

# The Offering of Begging Bowls by the Four Lokapālas: Its Literary and Visual Representations in South Asia

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## Abstract

This research paper aims to analyze a selection of visual representations regarding the offering of begging bowls to the Buddha by the four Lokapālas and their relationship to literary sources in South Asian art and discuss the significance of the story. This article reveals that these representations have always been popular in Gandhāra. The important components of this story relevant to the depictions include (1) the tree where the Buddha sat, (2) offering of the four bowls, (3) merging of the bowls, (4) presence of the two merchants, and (5) presence of other deities. However, a close one-to-one text-image relationship cannot be established due to multiple variants. The story is significant in emphasizing certain important Buddhist concepts, such as, the “transcendental virtue” of the Buddha as a supreme deity and a universal monarch (*cakravartin*); donative practice; usage of the bowl according to the *Vinaya* (Discipline), and the veneration of bowls.

## Keywords

the offering of begging bowls – the Lokapālas – Buddhist narratives – Indian art – Gandhāra

## 1 Introduction

The offering of begging bowls by the Lokapālas (Guardians of the Four Heavenly Quarters) is an integral episode in the account of the two merchants giving the Buddha his first meal after his enlightenment while the latter was spending time enjoying the bliss of his emancipation. In this episode, the four Lokapālas or Mahārājas (Great Kings), namely Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Virūḍhaka, Virūpākṣa, and Kubera, also known as Vaiśravaṇa,<sup>1</sup> each brought the Buddha a bowl in which to receive the merchants' alms. The popularity of the story is attested in numerous textual traditions and artistic representations. These narratives were widely transmitted by various Buddhist schools, and survived in different languages, like Gāndhārī, Sanskrit, Pāli, Tibetan, and Chinese. The earliest literary form is in Gāndhārī, preserved in Kharoṣṭhī manuscripts of the Senior Collection dated to the second century CE.<sup>2</sup> Most of the known textual traditions place this episode between two motifs: (1) the two merchants asked the Buddha to accept their offering, and the Buddha wondered how he could accept the food when he had nothing with which to receive the alms, and (2) the Buddha accepted the merchants' food, and then the two took either the two-fold refuge in the Buddha and the Dharma, or the three-fold refuge which also includes the [future] Sangha, depending on the accounts. In artistic expression, this episode is represented in the sculptural art of Gandhāra, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and in the relief panels of Borobudur in Java. It is also depicted in the paintings found in Central Asia, China, Tibet, Burma, and Thailand (see Tingsanchali 2012).

Numerous scholarly contributions have been made on this theme, both in textual literature and its pictorial representations.<sup>3</sup> However, the artefacts used in these previous studies are mainly from the Gandhāran region and do not include those found in present day India. Moreover, the textual sources used in the earlier comparative studies do not include the recently discovered Gāndhārī version which is dated much closer to the Gandhāran sculptures. Furthermore, the account of the offering of bowls by the Lokapālas is scarcely

1 In Pāli: Dhataratṭha, Virūḷha or Virūḷhaka, Virūpakkha, and Kuvera or Vessavaṇa. See an overview of the Buddhist Lokapālas in Sirisawad 2016, 68–69.

2 For the textual tradition of this Gāndhārī version, and the listing of its parallel in other languages, see Allon 2009, 10–14.

3 For the tradition regarding the bowl in Gandhāra see Rhi 2009, 61–77; For the historical and philological descriptions of the bowl and its inscriptions found in Gandhāra and Mathurā, see Falk 2005, 445–451; For the discussion on contradictory accounts in different textual traditions, see Katsumi Tanabe 1993–94, 158–165 and Tanabe 2000, 1087–1100; and Rehman 2010, 1–15.

being discussed. As such, in this paper, I will analyze the depictions of the Lokapālas giving the four bowls to the Buddha in a selection of reliefs from Sanchi, Gandhāra, Mathurā, and Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, and then attempt to link them to the relevant literary sources from the various Buddhist scriptures.

I will also examine how these artistic expressions support the ideology of merit that inspires the practice of giving (*dāna*). This bowl-offering event depicted in these sculptures could even shed light into the tradition of bowl veneration in certain regions, as well as why a Buddhist monk needs to have an alms-bowl, a custom which is still relevant today, especially in the Theravāda tradition. Moreover, as we shall see, these sculptures have repetitively supported the narrative of the textual tradition that places the Buddha as supreme among all other known celestial beings. As such, these art pieces not only help to strengthen the position of Buddhism but also indicate that paying reverence to the Blessed One would bring great benefits, a practice which is still on-going into the present.

## 2 Relationship Between Literary Sources and Their Visual Representations

I will start by examining the depictions of the four Lokapālas giving the Buddha four alms bowls in Indian art and their link to literary sources focusing on the following five components of this narrative.

### 2.1 *The Tree Where the Buddha Sat Under*

According to the *Mahāvagga* of the Pāli *Vinaya* (P VIN i 3–4), after the four-week trance and fasting that followed his enlightenment, the Buddha was offered his first meal (rice-cakes and lumps of honey: *mantha*, *madhupiṇḍikā*) by two merchants, Tapussa and Bhallika, while he was sitting at the foot of the Rājāyatana tree (*rājāyatanamūle*). Similarly, the *Śaṅghabhedavastu* (SBV i 122–125), which is the last section of the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* (MSV), and the Sanskrit *Catuṣpariṣatsūtra* of the Sarvāstivāda *Dīrghāgama* (CPS § 2.1–4.1) also mention an ecstatic trance that lasted for four weeks, however, the offering of food took place earlier in the second week.<sup>4</sup> The location where the merchants approached the Buddha, although not stated in the text, is presumed to be under the Bodhi tree as the event occurred just over seven days after the

4 The two merchants' names are Trapuṣa and Bhallika in SBV, and Tripusa and Bhallika in CPS. In SBV, they offered honey and the rice-cakes (*madhu*, *mantha*) while in CPS, only lumps of honey (*madhupiṇḍa*) were offered.

enlightenment. In the Gāndhārī version (G), the Buddha accepted Trivṛṣa and Valia's barley gruel (*matha*) and honey balls (*masupīḍia*) while he was sitting under the Bodhi tree too (see Allon 2009, 11 and 16 n.19), which agrees with the Chinese Dharmagupatka *Vinaya* (DHG VIN). As for the Chinese Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya* (MAHĪŚ VIN), despite the name of the tree is not clearly stated, it is also understood to be the Bodhi tree (Allon 2009, 12).

