

ANNUNZIATA ZURLO

On Some Iconographical Typologies Representing the Bodhi Tree in the Stelae of the Pāla Period*

This Soul of mine within the heart is smaller than a grain of rice, or a barley-corn, or a mustard-seed, or a grain of millet, or the kernel of a grain of millet; this Soul of mine within the heart is greater than the earth, greater than the atmosphere, greater than the sky, greater than these worlds (Chāndogya Upaniṣad 3.14.3).

Among the supports used in the Tantric meditation,¹ which may be defined of a visualization-type, many are in the form of paintings. Various studies – outstanding are those by Giuseppe Tucci (1949) – have focused on the meditation techniques which involve the use of *maṇḍalas* and other visual supports. These studies are mainly focused on pictorial images; however it is difficult to accept that during the period in which Tantric vision dominated every facet of cultural development – I refer specially to the Pāla period (eighth-eleventh century)² – other branches of figurative art such as sculpture and architecture were not susceptible to the same rules.

One of the main themes of Pāla sculpture is the episode of *Māravijaya*, in which the Buddha³ is represented seated on a lotus throne, in the act of defeating the assault of Māra and his hordes. The Tathāgata performs *bhūmisparśa-*

* I thank Dr Claudio Caniglia for his essential help in writing up and revising the text; Dr Angelica Baschiera, Dr Luisa Mengoni and Dr Christopher Jones for their assistance in wording and proof-reading the English version; Arch. Preziosa Zurlo who collaborated in the realization of drawings. Moreover, I thank Prof. Giovanni Verardi, Prof. Anna Maria Quagliotti, Dr Giuseppe De Marco and particularly Prof. Amedeo Maiello and Dr Pasquale Manzo for their valuable suggestions. Finally, I dedicate this paper to the memory of late Professor Maurizio Taddei who guided and encouraged me in the first stages of research.

¹ For further readings on the Tantric influences on primitive Buddhism, see e.g. Verardi (1988; 1994). For the influences of the Tantric conceptions in the Veda and Hinduism, see Kuiper (1970).

² On the cultural prevalence of Tantrism during the Pāla period see Darian (1971).

³ The identification of the central image with Śākyamuni or Akṣobhya remains an open question (Bhattacharya 1989: 352), which I shall not deal with in this paper.

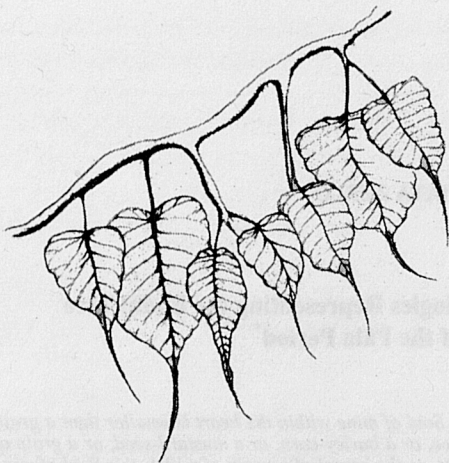


Fig. 1 – Leaves of Bodhi Tree (*Ficus religiosa*). (Drawing by the author).

mudrā with his right hand, a gesture which indicates his call to the earth to testify the achieved Enlightenment (pl. I). At the top of the stela is engraved the Bodhi tree, along the central axis represented by the spinal column of the Buddha. It is identifiable with the *ficus religiosa* because of its heart-shaped leaves with drop-shaped point (fig. 1). What I wish to emphasize is the importance of the episode of the Enlightenment (Awakening) for Buddhist soteriology, with reference to the Tantric context, where it is not only considered the *summum bonum* (Huntington – Huntington 1990: 136), but also a goal which can be

achieved by everybody, although after a long path of gnosis. It would be restrictive to think that there was not an anagogical purpose⁴ at the basis of sculptural representations of the Pāla period, and particularly those representing the *Māravijaya*.

That these sculptures are not exclusively descriptive or decorative is evidenced, on the one hand, by the structure of the stela, which is realized according to a strictly axial symmetry having the Buddha's body (flanked by attendants or episodes of his life) at the centre and, on the other hand, by the 'centripetal dynamism' of all the other features of the stela.

It is my intention to show, through the analysis of some iconographic elements present in a large number of sculptures, that the representation of the tree, as it appears in the Pāla stelae representing the *Māravijaya*, is not merely a feature placed on the top of the stela to indicate the place of the Enlightenment (Coomaraswamy 1935: 39; Kinnard 1996: 292), nor a lingering trace of a glorious cult which has disappeared due to the degradation of religious practices among the Pālas (Viennot 1954: 231-33). The tree is placed at the centre of the stela, along an axis which, according to Tantric physiology, is considered to be the most important part of the body. It becomes the fulcrum, together with the image of the Buddha, of the stela itself and thus of the process of visualization. This hypothesis is based upon a study of the different forms representing the tree, of which I identify here five main typologies.

⁴ On the basis of Abe's statements, Verardi (1994: 20-22) notes that the practice of visualization was probably known since the Gandharan period. The anthropomorphic image of Buddha could probably be linked to this practice.

The Dome Tree

In this type of images (pl. II), the tree is represented as a sort of dome which seems to rhythmically double the *uṣṇīṣa* of the Buddha. This typology (fig. 2) finds its explanation in the close relationship between the cult of the tree and that of the *stūpa*.



Fig. 2 – Dome Tree. See pl. II.
(Drawing by the author).

John Irwin (1980: 13), in his study on the *stūpa* symbolism, argues that the cult bestowed on it was originally addressed to the sacred trees. The identification between the *stūpa* and the cosmic tree reminds a well-known passage of the *Mahāvamsa* (XXX, 63; Geiger 1912: 203), where the king Dutthāgamani is described as he who «in the midst of the relic-chamber (of the Mahāstūpa) placed a bodhi tree ...».

In the construction of the *stūpa*, the shadows cast by a gnomon-pillar set up at the centre of a circle, is used to determine an East-West

axis (Snodgrass 1985: 14) which will serve to draw the basis of the architec-tonic structure. This tracing of a sacred circle recalls to the mind the *maṇḍala* liturgy and all those rites that stage a passage from chaos to order, namely a ‘cosmization’. The centre of the circle is the navel of the world and the axis passing through it makes communication possible between the various levels of Being (Eliade 1952: 64-70).

The *yūpa-yaṣṭi*, the pillar which has the function of the axis in the *stūpa* construction, does not have a structural role but only a symbolic function (Irwin 1979: 816 ff.). The pillar is often square-shaped at the base, octagonal in the middle section, and round at the top. This repartition symbolizes the three-fold division of the world: the square at the base is synonymous with stability and indicates the four cardinal points, the circle at the top indicates the heavenly plane, while the intermediate polygon symbolizes the world of space determined by eight, sixteen, or thirty-two directions. As noted by Guénon (1990: 235) the octagon is connected to the intermediate world and to the eight winds, the latter being assimilable to the vital breath with all the ‘yogic’ meanings which it assumes: we will see that it is the *prāṇa*, or more appropriately its canalisation, which allows the Awakening.

The archetype of the tripartition of the *yūpa-yaṣṭi* is the universal tree itself which divides the cosmic plane into three distinct sections: the chthonic

world, the terrestrial plane and the celestial one, corresponding respectively to the roots, the trunk and the foliage of the tree (Toporov 1973: 169). Moreover the top of the tree can be assimilated to the dome of the *stūpa*, which in its symbolism is both the centre of the universe and its outer limits. The series of concentric circles moving towards the centre and forming the dome, are the heavens. By looking at them from the centre of the circumference, the things of the world, to use Snodgrass expression (1985: 190), seem to unfold in space and time in an infinity which contains all finiteness.

