

VAJRADHĀTVĪŚVARĪ AND VAIROCANA: MIRROR TANTRIC IMAGES IN 10th-CENTURY CAMBODIA

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ABSTRACT—This article explores a collection of ten-armed, five-headed figures featured in 10th-century Khmer Buddhist miniature shrines. While traditionally identified as representations of Prajñāpāramitā, the female deity embodying “the Perfection of Wisdom”, this article puts forth a new interpretation, suggesting these images depict the Khmer iteration of two dual tantric Buddhist deities, Vairocana and Vajradhātvīśvarī, linked to the *Sarvatathāgata-tattvasaṅgrahaṇāmamahāyāṇasūtra* (STTS). The key insight for this hypothesis stems from an examination of a newly identified shrine located in the Battambang National Museum featuring mirrored male and female figures, prompting a reconsideration of their traditional identification. The link to the mentioned STTS text provides an explanatory framework for the unique iconographic features of these images.

KEYWORDS: Ancient Cambodia; Buddhist Iconography; Khmer Tantric Deities; *Sarvatathāgata-tattvasaṅgrahaṇāmamahāyāṇasūtra* (STTS); Vairocana and Vajradhātvīśvarī

Buddhist Tantric Trends in 10th-Century Cambodia

The 10th century in the Khmer empire witnessed a notable surge in Buddhist tantric practices, well-documented through scholarly investigations. For instance, key tantric texts, such as the *Karandavyūhasūtra*, the *Mahāvairocanasūtra*, and the *Compendium of the Truth of All the Tathāgatas* or the *Sarvatathāgata-tattvasaṅgrahaṇāmamahāyāṇasūtra*, abbreviated as STTS, emerged during this period and were commented on by Hiram Woodward (2007; 2015) and Peter Sharrock (2013). Traditional Mahayana scriptures, including the *Large Prajñāpāramitā Sutra* and the *Madhyāntavibhāgāśāstra*, were also referenced in inscriptions (Cœdès 1954).

The era prominently featured representations of buddhas and bodhisattvas such as Lokeśvara, Vajrapāṇi, and Prajñāpāramitā. Noteworthy Buddhist temples like Bat Cum and Prasat Phnom Trap provided insights, with Bat Cum displaying tantric inscriptions (K. 266–8) and Prasat Phnom Trap featuring reliefs of Buddhist deities (Cœdès 1908b; Woodward 2015). Miniature shrines from Banteay Meanchey province and the Khorat Plateau, along with a Buddhist hermitage with a stone inscription (K. 290; Cœdès 1908a), underscored the prevalence of monks and hermits in the region.

My present investigation delves into the significance of multi-headed deities, focusing first on the 968 CE inscription of Wat Sithor (K. 111; Cœdès 1937–66: VI). This inscription, detailing Buddhist

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FIGURE 1: Female deity (Vajradhātīśvari?), Kbal Sre Yeay Yin, Phnom Srok, Cambodia, late 10th c., National Museum Cambodia, Phnom Penh, H.: 187 cm, sandstone, inv. no. Ga 1735 © Pia Conti



FIGURE 2: Male deity (five-headed Vairocana?), Kbal Sre Yeay Yin, Phnom Srok, Cambodia, late 10th c., Musée Guimet, Paris, H.: 230 cm, sandstone, inv. no. MG 17487 © Pia Conti

scriptures introduced by Kīrtipāṇḍita, a high official in Jayavarman V's administration (968–1001), includes the STTS. This tantric text serves as a pivotal source inspiring depictions of five-headed and ten-armed figures, a theme explored in-depth below.

Male or Female Deities?

A brief review of the two images presented as **FIGURE 1** and **FIGURE 2** reveals a depiction of a female and a male five-headed, ten-armed, crowned

deity standing in a tri-lobed niche surrounded by flowers. These images embellish the exterior of two four-sided Buddhist shrines, known as *caitya* in the literature, or miniature tower shrines, originating from Kbal Sre Yeay Yin in Banteay Meanchey province, Cambodia. While both figures have traditionally been identified as representing Prajñāpāramitā, the female deity embodying “the Perfection of Wisdom” and often referred to as the “mother of buddhas”—a significant principle in Mahayana Buddhism—this conventional

attribution prompts a re-evaluation of the interpretation.

The image depicted in **FIGURE 2** is distinctly male, attired in a monk's robe (Baptiste & Zéphir 2008: 166), yet scholars consistently overlooked this detail.² Upon closer examination of its upper body, one observes that the line delineating the upper robe has been deliberately scratched out. It appears that the act of depicting a five-headed tantric figure adorned in a monk's robe (the fifth head also intentionally chiselled out) caused discomfort to someone, possibly a devotee. This discomfort is evident in their attempt to erase the hem of the robe. This act of vandalism diminishes the clarity of the image wearing a monk's robe, casting doubt on whether it truly represents a buddha.

