

THE LEGEND AND CULT OF GAVAMPATI: ITS ROOTS IN PALI AND SANSKRIT SOURCES

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ABSTRACT—This article examines the legend and cult of Gavampati through Pali and Sanskrit sources, tracing the textual roots of a figure who later became prominent in Southeast Asian Buddhist traditions as the “Fat Monk”. Although briefly mentioned in early canonical texts, Gavampati appears in a wide range of later narratives that portray him variously as an arhat, miracle-worker, forest meditator, and missionary to frontier regions. By analyzing his shifting presence in lists of disciples, his association with the First Buddhist Council, his bovine etymology, and his role in missionary and relic traditions, the study highlights the fluid and multifaceted character of Gavampati and the processes of “syncretism” that shaped his evolving cult.

KEYWORDS: Buddhist Disciples; Gavampati (Fat Monk); Pali Literature; Sanskrit Buddhist Texts; Southeast Asian Buddhism

Introduction

In the Pali *Vinaya*, Gavampati² is said to be one of the four friends of Yasa, the well-to-do young man who was the first person to be converted by the historical Buddha after the group of five ascetics who were present at the First Sermon (Vin I 18–19; trans. Horner 1938–52: IV, 26–27). The text, however, tells us almost nothing about him except that, inspired by Yasa’s example, he along with his companions (Vimala, Subāhu, and Puṇṇaji) asks the Buddha for ordination as a monk and almost immediately attains arhatship.

When he translated this story, André Bareau (1963: 225) wondered why the *Vinaya* even bothered to say this much about these four individuals since, according to him, they “are practically unknown in canonical sources [...] and never played any important role in the Buddhist Community”.³ This may be so for the first three of these “friends of Yasa” (who apparently are mentioned nowhere else in the Canon), but it is hardly the case for Gavampati who, as we shall see, appears in a host of Pali and Sanskrit texts, both early and late.

In mainland Southeast Asia, he becomes credited with the spread of Buddhism to Thaton (and other places) in lower Myanmar (Guillon 1983). He is said to bring the Buddha’s tooth relic there shortly after the Blessed One’s parinirvana or final extinction

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² For practical purposes, in this article I shall use the Pali form of Gavampati’s name rather than the Sanskrit (Gavāmpati), even when the latter would be more contextually appropriate. Similarly, I generally adopt Pali forms for terms and personal names unless referring specifically to a Sanskrit source.

³ Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this article are my own.

(Shorto 1963: 1970) and he achieves fame as the object of a popular cult in Bagan and then in Thaton (Stadtner 2005: 39–40; see also Donald Stadtner, this Special Edition). Today, in Thailand, he is commonly known as the “Fat Monk” and is represented as a pot-bellied figure seated in meditation [FIGURE 1], sometimes with his eyes and other orifices covered (Lagiarde 2003). He comes to be conflated with Mahākaccāyana or Phra Sangkachai (พระสังกัจจายน์) in later Thai tradition and is part of the group of the 80 Great Disciples (*asīti mahāsāvakas*) of the Buddha (Lagiarde 2000, 2001, 2005). Primarily because of his big belly, he has, over the years, been likened to other figures as well: the ventripotent Jambhala, well-known in tantric art (Luce 1969–70: I, 207); Budai, the so-called “fat” or “laughing Buddha” of Chinese tradition (Lagiarde 2019: 193); and even the Buddha’s disciple Moggallāna (Skt, Maudgalyāyana) at the moment of suffering from a belly ache caused by Māra who flew into his stomach and made it swell (Duroiselle 1933: 110).⁴ In other words, over the years, Gavampati has had a chameleonic personality—something that has enriched both his legend and his cult and led to his having multiple identities and roles (Lagiarde 2003).

In this article, I want to focus primarily on Pali and Sanskrit traditions about Gavampati. These too, as we shall see, are multifarious and sometimes rather fluid, but in their unstable quality and ambiguities they may help provide

a background to many of the multiple facets of this important Buddhist arhat. In what follows, I shall touch on seven interrelated topics: (1) Gavampati’s presence or absence from various listings of the Buddha’s enlightened disciples; (2) Gavampati and the First Buddhist Council; (3) Gavampati as Cattle-Lord; (4) Gavampati and the Serīsaka Celestial Mansion; (5) Gavampati as meditator and miracle-maker; (6) Gavampati as a borderland missionary; and finally, (7) Gavampati and Gotama Buddha.

Lists of Arhats

In many of his biographies, after attaining his Awakening at Bodhgayā, the Buddha decides to start preaching the Dharma to others. He briefly considers sharing his new-found doctrine with his former teachers, Ālāra and Uddaka (Skt, Ārāḍa and Udraka), but he realizes they have both passed away. So, he decides to go to the Deer Park at Sarnath to find his erstwhile companions with whom he had practiced austerities (the so-called “Group of Five”). His sermon to them, the “Setting in Motion of the Wheel of the Dharma”, is so effective that they are quickly converted, request ordination as monks, and soon thereafter attain full enlightenment. At that point, the Pali *Vinaya* (Vin I 14; trans. Horner 1938–52: IV, 21) tells us, “there were six arhats in the world” (the Buddha and the five former ascetics).

This begins a series of stories which, whatever their inherent interest, have the function of tabulating the growth of the *ariyaśaṅgha* (the community of “noble” [i.e., enlightened] ones). The

⁴ This story may be found in M I 332 (trans. Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi 1995: 431); it is also retold in the *Lokapaññatti* (Denis 1977: II, 138–139).