On the other hand, according to the *Mahāvastu*, the *Lalitavistara*, and the *Nidānakathā* of the Pāli *Jātaka* (Birth Stories, JA), the Blessed One fasted for seven weeks after his enlightenment before the event took place. In the *Mahāvastu* (MVU iii 303–304), a text of the Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravādins, the Buddha was sitting at a shrine in a thicket of Kṣīrikā trees (*kṣīrikāvanaṣaṇḍe*) when Trapuṣa and Bhallika brought refreshments of honey mixed with ghee (*madhusarpisaṃ yuktam tarpanam*) to serve him. In the *Lalitavistara* (LV 277), the Blessed One was sitting at the root of the Tārāyaṇa tree (*tārāyaṇamūle*)<sup>5</sup> when the two merchants went to see him with the offering of honey, gruel, and stripped sugar cane (*madhutarpaṇam likhitakāścekṣavaḥ*). Similarly, in the *Nidānakathā* the offering of rice-cakes and lumps of honey also took place seven weeks after the enlightenment, but the Buddha was sitting under the Rājāyatana tree (*rājāyatana*) instead (JA i 80–81). As we can see, most textual sources indicate that the Bodhi tree is where the Buddha was sitting while receiving the merchants' alms and the Lokapālas' begging bowls except the Theravāda and the Mahāsāṃghika traditions, which name the Rājāyatana and the Kṣīrikā trees, respectively.

The identification of the tree becomes more complicated through its artistic expression due to its multiple representations. In the selection of reliefs discussed in this paper (Figures 1–15), there are six different types of depictions of the tree. First, the depiction, found at the front side of the east pillar of the south gateway (*torāṇa*) of the Great Stūpa I in Sanchi, is a full figure tree with an empty throne beneath it. The tree here is an aniconic representation of the Buddha in the context of the offering of the begging bowls (Figure 1). Second, the representations in Gandhāra (Figures 14, 15) and Nāgārjunakoṇḍa (Figure 2) show a tree with its foliage forming an arch over the Buddha's head. Third, a tree with its flowers bloom on either side of the Buddha's head, which is only depicted in one Gandhāran sculpture found in Peshawar (Figure 9). Fourth, two leafy branches hanging on either side of the Buddha's head in the sculptures found in the Gandhāran region (Figures 6, 10–13). This is the most famous form of depiction of the tree. The fifth style is the depiction of pendent branches with foliage covering the Buddha's head (Figures 7, 8). Lastly, the tree

5 An epithet of the Bodhi tree which is particular only to this text.



FIGURE 1 **Sanchi East pillar of the south gateway, front side.** Ca. 1st century BCE. Sanchi museum (Madhya Pradesh). After Marshall and Foucher 1941, pl. XIXc



FIGURE 2 **Nāgārjunakoṇḍa Episodes in the life of the Buddha.** Ca. 3rd century CE. Nāgārjunakoṇḍa. AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPH

is represented as branches with foliage pointing upward above the Buddha's head (Figure 5). The Mathuran examples are the only ones in which the tree is not depicted. However, the tree or its branches with foliage might symbolize either the Bodhi tree, the Rājāyatana tree, or the Kṣīrikā tree, depending on where the scene is said to have taken place in various textual sources. They are always placed above the halo surrounding the head of the Buddha which symbolizes spiritual knowledge or the illumination of enlightenment (see Richie 2014, 45).

Besides the tree, there are two types of the Bodhi seat depicted in these visual representations. The Bodhi seat, or as it is famously called, the *vajrāsana* (diamond throne), is the seat the Buddha sat on when he achieved supreme enlightenment. The first type, which is also the most popular, is a rectangular throne without back and armrests found in Sanchi and all Gandhāran examples. The front of this seat is decorated with many motifs, found only in some Gandhāran sculptures, such as the three-flower motif, which is the most prevalent (Figures 5, 8, 15); a triangular motif with indentations (Figure 14); a creeper motif; a leaf-like motif (Figure 10); and a seat with a cloth cover (see Kurita 2003, Figure 241). The second type is a lion throne or *śiṃhāsana* found on the railing (*vedikā*) from Íśapura in Mathurā (thrones without back and armrests) (Figure 3) and Nāgārjunakoṇḍa (thrones with back and armrests)



FIGURE 3

Mathurā The offering of the four bowls to the Buddha on the railing (*vedikā*). Íśapura.

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CHEDHA TINGSANCHALI





FIGURE 4 **Mathurā** The offering of the four bowls to the Buddha. Pedestal of Mathuran *stūpa*.  
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF CHEDHA  
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(Figure 2). The decorative style of this seat is also depicted in a portrait statue of King Kaniṣka (Vima Kadphises) of the Kuṣāṇa dynasty from around the first to second centuries CE (see Revire 2011, Figure 9 and Figure 10).

## 2.2 *Offering of Four Bowls by the Lokapālas*

According to the *Mahāvagga*, when the Buddha was about to receive the food offered by the two merchants, he reflected that previous *tathāgatas* did not accept the food with their bare hands (P VIN i 4). Similarly, in the *Saṅghabhedavastu* (i 123) and the *Catuspariṣatsūtra* (§ 2.11–12), the Buddha could not accept the offering with his hand, but certain deities said to him that the previous buddhas accepted offerings with bowls (*pātra*). On the other hand, in the *Mahāvastu* (iii 304) the Buddha knew by himself that the previous buddhas had received foods in their bowls (*bhājana*). Just as in the *Lalitavistara* (277), the Buddha knew that it would not be appropriate for him to take these alms with his hands and that previous buddhas had used bowls to accept alms. The *Nidānakathā* gives more details about the Buddha's bowl, delineating that his earlier alms bowl disappeared after he had accepted the milk rice (*pāyāsa*) (from Sujātā).<sup>6</sup> And now that he had to accept the alms from the merchants, he thought, “The buddhas have never received foods in their hands. How shall I take it?” (JA i 80; transl. Rhys Davids 1880, 110).

6 This refers to a sequence of well-known events related in the *Nidānakathā* (JA i 69). See the account of Sujātā's offering food to the Buddha in other versions in Rhi 2009, 65–67.

It is well known from diverse sources that, when the Lokapālas came to perceive the Buddha's thought, they arrived from the four directions, each carrying a bowl to offer to the Buddha. However, there are again discrepancies in the scriptures describing the handling of these bowls, for example, the materials of the bowls. According to the *Mahāvagga* (i 4), the *Saṅghabhedavastu* (i 123), and the *Catuṣpariṣatsūtra* (§ 3.1–3.4), the four Great Kings<sup>7</sup> offered the Buddha four bowls made of stone.<sup>8</sup> In the *Mahāvastu* (iii 304), the four Great Lokapālas arrived bearing four golden bowls (*catvāri suvarṇapātrāṇi*) and presented them to the Buddha. However, the Buddha could not accept that material, and as such, the bowls were transformed first into various other precious metals and finally into four stone bowls (*catvāro śailapātrāṇi*), which the Buddha accepted. In the *Lalitavistara* (278–279), bowls made of gold, silver, lapis lazuli, quartz, coral and emerald were successively presented to the Buddha by the four Great Kings and all were refused. The Buddha at the end accepted the bowls when they were turned into stone (*śailapātra*). In the *Nidānakathā* (JA i 80–81), the four Great Kings offered the four bowls only two times. First, the Buddha refused four bowls which were made out of sapphire (*indanilamaṇimaye patte*), but later he accepted the four bowls when they were made entirely of stone in green lentil colour (*muggavaṇṇasalamaye cattāro patte*).

