

# TRIPITAKA IN PRACTICE IN THE FOURTH AND FIFTH REIGNS: RELICS AND IMAGES ACCORDING TO SOMDET PHRA SAṄGHARĀJA PUSSADEVA'S PAṬHAMASAMBODHI SERMON

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## Abstract

The *Tripitaka* is not simply an inert collection of manuscripts or books. It is a living thing, a store of ideas that has marked many aspects of social life, from ritual to ethics to mediation practice, to literature, art, and education. The ideas and ideologies of the *Tripitaka* pervade society. One of the main ways through which the *Tripitaka* leaves the library and penetrates society is the sermon, which adapts the ideas and ideals of the *Tripitaka* to suit circumstances and audiences.

As an example of one sermon genre, the “royally authorized sermon”, we translate an excerpt from the *Paṭhamasambodhi Sermon*, by Somdet Phra Saṅgharāja Pussadeva (then holding the rank Phra Sāsanasobhana, and one of the most significant figures of 19th century

Siamese Buddhism) to present to His Majesty King Rāma IV during the Royal Ceremony of Visākha Pūjā.

The excerpt translated here is from Part 4 of the sermon, “The Account of the Distribution of the Relics”. Somdet Phra Saṅgharāja Pussadeva relates how the brahman Doṇa distributed Śākyamuni’s relics. He takes this as a basis to define and describe the four types of shrines (cetiya): a shrine with physical relics, a shrine by association, a dhamma shrine, and a shrine by designation. He skillfully adapts classical sources—the *Tripitaka* and its commentaries—to the needs of his time, introducing the subject of Buddha images and examining the value of the cult of relics.

## Introduction

The *Tripitaka*, along with its commentaries and sub-commentaries and related works such as handbooks and grammatical treatises, was kept in the important monasteries of Bangkok from the beginning of the Ratanakosin period. Starting from the First Reign, many sets were produced and distributed under the sponsorship of kings or of members of the nobility. The formal study of the *Tripitaka* was largely the province of monks or those associated with the court. But the *Tripitaka* was not simply an inert collection of manuscripts, known only to the elite. It was a living thing, and as a treasury of ideas, it left its mark on many aspects of social life, from ritual to ethics to meditation practice, to literature, art, and education. The ideas and ideologies of the *Tripitaka* pervaded society and the lives of the faithful.

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One of the main ways through which the *Tripitaka* left the library and entered society was through the sermon. The *Tripitaka* was mediated through the sermon, which adapted its ideas to suit circumstances and audiences. Sermons (described in Thai by forms of the Pāli word *desanā*) were held regularly on certain days of the lunar calendar, as well as on special occasions. Sermons were often lively social events, and good preachers were much in demand. It was not necessary to know Pāli, or to read the *Tripitaka*: people encountered the *Tripitaka*, and absorbed its ideas and narratives through the sermon as well as through other media such as mural paintings or verse versions of *jātakas*.

As an example of the sermon genre (or of one of the several sermon genres, the "royally authorized sermon"), we give here an excerpt from Supreme Patriarch Pussadeva's *Paṭhamasambodhi Sermon*. The *Paṭhamasambodhi Sermon* is based on classical sources, such as the account of the division of the relics in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, amplified by later material from the commentaries and sub-commentaries, and, of course, the Pāli and Thai tellings of the *Paṭhamasambodhi* itself.<sup>1</sup>

Somdet Phra Saṅgharāja Pussadeva (Sa, BE 2346-2442 = CE 1803-1899) was one of the most significant figures of 19th century Siamese Buddhism. He was the first abbot of Wat Ratchapradit (Rājapraṭṭha) in central Bangkok, a Dhammayutika temple founded by King Rāma IV. During the Fifth Reign, in 2436 (1893) he was appointed Supreme

Patriarch (Saṅgharāja). Two of his works, the *Royal Chanting Book* (*Suatom chabap luang*) and a longer Thai-language *Paṭhamasambodhi* are still in use today, and have been published in staggering numbers. The latter—a version in ten parts (*kaṇḍa*), originally published in the journal *Thammachaksu* (*Dharmacakṣu*) — was edited by Prince Vajirañāṇavarorasa as the first section (*muat*) of *Thammasantat* (*Dhammasantat*) in Bangkok era 124.

