# The Veneration of the Buddha in the Nīlamatapurāṇa

PRATAPADITYA PAL

The *Nīlamatapurāṇa* (Ancient Lore according to [the serpent] Nila), is a short text (by puranic standards) of 1453 verses. Rather than a full-fledged *purāna* or even an *upa-purāna*, it is really a *sthalamāhātmya* (local sacred lore) about the valley of Kashmir. It provides a great deal of information regarding the Brahmanical/Hindu religion of Kashmir, of immense interest to both historians of religion and art of the Valley. It was composed or rather compiled almost certainly in the early years of the Karko a dynasty that came into power in 626 CE with Durlabhavardhan, the ruler who received and befriended the famous Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang who visited the subcontinent five years later.

The text of the *Nīlamata,* first published in 1924, was republished with a substantial commentary and an English translation in 1973 by Ved Kumari.[1] Since then it seems to have attracted the attention of Japanese Indologists who, in 1994, published a collection of studies on this seemingly minor text that many major puranas have not yet received (Ikari 1994). This book, which is not very easily accessible to students in the subcontinent, is in many ways a very detailed analysis of the text, both linguistically and contentwise. Nevertheless, it does not exhaust the analytic possibilities of the interesting *Nīlamata,* and one of the topics, that of the veneration of the Buddha, is the subject of this modest article.

The *Nīlamata* devotes six verses to the worship of the Buddha in Kashmir.[2] It unambiguously declares the Buddha to be an avatar of Vishnu and the guru of the world (*jagatguru*) and provides a detailed account of the observance of his birthday in the month of Vaiśākha (April-May) during the bright half of the month. The birth of the Buddha is said to have occurred when the asterism Pushya is joined with the moon. The ritual includes the bathing of an image of the Buddha with water mixed with all medicinal herbs, diverse gems and perfumes along with mantras uttered by the Śākyas. Apart from diligently whitewashing the dwellings of the Śākyas, the shrine of the Buddha, which is characterized as *devagṛiha,* should be beautified with paintings. One should also celebrate the festival with dancing and dramatic performances. It was moreover customary to honour the monks with clothing, namely chivara, food and books. The worship should continue until the advent of Maghā.

This passage has been described and discussed at length by Ved Kumari who regards its inclusion in the *Nīlamata* as an indication of the religious harmony that prevailed in the Valley until the eighth century (Kumari 1973, I: 176-179). She also discusses it in the context of other puranic texts, most of which, according to her, reveal antagonism towards the faith, even though they include the Buddha as an avatar of Vishnu. Certainly the *Nīlamata* shows no such antagonism but it should be mentioned that there is no indication that Brahman priests should worship the Buddha. On the contrary, we are explicitly told that the officiants should be the Śākyas with their own procedures and sayings, though it is clear that some of the rituals and offerings, such as bathing the image, offering of food and clothing and entertainment of the deity, are also parts of Hindu religious praxis.

This *Nīlamata* passage is also the point of departure for Toru Funayama's article on the Hindu-Buddhist milieu in Kashmir in the Japanese publication (Funayama 1994). While it is a useful essay

for anyone interested in the study of Hindu-Buddhist nexus in Kashmir in the first millennium of the Common Era, he does not seem to come to any conclusion regarding the relationship and does little justice to the interesting passage. He uses only the first verse of the passage where the Buddha is said to be an incarnation of Vishnu and writes:

> The reason why they worship Him lies in the very Hinduistic belief that Śākyamuni the Buddha is none other than the incarnation (*avatāra*) of Viṣṇu himself: through the former they worship the latter. Hence the Buddha is treated as one of the innumerable deities in Hinduism. It is certain that in this context Buddhism was not a menace to the orthodox religion. That is, the *Nīlamata* suggests that Buddhism and the orthodox power of that time got along together (Funayama 1994:368).

The learned author then takes up the twelfth century historian Kalhana's recounting of the 'antagonism of the orthodox side to Buddhism in the reign of Abhimanyu I' but does not provide any chronological framework for either the *Nīlamata* or the reign of the ruler (Funayama 1994: 368). Abhimanyu I belongs to the list of early rulers who is said to have been responsible for introducing Patanjali's *Mahābhāshya* to the Valley. By this token he must have reigned after Patanjali who is said to have started his magnum opus around 150 BCE. This would place Abhimanyu I at the earliest around 100 BCE whereas the *Nīlamata* was probably compiled after the rise of the Karko a dynasty with Durlabhavardhana (c. 626–662). Indeed, it is likely that the *Nīlamata* owes its very existence to the legendary association of the new dynasty with Karkoṭa Nāga.[3]

In any event, the interesting features about the description of the worship of the Buddha are:

1) The festival was observed during the lunar half of the month of Vaiśākha;
2) the rituals were performed by Buddhist monks rather than brahman priests following Buddhist texts;
3) the image was bathed with scented water containing gems (but not flowers? as in Hindu worship);
4) gifts consisting of garment, food and books were given only to the monks;
5) the buildings were whitewashed and the sanctuary itself was adorned with paintings;
6) celebrations included both dance and drama.