As for the artistic expressions of this offering, for example, in the middle panel of the Sanchi Stūpa I, two Lokapālas, each offering a begging bowl, are standing at the right side of the Buddha (here symbolically represented by the tree). The other two are presumed to be standing at the left side of the tree, though that panel is now damaged (Figure 1). This artistic component in Sanchi is popular in later Gandhāran art. In Gandhāran art, the Buddha, who has not yet accepted the four begging bowls, is depicted seated in cross-legged posture (on the *vajrāsana*) with a gesture of fearlessness (*abhaya mudrā*)—the right hand is held upright and the palm is facing towards the audience. All the four Lokapālas, two on either side of the Buddha, each wearing a chignon, *uttariya* (an outer garment), and *paridhāna* (an under garment), are standing and presenting their bowls to the Buddha (Figure 5). Only the defaced pedestal from Jamalgarhi shows the Buddha in a meditative gesture (*dhyānamudhrā*) with the four gods (see Ali and Qazi 2008, 124 Acc. No: PM\_00372). With regard to the posture of the Buddha, the sitting position depicted in the art is consistent with both the Pāli and Sanskrit textual traditions where the Buddha is said to

7 P Vin: *cattāro mahārājāṇo*; SBV: *catvāro mahārājā*; CPS: *catvāro mahārājāṇo*; Mvu: *catvāri mahālokapāla*; LV: *catvāro mahārājā*; Ja: *cattāro mahārājāṇo*.

8 P Vin: *salamaye patte*; SBV, CPS: *śailamayāni pātrāṇi*.



be sitting in one cross-legged position<sup>9</sup> under the tree continuously for seven days. This posture is suitable for both *abhaya mudrā* and *dhyana mudrā*.

In Mathuran art, for example, the railing from Išapura, which was carved from a local red sandstone, the figure of the Buddha is seated as a *yogin* on a lion throne in the *abhaya mudrā* gesture. The Buddha is backed by the four Great Kings wearing Indian turbans and transparent textiles, which are Mathuran features. They also hold the begging bowls (Figure 3). The panels from Nāgārjunakoṇḍa Stūpa demonstrate the two scenes in the middle register. On the left, the Lokapālas, turbaned and dressed in Indian style, are holding the bowls to the Buddha's left, while the Buddha is shown empty handed in *bhadrāsana* posture,<sup>10</sup> with both legs pendent and feet firmly planted on a lotus pedestal, on a lion throne (*simhāsana*) (Figure 2). This posture is popular in the Gupta and in post-Gupta periods.

### 2.3 *Merging of the Bowls*

According to textual sources, in order to strengthen the faith of each Lokapāla and allow all of them to gain merit, the Buddha accepted all the four bowls



FIGURE 5 **Gandhāra** The Offering of the Four Bowls to Buddha. Ca 2nd century CE. Gray schist; H. 42.5 cm, W. 46.8 cm. Ackland Art Museum, USA, no. 90.35.

9 P Vin: *ekapallaṅkena*; SBV, CPS: *ekaparyāṅkena*.

10 See the discussion on the terminology referred to this seated posture in Revire 2011, 45.



FIGURE 6 **Gandhāra** The offering of the begging bowls. Ca. 2nd century CE. Jamālgaṛhī. Grey Schist; H. 27.3 cm, W. 28.2 cm, D. 7.7 cm. British Museum, no. OA 1880-196. After Zwalf 1996, Figure 189.

offered by them. In the *Mahāvagga* (i 4), he received the four bowls without compressing them into one. However, both the *Saṅghabhedavastu* (i 124) and the *Catuspariṣatsūtra* (§ 3.5) mention that the four bowls were transformed into one bowl. In the *Mahāvastu* (iii 304), the Buddha touched them with his thumb, and then the four bowls turned into one with four rings around the rims serving as vestiges of the miracle performed. In the *Lalitavistara*, the Buddha received the bowls with his right hand (*dakṣiṇaṃ pāṇiṃ*) and transformed them into one. It is noteworthy that in this text, although the Buddha combined the four stone bowls into one, he accepted the offered food in a jeweled bowl (*ratnapātrī*) (1V 281). *Fangguang da zhuangyan jing* (方廣大莊嚴經), the Chinese translation of the *Lalitavistara*, by Divākara (地婆訶羅) in 683 CE corresponds to the *Lalitavistara* except that after the Buddha had merged the four bowls into one, he received the food from two merchants in a sandalwood bowl (*zhan tan zhi bo* 栴檀之鉢; T 187, ed. vol. 3, 602C10; Rhi 2009, 66).

In the *Nidānakathā* (JA i 80–81), the Buddha merged the four bowls into one single bowl also with lines near its rim showing the compression. The Gāndhārī version is not identical to any previously known versions, with one notable divergence. According to Allon (2009, 11–13), the episode where the Lokapālas offer the alms bowls occurred after the Buddha had accepted the food offering by the merchants and after they had taken the two-fold refuge. Allon finds this illogical sequence to be problematic, as the Buddha needed a bowl before he was able to accept the food offerings. Unfortunately, the Gāndhārī fragment only survived until the Lokapālas approached the Buddha



FIGURE 7 **Gandhāra** The offering of the begging bowls. Ca. 2nd century CE. Grey schist; H. 24 cm. Peshawar Museum. After Jr. Rowland 1960, p.17.

with their four bowls. Nevertheless, according to Allon, “the Gāndhārī text would undoubtedly have continued with the description of them offering the bowls to the Buddha, the Buddha accepting them and converting them into one bowl” (Allon 2009, 13).

As for the artistic expression of the bowl-offering event, I found that, in the selected Gandhāran reliefs, there are three types of depictions.

**Type 1:** The Buddha was sitting in the *abhayamudrā* gesture with a bowl in his hand; the Lokapālas are also holding their own bowls.

This type shows that the Buddha is in a seated position with his right hand raised in the *abhayamudrā* gesture, while his left hand holds a bowl over his lap to show that he has already received the bowl with his right hand and merged them together. In the same scene, on either side of the Buddha, a row of two Lokapālas in Indian dress, each holding a bowl and presenting it to the Buddha (Figure 7). In Figure 8, the Buddha is holding a bowl with four visible rims, which can be interpreted to signify the merging of the four bowls as stated in the textual tradition, but note that the two bowls being offered here also have one and two grooves below the rim respectively. On the Buddha’s left are the Lokapālas, depicted here offering up their bowls.