As noted by Snodgrass (*ibid.*: 360-65), the *stūpa*, and therefore the tree, can be assimilated to the body of the Buddha himself. In fact the division into three sections of the *yūpa-yaṣṭi* corresponds to an equal tripartition in the subtle physiology of the body, where the *cakra* at the basis of the *avadhūti*⁵ is formed by four petals, the intermediate *cakras* by eight, sixteen or thirty-two petals,⁶ whereas the last *cakra*, belonging to the transcendental plane, has a circular shape (like the *uṣṇīṣa* which can be assimilated to the dome of the *stūpa*; see Guénon 1990: 226-29).

This type of representation was probably used in initiatory contexts in order to visualize the *brahmarandhra*, the superior *cakra* corresponding to «the citadel of the gods» (Coomaraswamy 1977: 437), the point in which the passage from the human to the transcendental plane is accomplished.

The Parasol Tree

The substitution of the central part of the tree with the parasol (pl. IIIa) finds its origin in the symbolic interchangeability of these two elements. Like the tree, «The parasol is *imago mundi*: its canopy is Heaven, its pole is the cosmic axis, and the surface from which it rises is Earth» (Snodgrass 1985: 324).

The typology of the parasol tree (fig. 3) emphasizes the royal aspect of the Buddha, because it is connected to the symbolism of the wheel.⁷

⁵ The word *mūla*, basic word for *mūlādharacakra*, means root, therefore the root of the body, but also the root of the bodily tree.

⁶ The number varies according to different schools.

⁷ The wheel represents «... the Revolution of the Year ... the flowing tide of all begotten things (*Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, II,17), dependent on the Sun (*Maitri Up.*, VI,14-16); ... the Wheel represents the Sun, but more exactly the movement of the Sun ...» (Coomaraswamy 1935: 25). This movement is circular, as circular is the vault of heaven where it takes place. If the canopy of the parasol is the celestial vault, then the pole is the *axis mundi* that links it to the terrestrial plane. This last is represented by the lotus-throne. Thus the two wheels, the parasol in the upper part and the lotus-throne in the lower part, linked by the axis formed by the pole, are, together, the symbol of the solar chariot. In the Vedic texts, this chariot, associated to Agni (*ibid.*: 27-28), has a double meaning. On the one hand it represents the astronomic sun that, crossing the celestial vault, determines the year, on the other, it is the *tejas* that the *mystes* puts into action in his body.

The iconography of the parasol recalls the solarity of the Enlightenment event. The progressive Enlightenment is a gradual contraction of the wheel's rays, which brings the circumference (the mutable states of the conditioned existence) to 'collapse' on the centre (the *śūnya*) (Coomaraswamy 1935: 26).

Nirvāṇa and *samsara* actually belong to the same wheel; what changes is the 'collocation' of the consciousness.

The wheel, as is well known, is also linked to the idea of sovereignty.⁸ Thus the Perfect, being situated in the motionless centre of the cosmos (represented by the wheel) and untouched by worldly conditionalities, becomes the

universal king. Already present in the narrative relative to his birth, this idea of regality is associated to the Buddha and is therefore represented with a variety of symbols (throne, lion, *aśvattha*, *chattra*, crown, etc.) in the iconographies relative to the event of the Enlightenment.

Viennot sees two superimposed symbols of kingship in the iconography representing the Buddha surmounted by a *chattra* flanked by two branches of the *aśvattha* (she emphasizes the value assumed by the *pīpal* as a



Fig. 3 – Parasol Tree. See pl. IIIa.
(Drawing by the author).

regality symbol). The French scholar deems this fact to be indicative of a decline, typical of 'late' artistic periods, when the consciousness of original symbolic meanings of the iconographies had been lost (Viennot 1954: 232). This hypothesis, in my opinion, cannot be shared. The tree and the *chattra* are two symbolically interchangeable features. This is evidenced by some friezes from Amarāvati, where the *aśvattha* is represented by parasols instead of leaves (pl. IIIb). Furthermore, the parasol is often placed at the top of the *stūpa*, where it emerges from the *harmikā*, the place that formerly belonged to the Bodhi tree (Irwin 1979: 839). The discs forming its multiple canopy indicates the various levels of Being (Snodgrass 1985: 327-28). Due to their interchangeability, the combined presence of the tree and the *chattra* aims at reinforcing the axial function of the central image. The circular shape of the central feature recalls the transcendental plane, namely the last *cakra* to which the Perfect ascends (thus acquiring his spiritual kingship).

⁸ «He whose seat is on the lotiform nave or navel of the wheel, and himself unmoving sets and keeps it spinning, is the ruler of the world, of all that is natured and extended in the middle region, between the essential nave and the natural felly» (Coomaraswamy 1935: 27).

The Caṇḍālī Tree

In this typology, found in the stela from Nālandā (pl. IVa) and in the famous stela of Jagadīśpur (pl. IVb), the tree is represented by three leafy branches (fig. 4). The lateral ones fall by the side of the *prabhāmaṇḍala*, the central one is turned towards the observer. In the Nālandā image the central branch seems to be the natural extension of the Buddha's spinal column. In the stela from Jagadīśpur, due to the reduced size of the nimbus, it seems to directly come out of the *uṣṇīṣa*.



Fig. 4 – *Caṇḍālī* Tree. See Pl. IVa. (Drawing by the author).

Of this typology, particularly widespread as it is usually used in the *Aṣṭamahāprātihārya* representations, Viennot (1954: 233)⁹ notes: «Dans les exemples du second cas, le feuillage disposé, disions-nous, à l'intérieur de l'aureole oblige l'imagier à le figurer comme s'échappant de la protubérance crânienne (*uṣhniṣa*) du Bienheureux ... La protubérance crânienne parfois s'évase étrangement pour donner naissance à cette singulière excroissance végétale».

The coming out of the tree from the *uṣṇīṣa* of the Buddha reveals in actual fact the Tantric background which informs this iconography. As it has been noted above, the *uṣṇīṣa* of the Buddha can be assimilated to the *stūpa* dome. Furthermore, both of them can be traced back to the symbolism of the egg.

In the *Sutta Vibhaṅga* I.I,4, Buddha says: «Even so I, ... having pierced through the shell of ignorance for the sake of creatures ..., am unique in the world, utterly enlightened with unsurpassed enlightenment» (Horner 1992: 6-7). The egg is born twice, once when it is laid, and once when it opens. The adept likewise repeats in his microcosmos the creation of the universe. In this palingenesis he abandons his old Ego, the Chrysalis, and is reborn to a new life. In the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* XI,1,6,1 (Eggeling 1882-1900: V, 12) we read: «Verily, in the beginning this (universe) was water, nothing but a sea of water. The waters desired, 'How can we be reproduced?'. They toiled and performed fervid devotions, when they were becoming heated, a golden egg was produced». The primordial egg is therefore represented as floating on the waters.

⁹ More exactly, the French scholar refers to a bronze image conserved in the Musée Guimet of Paris, where the tree is represented as being inside the nimbus. In my data I did not come across any other example of this type.

Irwin (1979: 828) argues that in the ancient reliefs the *stūpa* is often represented as floating on the waters. During the excavations in Butkara in 1950, the Italian mission found a processional pathway round a *stūpa* composed entirely of thick azure-blue glass (*ibid.*: 831). The analogy between the *stūpa* and the egg is confirmed by the symbolism of the *harmikā*. The latter, to cite Irwin (1980: 20) again, is the repetition of the ancient *bodhighara* at the top of the *stūpa*. At its centre rises the Bodhi tree (pl. IIIb), subsequently substituted by the *chattra*.