During the Fourth Reign, when he held the rank of Phra Sāsanasobhana, Somdet Phra Saṅgharāja Pussadeva composed another work based on the *Paṭhamasambodhi*. This was the *Paṭhamasambodhi Sermon*, written to present to His Majesty King Rāma IV during the Royal Ceremony of Visākha Pūjā, which at that time was held throughout the month of Visākha. The sermon is divided into four parts, each part opening with introductory verses in Pāli (*ārambhakathā*). The four parts were delivered in the 6th lunar month as follows:

Part 1: The account of the Birth (*Jātikathā*), on the 14th day of the waxing moon;

Part 2: The account of the Full Awakening (*Abhisambodhikathā*), on the 15th day of the waxing moon;

Part 3: The account of the Final Nibbāna (*Parinibbānakathā*), on the 7th day of the waning moon;<sup>2</sup>

Part 4: The account of the Distribution of the Relics (*Dhātuvibhajjanakathā*), on the 8th day of the waning moon.

Somdet Phra Saṅgharāja Pussadeva

<sup>1</sup>Like the *Anāgatavamsa* and *Māleyyasutta*, the *Paṭhamasambodhi* is a genre or family of texts rather than a single text.

<sup>2</sup>Note that the edition consulted misprints "7" as "8".



presented the sermon in four parts every year from the Fourth Reign into the Fifth Reign, until the procedure of the Royal Ceremony of Visākha Pūjā was revised and held on only one day, the 15th day of the waxing moon which up to today is an official holiday. From then on a different version was used, since it was necessary to abridge the story of the *Paṭhamasambodhi* into a sermon in one part.

In his capacity of Head (Sabhānayaka) of the National Library (Ho Phra Samut Watchirayan), HRH Prince Damrong wrote an introduction to the second printed edition, sponsored by Mme Witsadanwinichay (Chan) and Mr. Kimchua for the funeral of their father, Mr. Ngiab, in the Snake Year 2460 (1917):<sup>3</sup>

The *Paṭhamasambodhi Sermon* counts as a royally authorized sermon (*phra thammathetsana chabap luang*) since it was composed to present to the king (*thaway thet*) and is a literary work of a Supreme Patriarch who is universally esteemed as a great scholar of this land of Siam. It is a praiseworthy work which should be preserved by being printed. I therefore had the first three parts published on the occasion of the funeral of my wife, Mom Cheuay (2404-2446 = CE 1861-1903), in the Rabbit Year BE 2446 (1903). The book was popular with those who received it, and monks used the sermon in Visākha Pūjā ceremonies, but there were complaints that it was incomplete, an unavoidable

situation which I regretted. Fourteen years have gone by, and the original edition is now scarce. Since I have heard that there is a demand for the text, it seems appropriate to print it again, but this time complete in all four parts. I therefore asked Phra Thepkawi of Wat Ratchapradit for the fourth part, *Dhātuvibhajanā*. Phra Thepkawi was a disciple of Somdet Phra Saṅgharāja, and had received it directly from him. The present edition is an improvement over the first edition because it is complete.

The excerpt that follows is from Part 4 of the *Paṭhamasambodhi Sermon*, "The Account of the Distribution of the Relics" (pp. 121-125). The translation of a Siamese sermon is no easy task, and it is hardly possible to do justice to the skilled composition of Somdet Phra Saṅgharāja Pussadeva, with its elaborate phrasing, so sonorous in the Thai language. Hence, our translation can only be provisional.

We pick up the narrative from the point at which the Brahman Doṇa has averted a war over the relics of the Buddha.

### Translation

[121] When the kṣatriyas and brahmins of the eight cities listened to the sweet speech (*madhurabhāṣita*), they agreed to act in harmony, and unanimously delegated the Brahman Doṇa to preside over the division of the holy physical relics (*phra sārīrikadhātu*). When the Great Brahman Doṇa received the royal command, he took a measuring cup (*tumba*) and measured the holy physical relics, dividing them into eight

<sup>3</sup>We give a somewhat abridged translation.



equal portions for the kṣatriyas and brahmins of the eight cities. He then asked for the cup with which he had measured out the relics as an article of worship (*cetiya*). The kṣatriyas and brahmins agreed and presented it to him.