In these selected examples, all the four Lokapālas are almost identical, portrayed as princely Figures wearing Indian garb and commonly turbaned to symbolize the headdress of gods or kings. It is impossible to distinguish





FIGURE 8 **Gandhāra** Presentation of the Bowls. Ca. 2nd–3rd century CE. Swat or Buner. Grey schist, broken and chipped; H. 31.7 cm, W. 34.6 cm, D. 6.1 cm. British Museum. After Zwalf 1996, Figure 191.

each of the Lokapālas from the other three, although they are surely illustrated there. However, according to Tanabe's study, in some artefacts, Vaiśravaṇa, the guardian of the northern direction, can be identified by his distinguished costume with a Kuṣāṇa dress and winged headdress (Tanabe 1993–94, 157–165; 2000, 1090–1094). The reliefs in which Vaiśravaṇa can be identified depict him wearing a Kuṣāṇa, or Iranian dress, boots, and a pair of wings on his headdress, while the other three Lokapālas are presented in Indian garments. I observe that Vaiśravaṇa is illustrated either on the right side or the left side of the Buddha, standing or kneeling, and with or without a bowl. For example, on a panel preserved in the Peshawar Museum (Figure 12), the two remaining figures standing to the right side of the Buddha were wrongly identified as the two merchants by Ali and Qazi (2008, 126). One of them, who wears a wing-headdress and short tunic and holds a bowl in his hand, is undoubtedly Vaiśravaṇa.

In Figures 9, 10, it was the Kuṣāṇa-dressed Vaiśravaṇa who was the first to offer his stone bowl to the Buddha before the other three Lokapālas as Vaiśravaṇa was no longer holding his bowl. These reliefs seem to reflect the arrangement and the order in which the Four Great Kings offer the bowls according to the *Lalitavistara* (277–285) and its Chinese translation (*T* 187,



FIGURE 9 **Gandhāra** The offering of the four bowls to the Buddha. A schist relief. Gai collection, Peshawar (Now kept by Professor Ikuo Hirayama, Director of the Institute of Silk Road Studies, Kamakura-shi, Japan). After Ingholt 1957, pl. xx. 1.

ed. vol. 3, 602a14–b18). In these texts, Vaiśravaṇa being the first, followed by Dhṛtarāṣṭra (east), Virūḍhaka (south), and Virūpākṣa (west), and the Buddha also received the stone bowls in this order (Tanabe 1993–94, 159–161). However, the order of the presenting the bowls as narrated in the aforementioned texts is not a normal arrangement of the Lokapālas and does not necessarily correspond to depiction of the reliefs. In the *Lalitavistara* and the *Mahāvastu*, the order of Lokapālas mentioned by Buddha in his blessing verses to the two merchants is merely following the common Indian tradition of mentioning direction which is in the sequence of East, South, West, and North (see Tanabe 1993–94, 163; Sirisawad 2012, 14–80).

Moreover, I also observe that some Gandhāran reliefs do not “accord foremost or leadership status of the Four Lokapālas to Vaiśravaṇa” as argued by Tanabe (Tanabe 1993–94, 161; Tanabe 2000, 1090–1094). I base my observation on reliefs depicting the figure of Vaiśravaṇa, who is dressed in Kuṣāṇa attire, is still holding a bowl while one of the other three no longer has a bowl. For example, in the relief from Sahri Bahlol (Figure 13), on the left side of the Buddha, two Lokapālas are holding bowls in their hand: One, identified as Vaiśravaṇa is wearing a decorated headdress and a short tunic with long boots; the other behind him is wearing an elaborate headdress and a dhoti. Two Lokapālas on the right side of the Buddha are wearing dhotis with embellished headdresses and necklaces. Both of them are standing, one is in *añjali mudrā*



FIGURE 10 **Gandhāra Offering of the Four Bowls 1**—Eurasian Art 2021, Gandharan Archives Kurita. Retrieved from <http://gandharan-archives.blogspot.com/2011/06/offering-of-four-bowls-3.html>.

(folded hands) without a bowl, and the other standing next to the Buddha, is still holding a bowl.

Furthermore, *Puyao jing* (普曜經) (T 186, ed. vol. 3, 526c), another Chinese translation of the *Lalitavistara*, translated by Dharmarakṣa (竺法護) in 308 CE and *Fo benxing ji jing* (佛本行集經) (T 190, ed. vol. 3, 802a) translated by Jñānagupta (闍那崛多) in 587–595 or 587–591 CE,<sup>11</sup> put the normal order of the four Lokapālas offering their bowls to begin with Dhṛtarāṣṭra (E), Virūḍhaka (S), Virūpākṣa (W), and Vaiśravaṇa (N). The Indian-dressed Lokapāla without a bowl could be Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the guardian of the eastern region, who is the first to present his begging bowl to the Buddha. Tanabe who states that “this arrangement of the four Lokapālas (E, S, W, N) seems to be reflected in some reliefs in which no distinction can be made among the dress of the four Lokapālas” (Tanabe 1993–94, 163), but the Sahri Bahlol example mentioned earlier (Figure 13) contradicts his claim. In that relief in which Vaiśravaṇa can be identified clearly, the northern king is not the first one to offer his bowl. Moreover, wearing an Iranian or Kuṣāṇa dress is a criterion used by Tanabe to distinguish the figure of Vaiśravaṇa from Kubera as depicted in Gandhāran art. In the textual tradition, Vaiśravaṇa has been an epithet of Kubera since the Vedic period, and the name Vaiśravaṇa or Vessavaṇa became popular in Buddhism, similar to the situation of Indra-Śakra or in Pāli, Sakka (Sirisawad

11 For an English translation of T 186 and T 190 see Tanabe 1993–94, 162–163.





FIGURE 11

**Gandhāra** Presentation of the Four Begging Bowls. 2nd–3rd century CE. H. 69.90 cm, W. 40.67 cm. Peshawar Museum, Acc. No: PM\_0145. After Ali and Qazi 2008, 125.

2012, 265–268), so they are identical, and no distinction need be made between the two as argued in Tanabe’s article.

Type 2 depicts the Buddha holding a bowl in his left hand while his right hand rests upon it; the turbaned and crested Lokapālas in *uttariya* and *paridhāna* are still holding their bowls (Figure 14). Types 3 shows the Buddha in a depiction similar to type 2, but the four Lokapālas are no longer holding begging bowls. They are illustrated standing in *añjali mudrā* gesture, as a token of reverence after having presented their bowls (Figure 15).