Such an act of destruction may be motivated by the belief that a depiction of a buddha should not feature five heads. Alternatively, if it was a reaction from followers of Śaivism, it might suggest that only a representation of Sadāśiva, one of the highest forms of Lord Śiva, is permissible with five heads, not a buddha. Sadāśiva holds a central role as the principal deity in dualistic Śaivism, historically revered in ancient Cambodia. His five heads symbolize distinct tantric revelations or *āgamas*. It is plausible that his five-headed form could have influenced the imagery within Buddhism.

An alternative rationale for the perplexity surrounding the misidentifi-

cation of what I interpret as a multi-headed buddha may stem from the presence of a different representation on the opposite side. On this opposing side, a more conventional Khmer buddha image, characterized by a single head, sits cross-legged in meditation, protected by a multi-headed *nāga* [**FIGURE 3**]. Instances of two buddhas depicted on similar shrines or miniature shrines are infrequent, though exceptions exist.³ I will revisit this observation later, addressing the unique juxtaposition of two distinct buddha representations—a traditional *nāga*-buddha and a tantric buddha manifestation with multiple arms and heads—both featured on the shrine now housed in the Musée Guimet and propose a plausible explanation.

Miniature Shrines as Devices for Devotional Meditation and Transformation?

The shrines originating from Kbal Sre Yeay Yin on Phnom Srok stand as miniature stone monuments, barely exceeding two meters in height. Comprising various elements meticulously arranged to form a sacred space, these structures differ from conventional boundary stones that delineate sacred sites. Rather, I suggest that these shrines were designed as aids for meditation, guiding devotees in invoking the deities depicted on them into their hearts.

² For the identification as Prajñāpāramitā, see *inter alia* Finot (1925: 252–253), Lobo (1997: 244), and Woodward (2015: 242). Multzer O'Naughten (2016: 38) points out a problem with the identification of the male figure as Prajñāpāramitā but does not offer any further clarification.

³ One of the exceptions can be seen on the stele BBK.0071 from the Battambang National Museum which features a seated *nāga*-buddha and a standing buddha with the double gesture of argumentation. Also, the stele hailing from Khum Prei, Angkor, now in the Angkor National Museum, features two similar buddhas. For an image, see Woodward 2015: 229.



FIGURE 3: Buddha (Śākyamuni?) on the nāga, Kbal Sre Yeay Yin, Phnom Srok, Cambodia, now in Musée Guimet (cf. FIG. 2) © Pia Conti

Contrary to boundary stones, which mark physical borders, the shrine of Kbal Sre Yeay Yin may have served as conduits for a profound spiritual connection. The intention might have been for devotees to identify with the spiritual qualities of the displayed deities, essentially transforming themselves into embodiments of these divine entities. This transformative process, known as *devatāyoga*, involves the devotee selecting a “chosen” or “cherished deity”.

Structured into three distinct parts—a pedestal, a band adorned with displayed images, and a mostly empty superstructure

embellished with lotus flower bands—these shrines hold symbolic significance. According to Wibke Lobo (1997: 242), interpreting this tripartite structure reveals a profound symbolism. The stylized lotus at the object’s tip symbolizes *nirvāṇa*, representing the transcendent and is devoid of specific representation. The middle section, adorned with depictions of buddhas and bodhisattvas, is suggestive of *samsāra*, where individuals amid life’s struggles find a path to access *nirvāṇa* in the form of a deity.

Engaging in the visualization process of a deity becomes an expedient means for devotees to embody the qualities and attributes of these divine entities. The square pedestal at the base of the shrine symbolizes the material world or *samsāra*, where individuals labor in their quest for enlightenment. By contemplating this representation of the macrocosm, devotees are guided to connect with the process of liberation, thus enriching their spiritual journey.

Iconography and Context of Four-Faced Shrines

The figures at the center of this article, featuring multiple heads and arms, are all depicted on four-faced shrines which were set up around 989 CE (Baptiste & Zéphir 2008: 183–185). There are very few known freestanding images from this time of multi-armed deities made in stone.⁴ This could be

⁴ One exception is a female figure with sixteen heads and six arms in the Musée Guimet whose identity has until now been a mystery (Baptiste & Zéphir 2008: 246). There are, however, more examples of multi-armed and multi-headed bronze images of Lokeśvara, discussed by Green (2014) and Piriya (2012: 292), from the 10th century, and there are later, 11th and

because the images have an entirely different function from freestanding images which can be individually worshipped and are usually housed in a temple or a shrine. The significance of these figures appears to derive from their association with other deities, forming a *mandala*, that is, a circle of deities that requires a distinct interpretation. Given that the figures under discussion are always presented alongside others that explicitly contextualize the STTS, I will interpret them within this framework.

The stone miniature shrines under discussion here generally feature four standing images of buddhas or bodhisattvas facing the cardinal directions. These monuments are quite unique to ancient Cambodia. Their closest counterparts in South Asia are the Licchavi shrines of the Kathmandu Valley, produced in the 6th to 8th centuries (Gutschow & Gellner 1997: 175–178). Whereas in Nepal, the principal buddhas or bodhisattvas are sitting or standing, in 10th-century Cambodia, they typically stand, except for representations of a buddha sitting on the *nāga* [FIG. 3].

