




Aspiring to Be a Buddha and Life Before Liberation: The Colophons of the Siamese Questions of King Milinda

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Abstract

This article presents the colophons of a Buddhist text, the Questions of King Milinda, as seen in manuscripts found mainly in Central Thailand. Through a survey of over seventy Pāli palm-leaf manuscripts and a Thai samut khoi (folding book), the colophons reveal information not only related to textual transmission, but also to the social and soteriological ambitions of the communities that created them. Inspired by the ideology of merit, which promises good karmic returns for presenting and preserving the Dharma in this world, donors and scribes produced various kinds of aspirations (Pāli: *patthanā*). These aspirations are recorded in colophons. In this group of manuscripts, it is not uncommon to find that the preferred path to Nirvana among stakeholders is to become a Buddha. This is somewhat contrary to the general assumption that the way of arhat is preferred for a community that upheld the Theravāda tradition. Moreover, the quest to be fully awakened and omniscient is shown not to be confined to kings or to the nobility, but shared by a wider layer of society. The colophon of the samut khoi was sponsored by the noble royal ladies (*pavaranārī*) from the court of Ayutthaya. It gives us a glimpse into what—in a past era—was considered good and righteous, both materially and spiritually, by the inner circle of the ruling establishment. Accordingly, colophons deserve special attention as they provide information not only about their respective manuscripts but also about the socio-cultural aspects of the community that preserved and transmitted them.

Keywords

samut khoi, *patthanā*, siam, *milindapañha*, manuscript colophon

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Aspiring to Be a Buddha and Life Before Liberation: The Colophons of the Siamese *Questions of King Milinda*

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THE *QUESTIONS OF KING Milinda* (Pāli: the *Milindapañha*) is a Buddhist text presented in the form of questions and answers between a Bactrian Greek ruler, King Milinda (Menander I, r. 155/165–130 BCE) and a Buddhist monk, Nāgasena. It is believed to have been written down around the first century CE in northwestern India, most probably in Gāndhārī.¹ However, at present, the text is only extant in Pāli

This article is part of my doctoral work done at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Mahidol University. I am particularly grateful to Peter Skilling for his ever-precious guidance during my course of studying the various aspects of the *Milindapañha*. I would also like to thank Trent Walker for translating the Thai and Khmer texts found in the manuscripts and inscriptions. My gratitude also goes to Yuwaret Wuttheerapon, Pratsaneeporn Phlaykumnerd, Santi Wongcharoonlak, Poonyawee Songserm, Chung Dipprakhone, Ratanaphorn Saadoat, and Sawinee Khonkhan of the Department of Manuscript, National Library of Thailand; Santi Pakdeekham, Somneuk Hongprayoo, and their team from the Fragile Palm Leaves Foundation and the Henry Ginsburg Fund for copies of the manuscripts; Giuliano Giustarini and the two reviewers for their valuable input and suggestions; Rosemarie Oong, Sherene Liew, and Vijaya Samarawickrama for their assistance.

1 Richard Salomon, *The Buddhist Literature of Ancient Gandhāra* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2018), 26.

and Chinese.² The founder of the Pali Text Society, Thomas W. Rhys Davids, considered this piece of work as “undoubtedly the master-piece of Indian prose, and indeed is the best book of its class, from a literary point of view, that had then been produced in any country.”³ Indeed it is. The text is quite popular, especially among the communities of the Theravāda tradition. Both its Pāli and Chinese recensions have been translated into multiple modern languages.⁴

The questions posed by King Milinda cover a wide variety of doctrinal topics. They range from simple questions, like “what are the distinguishing marks of mental phenomena?” to dilemmas in the Buddhist system, such as “why pay homage to the Buddha when he has already been fully liberated and is not around to accept the homage?”⁵ Nāgasena answers each of these questions skillfully, at times quoting the unimpeachable word of the Buddha (*buddhavacana*) and providing multiple similes to aid understanding of complex philosophical positions. For example, consider the simile of the “chariot” in which he emphasizes that a person’s name is merely a designation of aggregates (*khandha*), namely, body parts and mental activities coming together, as “no person is found,” comparing it to when the parts of a chariot are rightly assembled, the word “chariot” is spoken.⁶

2 On the text and its Pāli editions, see Oskar von Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pāli Literature* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), 82–86; Vilhelm Trenckner, ed., *Milindapañho: Being Dialogues Between King Milinda and Buddhist Sage Nāgasena* (Edinburgh: William and Norgate, 1880; hereafter Mil). For the Siamese Pāli edition, see Cattasalla Thera and Dhammapāmoḁkha, *Milindapañhā* (Bangkok: Mahāmaḁaḁurājavidyālaya, 1923). Pāli is the classical language of the Theravāda Buddhist canon. The texts in the canon are collectively referred to as the *Tripitaka*, and they are revered as “the word of the Buddha.” For more information on Pāli, see Wilhelm Geiger, *A Pāli Grammar*, trans. Batakrishna Ghosh, ed. Kenneth R. Norman (Bristol: Pali Text Society, 2013 [1994], XXIII–XXX); 那先比丘經 (*Nāgasena Bhikṣu Sūtra*), T1670B.

3 Thomas W. Rhys Davids, trans., *The Questions of King Milinda: Translation from Pāli* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1890), xlviii.

4 For a provisional list of translations into modern languages, see Peter Skilling, “Problems with Milinda (I): The Opening Verses and Prose of the Printed Siamese Milindapañhā,” *Journal of Centre for Buddhist Studies (Sri Lanka)* 8 (2010): 1–24 at 14–18.

5 Mil: 95–102; Isaline B. Horner, *Milinda’s Questions*, vol. I (London: Luzac & Co., 1963; hereafter *Milinda’s Questions I*), 132–42.

6 *Na puggalo upalabbhati* (no person is found/got at or no permanent individuality [no soul]). See *Milinda’s Questions I*, 34–38 and n. 2 at 34; Rhys Davids, *Questions of King Milinda*, 40;

The exceptional skill and ability of Nāgasena in answering these questions has been regarded as the embodiment of intelligence among the Buddhist communities. One should aspire to be as eloquent and wise as Nāgasena. In Southeast Asia, the aspiration (*patthanā*) to be like Nāgasena goes back at least as early as the twelfth century CE in the form of an inscription on a votive tablet in Pagan, Upper Burma.⁷ In Cambodia, they also appear in two Khmer inscriptions of the *Grande Inscription d'Angkor*, IMA 32 (1687 CE) and IMA 38 (1701 CE).⁸ The latter reads:

I humbly ask for intelligence, the skill to respond to riddles and resolve them in debate, just like Nāgasena who answered all the riddles before King Mālin [Milinda], resolving them without a hitch.⁹

In Thailand, these kinds of aspirations are found in the colophons of the *Questions of King Milinda* manuscripts. The tradition of Milinda-Nāgasena in Thailand is very much alive. The first printed Thai translation of the text was published in 1919 CE, by the Vajirañāṇa Library, and was met with great enthusiasm both in the capital and up-country, with the result that the print output did not meet the demand.¹⁰ Later, the library published an updated edition.¹¹ Since then, other Thai translations by different authors have been issued. Traditionally, the *Questions of King Milinda* texts, just like other Pāli literature, were preserved in palm-leaf manuscripts, as were their Thai adaptations; occasionally they were preserved in *samut khoi*, or accordion-style paper folding books.

Mil: 25–28; compare Léon Feer, ed., *Samyuttanikāya*, part 1 (London: Pali Text Society, 1991 [1884]), 135.20–21.