In the light of this similitude, the typology of the tree springing from the *uṣṇīṣa* does not appear 'singulière' at all, since the latter is assimilated both to the dome of the *stūpa* and to the egg. The tree is the *tejas* that, developed as a fire column in the *mystes*, leads him out of the human plane, rising up to the 'citadel of gods'.¹⁰ In this sense the tree is the golden germ that the *mystes* cultivates inside himself.

As shown by Butterworth (1970), the psychophysiological conceptions of the Haṭha Yoga are deeply rooted in the cultural *koiné* of the ancient indomediterranean civilizations. The Vedic sacrifice should and must be read as an interior rite, where Agni is intellectually builded up (Coomaraswamy 1977: 421-22) within the sacrificer, whose mind becomes an altar where a rite of ascension takes place: thus ascending to the top of the Tree «... those ... who have wings, fly forth, those who are wingless, fall down. Those who know, have wings, those who are devoid of knowledge, are wingless» (*Pañcaviṃśa-Brāhmaṇa* XIV, I,12-13; Caland 1931: 351).

According to the conceptions of the Haṭha Yoga, developed from the doctrines of both Buddhist and Hinduist Tantric schools, the liberation of the *mystes* occurs when the serpentine energy, dormant in the first *cakra* at the base of the spinal column, awakens and, unfolding through the central canal, *avadhūti-suṣūmṇā*, rises up 'to bite' the seventh and last *cakra*. Through this process man acquires the status of perfection.

Some aspects of Haṭha Yoga physiology can be traced back to the Vedic myths and the Brahmanical rites. For example, the serpent *kuṇḍalinī* which with its mouth shuts the access to the *suṣūmṇā* (Avalon 1931: 224) is the dragon Vṛtra, eventually defeated by Indra who assumes its power. The luminous energy that brings up the *mystes* beyond the six *cakras* to the transcendental plane accomplishes an ascent very similar to that of the king performing the *Vājapeya* who, after having gone beyond the capital at the top of the *yūpa*, declares: «We have become immortal!» (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* V, 2,1,14; Eggeling 1892-1900: III, 33). As evidenced by Verardi (1988: 1536) Tantric concepts can be traced back to an early phase of Buddhism.

The *Lalitavistara* (Foucaux 1884: 85) narrates that after his birth Śākya-

¹⁰ The *sahasrāra* or the *brahmarandhra*, the last *cakra*, is not considered to be part of the human plane, but of the transcendent one. It is conceived to be out of the body, above the head.

muni made seven steps and lotus flowers sprouted on the ground in every point touched by his feet. The ritual walk of the newborn Śākyamuni coincides with a ritual ascent through all levels of Being (Snodgrass 1985: 277), and therefore through successive *cakras*.

The episode of the snake Mucalinda recalls the ascent of the *kuṇḍalinī*. The position of the central branch of the tripartite *aśvattha*, which rises from the *uṣṇīṣa* of Buddha – as in the stela from Nālandā (pl. IVa) and in the stela of Jagadīśpur (pl. IVb) –, closely reminds us of the cobra's head in some Khmer sculptures, where, as noted by Viennot (1954: 182), the representation of the Mucalinda event (pl. Va) is used to symbolize the Enlightenment.

The snake, linked to the unexpressed potentialities of the cosmos (Snodgrass 1985: 304), in becoming tree through the unfolding of his luminous coils marks the ascent of the Buddha from the samsaric to the nirvanic plane. This Awakening of the unexpressed and dormant energy can be assimilated to the rising sun, whose symbology is closely connected to the Enlightenment (*ibid.*: 268-73).

It could be objected that the symbolism associated with the Vedic myths and to the tales regarding the life of Buddha belongs to a collective unconscious which pre-exists the mythopoietic phase of the civilizations, and therefore such myths and the consequent iconographies have to be interpreted without a specific yogic meaning. From this perspective, images such as those of Mucalinda could simply be representations of the related event in the life of Buddha, and not have any connection with the *kuṇḍalinī* ascension.

Such objections are on the whole rather weak. On one hand many scholars (Bosch 1960; Eliade 1969; Butterworth 1970; Kuiper 1970; Coomaraswamy 1977; Snodgrass 1985) have frequently pointed to the importance of the yogic consciousness and the correspondence between micro- and macrocosmos in ancient Indian and Buddhist texts. On the other hand, such observations could only be accepted for the early period of Buddhism, but certainly not with regard to Tantric sculptures, whose 'meditative utility' responds to one of the key elements in Tantrism.

According to the Buddhist (and Hinduist) Tantra doctrine, the vital breath (*prāṇa*) flows through several channels (*nāḍī*). At the centre of the body, in correspondence of the spinal column is situated the central channel or *avadhūtī* (corresponding to the Haṭha Yoga *suṣumṇā*). Along the *avadhūtī-suṣumṇā* there are energetic centers or wheels, *cakras* (varying in number according to the various traditions), each connected to psychic or sensorial faculties, to elements, to planets, etc. In the *Laghukālacakratāntra* the *cakras* are listed as six in number: at the top of the head (*uṣṇīṣa*), at the centre of the forehead, at the throat, at the heart, at the navel, and at the genitals (Nāropā 1994: 68). The *Hevajra Tantra* reports four *cakras*: at the navel, at the heart, at the throat, and last at the level of the head; each centre corresponds to one of the Buddha's bodies. On both sides of the *avadhūtī* there are two intertwining

channels, *lalanā* on the left and *rasanā* on the right, in which the *prāṇa* circulates through the two movements of inspiration and expiration.

The aim of the *yogin* is to stop the cycle of respiration within these two channels and to convey the vital breath into the *avadhūtī* (*ibid.*: 69). In this way the heating of *caṇḍālī* is provoked, the igneous energy (similar to the *kuṇḍalinī* of Haṭha Yoga) which awakens the *bodhicitta* of the *mystes* inducing it to flow through all the *cakras*, until it reaches the final one, situated at the top of the head (*uṣṇīṣacakra*):

Questa potenza, arrestata nell'ombelico, simile alla luce di un lampo, alzatasi in guisa di bastone, ascende leggera e piana, sospinta per il canale di mezzo da ruota a ruota, sinché non arriva a toccare con violenza il foro della cima della testa, come una spina [che buca] la pelle.

[Lo *yogin*], in questo momento, deve spingere verso l'alto, con estrema violenza, l'*apāna* nella via di mezzo, per cui, forata la cima della testa, perviene alla cittadella suprema, arrestati che siano i due soffi. In tal modo, risvegliatosi il *vajra*, [la potenza del soffio vitale] nella mente raggiunge, insieme con gli oggetti (*saviṣaya*), lo stato di vagante per l'etere (*khecara*), diventa naturata delle cinque conoscenze sovranaturali, e si identifica con la madre universale degli *yogin* (*Laghukālacakratantra* IV.196-97; Nāropā 1994: 247-48).

This power that rises in the guise of a stick and perforates the *uṣṇīṣa cakra* of the *mystes* seems to be the textual description of the tree represented in plate IVa and in the *Aṣṭamahāprātihārya*, that Odette Viennot (1954: 233) defines as an «iconographie aberrante attestant combien le symbolisme de l'union du figuier sacré et de Çākyaṃuni au moment de l'Illumination est à cette époque vidé de signification».

