meet with the Buddha. In tears, she grasps the Buddha’s feet and receives teachings from him. She eventually ordains as a nun and achieves nibbāna. The following Dharma song relates the intimate encounter between Yasodharā Bimbā and her servant the precedes the emotional meeting between the Buddha and his former wife as seen in the painting:

“O Bimbā! Show me your face
Whence comes this endless sorrow?
Recall all of your virtue
And sincerely meet the Prince.

“The All-Knower has returned
Why persist in your sorrow?
Should he decide to go back
How then would your wish come true?”

When the bright light of dawn came
Bimbā walked out gracefully
To approach the Blessed One
And bowed low in front of him.

27 ៀមៀវ នន្ ុទ្្បវតិ 62–63.

Framing the Sacred — 40

© Trent Walker 2013
Though her sorrow had cleared away
Teardrops soon poured down her face
With weeps and wails in her heart
The jilted princess cried on.28

9. Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī’s offering of the triple robe

This large (67” x 57.5”) painting recounts a rarely-depicted episode from the Buddha’s life. The upper inscription gives the name of the donors, their intention, and the artisan: “Cheang Chheng and Mrs. Chheng Ngao sponsored this painting for the continuation of the sacred teachings [i.e. the Buddhist religion]. [By] the painter Yaem Siek. Yaem [signature].” The lower portion identifies the date and destination of the painting, as well as the scene depicted: “A.D. 1981. [Mahāpajā]patī Gotamī makes an offering of the triple robe [to the Buddha]. [Name illegible] Pagoda.”

In this episode, the Buddha’s stepmother, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, weaves a special robe for her stepson and offers it to him. The Buddha refuses, insisting it be offered to the monastic community as a whole. This episode is almost entirely absent from the Cambodian liturgical tradition. The episode serves, however, as an important link between two better-known roles of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī: her care for the Buddha after his mother dies shortly after his birth, and her successful petitioning of the Buddha to form a community of nuns. After the Buddha renounces worldly existence and eventually attains awakening, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī can no longer care for the Buddha as her son. She becomes a devoted convert, but the episode shown here shows how her attachment to her stepson remains. Eventually, she seeks her own liberation and repeatedly asks the Buddha to allow women to ordain until he finally relents.

28 ចិន សុីន, ប្រភេទព្រះគុណសម្រាប់ (សាលាក់ស្ម្, 1998), 30.

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Figure 16: Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī’s offering of the triple robe
While the particular narrative of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī’s gift of the triple robe does not surface in Khmer liturgical texts, her motherly role is extolled in texts that describe the bodhisatta’s early life. One such text is the following Dharma song, which relates the Buddha’s dying mother’s guidance for her younger sister Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī:

Little sister Gotamī!
Hold to these words of guidance
I ask you now to receive
Little sister, forgive me.

Since giving birth to my son
Only seven days have passed
My life withers to nothing
As I pass on to the next world.

What can I do, when we are
Born only to be destroyed?
All humans and animals
Die and decay by nature.

Never lasting, never sure
Life is as the Pali phrase
ANICCAṂ DUKKHAM ANATTĀ
Little darling, you must know.

Now as for me, dear sister
Don’t worry, for death is sure;
No more can I hold my son
The refuge of gods and men.

You who pity your sister,
You, lovely girl, that is why
I ask you to hug and hold
This motherless child of mine.
Nurse him and bathe his body
Attend to him day and night
Care for him like no other
O my golden girl, don’t stop!29

10. King Suddhodana’s illness

This large (81” x 88.5”) painting depicts the culmination of the Buddha’s relationship with his father, King Suddhodana. In this episode, the Buddha, hearing of his father’s illness, comes to attend to him on his deathbed. The Buddha praises the king for his spiritual attainments and he passes away peacefully. The two-part inscription not only identifies the episode and the artisan, but also outlines the aspirations of the donors. The upper inscription reads, “King Suddhodana, the father of the Buddha, falls ill. [By] the painter Duk Nhep.” The lower inscription reads, “This Buddha image was sponsored by the community association of O Leav village for the continuation of the Buddhist teachings. May we all achieve the three treasures: the treasures of humans, of the gods, and of Nibbāna."

Although this scene is found in Khmer temple wall paintings, it is rare in liturgical texts. One mid-twentieth century poem narrates this episode. The opening stanzas set the scene, including the presence of King Suddhodana’s monastic relatives at his deathbed, including Ānanda, Nanda, Rāhula, and the Buddha himself. The closing stanzas, beginning with the last part of a sermon the Buddha delivers to his father in his dying moments, read:

“This form isn’t yours
No part will linger on
Without an essence
It’s not worth clinging to.”