It is noteworthy that there are observable cross-regional influences in these sculptures. For example, on the pedestal of the Mathurā Stūpa, the Buddha, with a bowl in his hand, is flanked by the Four Great Kings carrying begging bowls in a pattern similar to type 2 Gandhāran reliefs. However, unlike the relief of Íśapura which is also found in Mathūra, the figure of the Buddha at the Mathūra Stūpa, which is of a later Mathuran art, demonstrates signs of influence from Gandhāran art. Here, the Buddha is dressed in a toga-like *saṅghātī*, a garment seems inappropriate for the climate of India (Figure 4).



FIGURE 12

**Gandhāra** Presentation of the Four Begging Bowls. 2nd–3rd century CE. Mardan. H. 53.37 cm, W. 35.58 cm. Peshawar Museum, Acc. No: PM\_02775. After Ali and Qazi 2008, 126.

#### 2.4 *Presence of the Two Merchants*

After the Buddha had caused the four bowls to become one, he received the offering of the two merchants. The two then took refuge in the Buddha and the Dharma (P VIN, SBV, CPS, G, MVU, LV, JA), and in some textual traditions, they also took refuge in the future monastic Order (SBV, CPS, MVU). This act has made them the first lay followers (*upāsaka*) in the Buddha's dispensation. Then, just as in most textual traditions (G, DHG VIN, SBV, MSV, CPS, MAHĪŚ VIN), the Buddha uttered one or more verses in appreciation of the merchants' alms (see Allon 2009, 12–13). In the *Mahāvastu* and the *Lalitavistara*, the Buddha blessed the two traders with the utterance of many other verses by referring to the power of the Lokapālas and the auspicious elements of the four directions in order to protect them before they were established as part of the (lay) order.

As for the artistic expressions of the two merchants in Gandhāran arts, I am of the opinion that some of the unidentified human figures without turbans are the two merchants (Figures 6, 9, 10). However, it is not possible to definitively identify the two merchants in these Gandhāran reliefs. What is apparent is that they are illustrated in the preceding scenes in which they play an important



FIGURE 13 **Gandhāra** Presentation of the Four Begging Bowls. 2nd–3rd century CE. Sahri Bahlol. Schist Stone; H. 8 cm, W. 20 cm. Peshawar Museum, Acc. No: PM 02774. After Ali and Qazi 2008, 123.

role. For example, a relief from Peshāwar (Ingholt 1957, Figures 53, 67) shows a large caravan belonging to two merchants suddenly stopped near a grove where dwelt a deity who told them to bring food to the Buddha. Another reason for the possible omission of the two merchants from the scene is that the Gandhāran artists might have based their works on the textual tradition of the Gāndhārī version. As discussed earlier, in this version, the Buddha receiving the food offered by the two merchants and granting them refuge occurred before the four guardian deities brought him the bowls (Allon 2009, 11). As such, the merchants' food offering session is considered to be a separate and earlier event. Nevertheless, the presence of the two merchants is clearly depicted on middle panel of the Nāgārjunakoṇḍa sculpture (Figure 2). On the right side of the panel, the Buddha is being presented with food by the two merchants without turbans. Interestingly, the bowl in his left hand was already filled with food. This seems to suggest the successive unfolding of events—the merging of the four bowls into one and the offering of the food by the two merchants—from the scene depicted on the left side of the panel. These panels are interesting due to the chronological sequences in which the Buddha is represented twice in order to show the “before” and “after” the merging of the bowls into one.

### 2.5 *Presence of Other Deities*

In the *Lalitavistara* (278) when the four Lokapālas brought the stone bowls to the Buddha, they came with their retinues and other deities. These heavenly guardians also held alms bowls in their hands which were filled with divine flowers and various kinds of incense and offered the alms bowls to the Buddha. On the east pillar of the south gateway of the Sanchi Stūpa I, one of the deities surrounding the Lokapālas is playing the harp (Marshall 1955, 56). Mitra (1957, 35) indicates that one of the four Great Kings is apparently Indra, as suggested by the presence of Pañcaśikha. I think the figure playing the harp is probably



FIGURE 14 **Gandhāra** The offering of begging the bowls. Ca. 2nd century CE. Swāt? Grey schist, broken, cracked and with much soil incrustation, broken and chipped; H. 14.9 cm, W. 35.6 cm. British Museum, no. OA 1940.7-13.2. After Zwalf 1996, Figure 192.

Pañcaśikha, a heavenly musician who always follows Indra or Śakra, but Indra cannot belong to the group of the Lokapālas, because he is the lord of Trayastriṃśa heaven and a chief of these four guardians (SN i 234).

Other heavenly beings are most commonly represented on both sides, behind and above the Lokapālas, and in the background of the Gandhāran sculptures. In a few examples, the gods that are mentioned in the narrative of this episode might be illustrated among these onlooking deities. They are usually depicted as full or half-length standing or flying figures wearing chignons, headdresses, or turbans; ornamented; and in various postures of adoration with joined hands in *añjali mudrā* and throwing flowers towards the Buddha (Figures 5, 6, 7, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15). Among the gods in the background is Vajrapāṇi, who is frequently depicted in this scene.<sup>12</sup> He is commonly illustrated standing to the left side of the Buddha, holding a (damaged) *vajra* (Figures 7, 10). Besides these celestial characters, on the pillars enclosing the narrative scene, sometimes *yakṣas* (demons/spirits) are also represented (Figure 6).

Vajrapāṇi, however, does not appear notably in the written records of this episode of the offering of the begging bowls; instead, Indra or Śakra, lord of the devas, who is linked with Vajrapāṇi, is mentioned. According to certain texts, Śakra brought the Buddha a fruit of the myrobalan tree (Skt. *haritakī*; P. *harīṭaka*) as a medicine to cure his sickness after he had eaten the merchants' meal (SBV i

<sup>12</sup> Apart from this scene, the Buddha is also depicted as being accompanied by Vajrapāṇi during various events in the life of the Buddha in much of Gandhāra art, see Marshall 1960, Figures 66, 75, 77, 98, 100; Huntington and Bangdel 2003, 197 Figure 1.



FIGURE 15 **Gandhāra Offering of the Four Bowls**  
 3—Eurasian Art 2021, Gandharan Archives  
 Kurita. Retrieved from <http://gandharan-archives.blogspot.com/2011/06/offering-of-four-bowls-3.html>.

125, CPS § 5.1–5.3). The Buddha then planted the stalk of the myrobalan offered by Śakra and it miraculously grew into a big myrobalan tree (MVU iii 311). In the *Nidānakathā*, Sakka brought him a fruit of the myrobalan tree to eat, a tooth-cleanser made of the thorns of a snake-creeper, and water to wash his face before receiving the merchants' offering (JA i 80). However, Vajrapāṇi seen in the sculptures and Indra who is mentioned in the texts could not be the same person because they are individually depicted in some Gandhāran reliefs (see Marshall 1960, Figures 118, 120). Huntington and Bangdel (2003, 197) state that "Vajrapāṇi embodies the great power of a Buddha's enlightened heart-mind (*mahābalacitta*) to convert others of different persuasions into the Buddhist path." Thus, the *vajra*-holding figure was added into the representations in order to represent the power of the Buddha's heart-mind and make the narrative scene more auspicious.