7 Gordon H. Luce, *Old Burma: Early Pagan*, vol. 1: *Texts* (New York: Artibus Asiae and Institute of Fine Arts, 1969), 76.

8 Lewitz Saveros, “IX. Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33,” *Bulletin de l’Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient* 60 (1973): 205–42 at 228; Pou-Lewitz, Saveros, “VII. Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor 34 et 38,” *Bulletin de l’Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient* (1975): 283–353 at 304.

9 Translated from the Khmer language by Trent Walker, email 9 July 2020.

10 Skilling, “Problems with Milinda (I),” 2.

11 *Milindapañhā chabap phim khrang thi song*, in *three parts* (Bangkok: National Library of Thailand, 2006 [1925]).

Interestingly, the textual traditions of the Siamese Pāli *Milindapañhā*, edited by Cattasalla Thera and Dhammapānokka, and the Pali Text Society's *Milindapañho*, edited by Vilhelm Trenckner, the latter of which is based primarily on manuscripts from Ceylon, differ considerably.¹² There are Milinda-Nāgasena dialogues found in the Siamese edition that are absent in Trenckner's. For instance, the king asks: when a person dies, does he go to the next world as a radiance or as an apparition of an elephant, a horse, or a chariot?¹³ Undoubtedly, this dialogue seeks to address an important yet delicate issue in Buddhist philosophy—what passes from one life to another. Nāgasena gives an elaborative answer by using some similes that are not found elsewhere in the text. One wonders why such a dialogue is absent in other recensions.

Little is known as to how and why the two Pāli editions evolved according to different trajectories. In order to understand this better, I have studied the transmission history of this text, focusing on its Siamese recensions by examining what is embedded in the manuscripts. Over the course of two years of research, I managed to gain access to more than seventy manuscripts of the *Questions of King Milinda* in the Pāli language, which circulated mainly in central Thailand. The majority of them are found at the National Library of Thailand; some are in temples (*wat*) in the central and southern parts of the country.¹⁴ The National Library is the richest repository and custodian of manuscripts in Thailand. With a staggering 225,733 palm-leaf manuscripts alone, it dwarfs any temple collection.¹⁵ These *Questions of King Milinda* manuscripts are not all copies of each other or specimens in the same line of transmission but are made up of different recensions

12 See Kogen Mizuno, “ミリンダ問経類について” (On the Recensions of the Milindapañha), *Komazawa Daigaku kenkyu kyo* 17 (1959): 17–55 at 37–40; Thich Minh Chau, *Milindapañha and Nāgasenabhikṣusūtra: A Comparative Study (Through Pāli and Chinese sources)* (Calcutta: Firma KL Mukhopadhyay, 1964), 226–27; Skilling, “Problems with Milinda (I),” 1–24.

13 Cattasalla Thera et al., *Milindapañhā*, 117–20.

14 Wat Paramaiyikawat in Nonthaburi and Wat Samuh Nimit in Surat Thani province.

15 Suwakhon Siriwongworawat, ed., *The National Library of Thailand* (Bangkok: The Fine Art Department, 2000). On accessing the National Library manuscripts, see E. J. Ooi, “Survey of the Pāli Milindapañha Manuscripts Kept at the National Library of Thailand: A Brief Catalogue,” *Journal of the Siam Society* 109, part 1 (2021): 169–210 at 175.

and were copied in different periods of Thai history. Evidence in the colophon is particularly revealing. This article will consider several examples of colophons that reveal aspects of the manuscripts' production.¹⁶

Colophons

A colophon carries information about the manuscript. Colophons usually appear at the end of the text on the last folio. They can also be found on the first, or title, folio at the beginning of a text. The language of the colophons under review here is either Pāli or Thai. Sometimes it is a mixture, with Pāli words embedded in a Thai-language colophon.

In central Thailand, colophons were generally written in two scripts, Khom (ขอม) and Thai. “Khom Pāli,” sometimes transliterated as “Khom Bāli” (ขอมบาลี), is used to write the Pāli language, and “Khom Thai” (ขอมไทย) is used to write the Thai language.¹⁷ The Khom script is a cognate of Khmer script; at times it is also called *Akson Kampbucha* (fig. 1) in the manuscript. Another script used in central Thailand is the Mon script (อักษรมอญ). So far, I have only accessed two copies of Pāli *Milindapañha* written in Mon script; one is kept at the National Library, and the other one is preserved at Wat Paramaiyikawat in Nonthaburi, part of the Bangkok metropolitan area.

DATING SYSTEM

Another important piece of information in the study of the transmission history of a manuscript is the date it was copied. The date of the manuscript

16 For a complete listing of the *Milindapañha* manuscript colophons preserved at the National Library of Thailand, see Appendix I in Ooi, “Survey of the Pāli *Milindapañha* Manuscripts,” 169–210 at 187–207. For more examples of Thai colophons, see Harald Hundius, “The Colophons of 30 Pāli Manuscripts from Northern Thailand,” *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 14 (1990): 1–173.

17 For more information on scripts used in Thai manuscripts, see Peter Skilling and Santi Pakdeekham, “Manuscripts in Central Thailand—Samut Khoi from Phetchaburi Province,” *Manuscript Studies* 2, no. 1 (2017): 125–50 at 126–29.



FIGURE 1. The title of NL2018, written in Khom Pāli: *Phra Milin[da]pañhā-vitthāra-kambūjjakṣarachvāt phūk ๓* (The extensive version of the *Questions of King Milinda* written in *Kamphucha* script, fascicle no. six). Courtesy of the National Library of Thailand, manuscript code 2018, fascicle 6.

helps not only to build a chronology of the text's transmission but also to track the evolution of its textual tradition. The date can be found either embedded in the colophon (fig. 3, highlighted in a box) or written separately at the side of the title folio. The dating follows the Buddhist Era (พุทธศักราช, BE) system, appearing in the manuscript as *Phuttha-sakkarat*. It also uses the sexagenary system, which is a combination of the Siamese duodecimal animal cycle and the numeric decimal series, or the *Sok* (ศก) system indicating the year, from the first to the tenth year of the decade.¹⁸ The Sok system number points to the last digit of the year in *Chula-sakkarat* (จุลศักราช, Lesser Śaka Era [CS]).¹⁹ Each number in the Sok system has a name derived from the Pāli language.²⁰ For example, the date of manuscript NL1781 is given as follows (fig. 2):

18 The twelve animals are: rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig. Barend J. Terwiel, "Tai Peoples and the Computation of Time, a Comparative Perspective," *Oriens Extremus* 28, no. 1 (1981): 62–106 at 67 and 98.

19 BE – 1181 = CS. See Wisut Busayakun, "Calendars and Eras Used in Thailand / วิสุทธิ์บุษยกุล. ปฏิทินและศักราชที่ใช้ในประเทศไทย," *Journal of the Royal Institute of Thailand* 29, no. 2 (2004): 468–78 at 477.

20 The years of the decades are: first, *Ekasok*; second, *Thosok*; third, *Trisok*; fourth, *Chat-tawasok*; fifth, *Benchasok*; sixth, *Chorsok*; seventh, *Saptasok*; eighth, *Atthasok*; ninth, *Noppasok*; tenth, *Samritthisok*. See Terwiel, "Tai Peoples and the Computation of Time," 67.