Most four-faced shrines hail from the northwestern region of Cambodia, namely from Ta Muan near today's Thai border, from Thma Puok, from Kbal Sre Yeay Yin, and the newly identified one from Prasat Samre Namtaov (Prasat

12th century, representations of multi-headed and multi-armed Heruka and Prajñāpāramitā. More precisely, there are about ten twenty-two-armed and eleven-headed bronzes of Prajñāpāramitā, mirroring the eleven-headed Lokeśvara, known to date from that later period. For images of the eleven-headed Prajñāpāramitā, see *inter alia*, Piriya (2012: 295), Chemburkar (2022: fig. 27), and Kim (2022: 178–179).

Nam Tau?),⁵ also on Phnom Srok. The miniature monuments seem thus essentially localized in time and space.

Two of the shrines discussed in this article [FIGS 1–3] hail from a group of four found originally at Kbal Sre Yeay Yin, Phnom Srok (IK. 758). The four were briefly discussed by Louis Finot in an article on “Lokeśvara en Indochine” (1925). There, he named the objects *caitya* for lack of a better word (*ibid.*: 251).⁶ These ornamented shrines were later transferred to various museums such as the Musée Guimet in Paris, the National Museum of Cambodia in Phnom Penh, and the Angkor National Museum in Siem Reap.

According to the archive photos taken in the 1920s, the shrines seem to have been arranged in pairs, cordoning off a sacred space, like a *sīmā* or demarcating stone [e.g., FIGURE 4]. However, it is essential to note that the appearance of potentially enclosing a sacred space in the photographs may be wrong and influenced by the angle and method of photography. Currently, there are no reported foundations of temples or monasteries at or near the site and further information can only be obtained through excavation. This absence of archeological information seems to suggest that these structures did not function as *sīmā* but as protective monuments, and possibly as visualization aids for *devatāyoga*, as suggested by

⁵ Prasat Nam Tau, perhaps an alternative spelling for Prasat Samre Namtaov, can be located in the vicinity of Kbal Srei Yeay Yin. This stele has never been published as far as I am aware.

⁶ Some steles were partly discussed in Lobo (1997: 59), Baptiste & Zéphir (2008: 183) and, recently and more extensively, in Woodward (2015) and Multzer O'Naughten (2016).



FIGURE 4: Two shrines at Kbal Sre Yeay Yin, Phnom Srok (IK. 758) *in situ*
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another similar shrine and associated inscription found on a nearby site at Thma Puok.

The Inscribed Shrine of Thma Puok

The inscribed shrine from Thma Puok was used by Finot to explain the findings of Kbal Sre Yeay Yin. The two sites are only a few kilometers apart. The monument from Thma Puok depicts three four-armed female figures displayed in niches on three sides [FIGURES 5a-c] and a male Lokeśvara displayed on the fourth side [FIG. 5d]. In the upper registers in small niches, we find sitting images in meditation. On the Thma Puok shrine the female images are clearly representations of Prajñāpāramitā, represented

with four arms and hands, holding the common attributes of a book, a rosary, a lotus, and a flask (Bhattacharyya: 1968, *sādhana* 156).

The Thma Puok shrine is distinct from those coming from Kbal Sre Yeay Yin. It is unique and looks more like *un édifice en réduction*, a sort of tapering temple building with four niches above the main image. It is conceivable that the upper levels of these ornamented monuments suggest the heavenly realms in which the bodhisattvas appear to help guide humans in the earthly sphere. The shrine from Thma Puok holds significant value, not only for its aesthetic appeal but also for providing insights into the function of similar sacred objects. Additionally, its pedestal is adorned with a long and evocative inscription on the four faces.

The inscription of Thma Puok K. 225 has been written in Sanskrit in the name of a yogin called Padmavairocana who has erected the shrine and images of the “mother of the jinas”, of Indra, of Maitreya, of Lokeśvara and of Vajrin (Vajrapāṇi) in the year 989 CE (911 *saka*). The holy man, who has arrived near his deliverance from existence, has set up the images in the four cardinal directions, as well as “in the mind of the people who suffer from grief and in the happy hearts of good people”. This verse is significant because it suggests that the shrine functions as a meditation aid for devotees who engage in *devatāyoga*. By helping to erect the images in the mind and heart of the people who seek deliverance the monument can be read as an expedient means to liberation.

The inscription also reveals that Padmavairocana had set up a temple



FIGURES 5a-d: Shrine featuring three Prajñāpāramitās (a-c), four-armed with attributes, and a four-armed Lokeśvara (d), Thma Puok, Phnom Srok, Cambodia, late 10th c., National Museum Battambang, H.: approx. 130 cm, sandstone, inv. no. BBK 0064, with inscription K. 225 on the pedestal © Wibke Lobo

dedicated to a female deity (most likely Prajñāpāramitā) who seems to be the sage's favorite Buddhist deity. The inscription further states that a female and a male temple servant, as well as an elephant, are given to the deity for the foundation's upkeep. In its opening stanzas, the inscription invokes the Buddha, Prajñāpāramitā, Lokeśvara, Vajrin, and Maitreya. I give here my abridged version of the first five stanzas translated by George Cœdès in French (K. 225; 1937–66: III, 68–69):

I. May he who is unique, divide himself into several [entities] to satisfy the desire of his followers, just as the moon's reflection in several ponds, may the Buddha protect you!