### 3 **Significance of the Offering of Begging Bowl by the Four Lokapālas According to Buddhist Texts and Indian Art**

The event of the four Lokapālas giving the Buddha begging bowls and the Buddha turning these bowls into one has both literary and iconographic



significance in emphasizing certain important Buddhist concepts. Some of which are outlined below.

### 3.1 *Transcendental Virtue of the Buddha*

The role and behavior of Lokapālas help to enhance the transcendental virtue (*pāramitā*) of the Buddha in two significant ways:

#### (1) The Buddha is supreme to all deities

The four Lokapālas are individually and anthropomorphically described with some frequency in several *suttas* of the *Dīghanikāya* (DN), demonstrating their subservient position to the Buddha (DN iii 203, ii 257). In the same way, the Buddha is always described as being superior to all deities since he was a Bodhisattva (DN ii 15). The appearance of the four Lokapālas as the ones who offered begging bowls to the Buddha emphasizes the idea that the *pāramitā* of the Lord Buddha is superior to the Lokapālas and their retinues (the *gandharvas*, the *nāgas*, the *kumbhaṇḍas*, and the *yakṣas*), as well as all deities in the four directions of the world. According to my previous study, the concept of the Lokapālas in Buddhist literature shows the compromise and mutual recognition between Buddhism and precedent or contemporary indigenous beliefs, as well as people of other faiths who had cultural encounters with Buddhism.<sup>13</sup> The depiction of the Lokapālas making obeisance and other deities making reverence with the *añjali* gesture towards the seated Buddha in many representations also indicates the subordination of the gods to the Buddha and their acceptance of Buddhism. This, in a way, is emphasizing the supreme status of the Buddha as well.

#### (2) The Buddha as a universal monarch (*cakravartin*)

The Buddha, who is superior to the four Great Kings, is commonly compared with a universal monarch (*cakravartin*) who rules over the four directions (DN ii 17; transl. Walshe 1987, 205). In the Mathurā and Nāgārjunakoṇḍa examples, the Buddha is depicted seated on a lion throne (*siṃhāsana*) in *bhadrāsana* posture, signifying his royal position or power, which is equal to the *cakravartin* (see Revire 2012). The Four Great Kings offering the four bowls may be compared with the offering of the four great treasures to a king as mentioned in the *Maitreyāvadāna* (DIVY 61; transl. Rotman 2008, 125–126). Moreover, the name of the “Rājāyatana” tree, where the Buddha was sitting while enjoying happiness after his enlightenment, is mentioned in the Pāli text. “Rājāyatana” means “a seat of the king,” consisting of *rājā* (*rājan*, a king, sovereign, chief or best) and *āyatana* (*resting-place, support, seat, place, home, house, abode*). As

<sup>13</sup> See the concept of the Lokapālas in Buddhist literature in Sirisawad 2012.



such, the choice of the name of the tree further emphasizes kingship of the Buddha.

### 3.2 *Donative Practice*

Giving (*dāna*) is one of the essential preliminary steps of Buddhist practice that ultimately leads to the freedom from the recurring cycle of rebirth (*saṃsāra*). Three factors are said to determine the amount of merit gained through giving: the quality of the donor's motive; the gift-worthiness of the object; and the spiritual purity of the recipient (see *Abhidh-k-bh* iii 114c–115a). If these three factors were used to measure the act of giving alms-bowls by the Lokapālas, one could see that the merit gained is indeed great. First, the Lokapālas are faithful (Skt. *śraddhā*, P. *saddhā*) donors (*dāyaka*) with pure minds in their act of giving. Second, they offer the most appropriate and generous gifts that are gift-worthy objects (Skt. *deyadharmā*, P. *deyyadhamma* ...). Lastly, they make offerings to the Buddha as the recipient (Skt. *pratigrāhaka*, P. *paṭiggāhaka*) who is worthy of a gift (Skt. *dakṣiṇeya*, P. *dakkhiṇeyya*). Moreover, it is at a timely moment (*kāla*), and they operate within the Buddha's field of merit (Skt. *puṇyakṣetra*, P. *puññakhetta*), which in turn cultivates their own merit. *Fangguang da zhuangyan jing* (T 187, ed. vol. 3, 602a27–b2) narrates the three key factors as follows:

The Tathāgata! Please take pity on us to accept the bowls [=deyadharmā] we offer you in order to accept the food to be offered by two merchants. Please allow us to gain spacious and eternal peace of mind and the Dharma. Please have pity on us and accept them. Then the Tathāgata [=pratigrāhaka] told them what he thought: “The four Lokapālas [=dāyaka] donated to me the bowls with pure devotion (Tanabe 1993–94, 160–161).

As pointed out by Allon, the action of the Buddha accepting all four bowls, even though he needs only one, can be seen as a foundation story for the practice of Buddhist monks not to completely refuse an offering of a necessity by a donor for the sake of the latter's possible accrued merit (Allon 2009, 14). The offering of the four begging bowls by the Four Lokapālas, the devotion of other heavenly beings and the *yakṣas*, and the presence of Indra indicate and propagate the idea that “revering and serving the Buddha bear a great merit. If the heavenly beings were ever ready to serve the Buddha and accumulate merits, it becomes more important for humans to do so” (Rehman 2010, 7). Thus, the numerous depictions of the four deities still holding the bowls convey this symbolic message to the followers.

Moreover, this story is the foundation for “why Buddhist monks receive food in a bowl and not in their hand like other ascetics” (Allon 2009, 14). It is clearly stated in the *Catuṣpariṣatsūtra* in which the Buddha does not accept the alms with his hands in the same manner as the *tīrthikas* (adherents of another religion) (§ 2.11). The notion of no bowl at all is not allowed for Buddhist monks is put in place in order to distinguish them from naked ascetics, such as Digāmbara Jains who begged with a “hand bowl” (*pāṇipātra*) (see Jaini 1979, 40–41). This has led to the establishment of the convention that “the Buddhist monk carrying a bowl is a worthy recipient of alms and an act of giving to such recipient brings with it consequential merit for the donor” (Allon 2009, 14). This merit-making idea is even clearly stated in the Buddha’s words in this episode, recorded in verses in the Gāndhārī version, in appreciation of the merchants’ alms: “*The purpose for which a gift is given will be conductive to that end; A gift given for the purpose of happiness will be conductive to one’s happiness*” as well as its parallels in the *Saṅghabhedavastu* and the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya* (Allon 2009, 13).