It seems evident, instead, that this iconography reconfirms the assimilation between the Bodhi tree, the Mount Meru, and the Buddha's *avadhūtī*:

The spinal column is identified with Mount Meru – that is, with the cosmic axis. This is why, according to Buddhist symbolism, the Buddha could not turn his head but had to turn his entire body, “like an elephant”; his spinal column was fixed, motionless, as is the axis of the universe. According to tradition, the Merudaṇḍa is made of a single bone – which indicates its ideal, nonanatomical character (Eliade 1969: 235).

The *uṣṇīṣacakra*, as noted above, given its function and shape, can be assimilated to the dome; the breaking of which represents the going out into the cosmos and the obtained liberation (Verardi 1988: 1535). The antiquity of this conception is confirmed by some Gandharan images of the fasting Buddha, where a hole was produced on the *uṣṇīṣa*, probably holding a gem, which was the symbol of the link between the enlightened body of the Buddha and the heavens through the opening at the top of the head (Klimburg-Salter – Taddei 1991: 83-85).

The branches are represented as three in number, probably because the principal *nāḍī* (*avadhūtī*, *lalanā*, *rasanā*) are also three, linked in their numeric

symbolism to the three jewels, the three bodies of Buddha, the three parts of the world, etc.

I will now go back to the Mucalinda snake and its relationship with the *caṇḍālī*.

In the Indian tradition, the *nāgas* are genii superior to men. They inhabit the underwater paradises and act as guardians of the vital energy accumulated in the waters and in the earth (Zimmer 1990: 63). These figures, common to Buddhism and Hinduism, appear on many reliefs since the most ancient period.

Due to its linkage with the waters¹¹ the snake is also associated with the rainbow that joins Heaven to Earth (Eliade 1988: 155-56). On the other hand Mucalinda, according to the traditions, has five, seven or nine heads like the colours of the rainbow (Snodgrass 1985: 292), the white colour corresponding to the centre (*ibid.*: 287). Thus the snake is assimilable to a bridge or a ladder that joins Heaven to Earth.¹²

Another important indication of the relation between Mucalinda and the serpentine energy is the fact that the snake in protecting the Buddha wraps him up in seven coils. And as we have seen above, seven are the *cakra* of the Haṭha Yoga.

Of interest is the legend quoted by Zimmer (1990: 68), according to which at the beginning of his preaching the Buddha

realized that men were not prepared to accept it in its fullness. They shrank from the extreme implications of his vision of the universal Void (*śūnyatā*). Therefore, he committed the deeper interpretation of reality to an audience of *nāgas*, who were to hold it in trust until mankind should be made ready to understand. ... Not until some seven centuries had passed was the great sage Nāgārjuna, 'Arjuna of the Nāgas' initiated by the serpent kings into the truth that all is void (*śūnya*).

It is unnecessary to point out that Tantric speculation was initiated by the Madhyāmika teacher.

A relief from Amarāvātī (pl. IIIb) of the 2nd century AD represents a *stūpa* with a five headed snake carved at the base in line with the central axis. From the *harmikā* branches out the Bodhi tree showing leaves in *chattra*-like shape (see Knox 1992: 125, fig. 28).

An image in the Nālandā Museum (pl. Vb), dated to the second period of the Pāla school (eleventh century AD), shows at the base of the Buddha throne three events in his life. The one of the Mucalinda snake is represented at the centre, on the same axis of the main Buddha and of the *parinirvāṇa*, represented at the top.

It would be ingenuous to think that this iconographical choice was purely

¹¹ Mucalinda protects Buddha from the rain representing the snares of regressive forces, which obstacle the consolidation of *nirvāṇa*.

¹² In South-East Asia, the terraces of the *stūpa* have ladders in the four directions which end with the head of the snake, or of the *makara* (Snodgrass 1985: 283-85). Cf. also Eliade (1988: 155-56)

accidental, considering that during the Tantric period the iconographies, invested with an anagogic character, were fixed by precise and rigid rules.

In fact, from the latter perspective, the placing of the *parinirvāṇa* event at the top of the stela of *Aṣṭamahāprātihārya* must also have had a specific meaning. According to the tripartition of the tree, corresponding to that of the cosmos, the collocation of the snake is in the chthonic world, while the episode of the *parinirvāṇa*, the final ascension of the Buddha to the heavens, is placed in the upper part of the stela, at the top of the Bodhi tree. The Bodhi tree, being collocated at the centre, corresponds to the axis of the *maṇḍala*-body of Buddha through which the luminous energy flows and, ascending from the base of the lotus throne, eventually comes to perforate the *uṣṇīṣa* and to expand itself in the heavens. The *kuṇḍalinī*-snake, which ascends from the underworld along the *avadhūtī-suṣumṇā*-tree, breaks the shell of the egg-*uṣṇīṣa*. The snake has become Garuda, the solar bird.

The Fire Tree

Among the large number of pieces examined for this study, this typology (fig. 5) was found only on a stela kept at the Indian High Commissioner's Office in London (pl. VIa). The leafy branches are represented without solution of continuity with the halo. This features the image of a fire which originating from the *Jina* Buddha's shoulders¹³ reaches the top of the stela where the flames formed by the branches create an effect of outward expansion.



Fig. 5 – Fire Tree. See pl. VIa.
(Drawing by the author).

The representation of branches of the Bodhi tree as tongues of fire is the iconographic continuation of a well established tradition. In the *Upaniṣads*, the fire hidden in the vegetable kingdom is identified with the *ātman*: «As the material form (*mūrti*) of fire when latent in its source [i.e. the fire-wood] is not perceived – and yet there is no evanishment of its subtle form (*liṅga*) – but may be caught again by means of the drill in its source, so, verily, both [the universal and the individual *Brahma*] are [to be found] in the body by the use of *Om*» (*Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* I,13; Hume 1931: 396); «Fire (*Agni*), the all-knower (*jātaavedas*), hidden

¹³ In this stela the Buddha has been identified with Akṣobhya by Bhattacharya (1989: 352).

away in the two fire-sticks» (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* II,4,8; Hume 1931: 354). In the *Maitrī Upaniṣad* the tree is called the «awakens», and in the *Ṛgveda* is called «awakened at dawn» (Coomaraswamy 1935: 9-10).

In a relief from Amarāvātī dated to the second century AD (pl. VIb) a group of faithfuls is worshipping Buddha in the shape of a pillar of fire with three spherical elements (three jewels?) at the top, surmounted by the 'trident' (*triśūla*).¹⁴ This fiery pillar is «the survival of a purely Vedic formula in which Agni is represented as the axis of the Universe» (*ibid.*: 10). As regards the identity of the Bodhi tree and of Agni, let us furthermore recall that the *araṇi*, the ritual wood of the Vedic sacrifice, was of *aśvattha* wood (like the vessels used to contain the *soma*) (Viennot 1954: 153). Moreover, it should be noted that the lotus throne is an altar where a sacrificial rite, in which the impurities (*kleśa*) are burned, is performed (Snodgrass 1985: 48). The interior flame ascends like a pillar to the heavens, achieving the same ascension as the solar chariot (Verardi 1988).¹⁵

Many images from South-East Asia, representing the flames coming out from Buddha's *uṣṇīṣa* (pl. VIIa), clearly illuminate a concept which is subtended to the image of pl. VIa.

The tongues of fire are the manifestation of the fiery energy (*tapas*) developed by the *mystes*, symbol of the overcoming of the human condition and the profane (Eliade 1962: 93).