29 Ibid., 23.
Figure 17: King Suddhodana’s Illness

Figure 18: King Suddhodana’s Illness (detail)

Framing the Sacred — 45

© Trent Walker 2013
The king listened well
And let go of the heaps
He achieved the fruit
Of deathless arhatship.

Then the Wise One spoke
These inspired remarks
Saying, “Lord of Death
Who dares to end all life!

“Allow my father
To pass away just like this
Not fearing your might
Without a trace of shame.

“Come snatch up his soul
My father’s gone away
He can’t see your face
This power’s to be feared!”

Among the gathered
Monastics, royal kin
And ministers there
Not one was still afraid.30

11. The Buddha is born and enters parinibbāna

This two-panel (76.5” x 57.75”) painting depicts two unrelated scenes, the Buddha’s birth and his passing away into parinibbāna. The upper panel inscription gives the date the Buddha’s birth is believed to have taken place: “The Buddha is born, on Friday, the full moon day of the month of Visākha, the year of the dog, 80 years before the Buddhist Era.” In this episode, Siddhattha’s mother is walking with her attendants in the gardens at Lumbini when she stops to lean against the branch of a sal tree. In that moment, the bodhisatta is born

30 ឯកញឹមបជុំតលក (អ៊ុយ: គិមេសង, 1952), 32.
painlessly from his mother's side, takes seven steps, and declares that this is his final birth. The following Dharma song describes one variation of the bodhisatta’s first words:

Just born, he rose to his feet  
He walked forward seven steps  
Standing still he then declared  
“I alone am the eldest.

“I am beyond the three worlds  
No one is equal to me  
This birth is my final birth  
I will ferry all beings

“Across to the peaceful shore  
By explaining the teachings  
So all can reach nibbāna  
Blissful and free from all pain.”

Between the two panels, a donative inscription reads: The great merit [of sponsoring this banner] is offered to our [living] mother, Chea Im, and to the departed consciousness of our father, Hong Hao. [This banner] is for Ampil [Tamarind] Pagoda. [Sponsored by all of Chea Im and Hong Hao’s] sons and daughters, in a merit ceremony on the 13th day of [remainder of date illegible]. The lower panel shows the same scene as the lower panel of cloth painting #6, “The Buddha teaches the five ascetics and enters parinibbāna.” The lower inscription again gives the date of this Buddha’s final day: The Buddha entering parinibbāna on Tuesday, the full moon day of the month of Visākha, the year of the monkey.

31 ជិះ ះអុត, បូជ្ជុំយៃកស្រប. 11.

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The four scenes depicted in the paintings on glass are also depicted on cloth. Because of this repetition, it is not necessary to provide more than short descriptions of these four paintings.
Figure 20: The Buddha is born

Figure 21: The Buddha preaches
For detailed descriptions of the scenes depicted, please refer to the description of the cloth painting listed in the short description for each glass painting.

1. *The Buddha is born*

This 14” x 18” painting depicts the episode in which the Buddha-to-be is born painlessly from his mother's side, takes seven steps, and declares that this will be his final birth. For more details, see the upper panel of cloth painting #11, “The Buddha is born and enters parinibbāna.” The inscriptions reads, “[The Buddha-to-be] is born.”

2. *The Buddha preaches*

This 18” x 14” painting depicts the Buddha, surrounded by gods, preaching on a lotus throne. For more details, see the upper panel of cloth painting #6, “The Buddha teaches the five ascetics and enters parinibbāna.” The inscription reads, “The Lord [Buddha] preaches.”

3. *The Buddha preaches to his mother*

This 18” x 14” painting depicts the Buddha teaching the Abhidhamma to his late mother and other gods in Tāvatīṃsa Heaven. For more details, see cloth painting #7, “Teaching the Abhidhamma and the Descent form Tāvatīṃsa.” The inscription reads, “[The Buddha] preaches to his mother.”

4. *The Buddha preaches to his wife*

This 14” x 18” painting depicts the episode in which the Buddha goes to meet his former wife, who encourages their son Rāhula to ask for his inheritance from the Buddha. For more details, see the lower panel of cloth painting #8, “The Buddha converts his family and wife.” The inscription reads, “[The Buddha] preaches to [Yasodharā] Bimbā.”

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Figure 22: The Buddha preaches to his mother

Figure 25: The Buddha preaches to his wife
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