### 3.3 *Legitimate Usage of a Bowl According to the Vinaya Contexts*

Due to the fact that each story speaks of different kinds of material used to make the bowl, I think it is worthwhile to discuss briefly here the legitimate usage of a begging bowl according to the Vinaya rules. As we have seen, most of the textual traditions state that the Buddha refused all bowls made of precious things but accepted the bowls made of stone offered by the Lokapālas. Whereas in the *Lalitavistara* (281) and its Chinese translation (*T* 187, ed. vol. 3, 602c10), the Buddha received the food in a jeweled bowl and a sandalwood bowl respectively. But these kinds of bowls are prohibited according to the *Vinaya* regulations. Jeweled bowls are forbidden because they appear to be luxurious (P VIN ii 112). In the *Mahāvastu*, the Buddha refused the precious metal bowls because they were not suitable for a recluse (iii 304); wooden begging bowls are banned for monks for hygienic reasons because they retain greasy dirt and cannot be easily kept clean (*T* 1509, ed. vol. 25, 252c9). Furthermore, this ban serves to distinguish Buddhist monks from non-Buddhist heretics (Strong 2013, 24). The wooden bowl was denigrated by the Buddha as an ultimately worthless material thing. In the Sarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, it is referred to as a “naked-heretic thing” (*chiluo waidao wu* 赤裸外道物) (*T* 1435, ed. vol. 23, 269a27), while in the Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya* the Buddha himself is portrayed as initially refusing the Licchavis’ offer of a sandalwood bowl on the grounds that it is a “heretic’s bowl” (*waidao bo* 外道鉢) (*T* 1421, ed. vol. 22, 170a8). Nevertheless, the *Vinaya* rules about what kind of bowls Buddhist monks can legitimately use—what they can be made of, how to care for them, how to dispose of them, etc.—are complex and confusing, and not altogether consistent (Strong 2013, 23).

### 3.4 *Veneration of the Buddha's Bowl*

This episode establishes the origin of the Buddha's bowl, which later becomes an object of veneration. According to the *Lalitavistara* (281) and its two Chinese translations (*Puyao jing* T 186, ed. vol. 3, 526b–527a; *Fangguang da zhuangyan jing* T 187, ed. vol. 3, 601c–602c), the stone bowl of the Buddha was thrown into the sky after he had eaten his meal and was subsequently picked up by Subrahmā and worshipped in the world of Brahma (Brahmaloka). The veneration of the bowl is one of the most common practices in Gandhāra. Its popularity can be seen from the Gandhāran representations illustrated on the pedestals of the Buddha and Bodhisattva images or on the arch-shaped panel (see Rhi 2009, Figures 8.1–8.2; Bhattacharya 2002, Figures 351, 357; Kurita 2003, Figures 242–244). According to Foucher (1905, 419–420), the theme is connected to the actual worship of the Buddha's bowl in ancient Puruṣapura (present Peshawar), a practice reported by the Chinese pilgrims Faxian (about 400 CE) and Xuanzang (about 620 CE). In his travel account, Faxian gave a detailed description of the bowl: “It holds perhaps over two pecks, and is of several colours, chiefly black. The four joinings (of the four bowls fused by Buddha into one) are clearly distinguishable” (Giles 1923, 14; T 2085, ed. vol. 51, 858b29–c1). The bowl mentioned above was probably connected to the story of the four bowls of the Lokapālas merged into one. The tradition of venerating the alms bowl was strongly localized in Gandhāra. Buddhists in other regions, apart from far northwest India, did not pay much attention to this tradition, with only a few contemporaneous sculptures having found extant in Mathurā (see Rhi 2009, Figures 8.3–8.10). However, we have to keep in mind that Gandhāra is different from other Buddhist areas on the South Asian subcontinent: there are no direct vestiges of the Buddha, but “the Chinese pilgrims never doubted the authenticity of the Buddha's visits and items” (Falk 2005, 445). The popularity of the Gandhāran representations depicting the offering of the four bowls was probably influenced by the tradition of veneration of the bowl relic or the other way around.

## 4 Conclusion and Discussion

The story of the Lokapālas offering the begging bowl to the Buddha after his enlightenment is an important episode in the earliest phase of Gautama's career as the Buddha as recounted in several textual sources. Whether the episode occurred in the second, fourth, or seventh week of fasting after his enlightenment varies from one source to the other. Nevertheless, the important components of this story, which are depicted in motifs, are: (1) the

tree the Buddha sat under, (2) the offering of the four bowls, (3) the merging of the bowls, (4) the presence of the two merchants, and (5) the presence of other deities. This story is included in the textual traditions of most if not all of the known Buddhist schools, such as the *Saṅghabhedavastu* of the Mūlasarvāstivādins; the *Vinayas* of Dharmaguptakas and the Mahīśasakas; the *Mahāvastu* of the Lokottaravādin Mahāsāṃghikas; the *Mahāvagga* of the Theravādins; the lives of the Buddha in the *Lalitavistara*; the Sanskrit *Catusparīkṣasūtra* of the Sarvāstivāda *Ārghyagama*; the Pāli *Nidānakathā* of the *Jātaka* and in the Gāndhārī manuscript fragments. The narrative elements of these selected textual traditions which are relevant to the comparative analysis are summarized in Table 1.

The examination of these visual representations of this episode has brought to light different important narrative components as indicated in various Buddhist traditions. The visual representation from Sanchi depicts the narrative motifs of No. 1, 2 and 5, while the panel from Nāgārjunakoṇḍa combines all narrative components. The Mathuran art depicted on the railing from Iśapura shows the narrative motif of No. 2, and the pedestal of the *stūpa* combines the components of No. 2 and 3. Almost 30 artefacts depicting this episode are found particularly in Gandhāra, with various combinations of the narrative components comprising two motifs (No. 1,2); three motifs (No. 1,2,3; 1,2,5; 2,3,5); four motifs (No. 1,2,3,4; 1,2,3,5; 1,2,4,5); and all components. The offering of the four bowls is the only component that is depicted in all visual representations. Some Gandhāran artefacts (see Kurita 2003, Figures P2-VI) also added other elements from the local culture, such as the representation of the table (see also Rehman 2010, Figures 12–14). The provenance of some artistic styles represented in the sculptures indicates the existence of local workshops, from which these pieces may have originated (Rehman 2010, 4–5).