The Vajra Tree

If had not been for its characteristic drop-shape leaves, it would have been difficult to identify the sculptural element placed on the top of Buddha's head in the stela from Bangladesh (pl. VIIb). This element has the shape of a four-pointed star and it seems to come out in the guise of tongues of fire from the mouth of the *kīrttimukha*, placed on the top of the stela. What could have induced the artist to adopt this original solution? The answer may be found in iconological motivations behind it. It appears evident that the design delineated by the combination of the tree and the *kīrttimukha* represents a *vajra*.

The superimposition of symbols, mentioned by Viennot (1954: 233), referring to the parasol tree, in this stela dated to the 11th-12th century, creates

¹⁴ Knox (1992: 84) identifies this feature with the symbol of *triratna*. On the *triratna* representation and meaning in Indian art, see Bénisti (1977).

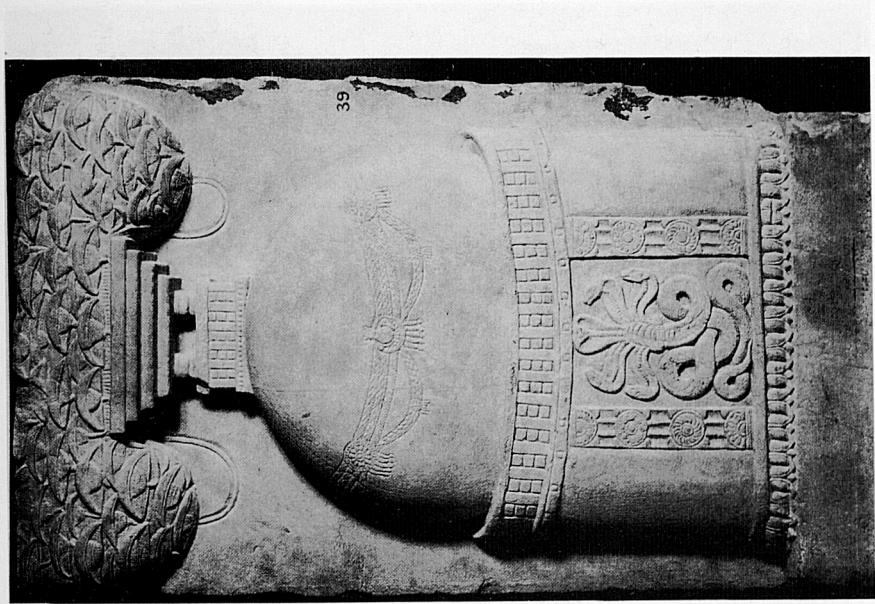
¹⁵ As noted by Verardi (1994: 18-19), the rite of *homa* was adopted by Buddhism since the hinayanic period and over time it has developed peculiar characteristics. Thanks to the discovery of rooms in the temples of Tapa Śotor (Hadda) and Tapa Sardār (Ghazni) where this rite was practised, and to the importance that the rite still has for Tibetan and Japanese Tantric Buddhism, it is possible to conclude that the *homa*'s rite had a central role in Buddhist rituals. The most important aspect in relation to this study is the connection between *homa* and practices of visualization and consecration of the image (*ibid.*: 41-43).



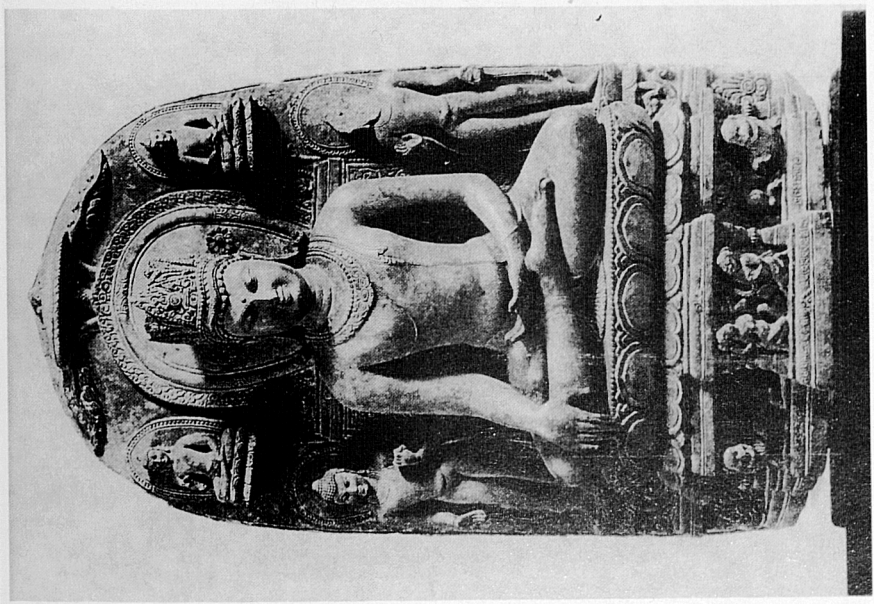
Buddha from Bodhgayā (9th cent.). Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.
(After Huntington – Huntington 1990: fig. 16).



Buddha from Bodhgayā (9th-10th cent.). Indian Museum of Calcutta.
(Photo A. Zurlo, courtesy Indian Museum of Calcutta).



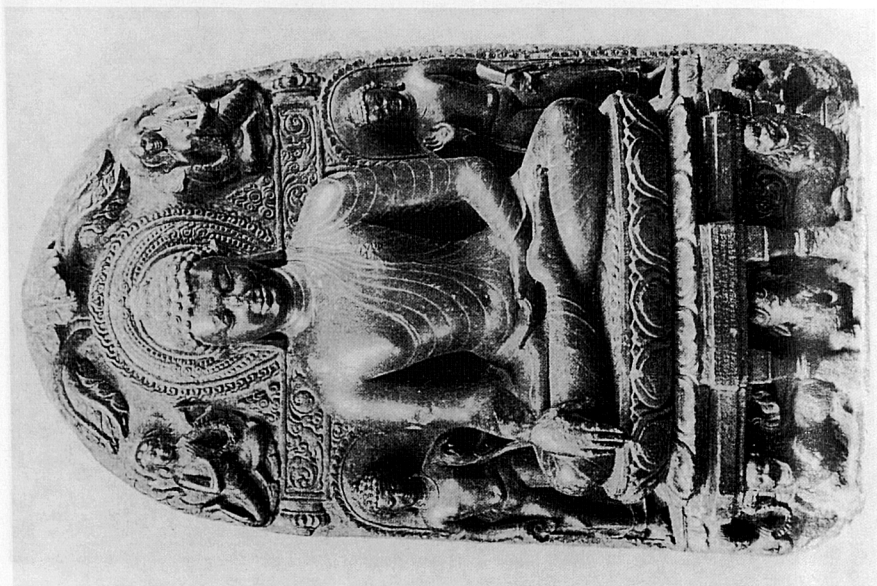
b) Relief from Amarāvati (2nd cent.). British Museum.
(After Knox 1992: fig. 64).



a) Buddha from Nālandā (10th cent.). Asia Society, New York.
(After Huntington – Huntington 1990: fig. 15).



b) Buddha from Jagadisipur, Nālandā (10th cent.).
(Photo A. Zurlo).