II. May Prajñāpāramitā, the virtuous mother of the Jinas, even of those who are not yet born, protect you from evil, you who are the best of men!

III. I honor Lokeśvara with devotion [...] elevated like Amitābha.

IV. Victory belongs to Vajrin [...] circle of the sun.

V. Honor to Arya Maitreya whose compassion, joy, indifference, patience, and other qualities [...]

Though the opening verses honor several deities, the adorned shrine itself portrays only two clearly, viz. Prajñāpāramitā and Lokeśvara. As

described earlier, Prajñāpāramitā is represented three times and Lokeśvara just once. Finot (1925: 261) suggested that the absence of other deities on the Thma Puok shrine implied their possible representation on different structures, yet no such objects have been discovered nearby. Importantly, Finot utilized the listed deities to tentatively identify the figures depicted in the Kbal Sre Yeay Yin set [FIGS 1-4]. This attempt seems to be the primary reason why the multi-headed male deity observed on one of the shrines [FIG. 2] was subsequently and uniquely associated with Prajñāpāramitā, despite a lack of compelling evidence beyond her written mention in the adjacent Thma Puok inscription.

On the Thma Puok shrine, Prajñāpāramitā is represented as one-headed and four-armed with the eponymous book in her upper left hand. Her representation is therefore significantly different from the female images found in Kbal Sre Yeay Yin which do not hold books in their hands. This dissimilarity prompts the question of whether the female deity depicted on one of the Kbal Sre Yeay Yin shrines is truly Prajñāpāramitā, as Finot suggested, or possibly another closely related Buddhist deity.

The 10th-century Khmer Buddhist inscriptions offer limited assistance in addressing this problem since they make no mention of any female deity apart from Prajñāpāramitā. Without inscriptional support, identifying the deities becomes a challenging task, requiring a methodical approach to gather circumstantial evidence. In the following discussion, I contend that the most probable candidate is a tantric incarnation of Prajñāpāramitā known as

Vajradhātviśvari. The rationale behind this assertion involves several steps, acknowledging that certain questions remain unanswered.⁷ However, a crucial element supporting this identification is a newly identified shrine in Battambang.

The Shrine of Prasat Samre Namtaov

On a recent visit to the Battambang National Museum, I saw a shrine said to come from Prasat Samre Namtaov which shows two five-headed, ten-armed figures, on opposite sides, one male and one female, linked by a Lokeśvara in the center [FIGURES 6 a-c]. As FIGURE 6a clearly shows the image is female with a pleated robe and a flap in front, similar to the sarong clothing seen on FIGURE 1. She has ten well defined arms and hands and five chiselled-out heads. The figure on the right [FIG. 6c] shows a five-headed and ten-armed male deity in a monk's dress which is like the garment seen in FIGURE 2. The image is missing two of its heads.

The ornamented shrine, while incomplete, distinctly reveals the Khmer conceptualization of a ten-armed buddha and a ten-armed female deity. Positioned on the same monument facing each other, it is not possible to

⁷ One unresolved issue lies in the diversity of representations on the four shrines from Kbal Srei Yeay Yin. Among these are a male jina with five heads (potentially Vairocana?), a five-headed and ten-armed female deity (possibly Vajradhātviśvari?), a depiction of a female deity with five heads but only four arms, and a stele featuring a three-headed female deity alongside a one-headed female deity (presumably Prajñāpāramitā?). Each of these depictions merits individual scrutiny to gain a more nuanced understanding of their symbolic significance. For visual references of these figures, refer to Multzer O'Naughten 2016: figs 4-7.



FIGURES 6a-c: Shrine possibly featuring Vajradhātviśvarī (a), Lokeśvara (b), and Vairocana (c), Prasat Samre Namtaov, Phnom Srok, Cambodia, late 10th c., National Museum Battambang, H.: approx. 200 cm, sandstone, inv. no. B54 (old) or BBK 0158 (new) © Pia Conti

categorize both figures as female. Their positioning indicates a deliberate mirroring.

The presentation of mirror images on the same structure suggests that both female and male elements are essential for attaining enlightenment. The concept of the union of a male and female deity is a foundational aspect defining many strands of tantric doctrine. However, in the absence of inscriptions, identifying these two images raises questions. What do they represent and how can we interpret the multiplicity of limbs? Could these figures serve as an allegory for enlightenment proposed by a specific text or

tantric environment? Further insight may be gleaned from the STTS tantric scripture.

Quincunx of Buddhas and the STTS

As discussed above, the STTS—which introduces a series of *mandalas*—was one of the important scriptures brought to ancient Cambodia in the 10th century. The most important of these is the *vajradhātumahāmaṇḍala* which presents a total of thirty-seven deities symbolizing different aspects of the mind on the way to enlightenment. Most importantly this tantra solidified the concept of the

Five Buddha families (Snellgrove 1987: 196–197). The concept was taken up by many commentators and became central to the belief system, signifying the universality of the buddha principle.