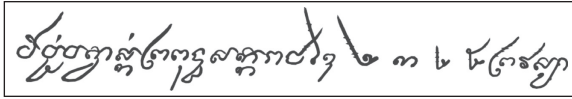


FIGURE 2. Date of the manuscript NL1781 at the title folio. Image drawn by the author from a National Library of Thailand manuscript, code 1781, fascicle 16.

Pi Cho Chattawasok Phra Phuttha-sakkarat dai 2345 Phra Phansa (The auspicious year is 2345 BE (1802 CE), the Year of the Dog, era *Chattawasok*, [the fourth year of the decade])

The ordinal number “fourth” here means in the year of *Chula-sakkarat* that ends in four (2231 BE minus 1181 = 1164 CS). Therefore, one sexagenary cycle will have the duodecimal series repeated five times and the decimal series six times.

The aspirations (*patthanā*) mentioned in the colophon generally express wishes that the donor seeks to fulfill for helping to preserve and spread the dharma. Contributing to the copying of manuscripts is considered a meritorious deed capable of yielding good karmic fruits in the future. This ideology of merit promises a favorable rebirth for the scribe and donor, culminating in his or her eventual realization of Nirvana. Some manuscripts have a simple formula, *nibbāna-paccayo hotu*, which means “may it be a contributing cause for Nirvana.”²¹ However, some aspirants are more ambitious and aspire to become what they see as the epitome of humanity and knowledge: the Buddha.

Aspiring to Be a Buddha

In the *Word of the Doctrines (Dhammapada)*, verse 354 indicates that the gift of Dharma exceeds all gifts and that a manuscript is considered the physical

21 For more examples, see Peter Skilling, “For Merit and Nirvana: The Production of Art in the Bangkok Period,” *Arts Asiatiques* 62 (2007): 76–94. Nirvana, a state of perfect bliss and happiness, in the Theravāda tradition, can be attained either by following the path to become a full buddha, or the path of *arhat* where one achieves personal realisation of Nirvana under another buddha. The third way is to become a *pacceka-buddha* (a lone Buddha), who attains enlightenment without the guidance of a teacher but is unable to guide others to enlightenment.

embodiment of the Dharma.²² As I discuss below, the merit earned from this kind of contribution is considered vast enough to allow even an aspirant to become a Buddha. Moreover, in this survey, the goal to become a Buddha is not limited to rulers or the nobility but also extended to lay contributors and the scribes themselves. However, it is noteworthy that most of the colophons record the meritorious deeds of the elite, including rulers and high-status individuals, because only they had the means to sponsor manuscripts (or images, or reliquaries, for that matter). This does not mean that only they aspired to be full Buddhas. Ordinary people would also seek merit, in other less ostentatious ways, but would rarely record their actions.²³

A common phrase in the colophons of those manuscripts classified as the royal edition, copied from the First to the Fourth Reigns of the Bangkok period (1782–1868 CE), reads as follows:²⁴

*iminā puññatejēna milindapaṇḥālikkhitvāna pāramiyo pariṇiṇṇo bud-
dho homi anāgate*

Having copied down the *Questions of King Milinda*, with the power of this merit, in the future, may I fulfill the Perfections and become a Buddha.

Thai monarchs have customarily sponsored the copying of the Buddhist scriptures as a means to sustain the Dispensation of the Buddha.²⁵ Thai rulers have been presented as Bodhisattvas (Pāli: *Bodhisattas*, Buddhas-to-be) since

22 The Dhammapada is a well-known collection of sayings of the Buddha in verses and it is a part of the Pāli canon of Theravāda Buddhism. On the gift of Dharma, see Oskar von Hinüber and Kenneth R. Norman, eds., *Dhammapada* (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1995), 99, verse 354.

23 Peter Skilling, in a note dated 19 November 2020.

24 For examples of manuscripts, see NL327, NL331, NL332, NL333, and NL335. Unfortunately, only the first half of the “royal” *Milindapaṇḥa* manuscript copied in the Fifth Reign is available; therefore, I am unable to assess its colophon.

25 The Dispensation of the Buddha (Pāli: *sāsana*) generally refers to the teaching or the doctrine of the Buddha. For more information on why the Thai monarchs sponsor the production of Buddhist texts, see the explanation given by King Rama V in the English translation of the preface of the first printed royal edition of the *Tripitāka* by the King of Siam published in 1894–95 CE, in Robert Chalmers, “The King of Siam’s Edition of the Pāli *Tripitāka*,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (January 1898): 1–10.

the Ayutthaya era (1351–1767 CE). This notion is foregrounded in the preamble to a law dated in 1433 CE: “His Highness has set his heart on the performance of the Perfection of Giving [*dānapāramī*] with the aspiration [*patthanā*] for realization of awakening [*bodhiñāna*], to lead all beings to freedom from the fears of cyclic existence [*samsāra*] and the suffering of the woeful realm.”²⁶

The Perfection of Giving is one of the ten principal virtues cultivated by a Bodhisattva.²⁷ The ten virtues described in the Theravāda tradition are: giving (*dāna*), morality (*sīla*), renunciation (*nekkhamma*), wisdom (*paññā*), energy (*viriya*), patience (*khanti*), truth-speaking (*sacca*), resolute determination (*adhiṭṭhāna*), loving-kindness (*mettā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*).²⁸ In order to become a Buddha, these ten virtues need to be developed to the highest degree. The Perfection of Giving aims to eliminate attachment to one’s own possessions, and therefore, part of the training includes giving away what is dearest and most difficult to give. This kind of giving is beyond the capacity of ordinary people. A famous example of this act is the *Vessantara Jātaka* in the *Birth Stories (Jātaka)*, where King Vessantara gives away his wife and children to a Brahmin when the latter asks for them.²⁹ It is said that the earth trembled seven times when this happened.³⁰ This act has become the personification of giving at the highest level. In exemplifying this, the colophon of NL4595 carries part of the *Vessantara Jātaka* story, which begins with the section where King Vessantara is about to encounter

26 Peter Skilling, “King, Sangha and Brahmins: Ideology, Ritual and Power in Pre-modern Siam,” in *Buddhism, Power and Political Order*, ed. Ian Harris (London: Routledge, 2007), 182–215 at 188.

27 Viggo Fausbøll, ed., *The Jātaka together with its commentary: being tales of the anterior births of Gotama Buddha*, vol. 1 (London: Pali Text Society, 1962 [1877]; hereafter Ja I), 73; Henry C. Norman, ed., *The Commentary on the Dhammapada I* (London: Pali Text Society, 1970 [1906]), 84.9. For the ten virtues, see N. A. Jayawickrama, ed., *Buddhavamsa and Cariyāpiṭaka* (London: Pali Text Society, 1974; hereafter Bv), 6, verses 76 and 77.

28 Chapter I: verses 76 and 77, in Bv, 6; Isaline B. Horner, trans., *Chronicle of Buddhas: Buddhavamsa and Basket of Conduct: Cariyāpiṭaka* (London: Pali Text Society, 1975), xiii–xv, 8.

29 Tale No. 547, Ja IV, 479–593. For the dilemma of giving away his wife and children, see Mil, 274–84; Isaline B. Horner, trans., *Milinda’s Questions*, vol. 2 (London: Luzac & Co., 1969; hereafter *Milinda’s Questions 2*), 95–109.