FIGURE 1: The Buddhist disciple or Fat Monk Gavampati, also known as Mahākaccāyana or Phra Sangkachai; 17th–18th century or later, Wat Chedi Luang, Chiang Mai © Nicolas Revire

pattern continues when the Buddha converts Yasa (Skt, Yaśas), a young man from a prominent merchant family in Benares: he is ordained, becomes enlightened, and “then there were seven arhats” (Vin I 18; trans. Horner 1938–52: IV, 26). Then he meets four of Yasa’s companions, one of whom, as noted above, is Gavampati. Hearing that their good friend Yasa had become a monk, they all decide to follow his example: after receiving instruction and ordination from the Buddha, they

too are enlightened and so bring the number of arhats in the world to eleven (Vin I 19; trans. Horner 1938–52: IV, 27).

This same pattern of keeping track of the number of enlightened disciples in the very early Saṅgha is found in several other *vinayas*,⁵ so it is not uniquely

⁵ See the *Mahīśāsakavinaya* (T. 1421, 22: 105c–106a; trans. Bareau 1963: 224); the *Dharmaguptakavinaya* (T. 1428, 22: 790b; trans. Bareau 1963: 224–225); and the *Mūlasarvāstivādinaya* (Sanghbbh I: 146–147; trans. of Tib., Feer 1883: 28–29). See also Kloppenborg 1973: 40–41.

a Theravada tradition. It is clear that in these episodes we find the start of a pan-Buddhist tradition of making lists of Buddhist arhats. Indeed, the tabulation continues in the very next passage of the *vinayas*. Yasa, it turns out, has 50 other acquaintances, young men of slightly lesser status. They too decide to go to the Buddha and become ordained and soon, we are told, “there were sixty-one arhats in the world” (Vin I 20; trans. Horner 1938–52: IV, 28). The members of this last group of 50 are not named, however; after the Buddha tells all of his disciples to go their own ways and individually spread the teaching of the Dharma, the 50 anonymous friends of Yasa pretty much drop out of the picture.

Their eclipse, however, does not mean the end of the tabulation of arhats. In the Pali commentarial tradition, we find mention of a group of the Buddha’s 80 Great Disciples whose names may or may not be listed. When they are, as in the *Theraḡāthā Commentary* (Th-a III 205–206), the first ten disciple-arhats (the five ascetics, Yasa, and his four friends including Gavampati) are named at the head of a list, which is then filled out with names of other enlightened disciples, many of whom (e.g., Sāriputta, Mahākassapa, Mahāmoggallāna) are quite famous. Gavampati’s early presence among the 80 Great Disciples is important for, as Lagirarde (2000: 58, 72, fig. 1) makes clear, he goes on to occupy a prominent position in iconography and in various Pali and vernacular reiterations of the list in Southeast Asia.⁶

⁶ For an orthodoxly established Thai list of the disciples, see, e.g., Vajirañāṇavarorasa 1974: II, 69 (where he appears as disciple no. 10). For a Burmese list, see Mingun 1990–98: VI, Part 1, xiv (where he

The origins of the tradition of the 80 disciples are, to me, obscure. Pali commentator Buddhaghosa (fl. 5th c.), in his *Visuddhimagga*, refers to the number without enumerating the names (Vism 98; trans. Pe Maung Tin 1923: 115). The *Dhammapada Commentary* assumes the tradition of the 80 disciples in figuring out the total number of monks going to visit the novice Tissa (Dhp-a II 93; trans. Burlingame 1921: II, 156–157).⁷ But perhaps the most noteworthy Pali commentarial reference occurs in the story of Mahākassapa and Ajātasattu building a great underground stupa for the Buddha about 20 years after his parinirvana. This involves collecting all the relics from the eight original stupas in which they had been distributed right after the Buddha’s death and centralizing them in a single underground chamber. Before re-enshrinement, eight nesting urns are prepared for each of the eight shares of relics. Because of a somewhat mysterious purported need for secrecy, however, an elaborate pretense is made that these relics are not those of the Buddha but of his 80 Great Disciples (Sv II 611–613).⁸ No enumeration of these disciples is made thus there is no mention of Gavampati, but the association of the 80 disciples with relics is nonetheless noteworthy, given Gavampati’s later association with the same.⁹

appears as no. 12 of the Buddha’s right hand side disciples, those flanking Sāriputta). See also Schnake 2024: 133.

⁷ 40,000 monks, we are told, went to visit Tissa in groups of 500, each led by one of the Buddha’s major disciples (40,000/500 = 80).

⁸ The story is repeated in Thūp 181–183 (trans. Jayawickrama 1971: 44–46) and is well known in the Burmese tradition (Strong 2004: 127–131).

⁹ One is tempted to think that the 80 disciples were

In looking at lists of great disciples, we should not neglect the enumerations that appear in the introductory paragraphs of some Mahayana texts. Typically these begin with an opening scene in which the Buddha is surrounded by a large number of “great disciples” who are arhats, some of whom, usually a few dozen, are then named. Although they are truncated, these lists bear a close—though not exact—resemblance to the start of the Pali lists of the 80 Great Disciples. Invariably, just as in the *Theragāthā Commentary*, they begin with the names of the Buddha’s first disciples (the “Group of Five”) and often follow that with the group of Yasa and his four friends including Gavampati. But even when this order is not strictly adhered to, Gavampati is still mentioned apart from his “group”.¹⁰

Lagirdar (2000: 60) has pointed out that, on some lists of the 80 disciples, Gavampati is curiously missing. This is the case, for instance, in a 15th-century inscription on a *buddhapāda* from Sukhothai—perhaps the earliest mention of the 80 disciples in Thailand. There, Yasa and his first three companions are mentioned, but not Gavampati. Curiously, exactly the same thing is true in the *Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha* where Gavampati is likewise skipped in the listing and no mention of him is made.¹¹

divided into eight groups of ten and each associated with one share of the Buddha’s relics.