In terms of iconography, the composition of these representations mostly shows that the Buddha sits in the center, with two rows of two bowl-carrying Lokapālas on either side of the Buddha as well as the onlooking deities above them depicted in half-length. Except for the Sanchi piece, which has a tree to symbolize the presence of the Buddha, others have the Buddha image represented in the sculptures. Most of the depictions show that the Buddha is sitting on a *vajrāsana*, cross-legged in the gesture of fearlessness either with or without a bowl. He is also rarely depicted in the meditation gesture in the Gandhāra sculptures ..., while in Nāgārjunakoṇḍa he is seated in *bhadrāsana*. The Lokapālas are commonly turbaned and in Indian dress (*uttarīya* and *paridhāna*). Vaiśravaṇa, the guardian of the northern region, is distinguishable only in Gandhāran pieces by his Kuṣāṇa dress and winged headdress. The less usual composition has two to three rows of figures, two on each side of the

TABLE 1 Narrative elements regarding the offering of begging bowls to the Buddha in different textual traditions

	P	VIN	SBV	CPS	G	MVU	LV	JA
(1) The tree where the Buddha seated		Rājāyatana tree (Fourth week)	Bodhi tree (Secondweek)	Bodhi tree (Secondweek)	Bodhi tree?	At a shrine in a thicket of Kṣīrikā trees (Seventh week)	Tārāyana tree (an epithet of the Bodhi tree) (Seventh week)	Rājāyatana tree (Seventh week)
(2) The offering the four bowls		Stone bowls	Stone bowls	Stone bowls	Stone bowls?	(1) Golden, silver, pearl, beryl, crystal, white coral and ruby bowls (2) Stone bowls	(1) Golden, silver, lapis lazuli, quartz, coral and emerald bowls (2) Stone bowls (3) Jewelled bowls	(1) Sapphire or jade bowls (2) Stone bowls
(3) Merging of the bowls	x		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
(4) the presence of the two merchants	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
(5) the presence of other deities	x		Śakra	Śakra	?	Śakra	their retainues and other deities	Sakka

Buddha: in each row two figures stand behind each of the two kings flanking the Buddha in the usual way on each side. A figure in one of the rows is identified as Vajrapāṇi, a non-Buddhist deity who does not appear in the text but is a prominent figure in the Gandhāran sculptures. It is noteworthy that other deities are depicted in this scene in the Gandhāran reliefs even though they are not mentioned in textual sources. As to why these other characters are included, it is because “the shape and space availability of the architectural piece has played its role in the execution of the scene” (Rehmen 2010, 4). Moreover, Indian artists do not usually present the story in its briefest form, so they have always taken full use of leftover empty space after “they have carved out the important story and then put other personalities for detail if space was still available” (Rehmen 2010, 7). Thus, the depiction of characters on the reliefs depends on the space available, which is a feature of Indian art.

Unlike Gandhāran art, other events which took place during the seven weeks after the enlightenment as described in various texts except the Pāli *Vinaya*, the *Saṅghabhedavastu*, and the *Catuṣpariṣatsūtra* were popular themes depicted in sculptures found in Sanchi (Madhya Pradesh) and Nāgārjunakoṇḍa Stūpas (Andhra Pradesh). Other than the week during which the Exalted One regarded the Bodhi tree in unblinking gaze and meditated under the goat herder's banyan tree, the pillars of the south and west gateway of the Sanchi Stūpa, I offer panels illustrating some other events that have taken place during the seven weeks. These events include, for example, in the fourth week the Buddha stayed in the jeweled house (*ratnaghara*) where gods paid homage to him, or in the sixth week the serpent king, Mucilinda, sheltered the Buddha during heavy rains and strong winds. In these panels the Buddha is depicted in an aniconic form (see Tingsanchali 2012, 145–152, and Figures 37–40). Contrary to the Sanchi art, in the sculptures of the Nāgārjunakoṇḍa Stūpa, the Blessed One is anthropomorphically shown. At site 2 of this stūpa, there is a slab with three registers depicting different events of the Buddha's life (Figure 2) (See also Bopearachchi 2016, 43–44). The top panel shows the Buddha giving his first sermon in the Deer Park. The other two lower registers illustrate four events, each corresponding to one week after the Great Awakening, including the event of the offering of begging bowls by the Lokapālas (Tingsanchali 2012, 159–163).

Previous scholarly studies have tried to examine some characteristics of these artistic representations and linking them to any particular textual tradition. However, due to the considerable variations between the artistic images and motifs, despite some components of the story being commonly shared in all textual traditions, the visual representations cannot be linked to a specific textual tradition or even exclusively to a particular episode of the



Buddha's life. The composition of the Gandāran artifacts dated ca. 2nd–3rd centuries CE mostly combined the narrative components of the offering and merging of the four bowls, implying that the artists probably drew their inspiration from textual sources in which these two motifs are included. These textual sources were most likely composed earlier or approximately in the same period when the artefacts were created. It is likely that these source texts include the *Saṅghabhedavastu*, the *Catuṣpariṣatsūtra*, the *Mahāvastu* (dated ca. 3rd–4th centuries CE), the *Lalitavistara* (the Buddha's biography), which belongs to the Sarvāstivādins, dated ca. 1st–4th centuries CE (see Nariman 1992, 19) and the Gāndhārī version, which probably belongs to the Dharmaguptakas.

Unfortunately, the surviving Gāndhārī version of the episode of the Lokapalas' offering the bowls is not complete. The fragments which exist today cannot entirely prove that the text directly corresponds with the Gandhāran examples. Even then, the Gandhāran artefacts cannot be attached to any particular Buddhist tradition and even less likely to a specific school. However, it could be assumed that the story was transmitted either in oral form or by textual sources that described the seven weeks (apart from the Pali *Vinaya*, the *Saṅghabhedavastu*, and the *Catuṣpariṣatsūtra*) and was known by the artists as of the Satacahana period around the 1st century BCE. This assumption is supported by the representations in Sanchi. Nevertheless, by the second century CE, this episode was evidently known in both written tradition and visual representations in the Gandhāra region. Even then, some elements are not reflected as such in any text like the appearance of Vajrapāṇi in Gandhāran examples. Literary and visual representations sometimes differ considerably from each other, so that perhaps what a text describes may be impossible to depict or for the sculptors follow using their own conventions. Zin (2018, 113) explains that some representations “are probably utilizing the visual phenomena and not the literary descriptions, giving them new meaning.”

As we have discussed, some important concepts in Buddhism are found throughout this episode demonstrated in both texts and narrative art, including (1) the “transcendental virtue” (*pāramitā*) of the Buddha as supreme to all deities and as a universal monarch (*cakravartin*), (2) donative practice, (3) legitimate usage of the bowl according to the Vinaya contexts, and (4) veneration of the bowl. Some of the findings here correspond to Tingsanchali's conclusion (2012, 87–103) that the offering of the four bowls has some symbolic meanings as a display of the Buddha's supramundane status (*lokottara*) and attempt to incorporate certain ancient beliefs into Buddhist mythology. The narrative depicted in stone sculptures not only play an active role in propagating Buddhist doctrines but is “an important tool for us to recognize and analyze the social and religious background of the time and place where

they were carved out” (Rehman 2010, 7). Further research is recommended in the form of a combined study of Buddhist art and textual traditions related to this episode in different geographical regions or other events of the life of the Buddha that have not yet been studied. This future research will help us to understand the chronology of events and reconstruct a more reliable history of Buddhism.

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