30 Mil, 113; *Milinda’s Questions 1*, 158.

the Brahmin and knows that his Perfection of Giving is to be fulfilled on that day.³¹ The following colophon records what he said to his son Jāli on this occasion:

*anāgate |
 utṭhehi jāli patitṭha poraṇaṃ viya dissati
 brāhmaṇaṃ viya passāmi nandiyo mābhikirare ti
 ahaṃ pi tāta passāmi yo so brāhmāva dissati
 atthiko viya āyāti³² [atithi no bhavissati]³³*

In the future:

Get up now, Jāli, and be a support: it is as if something from the past is in view.

I might just see a brahmin, and delight overwhelms me.

[Hearing this, the boy said]:

I see him too, dear one. He certainly seems to be a brahmin. Perhaps he is a suppliant, [and will be our guest].³⁴

Unfortunately, the verse ends at the penultimate line, and the following folios of the manuscript are missing. Nevertheless, the donor or scribe must have been aware that, in aspiring to become a Buddha, the ultimate act of giving, as in Vessantara's case, has to be fulfilled in the future.

The quest by members of the nobility to become a Buddha is reflected in manuscript NL2921. Phaya Phisan was the sponsor. It was copied by the monk Phra Sa in the Year of the Snake, era Ekasok or the first year of the decade, when 2,411 years of the Dispensation of the Buddha had elapsed (1868 CE). This manuscript carries the same stock phrase concerning the fulfillment of Perfections and the becoming of a Buddha as the royal editions. In another colophon, whose text expresses the same aspiration to become a

31 Viggo Fausbøll, ed., *The Jātaka together with its commentary: being tales of the anterior births of Gotama Buddha*, VI (London: Pali Text Society, 1964 [1896]; hereafter Ja VI), 541.6–7.

32 The manuscript ends here.

33 Cf. verses 2117 and 2118, Ja VI, 541–42.

34 Translation adopted from Naomi Appleton and Sarah Shaw, trans., *The Ten Great Birth Stories of the Buddha: The Mahānīpāta of the Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*, vol. 2 (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2015), 595.

Buddha, the scribe is a member of the monastic order. Manuscript NL11730 records the monk's contribution:

มหเสงอุษาหะเพียรพญายามเขียรมลินระปะฤษหนาให้ได้ทันสร่าง.³⁵

[Venerable] Mahāseung made an effort to write the *Questions of King Milinda* to finish [it in time].

The colophon also records that early in the Bangkok period, a group of five lay devotees (ประสก) came together in the Year of the Rabbit (1783 CE), era Benchasok or the fifth year of the decade, to make the *Questions of King Milinda* manuscript (หนังสือ), possibly in the context of sustaining the Dispensation (สร้างไว้ในศาสนา). They are:

Lay devotee Sālīkā [ประสกสาสิกกา]

Lay devotee *Than* In [ท่านสีกาอิน]

Than Nā [ท่านหนา]

Lay devotee *Than* Dī and female lay devotee Chan [ท่านประสกศี
สีกาจัน]

Coming together to perform a good deed and creating group merit is a common practice. Despite the names appearing separately on different palm-leaf fascicles, each mention shares the same stock colophon at its conclusion—"In the future, may I fulfill the Perfections and become a Buddha."

The word "Dispensation" or *Śāsana* (ศาสนา), mentioned earlier, signifies not only the teaching of the Buddha but rather a specific period when the Buddha's teaching will endure before it is obscured by the ignorance of humanity. According to the Theravāda tradition, this period, which is generally regarded as the Dispensation of the Buddha (Pāli: *buddhasāsana*), will last for only five thousand years after the demise of the Blessed One.³⁶ Therefore, it is believed that performing good deeds, such as sponsoring the production

³⁵ The sentence is not complete.

³⁶ Thomas W. Rhys Davids and J. Estlin Carpenter, eds., *The Sumaṅgala-vilāsini, Buddhaghoṣa's Commentary on the Dīgha Nikāya*, part I (London: Pali Text Society, 1968), 25.16–17; Wilhem Geiger, ed., *The Mahāvamsa* (London: Pali Text Society, 1908), 19, verse 38. See also



FIGURE 3. Colophon of NLS008 dated 1686 CE (in box) written in the Thai language in Khom Thai script. The colophon is written on an independent palm-leaf folio, placed at the end of the fascicle. Courtesy of the National Library of Thailand, manuscript code 5008, fascicle 1.

of manuscripts and dedicating them to the promulgation of the Dispensation, will bring great merit. This idea is reflected in the colophon of NL5008, copied in 1686 CE, which is also the oldest dated manuscript in this selection (fig. 3):

พระญามิลินท ผูก ๑ ข้าพเจ้าผู้ชื้ออุบาสกมมุชิต ได้เอาใจลงในพระศาสนา ณ วัดกลาย [กงวย] และได้สร้างพระยามิลินทปัญหาปริศนาคัมภีร์ ๑ จบบริบูรณ์ ๑๖ ผูก ไว้สำหรับ พระศาสนาให้บริบูรณ์ถ้าน ๕๐๐๐ พระวัสสา เมื่อสร้างนั้น พุทธศักราช ๒๒๒๙ พระวัสสา เศษสังขยาได้ ๑๐ เดือน กับ ๑๒ วัน สำเร็จในวันศุกร์ เดือน ๕ ขึ้น ๒ ค่ำปีชาล อัฐศก แล้ว ข้าพเจ้าขอเป็นปัจฉัยแก่นิพพาน ในอนาคตกาลภายภาคหน้า นั้นเกิด แลข้าพเจ้าผู้ได้เขียนหนังสือนี้เล่าไชรั ขอเป็น อัครสาวกพระเจ้าเบื้องหน้านั้นเล่าเกิด.

Fascicle one of King Milinda (*Phaya Milinda*). I, a layman by the name of Dhammajota, devoted myself to the Dispensation of the Buddha at Wat Kluai, sponsored this manuscript of the *Questions of King Milinda*, complete in sixteen fascicles, to be established in the Dispensation of the Buddha for the full five thousand years. As for the time I sponsored it, it was in 2229 of the Buddhist era, plus ten months and twelve days, completed on a Friday, the fifth month on the second waxing day, the Year of the Tiger, era *Atthasok* or the eighth year of the decade. I humbly aspire for the conditions for Nirvana in the future. May I, the person who copied this manuscript, be a foremost disciple of a Buddha in the future.³⁷

Étienne Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism: From the Origins to the Śaka Era*, trans. Sara Webb-Boin (Louvain: Institut Orientaliste, 1988), 196.

37 Input by Trent Walker, personal communication, 14 February 2020.

Two individuals are present in this colophon. One is the sponsor, Dhammajota, who aspires for Nirvana, and the other is the scribe, who wishes to be the foremost disciple of a future Buddha.

The desire to be born in the time of a future Buddha, especially the next fully awakened Buddha (*sammāsambuddha*), Maitreya, is displayed in another colophon, NL4594:³⁸

ขอให้ชาตินพรสี่อารยเมตไตรโนอนาวาร[ณ]ญาณโนนแล

May I be reborn in time for Sri Arya Maitreya, who has unobstructed [omniscient] knowledge, in that distanced future.