¹⁰ For example, see the *Lotus Sutra* (Sad 3; trans. Kern 1884: 2); the *Smaller Sukhāvatīvyūha* (ed. Müller & Nanjio 1883: 92; trans. Gómez 1996: 15); the *Lalitavistara* (Lal 1.2; trans. Foucaux 1884: 3); the *Karunāpuṇḍarika* (Kp 2.2; trans. Weiler 1956: 118–119).

¹¹ See ed. Müller & Nanjio 1883: 2. In his translation, Gómez (1996: 62) has added him back in without explaining why, but seemingly on the basis of the Chinese text which does include him. See T. 360, 12: 265c; trans. Inagaki 1995: 21.

More generally, I might add that he also does not figure on the well-known list of disciples in the *Anguttaranikāya* (A I 23–26; trans. Bodhi 2012: 109–113) which was so important to Theravada hagiography, specifying the quality in which each major disciple—including nuns and laypersons—was “most preeminent”. The *Mūlasarvāstivādinaya*, however, does refer to him, in a different context, as the “most preeminent of the disciples who dwell in frontier regions”.¹² Nor is Gavampati included in the usual lists of the 16 or 18 arhats (Ch., *luohan* 罗汉), although he does figure on one list of eight arhats which Étienne Lamotte (1988: 694) claims was a building block towards the longer list of 16.¹³ And he is likewise included among the arhat-disciples in the so-called “cult of the nine gods” and in related *paritta* rites found in various parts of Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia. In this tradition, Gavampati is one of eight disciples who are arranged in the four cardinal and four intermediate points of the compass around the Buddha who is in the center.¹⁴

The first thing to be noted about Gavampati, then, is that he is an arhat who comes and goes. In both Pali and

¹² T. 1451, 24: 228a (trans. Guillon 1983: 55). See also Lamotte 1949–80: 629n.; Przyluski 1926: 243; and Panglung 1981: 171.

¹³ In general, on the 16 arhats, see Lévi & Chavannes 1916.

¹⁴ Htin Aung 1978: 7–11. In Myanmar, the disciples are each associated not only with a direction, but with a planet, a day of the week, an animal, etc. In Gavampati’s case, he is connected to the Northwest, Wednesday afternoon, Rāhu, and the tuskless elephant. The origin of the rite seems to lie in the notion of using the arhats to form a kind of protective cage around the Buddha that can be used to ward off malignant forces. See Guillon 1987: 149; also Strong 1992: 238–241.

Sanskrit sources, he is sometimes listed as present among the Buddha's enlightened disciples and he is sometimes absent.

The First Council

The same thing may be reflected in Sanskrit traditions relative to the First Buddhist Council held at Rājagṛha (today in Bihar, India) shortly after the death of the Buddha, usually dated to around the 5th century BCE. It is noteworthy that several of the listings of the great disciples at the start of Mahayana texts, in which Gavampati is included, end with the name of the Buddha's disciple Ānanda, who is specified in the lists as "still a learner", i.e., not yet an arhat (e.g., Sad 3; trans. Kern 1884: 3).

I take this mention of such a prominent disciple at the tail end of the listing and the recall of his not-yet-enlightened status as a reference to the story of the First Council to which 500 arhats were invited but from which Ānanda was initially excluded because he was still a "learner". Thus, Gavampati's inclusion on these lists is all the more noteworthy given the contradictory Sanskrit tradition that he did not attend the First Council. The story, studied long ago by Jean Przyluski (1926: 239–256), is well known. The Buddha's disciple Mahākāśyapa (P., Mahākassapa), having assembled the elders for the recitation of the sutras and the *Vinaya*, realizes that one arhat—Gavampati—is missing, absent because he is dwelling in a celestial abode (about which see below). Accordingly, a young monk is sent up to fetch him. However, when Gavampati

realizes that the Buddha has died, he refuses. "What is the use of remaining in a buddhaless world?" he asks and, declaring that he wishes to follow the Buddha into extinction, just as a baby elephant follows its mother, he flies up into the air, autocrebrates himself, and is no more.¹⁵

The story in the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sāstra* is even more dramatic. When Mahākāśyapa realizes that Ānanda will not be able to recite all the Buddha's teaching because he is not qualified to participate in the First Council due to his lack of arhatship, he asks who can do it in his stead. Aniruddha suggests Gavampati who, he says was Śāriputra (P., Sāriputta)'s best disciple and fully knows the *Vinaya*- and *Sūtrapīṭakas*. He is now in retreat in a celestial abode. Thus, a messenger monk is sent flying to heaven to request Gavampati's presence for this important task. However, when Gavampati finds out that not only has the Buddha passed away, but so have Śāriputra and Mahāmaudgalyāyana, that Ānanda is dysfunctionally depressed from mourning, and Rāhula does nothing but contemplate impermanence, he concludes the situation is hopeless and goes into extinction himself (T. 1509, 25: 68b–69a; trans. Lamotte 1949–80: 97–99). One might have expected him to step up to the occasion, but he chooses not to.