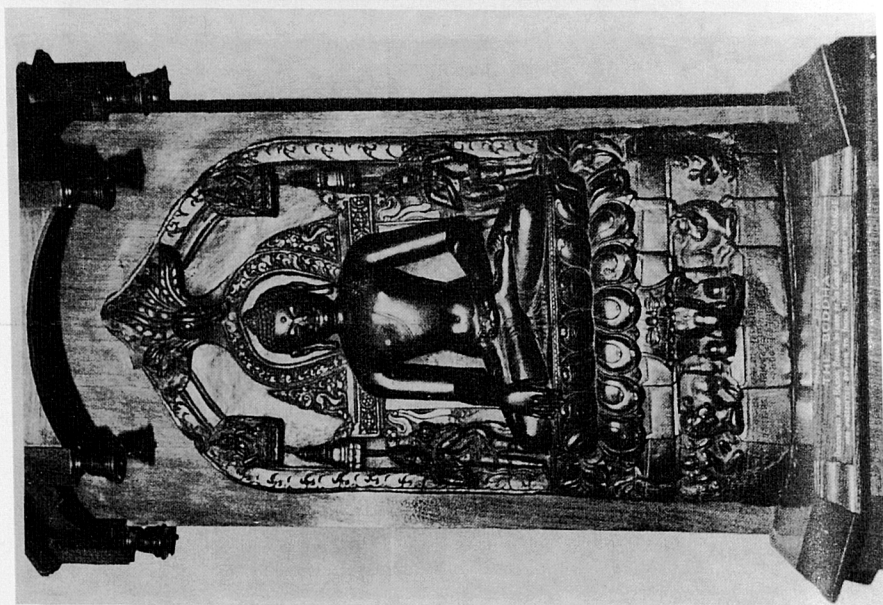
a) Buddha from Nālandā (10th cent.). Cleveland Museum of Art.
(After Huntington — Huntington 1990: fig. 13).



a) Buddha surmounted by Mucalinda from Prachinburi (7th-8th cent.).
National Museum, Bangkok. (After Arte thailandese 1964: fig. 15).



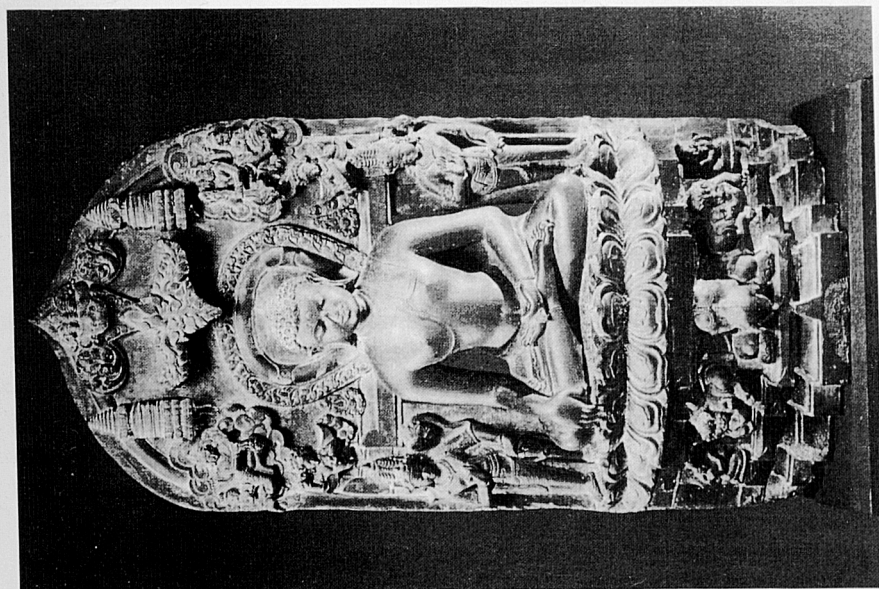
b) Buddha from Nalanda (10th-11th cent.).
Nalanda Museum. (After Paul 1995: fig. 71).



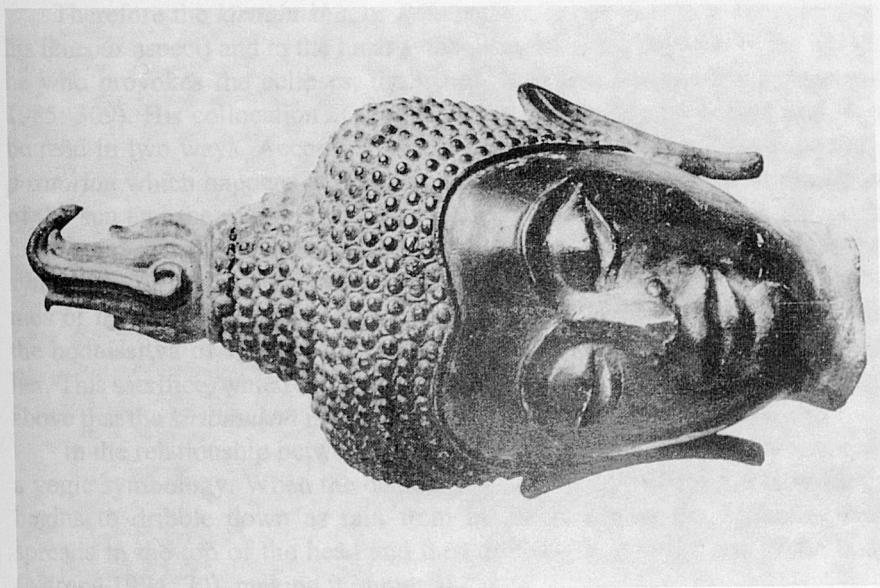
a) Buddha Śākyamuni or Aśvabha? From Rājagīrī (12th cent.).
Office of the Indian High Commission, London.
Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1925, fig. 17.



b) Adoration of fire pillar from Amarāvati (late 2nd cent.).
British Museum (After Knox 1992; fig. 28).



b) Buddha from Bangladesh (11th-12th cent.).
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA.
(After Huntington – Huntington 1990: 29).



a) Buddha head from Ayuthia, Thailand (16th cent.).
(After Zimmer 1990: fig. 593).

instead an intersecting of elements which gives origin to an interesting iconographic polisemy.

In the late Pāla period it became a widespread practice to engrave at the top of the stela, including the Buddhist ones, an image of the *kīrttimukha*, which was originally placed at the entrance of Śiva temples. According to the *Purāṇa* myth, this demon originated from the third eye of Śiva as a consequence of his anger at the Jalandhara titan request to deliver Śiva's bride Pārvatī to him. The demon, ready to eat up Rāhu, messenger of the titan, had to feed on his own flesh, when Jalandhara's envoy, terrorized, asked Śiva for forgiveness (Zimmer 1990: 181). The *kīrttimukha* is also called Vanaspati, Lord of the Forest, an Agni's attribute (*ibid.*: 184), probably due to the analogy between the latter and the sacrificial pillar (Coomaraswamy 1935: 9).

The «face of glory» (*kīrttimukha*) represents the igneous power of the god Śiva who periodically destroys the worlds. The demon Rāhu is the symbolic double of *kīrttimukha*:

... in the remotest periods of prehistoric time, when the gods and titans, in the first days of the world, churned the cosmic Milky Ocean to extract from it the Amrita, the elixir of immortal life. Rāhu stole a first sip of the liquor, but was immediately beheaded by a stroke of Vishnu. The drink having passed through his mouth and neck, these were rendered immortal, but the severed body succumbed to the forces of decay. The head, ravenous for another taste, has been chasing the cup of the elixir, the moon, ever since. Eclipses come when he catches and swallows it, but the vessel only passes through the mouth and neck (there being no stomach any more to retain it) and reappears (Zimmer 1990: 176).