There are two sentences preceding this line in the colophon. The first is the Pāli stock phrase on the aspiration to become a Buddha. The second is *nibbāna-paccayo homi* (may I be the contributing cause for Nirvana).³⁹ The aspiration to be the contributing cause for Nirvana is also seen embodied, with some differences, in Sumedha, the Bodhisattva in the time of Dīpankara Buddha. Just before taking the vow to become a Buddha, Sumedha thought: “There is no use of crossing over [the ocean of cyclic existence] alone, and having awareness of my own strength, I resolve to reach omniscience and cause the world together with its gods to cross over [*santāressam sadevake*].”⁴⁰ This resolution was made in front of Dīpankara Buddha, who then foretold that Sumedha would become Gotama Buddha. Similarly, a fourteenth-century inscription found in the early Thai kingdom

38 According to the tradition, the current Dispensation will only last five thousand years, followed by a long period where the Buddha’s teaching will be completely obscured until the appearance of the next Buddha, Maitreya. See Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism*, 191–98. Maitreya (Pāli: *Metteyya*) is mentioned in the Pāli canon. See J. Estlin Carpenter, ed., *The Dīgha Nikāya* III (London: Pali Text Society, 1976 [1911]), 75–77; Maurice Walshe, trans., *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: Translation from the Dīgha Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995 [1987]), 403–4; Bv, 101 (chapter XXVII, verse 19); Horner, *Chronicle of Buddhas*, 97.

39 Curiously, the verb *to be* (*bhū*) in the second sentence has changed from the usual stock *may this be* (*hotu*) to *may I be* (*homī*).

40 Ja I, 14; Bv, 12 (chapter II, verses 55–57); Horner, *Chronicle of Buddhas*, 14–15.

of Sukhothai indicates that the chief monk (*saṅgharāja*), who was also the preceptor of King Mahādharmarājā I (r. 1347–1368/1374), set down his aspirations in the colophon of a cosmological text, the *Lokappadīpasāra*, which he composed: “By the merit that has been well stored, may I, until the attainment of the excellent Buddhahood in the process of becoming, be always the one who causes the welfare of the world and full of refuge [to others].”⁴¹

Furthermore, according to the *Chronicle of Buddhas* (*Buddhavaṃsa*), meeting a living, fully awakened Buddha (*sattbāradassanaṃ*) is one of the eight conditions an aspirant must fulfill for the resolve (*buddhabhāvāya abhinīhāra*) to be successful.⁴² Therefore, meeting Maitreya becomes imperative in this quest.

This selection of colophons demonstrates that a particular path to attaining final bliss by way of becoming a Buddha seems to have been a favored choice among donors and scribes. Even though this path is more demanding and time consuming than that of the *arhat*, there are nevertheless individuals who, out of altruistic intent and the desire to give their best, would take up these challenges.⁴³ The quest to become a Buddha is also taught by certain monks, as reflected in NL4596, copied in 2230 of the Buddhist Era (1687 CE), the Year of the Rabbit, era Nopphasok, or the ninth year of the decade:

อินทปัญญายภิกขุนาสัพพัญญูปุทธภาวปณฺธุณฺเตนอิมํสิกขาเปตํ | อุบาสิกา
 ายเปนอุปการ |

41 Translation adapted from Alexander B. Griswold and Prasert ṅa Nagara, “The Epigraphy of Mahādharmarājā I of Sukhodaya, Epigraphic and Historical Studies, No. 11, Part II,” *Journal of the Siam Society* 61, part 2 (1973): 91–128 at 93–94. *anena puññena susambhatena sayambbutaṃ yāva ca pāpuṇe varam niranataram lokabittassa kāraṅko*. Later, the same monk also repeats his wish to become a Buddha in a gold-leaf inscription using the words *buddho bhavissāmi anāgate bhava* (may I become a Buddha in a future existence) (128 and n. 10).

42 Bv, 12 (chapter II, verse 58); Horner, *Chronicle of Buddhas*, 15; Ja I, 14.5.

43 Gotama Buddha went through an intensive training of four incalculable (*asaṅkheyya*) eons (*kappa*) and a hundred thousand world cycles from the day he made the resolve in front of Dipankara Buddha to his Awakening. See Ja I, 15; Mil, 232; Horner, *Milinda’s Questions* 2, 34.

[Pāli: *Indapaññāya bbikkhunā sabbaññū buddhabhāvaṃ paṭṭhenta imaṃ sikkhāpetam. Upasikā Ngai pen upakāra*]

This was taught by the monk Indapaññā, who aspires to be an omniscient Buddha. A female lay devotee Ngai sponsored [this manuscript].

The aspiration to become a Buddha in the future has existed since the early period of Thai history, as shown by the statement made by the chief monk of Sukhothai mentioned above. It is not only the chief monk who has such a goal. The king himself also resolves to become a Buddha.⁴⁴ Furthermore, in a stone slab inscription found in Wat Si Chum, another high-ranking Sukhothai monk, Si Sattha, is said to aspire to become a Buddha.⁴⁵ Even though in the Pāli canon the mention of a future Buddha occurs only once, with regard to Maitreya, later (apocryphal) Theravādin texts such as the *Sotattakā Mahānidāna* identify many more bodhisattvas who will become buddhas in the future; in the *Dasabodhisattupatti-kathā*, the Buddha is quoted as saying that the number of beings who will become Buddhas in the future is countless.⁴⁶ As such, the aspiration to become a buddha becomes possible when the number of future buddhas is left open.⁴⁷

Overall, despite certain colophons being composed of stock phrases, and despite there being donors who might not be aware of their contents due to lack of knowledge of the Pāli language or disregard for details, we do see some phrases being tweaked to suit certain individuals' needs in this regard,

44 Inscription 5; see Alexander B. Griswold and Prasert ṇa Nagara, "The Epigraphy of Mahādharmarājā I of Sukhodaya, Epigraphic and Historical Studies No. 11," *Journal of the Siam Society* 61, part 1 (1973): 71–182 at 142–43.

45 Inscription II; see Alexander B. Griswold and Prasert ṇa Nagara, "King Lōdaiya of Sukhodaya and His Contemporaries, Epigraphic and Historical Studies, No. 10," *Journal of the Siam Society* 60, part 1 (1972): 21–152 at 122.

46 *Sōtattakā Mahānithān* [*Sotattakā-mahānidāna*] by Cūlabuddhaghosa, a cremation volume for Somdet Phra Phutthachan (Bangkok, 2526 [1983]), v. 629 at 96; *Dasabodhisattupattikathā* (The Birth Stories of the Ten Bodhisattas), ed. and trans. Ven. H. Saddhatissa (London: Pali Text Society, 1975), 54 (trans.) and 119 (text).

47 For more information on future Buddhas and the Theravāda, see Peter Skilling, "The Sambuddhe Verses and Later Theravādin Buddhology," *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 22 (1996): 150–83 at 173–75.

as I discuss below. Nevertheless, the ambition to become a Buddha and the desire to lead all beings to escape from the continuous, suffering-laden cyclicity of existence is regarded as a noble quest and the wish of many across all layers of society.