In this particular story, then, Gavampati has opted for the path of the

¹⁵ T. 2043, 50: 150b–151a (trans. Li 1993: 94–97); T. 2042, 50: 112a–c (trans. Przyluski 1923: 314–316); T. 2027, 49 : 4c–5c (trans. Przyluski 1926: 6–11). For the Mūlasarvātivāda version, see Obermiller 1931–32: II, 73–76.

antisocial meditator who cares little about Sangha politics or, apparently, the laity. His devotion is more to the Buddha than to the monastic community. Paul Lévy (1957: 86) calls him “the most faithful of the Buddha’s disciples” and compares his aut cremation to an act of *satī*—throwing himself on his lord’s funeral pyre. Mahākāśyapa realizes such an act is potentially problematic for the ongoing existence of the established monastic community: when he is told of Gavampati’s refusal to come to the Council and his opting for extinction, Mahākāśyapa issues an injunction forbidding all monks from entering nirvana until the basket of Dharma has been collected (Przyluski 1926: 32).

And yet the tale gives us a more mixed picture of Gavampati. It makes it clear that he was seen as someone who was a master of the Dharma and potentially a leader of the Sangha. His refusal to attend the First Council ends up having a happy ending, for it causes Ānanda to redouble his efforts to attain arhatship. Fortunately that night Ānanda does and so can recite the sutras in Gavampati’s stead (T. 1509, 25: 69a; trans. Lamotte 1949–80: 100). At another level, then, in the words of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962), Gavampati’s story is *bon à penser* (good to think). The choice Gavampati is presented with epitomizes a tension that is broadly characteristic of much of Buddhism: between the poles of aloofness from the world and involvement in it. And in some ways, as Lagirarde (2003: 167) points out, this tension between “strict monk” and “bodhisattva” may still be found in Gavampati’s cult in modern Thailand.

Cattle-Lord

This pattern of inclusion/exclusion also occurs in a series of Pali and Sanskrit legends connected to Gavampati’s karmic history. The name “Gavampati” literally means “Lord of the Cattle”;¹⁶ thus it is not surprising to find, in various Pali Commentaries, the assertion that he was, in a previous life, an oxherder.¹⁷ This bovine connection is found even more explicitly in a Chinese commentary on the first chapters of the *Ekottara-āgama*, where Gavampati’s name is rendered as “Ox-foot” (Ch. *niujiao* 牛脚) which, according to Przyluski (1926: 240) suggests an original Sanskrit of *gavāmpādī*. The Commentary then explains that this monk was so called because his feet resembled the hooves of an ox;¹⁸ moreover, after *Gavāmpādī* finished eating, he chewed (or appeared to chew) his cud.¹⁹ This was a problem because it risked causing heretics to critically point out that here was a Buddhist monk who was eating after noon, a clear violation of the *Vinaya*. So as to avoid such embarrassment, the Buddha exiled Gavampati to heaven where he could ruminate alone (T. 1507, 24: 40c; trans. Przyluski 1926: 115). Much the same

¹⁶ In Sanskrit, *gavāṃ* is genitive plural of *go* (“cow, cattle”) and *pāti* means “lord, master, owner”.

¹⁷ Sv III 814; and Vv-a 331–332 (trans. Masefield 1989: 505–506). For an alternative interpretation of Gavampati’s name, meaning “Lord of Speech”, see Javier Schnake, this Special Edition.

¹⁸ The term *pāda* means “foot”, and the suffix *-ī* forms a possessive or adjectival derivative. The compound *gavāmpādī* would therefore mean “having the feet of cattle” or “cow/ox-footed”.

¹⁹ A demythologizer might suggest that Gavampati was suffering from oromandibular dystonia or Meige syndrome.

story is found in the *Mūlasarvāstivā-davinaya* which asserts that because, long ago at the time of Kāśyapa Buddha, Gavampati insulted his teacher by calling him an old ox and thus was reborn 500 times as an ox himself. In the last of these bovine rebirths, he happened, one day, to get stuck in a bog. He was rescued by Śāriputra who preached the Dharma to him, ox though he was. A bit later he was killed by a jackal and reborn in the womb of the wife of a brahmin. Śāriputra, who frequented that brahmin's house, got him to promise that he would give his son—then still *in utero*—to the Buddhist Sangha. When the child was born, he was named Gavampati who soon became a monk and attained arhatship. Due to his bovine past, however, he was inclined to gastral reflexes and rechewing his food in the evenings. He was given permission to reswallow it by the Buddha but sent to the borderlands because of his habit (Panglung 1981: 170–171).

Przyluski (1926: 250–256) has sought to make much out of these stories, connecting Gavampati to Śiva and Śiva's bull Nandi, on the one hand, and to various accounts of the sacrifice of the buffalo in "Monsoon Asia", on the other. His argument is that Gavampati represents an indigenous "God of the Dry Season", who has become Buddhized as an arhat, but who should be associated with an ancient Southeast Asian cult in which a bull or buffalo, representing the deity of drought, was sacrificed at the start of the rainy season. Przyluski implies that Gavampati's extinction in parinirvana (which makes possible the First Council held during the rainy season) is a Buddhist reworking in

legend of an old pre-Buddhist ritual tradition involving the killing or expelling of a bovine victim.

These imaginative leaps have been vigorously criticized by others. For instance, after citing Przyluski, Éveline Porée-Maspero (1962–69: II, 308) wonders why the ox—a crucial animal for plowing and planting—would be expelled, even in effigy, at the very time when it is most needed. More devastatingly, Harry Shorto (1970: 24–25) has found Przyluski's interpretation is based on a too-easy acceptance of a misreading of a misleading report on the dubious discovery of an amulet near Bagan in Myanmar that can only questionably be associated with someone who might perhaps be called Gavampati. He concludes that Przyluski's "excursus", as he calls it, is "irrelevant".