At that time the Moriya kṣatriyas from the country of Pipphalivana learned that the Buddha had entered Nibbāna, so they sent a royal envoy to the Malla kṣatriyas to request a portion of the holy physical relics. The Malla kṣatriyas told the royal envoy from the country of Pipphalivana, "There remains no portion of the holy body at this time, since we have already shared it out. You should take the holy ashes (*phra aṅgāra*) and enshrine them within a stūpa and pay respect and make offerings." The [distribution of the relics to the] kṣatriyas of the six cities and to the one Great Brahman made seven sites. When they had received a share of the holy physical relics, they each invited [their share] back to their own lands where they built stūpas and enshrined [the relics] with a great festival and celebration. The Malla kṣatriyas of the city of Kusinārā also built a stūpa, enshrined the holy physical relics, and held a festival. Altogether there were eight sites with Holy [Physical] Relic stūpas, as has been described.

The Great Brahman Doṇa invited the measuring cup and enshrined it in a stūpa which he had erected for the purpose, called the Tumba Stūpa. When it was completed, he held a festival and celebration. The Moriya kṣatriyas from the country of Pipphalivana invited the ashes to their city and enshrined them in a stūpa built for the purpose, called the Aṅgāra Stūpa. When it was completed they held a festival and celebration with many kinds of worship.

[122] In that the Brahman Doṇa asked for and obtained the measuring cup and then installed it in a stūpa to be honoured and venerated, and the Moriya kṣatriyas from the country of Pipphalivana invited the holy ashes and installed them in a holy stūpa which they built as a shrine, these two are models to show intelligent people (*pañḍitajana*) what sort of objects make suitable *paribhoga-cetiyas*, comparable to the four Inspiring Sites. At the beginning of the first period there were holy stūpas at the ten shrine sites in this fashion.

At the time of the Parinibbāna, Somdet the Holy One, Possessor of Blessings, revealed the four Inspiring Sites, that is, the place of birth from the womb, the place where the Tathāgata realized unsurpassed true and full awakening, the place where the Tathāgata set in motion the unsurpassed wheel of the Dharma, and the place where the Tathāgata attained Parinibbāna without any remainder (*anupādisesanibbānadhātu*). These four sites are worth seeing and gazing at, that they may inspire a faithful son of family (*kulaputra*).

According to this principle we arrive at two kinds of shrine: the "physical relic-shrine" (*dhātucetiya*) and the "shrine by association" (*paribhoga-cetiya*). The eight portions of holy physical relics which the Brahman Doṇa distributed and which were then invited and established within stūpas as objects of homage and veneration, honour and offerings, are relic-shrines, while the Tumba Stūpa, the Aṅgāra Stūpa and the four Inspiring Sites are shrines by association.

The Buddha's mention of the four Inspiring Sites and the reference to the Tumba Stūpa and the Aṅgāra Stūpa lead intelligent people (*viññūjana*) to



conclude that the bowl (*pātra*), robe (*cīvara*), and special requisites like the water-strainer (*dhamakarakā*), etc., used by the holy, truly, and fully Awakened One [123], and the lodgings, seats, bed, hut, and residence, used by the holy Buddha when sitting or lying down, etc., are all shrines by association as well.

After long ages had passed, knowledgeable Buddhists (*buddhasāsanika-panḍita*) considered the strong benefits of reminders which could produce bliss from taking the Buddha as an object of contemplation (*buddhāraṇapīṭi*), etc., and therefore they created images in the form of the Buddha (*buddharū-papaṭimākara*) with durable and precious materials like silver, gold, and precious stones, etc., and set them up as focal points for worship (*pūjanīya-sthāna*), in order to produce the lofty virtues of the unsurpassed recollection (*anussatānuttariyādhiguṇa*). The term for this is "shrine by designation" (*uddesikacetiya*).

Herein, some knowledgeable people (*viññūjāna*) are not able to make images of the Buddha, or have no liking for or inclination towards (*chandaruci-adhyāśraya*) images of the Buddha. They wish only to build stūpas, but are unable to find any physical relics, and therefore enshrine palm leaves inscribed with the word of the Buddha, the Dhamma of instruction (*buddhavaṇa-pariyattidharma*), such as [the formula of] dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) etc., and install them in place of relics, establishing a stūpa as an object of worship. This is called a "dhamma-shrine" (*dhamma-cetiya*).