Life Before Liberation

The path to Nirvana, by way of either the arhats or the Buddhas, is long and protracted. Unless one becomes an arhat or attains the paths or fruits in this very life, which would then reduce the number of rebirths, one is expected to go through many more cycles of existence before the eventual achievement of perfect bliss.⁴⁸ Accordingly, it would not be unwise to take the merit generated as an opportunity to transform oneself into a capable, virtuous, and fortunate being. Below are two examples, one in a palm-leaf manuscript, the other in a samut khoi, that demonstrate this aspiration:

The following colophon appears in four manuscripts, namely, NL4600 (undated), NL5500 (undated), NL11815 (1782 CE) (fig. 4), and NL5435 (1793 CE). Below is the edited Pāli text from these four witnesses:⁴⁹

*iminā lekkhapuññaena tikkhapaññaena visārado ahaṃ pi jātīsatassāni
dhārento tipitakaṃ kittiyaṃ ahaṃ pi jātīsatassāni tipitakaṃ
labhissāmi ahaṃ pi yāva nibbānaṃ na gamissāmi saṃsāraṃ saṃsaranto
mahābhogo labhissāmi ahaṃ pi suddhakeso suddhadanto suddhanāso
suddhamukho suddhasoto suddhalalāto suddhacakkhu suddhajivho
suddhabhāsito piyavaddho suddhanakkho suddhapādo suddha-uro*

48 The paths (Pāli, *maggā*) and fruits (Pāli, *phala*) are stages to the attainment leading to arhat-ship; If one attains the first fruit (*sotāpanna* or stream-enterer) toward arhat-ship, one would not take the eighth rebirth before realizing Nirvana. See Dines Andersen and Helmer Smith, ed., *Sutta-Nīpāta* (London: Pali Text Society, 1994 [1913]; hereafter Sn), 40, verse 230; Bhikku Bodhi, *The Suttanīpāta: An Ancient Collection of the Buddha's Discourses Together with Its Commentaries* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2017), 194, verse 230, and its commentary at 697–98.

49 For the critical apparatus of this edited text, see Ooi, “Survey of the Pāli Milindapañha Manuscripts,” 207.

*suddhabāhu suddhabattho suddhavāco suddha-akodhano cettha
mettābhāvano punappunam anāgate yassa buddho paccayo lokanāyako
abam labhāmi sāvako buddho puna จงได้ตรัสรู้เป็นพระ⁵⁰ | |*

With this merit of writing down [the text], may I be accomplished in sharp wisdom, may I memorize and teach the *Tripitaka* for a hundred thousand lives. I will also be one who receives the *Tripitaka* for a hundred thousand lives. As long as I am yet to attain Nirvana, I will get to be one who possesses great wealth, pure hair, pure teeth, pure nose, pure mouth, pure ears, pure forehead, pure eyes and pure tongue; one who is pure in speech and who is dear to the elders; one who has pure nails, pure feet, pure chest, pure arms and pure hands; one who is pure in words and perfectly free of anger; and one who cultivates loving kindness here and in the future, again and again. . . . [and] to awaken as a Phra [Buddha].⁵¹

It is interesting to see the aspirants in these manuscripts going into such detail about a perfect physical embodiment of a human form. They leave no parts of the body to chance. It is noteworthy that among the four manuscripts, only in one of them, NL5500, do we see someone (either the scribe or the donor, it is unclear) declare a determination to awaken as a Buddha. Therefore, while the other part of the colophon may seem to be formulaic, aspiring to be a fully enlightened being is a personal choice.

Another manuscript that expresses somewhat similar aspirations but covers a broader scope is the *Milindapañha*, in an edition made by Chao Pān and Chao Pom during the period of the Kingdom of Sri Ayutthaya (มีลินทปัญหานับเจ้าปานเจ้าป้อมครั้งกรุงศรีอยุธยา), promulgated by the court nobility. This work is a samut khoi on the section of *Questions on Talk of Similes* (*Opammakathāpañha*) of the *Questions of King Milinda*.⁵² This two-volume

50 จงได้ตรัสรู้เป็นพระ (Thai: to awaken as a Phra [Buddha]) only in NL5500.

51 The syntax of the last Pāli passage, “yassa . . . puna,” is not clear.

52 The title of the samut khoi is given as *milindapañhā-yogikathā* (talks on yogi). The word *yogikathā* refers here to the talk on what qualities a yogi should be endowed with in order to become an arhat, which is discussed in the section of the *Questions on Talk of Similes*. It should not be mistaken as the section of the *Questions on Talks About Yogins* (*Yogikathāpañha*).



FIGURE 4. The colophon of NL11815 starts at the top folio, line three, after the punctuations (๑). Courtesy of the National Library of Thailand, manuscript code 11815, fascicle 16.

samut khoi currently belongs to Wat Champa in Thonburi District. It was copied during the (late) Ayutthaya era by an unknown scribe. The content was transliterated into a printed edition in 1924, on the occasion of the royal cremation ceremony of Phra Suwan Muni Narasitham.⁵³ At present, the manuscript is in the custody of the National Library. The text’s original sponsors were the noble royal ladies (*pavaranāri*), Pān and Pom, who are depicted as donors in the manuscript itself (fig. 5), which is a rather rare feature in the Buddhist art of Thailand.⁵⁴

The two donors acknowledge that they have many more lives to go through before the final attainment, and therefore wish to be reborn in a noble house again, blessed with wealth and retinues, and the chance to practice the Perfections. The rhythmic exordium (fig. 5) reads:

ฉบับนี้ ของบวรนารียองศัขัตติยะทรงนาม ปานป้อมสองพระพี่น้องอัน
ประกอบด้วยศรัทธา สร้างไว้หวังจะให้เป็นกุศลสืบไปในอนาคตกาล ขอ
ปณิธานปรารถนา ถ้าพระบารมียังมีเกล้า จะสังสนาการ ท่อง เที่ยวอยู่
ตราบใจจะเกิดในภพใดก็ให้ล้ำเลิศ ประเสริฐด้วยสกุลวงศ์ อันทรงทานภาพ
แลเลื่อมใส ในบวรพุทธศาสนา ขอมิปัญญาตรัสรู้ธรรมมาพิสมัย แล้วให้

53 National Library of Thailand, *Milindapañhā of Chao Pān, Chao Pom, Krung Sri Ayutthaya* (Phra Nakhon [Bangkok]: Thiphayarat, 1924). On the occasion of the Royal Cremation Ceremony of Phra Suwan Muni Narasitham, the heir of Sanghapānok (Chui Suk Bhikkhu), Gangaram Chao Temple, Phetchaburi Province. / มีลินทปัญญาฉบับเจ้าปานเจ้าป้อมครั้งกรุงศรีอยุธยา. พระนคร: ทิพยรัตน์, 2467 (พิมพ์ในงานพระราชทานเพลิงศพพระสุวรรณมุนีธรรมทายาทสังฆปาโมกข์ (ฉุย สุขขิกขุ) วัดคงคาราม เจ้าคณะจังหวัดเพชรบุรี เมื่อปีชวด พ.ศ. 2467).

54 Cf. Peter Skilling, *For Merit and Nirvana*, 79–80 and figs. 3 and 4; email 16 July 2020.



FIGURE 5. The opening pages or exordium of the samut khoi on the section *Questions on Talk of Similes* (*Opammakathāpañha*) in the Thai language and script. The two ladies in the image are the sponsors, Chao Pān and Chao Pom. Courtesy of the National Library of Thailand, manuscript *Panha Tham* No. 7, *Milindapanha* No. 10.