What, then, are we to make of Gavampati's ox-like nature? A different line of interpretation would seem possible. The texts cited above make it clear that Gavampati's chief bovine feature is that he "chews the cud": that he has a habit of masticating even when not eating. In itself, this was not against monastic discipline; we are told in the Pali *Vinaya* (Vin II 132; trans. Horner 1938–52: V, 183) about an unnamed monk resembling Gavampati who had been a cow in a previous life and so now chewed the cud. The story makes it clear that this is fine—the Buddha "allows rumination for a ruminator (*romanthaka*)"—but the episode goes on to specify that this habit caused problems because it made lay devotees suspect him of eating after hours.

Like many stories, however, this one may have contextual overtones.

As François Bizot (1976: 6) and others have shown, in Southeast Asia, the practice of monks eating after noon, specifically of their taking an evening meal, was commonplace among certain unreformed forest monks (Than Tun 1959: 107). What we would seem to have in Gavampati, then, is a figure who appears, from one perspective (that of Sri Lankan Theravada orthodoxy), as a violator of the *Vinaya* rules, but who actually, from another perspective (that of the “unreformed tradition”), is innocent of wrongdoing and who, moreover, is portrayed as being persecuted despite his innocence.²⁰

The Serīsaka Celestial Mansion

This theme of Gavampati as an arhat who wants to, or has to, eat alone is also found in traditions that know nothing about his chewing the cud. In the *Dīghanikāya* (D II 356–357; trans. Walshe 1987: 368), for example, he is in the habit of taking his meals and spending his noonday rest in an empty celestial mansion known as the Serīsaka Vimāna (“The Celestial Mansion Made of Acacia Wood”) in the Heaven of the Four Great Kings. There, one day, he is suddenly burst in upon by Pāyāsi, a heretic turned devout layman whose time for rebirth in heaven happens to have arrived and whose karma has apparently assigned him the Serīsaka mansion. Gavampati remembers Pāyāsi from his former life and, somewhat peeved at having his siesta space and

meditative retreat invaded, he asks him: “Brother, aren’t you the one who used to say there was no other world, [...] and no karmic rewards for good or bad deeds?”. Pāyāsi explains that he was, but that he got converted by the elder Kumara Kassapa and was reborn here as a result of his merit. The commentary on this passage (Sv III 814), as well as a parallel text in the *Vimānavatthu Commentary* (Vv-a 331–332; trans. Masefield 1989: 505–506), tell the origin of this Divine Mansion. Once upon a time, in the era of the previous Kassapa Buddha, there was an arhat who, after going on his alms round, was in the habit of taking his bowl out to a field and sitting down to eat and rest there. A local cowherd, worried that the elder would suffer from the heat of the noonday sun, undertook to build him a shelter. Using four posts of acacia wood, he made a pavilion which he covered with acacia leaves, in front of which he planted an acacia tree. As a result of this good deed, the cowherd was reborn in the Heaven of the Four Great Kings, in a *vimāna* in front of which there grew a great acacia tree. It was consequently known as the Serīsaka (Acacian) Vimāna. Eventually, the cowherd’s time in heaven was up and he was reborn as the Buddha’s disciple Gavampati. Because of Gavampati’s past familiarity with that heavenly mansion, he used to visit it on a daily basis for his noonday meal and rest.

Meditator, Miracle-Worker, and Protector

In some texts, however, the Serīsaka Vimāna is presented very much as though it were a forest hermitage (e.g.,

²⁰ The arhat Upagupta too, in Southeast Asia, was suspected of eating after noon, though his solution is rather more assertive than Gavampati’s: he uses his magical powers to stop the sun in its course so that he can continue eating (Strong 1992).

T. 2027, 49: 5a; trans. Przyluski 1926: 7). In the *Dīvyāvadāna* (Div 399; trans. Strong 1983: 259), for instance, though still called a celestial mansion, the *Vimāna* is paired with other retreats such as Kashmir, Mahāvana, Revataka, Lake Anavatapta, and Mount Gandhamādāna, which, though remote, were nonetheless considered to be in our world. In the *Theragāthā Commentary* (Th-a I 110), rather than dwell in heaven, Gavampati chooses to reside in the Añjana forest in Sāketa. Thus, in the polarity between forest-monks and city-monks that has characterized Buddhism pretty much everywhere it has gone, Gavampati is a figure who embodies the ideals of the former pole. It comes as no surprise, then, to find forest monks worshiping an image of Gavampati in a 15th-century controversy in northern Thailand (Mangrai 1981: 135).

But whether in a forest hermitage or in heaven, he is said to spend much of his time in a trance of *samādhi*. This is a theme that also was developed in various ways in Southeast Asia. For example, in the Thai and Lao *Gavampatisutta* studied by Lagirarde (2000), he is presented as a saint who guards the doors of his senses.²¹ Small images or amulets, in fact, often represent him as a figure covering his eyes (*phra pit ta*; พระปิดตา) [FIGURE 2] and sometimes other orifices with an extra pair of arms. Alternatively, his head may be covered by his robe—a sign of being in a trance.²²

²¹ Given the affinities between Gavampati and Mahākaccāyana, it is interesting to note that the latter was also praised by the Buddha for “keeping the doors of his senses guarded” (*indriyesu guttadvārā*) and therefore beloved by both humans and gods (Dhp-a II 177; trans. Burlingame 1921: II, 203).