Therefore the *kīrttimukha*, or *Rāhumukha*, is linked both to the solar (for his igneous aspect) and to the lunar symbolism. He is the devourer of the world, he who provokes the eclipses, the *tamas*, time that devours life (Snodgrass 1985: 309). His collocation at the top of the stela, along the central axis, can be read in two ways. According to the first, it represents the *concordia oppositorum* which happens at the moment of the eclipse, when the conjunction of the sun and the moon takes place at the nodes (the points where the moon orbit intersects the ecliptic). The second springs from its connection to the symbolism of the door (Guénon 1990: 311). By entering the psychologic cosmos of the stela, the *mystes* offers his ego as food to the *kīrttimukha*, just as the bodhisattva of *Vyāghrī-Jātaka* gave his body to the tiger in order to feed her. This sacrifice, which symbolically repeats the Vedic sacrifice (we have seen above that the *kīrttimukha* is assimilated to Agni), is the door of liberation.

In the relationship between «the face of glory» and the *amṛta* we can read a yogic symbology. When the demon gulps down the ambrosia, this suddenly begins to dribble down as rain from his neck, just as the *bodhicitta* seed spreads in the top of the head and then diffuses itself to the rest of the body (Nāropā 1994: 70), making it immortal.

The tree that emerges as a fiery star from the mouth of *kīrttimukha* con-

firms the igneous and, at the same time, ambrosiac nature of both.¹⁶ The union of the two iconographic elements forms a *vajra*, whose prongs are constituted by the three branches of the tree, by the *kīrttimukha*'s ears and by the top of the stela (fig. 6).

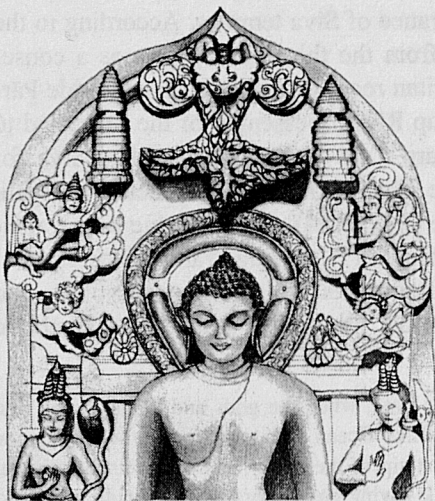


Fig. 6 – *Vajra Tree*. See pl. VIIb.
(Drawing by the author).

The *vajra*, the key-element of the iconography of Tantric Buddhism is, as noted by Coomaraswamy (1935: 14), an object made of two superimposed tridents. The trident is a symbol associated with Agni, adopted also in Buddhism, where in some representations it is placed at the top of the pillar (pl. VIb).

In the *Rgveda* (VI,22,6; Griffith 1976: 298), the double trident/*vajra* is the weapon of Indra, a deity representing the temporal aspect of power (while Agni symbolizes its spiritual aspect). Indra is the demiurge that, in Indian cosmogony, kills the demon *Vṛtra* transfixing him with the *vajra*, since *Vṛtra*'s

role was to obstruct the waters of fertility inside the cosmic mountain. After having released the waters, with the pillar of the world he fixed the primordial hill at the top of the cosmic ocean, thus separating heaven and earth and creating the duality from which everything follows (Irwin 1976: 740). It is worth noting that in India, in building a house before placing the first stone «the astrologer shows what spot in the foundation is exactly above the head of the snake that supports the world. The mason fashions a little wooden peg from the wood of the khadira tree, and with a coconut drives the peg into the ground at this particular spot, in such a way as to peg the head of the snake securely down ... if this snake should ever shake the world to pieces» (Coomaraswamy 1977: 429).

In the myth of the Buddha, *Vṛtra*'s defeat is represented by the *Māra-vijaya*. *Māra* is in many aspects similar to *Vṛtra*. Both are connected to the waters and to the primordial chaos.¹⁷ While Indra eliminates *Vṛtra* with the *vajra*, Buddha does the same with the *bhūmisparśamudrā*, which is the confirmation of his adamant position at the centre of the world.

¹⁶ As we have noted above, the boxes of *soma* and the *araṇi* used during the Vedic sacrifice was made of *aśvattha* wood.

¹⁷ The riding of *Māra* is an elephant, an animal linked to the *nāgas*' world.

Coomaraswamy (1935: 15), on the basis of Foucher's statements, suggests an analogy between the three-pronged shape of the *vajra* and the upper part of the human body's trunk (arms and head). Furthermore, the *vajra* is used in the consecration of the soil where the *maṇḍala* will be drawn: the centre is touched by the *vajra*'s end and the goddess Bhūmi is invoked in order to drive away Māra's demons (Tucci 1949: 100).

The word *vajra* has a double meaning. On the one hand, it means thunderbolt and in this form is the fiery column that unites the heavens and earth; on the other hand, it means diamond, synonymous with transparency and hardness. Especially in the Tantric context, the diamond is associated with the Buddha himself, who, seated at the centre of the world, acts as its axis, and resting on the void (*śūnya*), keeps the hardness and transparency of the diamond. Its association with the *aśvattha* on the other hand dates back to the Vedic period (Grossato 1987: 181-82). In the *Atharvaveda* the *pīpal* is referred to as the weapon used by Indra to kill Vṛtra: «Crush the enemies, as they rush on, O *Asvattha* 'displacer', allied with Indra, the slayer of Vṛtra, allied with Mitra and Varuna!» (*Atharvaveda* VIII,8,3 and III,6,1-2; Bloomfield 1897: 9).

The placing of the *vajra*-tree at the top of the stela, as a natural extension of the image of the Buddha, gives the impression that the tree becomes a single pillar emerging from the lotus throne.

In Tantric practices the canalization of the breath in the *avadhūtī* is the *conditio sine qua non* of the beginning of the alchemic process. *Lalanā* and *rasanā* (*iḍā* and *piṅgalā*) can be assimilated to the two snakes of the *caduceus* of the Greek Hermes. Conveyed in the central axis, their power is bridled; at this point the Awakening of the adamantine consciousness takes place. The *vajra* has pierced the snake, Buddha has defeated Māra.

The *vajra* is the central axis of the adamantine body of the Buddha, axis which, as noted above, is the Bodhi tree. Both the cosmogony of Indra and the *Māravijaya* represent a victory of the vertical plane over the horizontal one (Snodgrass 1985: 184-88, 217). The earth corresponds with the plane of ignorance, with the *prakṛti* that is being 'consecrated'.

It must be emphasized that the earth is associated with the first *cakra* of the Haṭha Yoga, the *mūlādhārā*. The animal linked to this *cakra* is the elephant (Avalon 1931: 117). This animal has a close connection with the snake, both belonging to the water world. The demon Māra leads his hordes against the Tathāgatha riding on an elephant. In the eighth century, an iconography became widespread which represented a female divinity that subdues an elephant on the throne of Buddha. This deity, identified with Aparājita, « the unconquered » (which is also one of the appellatives of the throne of Buddha), is probably the active aspect of the goddess Bhūmi, whose action is decisive in the defeat of Māra (Leoshko 1986: 48-50).

The presence of the elephant, placed at the centre of the throne on the stelae of the same period, is certainly a symbol of royalty (Auboyer 1949: 131-32),

showing the confluence of the characteristics of the Vedic Indra in the figure of Buddha,¹⁸ but it especially symbolizes the supremacy of Buddha, after his Enlightenment, over the terraqueous world and over the tremendous energies latent in it.¹⁹

In the light of these observations it is possible to assume that the representations of the Bodhi tree in the stelae of the Pāla period, in their different typologies, played an essential role in the visualization processes of the Tantric meditative practices.

It is also noteworthy that such practices and processes can be related to primitive Buddhism. Further investigations in this direction could help in clarifying these relationships.

¹⁸ The elephant is also the vehicle of Indra, and this is more than a coincidence. As noted by Wayman (1959: 114), Indra is assimilated to Māra in term of obstructing the adepts' meditation. Their attainment represents for the god a loss of sovereignty.