ใพบูลย์ด้วยรูปแลลักษณะอันงามด้วยวรรณสีฐาน ประกอบด้วยบริวารและ
 สมบัติอันมาก ขอให้ปราศจากโรคภัยพยาธิแลภัยอันตราย ให้จำเริญกายแล
 จิตเป็นสุขทุกประการ ขอให้บำเพ็ญศีลแลทานบารมีเป็นนิจ ถ้าจะคิดสิ่งไร
 ขอให้สำเร็จความปรารถนา ให้มีพระชนษาอายุยืนโดยควร แยกกาลทุกชาติ
 ไปกว่าจะได้พระนิพพาน ในอนาคตกาลนั้นเกิด⁵⁵

This edition [of the *Questions of King Milinda*] belongs to the noble royal ladies, named Pān [and] Pom, sisters endowed with faith, who sponsored [this manuscript] as an act of merit to continue into the future. We make the following aspirations, lest our Perfections [*pāramī*] be insufficiently strong, and we end up transmigrating for however many lives: in whatever existence we are born into, may we

55 This transliteration is an attempt to adapt the old Thai writing in the manuscript to modern Thai.

be born in an exalted lineage, blessed with power and radiant [with faith] in the Dispensation of the Buddha. May we have the wisdom to awaken to the realization of the Dharma, and be endowed with an abundance of physical beauty, both in complexion and form. [May we] possess a [vast] retinue and vast wealth. May we be free from disease and danger, and may our bodies and minds prosper with all manner of bliss. May we constantly fulfill the Perfections of Morality [*sīla*] and Giving [*dāna*]. Whatever we may wish, may we achieve our aspirations. [May we] have great longevity, suitable for the times, in each and every life, until we reach Nirvana in the future!⁵⁶

At the end of the second volume, there is also a colophon (fig. 6) expressing somewhat similar sentiments:

พระมิลินทพินหา บวรนารียวงษชัตติยะทรงนาม ปานป้อมสองพระพี่น้อง ผู้ประกอบไปด้วยกุศลศรัทธาเจตนา สร้างไว้หวังให้เป็นธรรมสวนานิสงส์ ในปัจจุบันแลอนาคตกาล ขอปณิธานปรารถนา ถ้าจะเกิดมาในภพเบื้องหน้า ขอมีปัญญาเลิศล้ำ ตรัสรู้ธรรมวิเศษ ให้มีเดชเดช ประเสริฐด้วยสกุลวงศ์ ทรงสรรพลักษณะเป็นสวัสด์ ใพบูลย์ด้วยโภคิยสมบัติแลยศบริวารเป็นอันมาก ให้ปราศจากภัยอันตราย ศัตรูพ่ายแพ้อำนาจ อย่าให้มีโรคพาพยาธิมาเบียดเบียน เป็นบรมสุขขมชื่น ให้มีพระชันษาอายุยืนนาน ขอได้บำเพ็ญทานบารมีแลศีลบารมีเป็นนิจกาล มีได้ขาดถ้าจะปรารถนาสิ่งใดขอให้สำเร็จโดยมโนกรรมย้งทุกชาติไป กว่าจะได้ถึงมหานครนิพพานในอนาคตกาลนั้น เกิด. อายุ วัณโณ สุขัง พลัง

This book of the *Questions of King Milinda* belongs to the foremost royal ladies named Pān and Pom, sisters endowed with meritorious

56 In the Discourse of The Lion's Roar on the Turning of the Wheel, it is explained that the lifespan of human beings correlates to their behaviors. Unskilled behaviors lead to shorter lifespan. In the Discourse, a normal lifespan ranges from eighty thousand years (when unskillful behavior is unknown to humanity), deteriorating over time to ten years. Cf. Carpenter, *Dīgha Nikāya*, 58–79; Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, 395–405. Translated from the manuscript by Trent Walker with minor changes (i.e., certain terms changed for consistency throughout this article), email dated 5 November 2020.

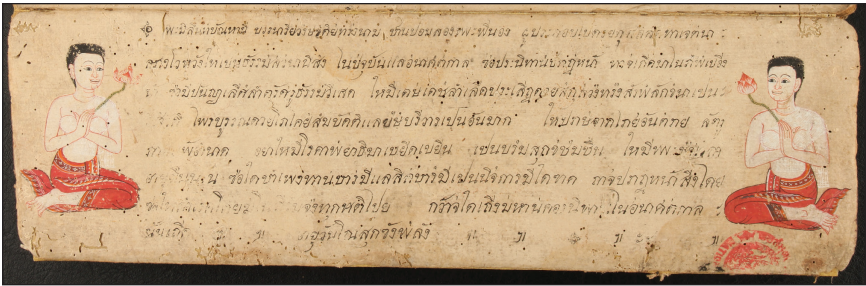


FIGURE 6. The colophon of the *Milindapañha*, the Edition of Chao Pān and Chao Pom. Courtesy of the National Library of Thailand, manuscript Panha Tham No. 7, *Milindapañha* No. 11.

intentions, sponsored [this manuscript] in order to [reap] the benefits of listening to the Dharma, both in the present and in the future. We make the following aspirations. Should we be born again in a future existence, may we have exalted wisdom to awaken to the exquisite Dharma. [May we] be endowed with supreme might, lofty in our lineage, and possessed of all marks of [prosperity],⁵⁷ abundantly equipped with luxuries and wealth, and a vast pomp and retinue. [May we] be free from danger. [May] enemies be vanquished by our power. May we be free of the molestations of disease and illness, and be filled with pleasant bliss. May we have great longevity. May we fulfill the perfection of charity and moral conduct in every life to come until we reach the great city of Nirvana in the future.⁵⁸ Longevity, beauty, happiness, and strength.

The four benefits in the last sentence (Pāli: *āyu, vaṇṇa, sukha, bala*) are also found together in the *Word of the Doctrines*, verse 109, which says: to those who always show respect and honor to people who are older and more virtuous, these four benefits of longevity, beauty, happiness, and strength will

57 Not clear in the manuscript.

58 For the Nirvana imagery in Thai tradition, see Barend J. Terwiel, “The City of Nibbāna in Thai Picture Books of the Three Worlds,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 20 (2019), Issue 1-2: 184–99. Translation by Trent Walker, email 5 November 2020.

increase.⁵⁹ This verse may have functioned as a moral foundation upon which one might learn humility and respect for the elders. The Perfections of Giving, or the practice of generosity through charitable work, is emphasized in these two paragraphs in particular. The kingdoms of Southeast Asia were in near continual strife with neighbors and vassals.⁶⁰ Everyone wished to be victorious against all threats; naturally enough, *jaya*, “victory,” “success,” and the wish to vanquish enemies were part and parcel of the court ideology. Overall, this exordium and this colophon give us a glimpse of what was considered good and righteous, in lifestyle and conduct, among people living in Ayutthaya-era court.

Returning to the above-mentioned aspiration of donors and scribes who wish to be as wise as Nāgasena, the next colophon, carrying this hope, appears in three manuscripts, namely NL4596, NL6133, and NL4606. The aspirant asks not only for a heavenly rebirth, but to be wise as well:

Edited Pāli text:⁶¹

*iminā puññākammaṇa sagge sugati gāṃhiko tāvatimse nibbatteyyaṃ
sudhammāyaṃ sanantane gato pūto bhava yattha divibhū vibhava bhava
uppanno paññavabessaṃ cheko pucchāvisajjane yathā rājā nāgaseno yujj-
hanti yujjabbhūmiyaṃ aññamaññaṃ vivecanoti || nibbāna paccayo hoti
| buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi⁶² |*

Translation:

Through this act of merit, may I be the one who goes to the happy realm [*sugati*]. May I be reborn in the heaven of the Thirty-Three [Tāvātimsa] and spend a long time in the Sudhammā hall. May I be

59 *Dhammapada*, 31, verse 109.

60 According to Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, twenty-four wars were fought between Siam and Burma, from 1539 CE until the destruction of Ayutthaya in 1767 CE. See Damrong Rajanubhab, *The Chronicle of Our Wars with the Burmese: Hostilities Between Siamese and Burmese When Ayutthaya Was the Capital of Siam*, trans. Phra Phraison Salarak Thein Subindu a.k.a. U Aung Thein, ed. Christopher Baker (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2001), xxii–xxiii, 3–9.