The central figure in the STTS and the lord of the *vajradhātumāndala* is Buddha Vairocana. He is conceived as the *sambhogakāya* of Buddha Śākyamuni (Kwon 2002: 32). According to the theory of the *trikaya* or three bodies of the buddha, the term *sambhogakāya* signifies “a glorified form” of the buddha or his “enjoyment” form. The buddha aspect becomes transcendent and immortal, as opposed to the mortal body of Buddha Śākyamuni. In Mahayana Buddhist doctrine, this mortal body, called *nirmāṇakāya*, is given to a buddha while he exists in human form on earth and lasts until he dies.

The origin story of the STTS relates that the tantra is taught by the enjoyment form of Buddha Vairocana to all buddhas and bodhisattvas gathered in Akaniṣṭha heaven, the highest spiritual abode, whilst his human form, his *nirmāṇakāya*, meditates on earth under the bodhi tree. The bodhisattvas Lokeśvara and Vajrapāṇi are among the listeners in Akaniṣṭha heaven. Vairocana is also lord over four directional buddhas: Akṣobhya to the East, Ratnasambhava to the South, Amitābha to the West, and Amoghasiddhi to the North.

In the system of the STTS, these Five Buddhas or Jinas (conquerors) are also seen as homologies of the Five Aggregates, the Five Wisdoms, and the Five Poisons. All these correspondences are made within the STTS or its corpus of commentaries. The all-important role of the number five leads me to suggest that the male five-headed buddhas may indeed personify the concept of the Five

Buddhas, with Vairocana as the central character. No other Buddhist concept evokes such a strong connection.

If the multi-limbed male deity represents Vairocana, the Buddha’s *sambhogakāya*, the *nāga*-buddha, on the opposite side of the shrine, must be Śākyamuni, his *nirmāṇakāya*. This suggestion is bolstered by the observation that the *nāga*-buddha [FIG. 3] is portrayed without a crown, just with his monkish curls, whereas the Vairocana on the opposite side is visibly crowned [FIG. 2]. The STTS states clearly that buddhas wear a “gem crown” as a sign of their sovereignty over the triple world. As Kwon (2002: 44) translates: “[Vairocana] was bestowed with the consecration of the Dharma sovereignty over the three worlds by means of the gem-diadem of all the Tathāgatas”.

My identification of the uncrowned *nāga*-buddha as Śākyamuni therefore differs from the interpretations proposed by Sharrock (2011) and Woodward (2015: 226) which identify the *nāga*-buddha as representing Mahāvairocana.

Using my identification and examining the Guimet shrine from Kbal Sre Yeay Yin [FIGS 2–3], we can account for all the images. In the origin story of the STTS, Vairocana in his *sambhogakāya* form teaches the tantra in Akaniṣṭha heaven to a group of bodhisattvas including Vajrapāṇi and Lokeśvara, while the *nāga*-buddha as the *nirmāṇakāya* of Śākyamuni on earth meditates under the bodhi tree. The Vajrin or Vajrapāṇi on this shrine [FIGURE 7] is interestingly three-headed and wearing a Five Jina crown, so the image is highly infused with the Five Buddha family system of the STTS.⁸

⁸ For a discussion of the elaborate figure of Vajrin, see Lobo 1997: 244.

Vajradhātvīśvarī: Mirror-Image of Vairocana?

If we accept the proposition that the five-headed, ten-armed male crowned figure represents Vairocana [FIGS 2, 6c], we may look for a solution regarding his female mirror-image [FIGS 1, 6a]. Here we have a female form with four extra heads; we want to enquire what these heads may stand for. The STTS lists a second *mandala*, called the *guhyamandalā* or the “diagram of secrets”. This diagram is also called *dhāraṇīmandala* or “diagram of spells or consorts”. The diagram represents the mystic knowledges, gestures, and symbols of the Five Buddhas, in feminine form.⁹ The STTS relates that each *jina* of the *mahādhātumandalā* emits a spell or gesture. Thus, Vairocana emits the spell/gesture Vajradhātvīśvarī, Akṣobhya emits Vajravajrī, Ratnasambhava emits Ratnavajrī, Amitayus/Amitābha emits Dharmavajrī, and Amoghasiddhi emits Karmavajrī (Kwon 2002: 94). These “spells” also correspond to the four great *pāramitās* or perfections (Lokesh Chandra & Snellgrove 1981: 30–31). The perfections are, according to Lokesh Chandra and Snellgrove, clearly personified and conceived as “goddesses”.