¹⁹ Bhattacharya's theory (1989), who associates the elephant only with Akṣobhya, is contradicted by stela of pl. VIa. Here an elephant is engraved at the base of the throne, and the representation of two episodes of the life of Śākyamuni at the border of the central image make the latter hardly identifiable with Akṣobhya.

REFERENCES

- Arte thailandese 1964 = *Arte thailandese. Catalogo della Mostra organizzata dal Comitato Fiorentino in collaborazione con l'Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente. Città di Firenze, Palazzo Vecchio, 15 dicembre 1964 - 31 gennaio 1965. Roma 1964.*
- Auboyer, Jeanine (1949) *Le trône et son symbolisme dans l'Inde ancienne*. Paris.
- Avalon, Arthur (1931) *The Power of Serpent*. London.
- Bénisti, Mireille (1977) A propos du triratna. *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême Orient* 64, 43-82. Paris.
- Bhattacharya, Gouriswar (1989) Buddha Śākyamuni and Panca-Tathāgatas: Dilemma in Bihar and Bengal, in Karen Frifelt, P. Sørensen (eds.), *South Asian Archaeology 1985: Papers from the Eighth International Conference of South Asian Archaeologists in Western Europe, Held at Moesgaard Museum, Denmark, 1-5 July 1985*, 350-71. London – Riverdale, MD.
- Bloomfield, Maurice trans. (1897) *Hymns of the Atharva-Veda*. Oxford.
- Bosch, F.D.K. (1960) *The Golden Germ. An Introduction to Indian Symbolism*. 's-Gravenhage.
- Butterworth, Edric Allan Schofield (1970) *The Tree at the Navel of the Earth*. Berlin.
- Caland, W. trans. (1931) *Pañcaviṃśa-Brāhmaṇa. The Brāhmaṇa of Twenty Five Chapters*. Calcutta.
- Coomaraswamy, Ananda K. (1935) *Elements of Buddhist Iconography*. Cambridge.
- (1977) The Symbolism of the Dome, in Roger Lipsey (ed.), *Coomaraswamy. Selected Papers: Traditional Art and Symbolism*, 415-64. Princeton.
- Darian, Steven (1971) Buddhism in Bihar from the Eighth to the Twelfth Century with Special Reference to Nālandā. *Asiatische Studien / Études Asiatiques* 25, 335-52. Bern.
- Eggeling, Julius trans. (1882-1900) *The Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa*, 5 vols. (Sacred Books of the East 12, 26, 41, 43, 44). Oxford.
- Eliade, Mircea (1952) *Images et symboles*. Paris.
- (1962) *Méphisophèles et l'androgynie*. Paris.
- (1969) *Yoga. Immortality and Yoga*. London. [Or. edn. *Le yoga, immortalité et liberté*, Paris 1954].
- (1988) *Lo sciamanismo e le tecniche dell'estasi*. Roma. [Or. edn. *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase*, Paris 1951].
- Foucaux, Philippe É. trans. (1884) *Le Lalita Vistara*. Paris.
- Geiger, Wilhelm trans. (1912) *The Mahāvamsa or The Great Chronicle of Ceylon*. London.
- Griffith, Ralph T.H. trans. (1976) *The Hymns of the RgVeda*. Delhi. [Repr.].
- Grossato, Alessandro (1987) La simbolica vegetale hindu tra mito e iconografia. I. Considerazioni sul mitologema indiano dell'*Urpflanze*. *Annali dell'Istituto Orientale di Napoli* 47, 177-89. Napoli.
- Guéron, René (1990) *Simboli della scienza sacra*. Milano. [Or. edn. *Symboles fondamentaux de la Science sacrée*, Paris 1962].
- Horner, I.B. trans. (1992) *The Book of the Discipline (Vinaya-Piṭaka). Vol. I. (Suttavibhaṅga)*. Oxford. [1st edn. 1938].
- Hume, Robert Ernest trans. (1931) *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*. London.
- Huntington, Susan L., J. Huntington (1990) *Leaves from the Bodhi Tree: The Art of Pāla India (8th-12th Centuries) and Its International Legacy*. Seattle – London.
- Irwin, John (1976) 'Aśoka' Pillars: A Reassessment of the Evidence, IV. Symbolism. *Burlington Magazine* 118, 734-53. London.
- (1979) The Stūpa and the Cosmic Axis: The Archaeological Evidence, in Maurizio Taddei (ed.), *South Asian Archaeology, 1977. Papers from the Fourth International Conference of the Association of South Asian Archaeologists in Western Europe, Held in the Istituto Universitario Orientale, Naples (Series Minor 6)*, 2, 799-845. Naples.

- (1980) The Axial Symbolism of the Early Stūpa: an Exegesis, in Anna Libera Dallapiccola, in coll. with S. Zingel-Avé Lalleman (eds.), *The Stūpa. Its Religious, Historical and Architectural Significance*, 12-38. Wiesbaden.
- Kinnard, Jacob N. (1996) Reevaluating the Eighth-Ninth Century Pāla Milieu: Icono-Conservatism and the Persistence of Śākyamuni. *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 19/2, 281-300. Lausanne.
- Klimburg-Salter, Deborah, M. Taddei (1991) The Uṣṇīṣa and *Brahmarandra*: An Aspect of Light Symbolism in Gandharan Buddha Images, in Gouriswar Bhattacharya (ed.), *Akṣayanīvi. Essays Presented to Dr. Debala Mitra in Admiration of Her Scholarly Contributions*, 73-93. Delhi.
- Knox, Robert (1992) *Amaravati. Buddhist Sculpture from the Great Stūpa*. London.
- Kuiper, F.B.J. (1970) *Ancient Indian Cosmogony*. Delhi.
- Leoshko, Janice (1986) The Case of the Two Witnesses to the Buddha's Enlightenment. *Mārg* 39/4, 39-52. Bombay.
- Nāropā (1994) *Iniziazione. Kālacakra* (ed. Raniero Gnoli, G. Orofino). Milano. [Italian trans. of the *Sekoddeṣaṭikā*].
- Paul, Debjani (1995) *The Art of Nālandā*. New Delhi.
- Snodgrass, Adrian (1985) *The Symbolism of the Stūpa*. Ithaca, N.Y.
- Toporov, V.N. (1973) L'albero universale. Saggio di interpretazione semiotica, in Iurij M. Lotman, Boris A. Uspenskij (a c.), *Ricerche Semiotiche. Nuove tendenze delle scienze umane in URSS*, 148-201. Torino.
- Tucci, Giuseppe (1969) *Teoria e pratica del mandala*. Roma. [1st edn. Roma 1949].
- Verardi, Giovanni (1988) Tematiche indiane di alcune iconografie Gandhariche. Il Buddha, Agni, i *Lakṣaṇa*, il miracolo di Śrāvastī e altri problemi connessi, in Gherardo Gnoli, Lionello Lanciotti (a c.), *Orientalia Iosephi Tucci Memoriae Dicata* (Serie Orientale Roma 56), 3, 1533-46. Rome.
- (1994) *Homa and Other Fire Rituals in Gandhāra* (Supplemento nr. 79 agli *Annali dell'Istituto Orientale di Napoli*). Napoli.
- Viennot, Odette (1954) *Le culte de l'arbre dans l'Inde ancienne*. Paris.
- Wayman, Alex (1959) Studies in Yama and Māra. III. The Four Māras. *Indo-Iranian Journal* 3/2, 112-31. The Hague.
- Zimmer, H. (1990) *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*. Delhi.