²² Przyluski (1926: 250) contests the interpretation

Like many saints of the forest, Gavampati also has developed supernatural powers—abilities that are the outcome of his meditational prowess, but which draw him back into involvement in the world. Many examples of use of his powers to help others could be given from Southeast Asian materials, starting with his cult long ago in Bagan as a protector of palaces or monasteries, or, in more modern times, as a protector of the Buddha in the cult of the “Nine Gods” (see above), or as a bringer of worldly benefits to his possessors and devotees.²³ One possible root of this theme of using his superpowers for the benefit of people may be found in the Pali Canon in a specific story. In the *Theragāthā*, the Buddha praises Gavampati for his detachment and for his *iddhi* (supernormal powers) which he applies to holding back the flood waters of the Sarabhū River. As K.R. Norman (1969: 5; Pali text in Th 6) translates the verse: “Gavampati, who by his supernormal power made the river Sarabhū stand fast, is unfettered and unmoved. The devas revere that great sage who has surpassed all attachments and reached the far shore of existence”. The Commentary on the text explains that once, when Gavampati was residing and meditating in the Añjanavana forest, the Buddha came to visit him together with a great following of monks. As there were not enough accommodations for all of them, some of the *bhikkhus* slept

that covering the eyes indicates a trance. Comparing Gavampati to Śiva, he argues instead that the eyes are covered so as to shield devotees from the potentially destructive power of Gavampati’s glance.

²³ See *inter alia* Shorto 1970: 21–22; Guillon 1983: 52–53; Luce 1969–70: I, 208; Mangrai 1981: 135, 177, n. 140.



FIGURE 2: Miniature metallic image of Gavampati depicted closing his eyes; Wat Huay Duan, Nakhon Sawan; special edition, May 2022 © www.thailandamulet.net

on the sand of the Sarabhū River. In the middle of the night, however, the waters suddenly began to rise and the monks were in danger of drowning or being swept away.²⁴ The Buddha, worried about the situation, ordered Gavampati to stop the water from rising, which he did: using his superpowers, he stays the flow of the stream so that the whole river rears up like a great mountain (Th-a I 109–111; partial trans. Davids 1986: 2: 42–43).²⁵ Przyluski (1926: 246–247) invokes

this as yet more evidence of Gavampati's opposition to the rainy season. The holding back of the waters of the river, however, has less to do with Gavampati as a "God of the Dry Season" (*dieu de la sécheresse*) than with his position as a powerful arhat endowed with supernatural powers which he uses for the well-being of the community.

Borderland Arhat, Missionary, and Patron Saint

Gavampati's combination of withdrawal from the world—whether in Serīsaka or in *samādhi*, or in a forest hermitage—with involvement in the world may be behind another theme prominent to his legend and cult: his specialization in spreading the Buddha's teaching to the borderlands. In the Pali *Samyuttanikāya*

²⁴ This was apparently a perennial problem in the forest of Añjana, at the start of the rainy season when flash floods were apt to occur. For another instance, see the story of the elder Añjanavaniya who put his bed on top of four big stones so that the waters would pass underneath him (Th-a I 136–137).

²⁵ The Buddha performs a similar feat shortly after his Awakening, when he holds back the waters of the Nairāñjana River, a miracle that helps finally convert the Brahmanical ascetic Uruvelā Kassapa. See Vin I 31; trans. Horner 1938–52: IV, 42.

(S V 436–437; trans. Bodhi 2000: 1857), there is a short sutra attributed to Gavampati. Nothing is doctrinally remarkable about it, but it is noteworthy that his sermon—which Gavampati says repeats what he heard from the Buddha—is addressed to the Cetian people who are variously thought to have dwelt in present-day Nepal or in settlements in the region of the upper Ganges or Yamuna River (Malalasekera 1974: I, 911). The picture that emerges, then, is that of Gavampati transmitting the Dharma in a remote region to persons who may never have seen the Buddha.

The theme also appears in the Sanskrit tradition. For instance, in the *Mūla-sarvāstivādaśāstra*, the Buddha tells Gavampati that, henceforth, he should no longer remain in Madhyadeśa (“the Central Region”) but go and reside beyond its borders. The Buddha thereby proclaims Gavampati “the foremost of his disciples who dwell in frontier-lands”.²⁶ The *Mahākarmavibhaṅga* (Mkv 124–125; trans. Lévi 1932: 131) is more specific. It states that Gavampati converted the inhabitants of Suvaṇṇabhūmi, the “Land of Gold”, often identified with the Mon regions of lower Myanmar or central Thailand (Revire 2018). If this Gavampati is indeed the Buddha’s disciple, the account would imply that he was still active more than two centuries after the death of Gotama Buddha, a

chronological difficulty already noted by modern scholars (Lagirdar 2005). In this respect, the Sanskrit text differs from the Pali chronicles, which attribute the mission to the same region (Suvaṇṇabhūmi in Pali) to the monks Soṇa and Uttara, said to have been dispatched there under King Asoka (e.g., Mhv 94; trans. Geiger 1960: 82).