It should be noted that there is another *mandala* in which Vajradhātvīśvarī plays a role in the STTS; this is the *padmaguhyamandalā*, in

which she is accompanied by four *pāramitās* (Kwon 2002: 226).¹⁰ This *mandala* also appears in the *Sarvadugatipariśodhanatantra*, a text translated into Tibetan in the late 8th century and is thus almost contemporary with the STTS. There, Vajradhātvīśvarī is more explicitly part of a sacred circle, representing the female aspect of Vairocana (Huntington & Bangdel 2003: 122). She appears as the central deity surrounded by Vajravajrī, Ratnavajrī, Dharmavajrī, and Karmavajrī. Vajravarman, a Tibetan contemporary commentator, equates in his exegesis “the mother of the *tathāgatas*” with Vajradhātvīśvarī. In this tantric commentary, Prajñāpāramita’s epithet “mother of the *tathāgatas*” is given to the female deity Vajradhātvīśvarī (Skorupski 1983: 315).

In the *Kriyāsamgraha*, a ritual manual relating to the *vajradhātumandalā* (Skorupski 1998: 187), written a few centuries later, Vajradhātvīśvarī is also visualized as consort of Vairocana, whereas the other four female deities are assigned to their usual partners. Vajradhātvīśvarī is called by the tantric master with her mantra, “Ohm Vajradhātvīśvarī Hūm, consecrate me!” (*ibid.*: 85), and participates in other rituals, where she is clearly conceived as the partner of Vairocana.

The 11th-century Indian pandit Maitrīpa, who studied at Nalanda and Vikramāśila, explicitly links the Five Jinas with the Five Goddesses in his *Compendium of the Nondual Vajra* (*Advaya vajrasamgraha*). He also unequivocally

⁹ *Vidyā* or *mudrā* are used interchangeably. *Mudrā* may be in general rendered as gesture, sign, or seal, but also as female consort, especially in a tantric context. In the introduction to the *Kriyāsamgraha*, Skorupski (2002: 18) states that the “devotee may envisage the deities or their symbols in a *sādhana* or mystical practice”. Furthermore, the *Kriyāsamgraha* clearly calls a woman involved in tantric rituals a *dhāraṇī* or a *vidyā* (*ibid.*: 124).

¹⁰ I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for guiding me to this *mandala* in the STTS, and for also pointing out Vajradhātvīśvarī’s role in the *Sarvadugatipariśodhanatantra*.



FIGURE 7: Vajrin (Vajrapāni), Kbal Sre Yeay Yin, Phnom Srok, Cambodia, now in Musée Guimet (cf. FIGS 2–3) © Pia Conti

equates Vajradhātvīśvarī with Prajñāpāramitā. The text makes it clear that the male and female elements work closely together to form a unity. David Snellgrove remarks that in this tantric tradition “a fifth goddess is sometimes mentioned as a partner of the chief buddha-manifestation at the center of the *mandala*. She may be known as the Lady (Bhagavati), as suchness (Tathatā), as Voidness (Śūnyatā), as Perfection of Wisdom (Prajñāpāramitā), as Limit of Reality (Bhūtakoṭi), or as Absence of Self (Nairātmyā), for she possesses the true

nature of Vajrasattva and is the Lady of the *Vajra* sphere (Vajradhātvīśvarī)” (1987: 208–209).

Further evidence for the centrality of the relationship between Vairocana and Vajradhātvīśvarī is found in contemporary Java where Vairocana is frequently mentioned in a Javanese text called the *Saṇi Hyaṇ Kamahāyānikan* (SHK) or the *Holy Scripture Pertaining to Mahāyāna*. Vajradhātvīśvarī plays an important role in this text which has been dated between the 8th and the 10th century. The scripture comprises two parts: (1) *The Sang Hyang Kamahāyānan Mantranaya*, meaning *The Mantra System of Mahāyāna*, and (2) *The Saṇi Hyaṇ Kamahāyānan Advaya Sādhana*, or *The Mahāyāna Method for Attaining Non-Duality*.

The *Advāya Sādhana* describes a four-fold way to liberation which every practitioner of this particular Mahayana creed must follow. The four female deities play an important role in a section of the text which can be interpreted as a recasting of the Bodhisattva Path. This section is called the *paramamārga*, i.e., the supreme path. It defines Prajñāpāramitā, the highest principle of the path, as the “insight that everything considered part of the world, [everything] found in the ten quarters of the world [...], along with the external body as well as the metaphysical [entities], and all beings, all actions, all results—[...] whether with form or formless, are in essence empty (śūnya)” (Lokesh Chandra 1995: 368).

The *paramamārga* rehearses the Bodhisattva Path by explaining the meaning of the six *pāramitās* or perfections—generosity, morality, patience, vigor, concentration or meditation, and wisdom. Prajñāpāramitā is the essence

of these *pāramitās*, because, without wisdom the fulfilment of the first five perfections does not lead to liberation. This point is repeatedly stressed in all Wisdom texts and the SHK stands firm in this tradition. Prajñāpāramitā is then given the name Vajradhātvīśvarī and evoked in the following way: “Srī Vajradhātvīśvarī is extraordinary in wisdom and at the same time very beautiful and exceptional in her service to lord (Bhaṭāra) Vairocana. She is the essence of the six *pāramitā-s*” (*ibid.*). Interestingly, the six perfections and the four female deities are then interpreted as the ten stages of the Bodhisattva Path.