When we take all of the shrines into account, including those explained in the holy Pāḷi and in the commentaries and

sub-commentaries, we get four types: the relic-shrine, the shrine by association, the dhamma-shrine, and the shrine by designation. The holy footprints (roy phra *pāda*) which the Buddha revealed himself are shrines by association, while those which are made as replicas are shrines by designation.

The objects of worship (*pūjaniyavatthucetiya-sthāna*) whether new ones which knowledgeable Buddhists are motivated to build or old shrines which have fallen into ruin which they restore [124] to their original state or improve and embellish accomplish benefit for the gods and humans who see them, in that they give rise to inspiration and faith through the recollection of the virtues of the Three Gems as object of thought (*āraṇa*). They are then able to accumulate the wholesome deeds of giving, keeping precepts, and mental cultivation (*dāna, sīla, bhāvanā*) to perfection in their mental streams for the sake of exquisite and vast bliss in the favourable situation as a human and in the heavens in the future, to the end that they may increase and perfect wholesome conduct (*puñacariyā*) with regard to the wholesome path which turns away [from Saṃsāra: *vivatta-gāmi-kusala*] and leads to Nibbāna. The [results of constructing the objects of worship] are entirely beneficial.

The Buddha originally permitted the installation of holy physical relics in a stūpa constructed at the intersection of four great roads, a central location which would enable large numbers of people to see and to venerate the stūpa enshrining the holy physical relics. The crowds of people who see it would believe in it and their minds would become settled and clear. It would act as a reminder to the throngs who see it to recollect the



virtues of the Buddha. In the same fashion, the four Inspiring Sites are reminders to those who see them.

After the lapse of a long time, holy physical relics became scarce. People built many holy stūpas, some enshrining relics, some not. [Some people] inscribed the holy Dhamma of instruction (*phra pariyattidharma*) —conditioned arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), the four truths of the noble (*ariyasacca*), the factors of enlightenment (*bodhipakkhiya*), and so on, which they held to be the true word of the Buddha—on silver plates, gold plates, stone slabs, or palm leaves, etc., and installed them within.

As for holy stūpas which do not enshrine genuine relics, it is simply that people desiring merit built them here and there out of their liking and inclination. If a person who sees it is convinced that there is a genuine relic inside and prostrates and venerates it with a clear and settled mind, this can give rise to merit because of the settled and clear state of mind that arises. When a person who sees a stūpa knows for certain [125] that it does not contain any holy relics, or, even if there are relics, doubts whether or not they are genuine, his mind does not become settled and clear. As for people who bring this or that, things like pebbles or stones, and pass them off as holy relics—there are numerous instances in different places throughout the land, to the point that people do not know what genuine relics are like.

Genuine relics are rare. We must investigate and examine them carefully in order to determine [whether or not they are genuine]. The stūpas erected here and there are already too numerous, and those who see them become indifferent

and their minds do not become settled and clear. Holy physical relics can be transported wherever one wants, but the Inspiring Sites are immovable (*asaṇharima*) and cannot be taken away. The bowl, robe, and requisites used by the Buddha are few. This is why the faithful resorted to erecting Buddha images (*buddharūpapaṭimākara*) as shrines by designation. The people who saw these examples and then built the image—only think about building and accumulating merit so they built images some all, some large, with features and shape varying according to the skill of the artisans—which have become so widespread and numerous that they become indifferent, with the result that they do not achieve their purpose. Therefore, the wise conceived of a Buddha image having exactly the same dimensions as the Sugata, or with reduced size but maintaining the proper proportions, so that it would be beautiful, intending it to function as a reminder which could cause the mind of the viewer to become settled and calm, so they would prostrate and venerate it with full trust. Shrines of the truly and fully awakened one (*sammāsambuddha- cetiya*) have developed in various ways according to time and place and the goals and needs of the faithful, as has been explained.

This is the explanation of history of relics and shrines (*dhātucetiyavaṇṣa-kathā*).