This same overlap with Soṇa and Uttara may be reflected in an intriguing archeological find, made in the Tilominlo Temple in Bagan in 1928, not of one but of two images of the Fat Monk. They were found in a relic chamber flanking a statue of the past Buddha Vessabhū, identified by inscription. Immediately above the relic chamber was a brick pedestal on which an identical image of the Buddha (presumably Gotama) resided, flanked by two disciples identified as Sāriputta and Moggallāna (Duroiselle 1933: 110–111). An implicit parallelism is present here: just as Sāriputta and Moggallāna were the two *aggasāvaka*s (chief disciples) of Gotama, so the two fat monks (presumably two images of Gavampati) appear to have been the two chief disciples of Vessabhū. This is noteworthy since, according to orthodox Theravada tradition (Bv 84; trans. Horner 1975: 82), the two chief disciples of Vessabhū were called Soṇa and Uttara and thus were namesakes of the two missionaries who in the Pali chronicles are sent to convert Suvaṇṇabhūmi.

A number of Southeast Asian texts (both chronicles and inscriptions) work this identification of Gavampati as the converter of Suvaṇṇabhūmi into a full-blown legend. The story in the Pali *Sāsanavaṃsa* may be summarized as follows.

²⁶ See T. 1451, 24: 228a (trans. Guillon 1983: 55); also Przyluski 1926: 243; Lamotte 1949–80: 629n.; and Panglung 1981: 171. Like Gavampati, Mahākaccāyana is also associated with borderlands; he is from Avanti, in the West, a region paradigmatic of the periphery in early Buddhist literature, since it is with regard to Avanti that the Buddha is asked to make special allowances to the *Vinaya* rules for monks living outside the “Central Region” (Vin I 194–195; trans. Horner 1938–52: IV, 263).

Once upon a time, a wizard (*vijjādhara*) had sexual relations with a *nāgī* who, in due time, lays two eggs, which she then abandons out of embarrassment.²⁷ A prince finds the eggs and keeps one, giving the other to his younger brother. Eventually two humans are born from the eggs. At age ten, the boy from the younger brother's egg dies and is reborn as a prince named Gavampati in Mithilā, in India. There, he meets the Buddha, joins the order, and soon becomes our arhat. A bit later, the god Indra takes the boy from the older brother's egg and installs him as a king named Sīharāja in the city of Sudhammapura (Thaton) in lower Myanmar.

In time, Gavampati, who has followed the Buddha in his wanderings, conceives a desire to see his mother again and sets out for his hometown of Mithilā. By virtue of his divine eye, however, he perceives that she has died and been reborn in lower Myanmar, a country inhabited by many hunters and fishermen. Worried that, in such an environment, his mother will grow up a sinner, he resolves to go there and preach to her. Flying through the air, he quickly arrives in the city of Thaton where he meets King Sīharāja, his former brother, and his mother, reborn as a little girl.²⁸ In order to convince his brother of the truth of karmic connections, he arranges for milk to spurt forth into his mouth from the breast of the young girl, his former mother. Impressed by this miracle, King Sīharāja tells Gavampati

that he is the most fantastic being in the world, to which he replies that is not true, for the Buddha is much greater. Sīharāja thereupon expresses a desire to see this Buddha and Gavampati agrees to invite him to come. The Buddha accepts, flies through the air in the eighth year after his enlightenment, and lands in lower Myanmar together with 500 monks. There, he preaches to King Sīharāja and the whole population and establishes them in the three refuges and five precepts. Upon his departure, he leaves six hair relics behind for the establishment of his cult and promises that, after his parinirvana, Gavampati will be able to take one of his tooth relics which he will posthumously transform into 33 tooth relics, one for each of the provinces of the kingdom. And indeed, that is what happens 37 years later. Learning of the Buddha's demise, Gavampati—who apparently has remained in Thaton—flies to Kusinārā, takes a tooth relic from the still burning pyre of the Buddha and conveys it to lower Myanmar where it is miraculously cloned and enshrined all over the kingdom.²⁹

Gavampati's connection with relics in this story is noteworthy. On the one hand, the relics come to legitimize the rule of the king and are used to establish and reinforce the very organization of the state (Shorto 1963). On the other hand, the association with relics would seem to be confirmed by archeology; as Gordon Luce (1969–70: I, 206) points out, images of Gavampati have “frequently [been] found in old relic-chambers—at Śrīkṣetra, Yangon, Pegu, Mandalay, Pagan, etc.”³⁰

²⁷ This is a common initial scenario in Southeast Asian culture-founder myths.

²⁸ The meeting with his mother is not recounted in the *Sāsanavaṃsa* but is found in the Mon chronicles. See Guillon 1983: 56.

²⁹ Sās 35–37 (trans. Law 1952: 40–42). See also Shorto 1970: 16–17; and Bigandet 1979: II, 144–145.

³⁰ We know, from Sri Lankan examples, that those

In this way, Gavampati becomes a kind of patron saint of the Mon people, credited with introducing them to Buddhism and enabling them to lay claim to possessing the very first tooth relic from the Buddha's funeral pyre. As such, he is often portrayed as a founder figure of Thaton. Inscriptions, however, indicate that he was also associated with other cities and regions, and the primacy of his Mon connections in lower Myanmar has thus been challenged by some scholars. Michael Aung-Thwin, rereading the epigraphical record, goes so far as to state: "The earliest evidence we have regarding the Gavampati tradition is found in and concerned with *Upper, not Lower Burma*, and is concerned with the 'establishment' of Śrī Kṣetra and Pagán, the 'quintessential' capitals of the Pyū and Burmese speakers respectively, *not with Thatôn and Mon speakers*" (2005: 85; his emphasis). Yet the earliest inscriptions related to Gavampati in Myanmar, found at Bagan during the reign of Kyanzittha (1084–1113 CE), are all in Mon, thus underscoring the continued centrality of Mon cultural agency in the material articulation of his cult (see also Donald Stadtner, this Special Edition).