Considering the above discussion, I propose to read the female five-headed and ten-armed figure on the Kbal Sre Yeay Yin shrine in the Phnom Penh Museum [FIG. 1] as well as the Prasat Samre Namtaov shrine in the Battambang Museum [FIG. 6a], as representing Vajradhātvīśvarī, the tantric embodiment of Prajñāpāramitā. Similarly, I read the five-headed and ten-armed male figure seen on the Guimet shrine from Kbal Sre Yeay Yin [FIG. 2] and the Battambang shrine from Prasat Samre Namtaov as representing Buddha Vairocana [FIG. 6c].

Symbolism of Five-Headed and Ten-Armed Deities

The presence of Vajradhātvīśvarī on Khmer stone miniature shrines is truly remarkable, as she manifests as a fully developed tantric deity adorned with multiple heads and arms. In contrast, only two known bronze depictions of Lokeśvara from the 10th century showcase this bodhisattva with eleven heads and twenty-two arms. Interest-

ingly, Lokeśvara's eleven-headed form enjoyed widespread popularity in various Buddhist regions at the time, possibly reaching ancient Cambodia from neighboring Campā (Green 2014: 70). Unlike the familiar and widespread nature of Lokeśvara's eleven-headed manifestation, Vajradhātvīśvarī stands out as a distinctive figure within the Khmer tradition of mainland Southeast Asia.

The female figure from Kbal Sre Yeay Yin housed in Phnom Penh [FIG. 1] features five heads with diadems and heavy earrings. The front face displays a benevolent smile. The expression of the faces on the side are harder to read. These latter faces have sterner expressions, whereas the ones on top look almost male. It must be remembered that the small faces are less than five centimeters in height, so it is quite difficult to give them a definite expression. The body of the deity is clearly marked as female: she displays breasts with two beauty lines underneath and she wears a sarong with the frontal goffer typical for 10th-century female attire.

We have discussed the five heads and their probable meaning extensively above. As shown, the number five is frequently used in the STTS and is central to its theology. Since in this scripture Vajradhātvīśvarī is the queen of her *mandala*, I propose to read the faces as representing the Five Goddesses and therefore the Five Wisdoms. Acquiring these wisdoms will lead to liberation through the tantric path.

The ten arms can be interpreted as symbolic references to the ten stages of the Bodhisattva Path, as expounded, for instance, in the *Daśabhūmikasūtra* (Dayal 1970). In this scripture, each of the ten

stages corresponds to the mastery of a specific perfection. The inclusion of ten arms in the visual representation may serve to portray the systematic and progressive development that a bodhisattva undergoes on their journey toward perfection.

The narrative unfolds in a step-by-step fashion, aligned with the sequential mastery of perfections associated with each stage on the Bodhisattva Path. As the devotee engages in this spiritual odyssey, the initial transformation into a bodhisattva marks the beginning. Dedicated progress across all ten stages ultimately leads the aspirant to buddhahood. The significance of the ten *bhūmis* or stages resonates deeply in the STTS, emphasizing the swift achievement of both the *bodhisattva-bhūmi* and the *buddha-bhūmi* for the earnest practitioner.

Reflecting upon the depiction of the multi-headed buddha [FIG. 2], I propose a similar interpretation. The five heads could symbolize the Five Buddhas, with the central head representing Vairocana, embodying the transcendent essence of the mortal Buddha Śākyamuni. The remaining four heads may correspond to the celestial buddhas: Akṣobhya, Ratnasambhava, Amitābha, and Amoghasiddhi. Notably, the five heads are adorned with a diadem and substantial earrings, deviating from the monastic aspect of the buddha under the *nāga*, who is devoid of jewelry and earrings [FIG. 3]. This intentional use of jewelry elements in the multi-headed buddha likely alludes to the tantric enlightenment of Vairocana.

The ten arms, in turn, could symbolize the Bodhisattva Path. It is only when a buddha attains the 10th stage or *bhūmi*

of this path that the STTS can be unveiled to the world. This intricate symbolism suggests a profound connection between the physical representation of Buddha Vairocana and the spiritual journey encapsulated within the tenets of the Bodhisattva Path.

Symbolism of the Hand Gestures

A further unusual trait is displayed by the five-headed and ten-armed figures displaying a series of unfamiliar hand gestures. Whereas in early Buddhism hand positions usually referred to a specific episode of the historical Buddha's legend, with the emergence of tantra, hand gestures acquired esoteric meanings. In tantric rituals, bending a finger inside, touching another finger, or forming a fist is often done in very quick succession to accompany sacred utterances or mantras or in order to "seal" (*mudrā*) a particular meaning. *Mudrā* become "manual signals indicative of various ideas" and "the manipulations of fingers work(s) as if to supplement the power of words" (Saunders 1960: 5).¹¹

Taking a close look at the ten hands of Vajradhātviśvarī depicted on the shrine from Kbal Sre Yeay Yin at the Phnom Penh National Museum, we can see that they display a series of gestures which seem to convey esoteric meaning

¹¹ The term *mudrā* has a complicated history, but became most important in Buddhist tantric literature, where tantric deities which require visualization use these ritual gestures. This practice started in the late 8th-century with the *Guhyasamājatantra*, see Smith 2015. The terminology used here in the reading of the gestures is taken from general Indian manuals on *mudrās* or *hastas* such as the *Abhinayadarpanam* by Nandikeśvara (Ghosh 1957), and modern compilation manuals such as Bunce 2001.