61 The syntax in this colophon is unusual. For the critical apparatus of this edited text, see Ooi, “Survey of the Pāli Milindapañha Manuscripts,” 169–210 at 206.

62 The last two phrases only in NL4596.

there, in the majesty of the divine state. May I be wise and skilled in answering questions in the same way the king and Nāgasena contested on the forum of debate, each of them sharply discerning. May this be the contributing cause for Nirvana. I go to the Buddha for refuge.

In Buddhist cosmology, the abode of the Thirty-Three (Pāli: *Tāvatiṃsa*) is the second of the six worlds of gods, the first being the abode of Four Heavenly Kings (Pāli: *cātummahārājika*).⁶³ The chief of the gods in the Thirty-Three is Śakra (Pāli: Sakka).⁶⁴ The Hall of Sudhammā is a distinguished location where gods of the Thirty-Three regularly hold their meetings, or go when the Dharma is preached.⁶⁵ It is said that while Gotama Buddha was living among the gods of the Thirty-Three, he taught the Abhidharma, as did other previous buddhas.⁶⁶ Thus, the Hall of Sudhammā in the abode of Thirty-Three has a special and exalted position in the Buddhist imagination. It is often depicted in Thai art. For example, it appears in the royal temple of Wat Phra Chetuphon (Wat Pho) in Bangkok.⁶⁷ Consequently, possessing the wisdom and skill to debate in the

63 See G. P. Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names*, vol. 1 (London: John Murray for the Government of India, 1937), 1002–4, for details of Tāvatiṃsa.

64 For Sakka as the chief of gods [*devānaṃ inda*], see G. P. Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names*, vol. 2 (London: John Murray for the Government of India, 1938), 957–65.

65 For what was taught in Tāvatiṃsa, see Peter Skilling, “Dharma, Dhāraṇī, Abhidharma, Avadāna: What Was Taught in Trayastriṃśa?,” *Annual Report of the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhism* 9 (2008): 37–60.

66 In the Theravāda tradition, the Abhidharma (or Higher Doctrine) is one of the divisions of its Pāli canon that deals with the philosophical psychology of Buddhism presented in a highly technical systemization of the doctrine. See Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Abhidhammattha Sangaha, a Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma: Pāli Text, Translation, and Explanatory Guide* (1993; rpt. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2013), 1–20. Edward Müller, ed., *The Atthasālinī: Buddhaghosa’s Commentary on the Dhammasaṅgani* (London: Pali Text Society, 1979), 31.13–15; Bv, 92 (chapter XXV, verse 6); Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names*, 2:1203–4, for details of Sudhammā.

67 See Peter Skilling, “King Rāma I and Wat Phra Chetuphon: The Buddha-Śāsanā in Early Bangkok,” in *How Theravāda Is Theravāda? Exploring Buddhist Identities*, ed. Peter Skilling, Jason A. Carbine, Claudio Ciruzza, and Santi Pakdeekham (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books,



FIGURE 7. Colophons of the *Questions of King Milinda* manuscript kept at Wat Samuh Nimit in Chaiya District, Surat Thani Province, southern Thailand, dated 1802 CE. Photographs courtesy of the Fragile Palm Leaves Foundation and the Henry Ginsburg Fund.

assembly of gods inside the famed hall adds prestige to the aspiration expressed in the above colophon.

However, for those who wish to be well-versed and conversant in the Dharma, the icon is Śāriputra, one of the Chief Disciples of Gotama Buddha. The Blessed One proclaimed him to be foremost in wisdom (*mahāpaññānaṃ yadidaṃ sārīputto*), and in the *Questions of King Milinda*, Nāgasena calls him the General of the Dharma (*dharmasenāpati*) whenever he quotes the Chief Disciple.⁶⁸ This aspiration can be found in these two colophons in a manuscript copied in 1802 CE, kept at Wat Samuh Nimit in Surat Thani province in southern Thailand (fig. 7). They have similar contents, but the aspirations are articulated slightly differently. Below is the translation based on the two colophons:

Friday, the fourteenth waxing day of the tenth month, year of the dog, the fourth year of the decade, when 2345 years had elapsed in the Buddhist Era, We, servants of the Lord, the former monk Chuen and Mr Nak, the scribe, were replete with faith and created these four manuscripts of the *Milinda[pañhā]* to be established in the excellent religion of the Buddha. We, servants of the Lord, pray to reach the state of buddhahood in the future. In the period before we reach buddhahood, may we be endowed with Śāriputra's

2012), 297–354; Chatri Prakitnonthakan, “Symbolism in the Design of Wat Phra Chetuphon Wimonmangkhalaram (Wat Pho),” *Journal of the Siam Society* 102 (2014): 1–39.

68 Richard Morris, ed., *The Aṅguttara-Nikāya* I, 2nd ed., ed. Anthony K. Warder (London: Pali Text Society, 1961), 23.18; Mil, 170.

intelligence. Moreover, we ask for eight boons to be granted to Phra Maha Nak Chao, the monk who studied and preached these four manuscripts of the *Milinda[pañhā]*. May all we imagine be achieved in accordance with our wishes.⁶⁹

In this colophon, we see that the merit was distributed to the monk too. Sharing of merit after a good deed is an important aspect of Buddhist practice. The merit is generally shared with departed relatives, protective deities, and all sentient beings, so that they too can rejoice together. In the section of the *Dilemmas (Menḍakapañha)*, Nāgasena explains that what is skillful (*kusala*)—a good deed, for example—is abundant (*babuka*), and can thus be shared with many other beings. Using simile, he states that a good deed is like the water of the great and mighty cloud: if it were to pour down rain, this would satisfy the earth's surface, and the water from the great cloud would spread out all around.⁷⁰

Conclusion

The tradition of aspiring to become a Buddha has been present in Thailand since the formation of the Siamese state around the fourteenth century, as evidenced by epigraphic inscriptions. This survey has shown that such aspiration continued to be a popular option for donors and scribes from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. The colophons examined also reveal that the desire to become an omniscient Buddha was expressed by all layers of society, not just by the nobility or by high-ranking monks.

While the donors emphasized the final goal of Nirvana, they also wished that the merit generated by their contributions toward the production of manuscripts would help them become more capable, intelligent, and fortunate beings in their future lives. Their colophons also reaffirm their commitment to lead a life of righteousness and to practice loving-kindness and

69 Translated from the manuscripts by Trent Walker, email 10 November 2020.

70 Mil, 294–97; Horner, *Milinda's Questions* 2, 123–28.

generosity. The idea that merits (*puñña*) benefit not only the donor but others as well can be seen as a powerful driver for the production and preservation of manuscripts.⁷¹

Although the *Questions of King Milinda* is not considered to be the word of the Buddha, it is regarded as Dharma and thus enjoyed a certain degree of popularity in Siam. Its colophons not only capture information about the manuscripts' circumstances of production, but also reveal the social and psychological aspects of the Siamese community that preserved and transmitted the text.

71 For examples of Sri Lanka manuscripts, see Stephen C. Berkwitz, "Materiality and Merit in Sri Lankan Buddhist Manuscripts," in *Buddhist Manuscript Cultures: Knowledge, Ritual and Art*, ed. Stephen C. Berkwitz, Juliane Schober, and Claudia Brown (London: Routledge, 2009), 35–49 at 43–47.