Gavampati and the Buddha

It is commonplace to say that the Buddha's disciples, in so far as they preach the same Dharma, act for the Buddha in his absence. As a missionary

responsible for bringing the Buddha and/or his relics to the land—such as the Elder Mahinda—were often represented inside stupas; somewhat the same thing seems to have happened here. See Thūp 235; trans. Jayawickrama 1971: 118.

monk and frequenter of borderlands, Gavampati was often called to do this. For this reason, perhaps, Paul Lévy (1957: 87) called him the Buddha's "understudy". Even today in Thailand, as Lagirarde (2003: 155) has shown, there are iconographic settings that have an image of the Fat Monk/Gavampati/Sangkachai sharing a place of honor with the Blessed One.

Gavampati, of course, is not the Buddha. Yet the tradition took pains to make that point. One of the ways it did this was by portraying him iconographically as a small, squat, and obese figure. Luce (1969–70: I, 208) worried that he knew of "no text which says that Gavampati was abnormally fat", but a series of Pali, Thai, and Lao manuscripts studied by Lagirarde (2000: 76) explain the reason for this obesity and go on to give a quite different final life story of the arhat which may be summarized as follows:

At the time of the Buddha, a monk named Brahmaputta lived in a forest monastery in Hemabhūmi (i.e., Suvannabhūmi, the Land of Gold). He was very, very handsome, so much so that he was often confused with the Buddha. This caused problems because, when he went out on his alms round, people would get excited thinking the Buddha had come to town and then would be disappointed. So as to put an end to such confusions, Brahmaputta used his supernatural powers to change his appearance: he shrunk the size of his body and made himself quite ugly and fat. At the same time, he changed his name, calling himself Gavampati. Years pass and Gavampati, thinking he will enter parinirvana, flies to the Jetavana

monastery to take leave of the Buddha. Upon his return to Hemabhūmi, however, he remembers that he had not yet converted a man named Sambala whom he must convert.³¹ Accordingly, he decides to delay his parinirvana, assembles a crowd of disciples and laypersons and preaches a lengthy sermon to them, not unlike the Buddha from his deathbed. This does the trick for Sambala—who is in the audience—and who promptly takes refuge in the Triple Gem. Gavampati then enters into parinirvana, which the text likens to a city of crystal called Nibbāna (Lagiarde 2000: 64–68; see also Gregory Kourilsky and Javier Schnake, this Special Edition).

There then follows an account of Gavampati's funeral, lasting a whole week, the bier and the platform being provided by the gods. Most extraordinary is that the Buddha himself comes all the way from India to officiate at the ceremony and that he stays right through to the end. He lights the funeral pyre in person and then gathers Gavampati's relics which he asks his disciples to take back to India where they are enshrined in the Ghositārāma monastery in Vesālī. He also preaches a sermon that results in the recently converted Sambala attaining arhatship (Ibid., 69–71).

Lagiarde does not mention this, but what we appear to have here is a striking reversal of the Mon tradition in which Gavampati attends the funeral of Gotama Buddha and brings a tooth relic back with him. It is almost as though the two figures have traded positions. At

the same time, this narrative further glorifies Gavampati by portraying him as if he were treated by the Buddha as the Buddha himself. Perhaps the story also serves to counter the Sanskritic tradition in which he survives the Blessed One only to refuse to attend the First Council.

Concluding Remarks

It need hardly be pointed out that traditions about Gavampati are multifarious and diverse. It is also clear that they grew and evolved in a variety of directions. Rather than try to reduce their diversity to a single theme, without addressing the question of whether there were or are many Gavampatis, I would like to respect their multiplicity which strikes me as already present in Sanskrit texts and the Pali Canon.

Instead of attempting to review them, I would like to end with a brief note of my own. At one point in his important article on the "Gavampati Tradition in Burma", H.L. Shorto (1970: 25) asks "what were the sources in Indian tradition from which the Burmese Gavampati legends sprang?" His immediate answer is "they are hardly to be sought in the Pali Canon", and his final conclusion is "I believe that the ultimate source of our legend is to be found in Northern [Sanskrit] Buddhist tradition". More carefully, Emmanuel Guillon (1983: 55) and François Lagiarde (2000: 75), in their invaluable analyses of the present Southeast Asian legends and cult of Gavampati, end up pointing to non-Sinhalese, "non-orthodox" traditions as a primary source of Gavampati lore in the region. In this, they reflect current scholarly trends to complexify the

³¹ This theme of converting "one last person" that one is due to convert is also found in the Buddha's biography, in the story of his preaching to Subhadra from his deathbed. See Strong 2001: 181–182.

picture of Buddhism in northern, or mainland, Southeast Asia as having roots other than Sri Lankan Theravada.³²

Over 30 years ago, in a book on the arhat Upagupta (Strong 1992: 4), I noted that one of the extraordinary things about him—and indeed one of the appealing things for some devotees—was that there was no mention of him in the Pali Canon or in the standard Sri Lankan commentaries. As we have seen, this is not the case with Gavampati. For him, the seeds of later Southeast

Asian traditions may be found in both Sanskrit traditions and the Pali Canon and Commentaries. Thus, a final account of his polymorphic personality seems more a matter of ongoing “syncretism” rather than one of confrontation and survival. But it is a syncretism of a particular sort—one that reinterprets and expands upon the Pali and Sanskrit traditions in order to transform Gavampati into a major figure in the Southeast Asian Buddhist pantheon.

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³² François Bizot (e.g., 2000) and others have dedicated themselves to recovering still extant elements of this “lost”, and persecuted tradition.

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