FIGURES 8a–b (proper right and left):
Hand details of Vajradhātvīśvarī (cf. FIG. 1) © Pia Conti

[FIGURES 8a–b]. The top proper right hand has the ring and the index finger bent, while the little and middle finger and the thumb are straight [FIG. 8a]. This gesture is called *śukatunḍahasta* and may signal at times an “angry” or “fierce” mood (Bunce 2001: 220). Bunce

(2001: 220) gives also “shooting an arrow” as a meaning of the gesture, which more likely stems from theatre performances and not tantric ritual. An alternative denotation given in the manuals is the “telling of a mystic secret” (Ghosh 1957: 66–70). This reading

would fit well with the interpretation of a spiritual figure such as Vajradhātvīśvarī.

The top proper left hand displays a different gesture: all fingers are straight, except for the ring finger [FIG. 8b]. This gesture is called the *tripātakā* which literally means “three parts of the flag”. It denotes a crown, the *vajra*, light (Bunce 2001: 242), and wisdom (Nair 2020). The gesture on the second proper right hand [FIG. 8a] is undecipherable whereas the second left hand shows the middle finger bent [FIG. 8b]. This gesture may be identified as the *śūnyahasta* or *śūnyamudrā* (Bunce 2001: 221). *Śūnya* is the Sanskrit word for “emptiness” or “voidness”, a key Mahayana concept. Both deities—*Prajñāpāramitā* and Vajradhātvīśvarī—symbolize emptiness (*śūnyatā*), as already mentioned (Snellgrove 1987: 208–209). This reading of the “empty-handed” gesture enhances our understanding of the deity’s iconography.

The right third and fourth proper hands are undecipherable [FIG. 8a], but the third left hand shows again the *tripātakā* (possibly symbolizing wisdom), and the fourth left hand [FIG. 8b], the *śūnya* gesture symbolizing emptiness (Bunce 2001: 221). Finally, the fifth right hand [FIG. 8a] is in *varada*, that is, the gesture of “granting a boon” or “fulfillment of a vow” (Bunce 2001: 267), whereas the fifth left hand [FIG. 8b] shows the gesture of “emptiness” again.

Intriguingly, the Vajradhātvīśvarī depiction hailing from Prasat Samre Namtaov, now in the Battambang Museum [FIG. 6a], also displays several gestures which show some similarity to the relief housed in the Phnom Penh Museum. Clearly visible on the top

proper left hand is the bent ring finger which makes it a *tripātakā* gesture. Some of the hand gestures are more three-dimensionally worked than on the Phnom Penh shrine, such as the third proper left hand which shows the *śūnya* gesture. One can see the thumb is indented to meet the middle finger. The Vairocana figure, depicted on the rear of the shrine from Prasat Samre Namtaov, also exhibits distinctive *mudrās* in the hands that have remained intact [FIG. 6c].

Although the presentation of these ritual hand gestures might not be as intricate as observed in the Japanese context, where detailed charts elucidate their esoteric meanings, we can reasonably assert that these gestures convey profound messages. Notably, Vajradhātvīśvarī’s bent middle finger in the third and fifth hands, for instance, signifies *śūnyatā*—the emptiness she embodies. Additionally, the array of other hand gestures can be interpreted as embodying or shaping the very concepts that lead to enlightenment.

Unlocking Khmer Enlightenment

In conclusion, this article has endeavored to illustrate that the five-headed and ten-armed depictions, discovered on 10th-century Khmer shrines from Phnom Srok in northwest Cambodia, representing both male and female figures, embody profound spiritual entities. Specifically, these depictions are now identified as Vairocana, a tantric manifestation of Buddha Śākyamuni, and Vajradhātvīśvarī, a tantric manifestation of *Prajñāpāramitā*, the goddess of Transcendent Wisdom. Within the intricate tapestry of the *vajradhātu*- and

the *guhyamāndala* of the STTS, these deities assume pivotal roles, symbolizing a male and female enlightenment matrix. A notable revelation emerges when recognizing the interconnectedness of the “twin” or mirror-image figures on the Battambang shrine from Prasat Samre Namtaov, highlighting the inherent complementarity of male and female principles in the profound pursuit of enlightenment.

These intricate images, with their nuanced details, potentially symbolize a spectrum of spiritual concepts. From the Five Goddesses, the Five Jinas, the Five Wisdoms, and the Five Aggregates to the ten-staged Bodhisattva Path, each element within these depictions serves as a profound guide along the spiritual journey towards enlightenment. What further enhances the significance of

these depictions is their unique form, unparalleled in the broader Buddhist world. This distinctiveness marks a profound and singular contribution from Khmer sculptors to the rich imagery of enlightenment in ancient Cambodia.

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