**Comments**

1) The Buddha *jayantī* is still observed annually by all Buddhists on the day of Vaiśākha Pūrnimā. Interesting, however, is the fact that the celebration was continued, according to our text, until the advent of Maghā which is the thirteenth day of the dark fortnight of Bhādra (August–September). That would make this one of the longest religious observances known.
2) Does the specific mention of the Buddhist priests or monks as officiants mean that it was a Buddhist festival primarily, although Hindus participated as well, as we encounter in certain festivals such as that of Macchendranāth in the Nepal Valley (see Slusser 1982, I:368-369, 379-380, and passim)? Indeed, although the Buddha had been incorporated

in the Hindu pantheon as an avatar of Vishnu by the Gupta period, and is frequently represented thereafter among the ten conventional avatars, I know of no specific ritual or mantra invented for the Buddha's worship in Hindu texts or praxis. Only his images occur in representations of the groups of ten avatars.[4]

3) Bathing of the Buddha image still forms the major rationale of the observance of the birthday, especially in East Asia (see Pal 1984:82-87). In re-enactment of the first bath of the Buddha, an image of the baby Buddha symbolizing his cosmic nature is used. I know of only one image of an adolescent Buddha from Kashmir, though our text does not mention the use of an infant Buddha icon (see Pal 1988:66-67).

4) Giving garments and food are, of course, common to both the Hindus and Buddhists but the gift of books on the holy day is interesting. As far as I know, no Buddhist text mentions the gift of books to monks on the Master's birthday, though donating books in general had become an important act of piety among Mahayana Buddhists certainly by the early centuries of the Common Era in the subcontinent (Pal and Meech-Pekarik 1988:9-10). It should be noted that the evidence of the *Nīlamata* clearly reiterates, as in the discovery of the Gilgit (Pakistan) manuscripts, that it had become common practice in Kashmir to copy books. According to Xuanzang King Durlabhavardhan provided him with a fleet of scribes.[1] Also relevant is the allusion to venerating books in the temple of Durgā in the Nīlamata (Kumari 1973:164).

5) The reference to wall decoration with pictures in the text is clear evidence of painting in Kashmir at the time and probably much earlier, as is known from the *Chitrasūtra* of the *Vishnudharmottarapurāna.* Whether this is in reference to didactic or ornamental murals on the outer walls of shrines and monasteries, as one sees in the Kathmandu Valley, cannot be determined.

6) In addition to feeding the monks and devotees, entertaining the congregation with music, dance and dramas is, of course, again common to both Hindus and Buddhists, as is repeatedly stressed in the *Nīlamata.* Besides, it is well known that dramas with didactic intent were performed in most Buddhist monasteries regularly and survival of the tradition can still be witnessed among the Newar Vajracharya or priestly community of Nepal. In fact, it was from Nepal that most of the Buddhist *Charyā* songs and other Buddhist dramas were recovered in modern times. Dance and drama are still important components of the Buddhist religious tradition elsewhere in the Himalayas, including Sikkim, Bhutan, northeastern corner of India and of course, Tibet.

7) Finally, it is clear that the birth celebration of the Buddha described in the *Nīlamata* was largely Mahayana in character. Even though non-Buddhists participated in it as a sort of a national festival, it was predominantly a Buddhist rather than a Hindu rite. While its inclusion in the *Nīlamata* and the acceptance of the Buddha as an incarnation of Vishnu - and there is no demonstration of hostility towards Buddhists as we encounter in other puranic literature - the Buddhist bias of the festival is also explicit. It should further be mentioned that the Buddha does not appear as an avatar at all in the slightly earlier

*Vishnudarmottara-purāna.* Moreover, neither that text nor the *Nīlamata* describe the conventional group of ten avatars. Instead in both we find the inclusion of Hayagriva (Aśva in *VDP* and Aśvaśīrsha in the *Nīlamata*) and Hamsa (Hazra 1958, I:167).[6] In Buddhist *jātaka* tales, Buddha was born as both a horse and a gander in previous lives. One wonders if the previous birth stories of the Buddha did not influence the avatar theory of the Hindus, as R.C. Hazra first noted (Hazra 1958:218). What can be asserted with some certainty is that at the time of the compilation of the text, religious harmony prevailed in the Valley.

## Notes

[1] Dr. Kumari (1973, I: 9-15) dates the Nīlamata to the 6th – 7th century.

[2] Although, according to the Japanese publication, the text published by Kumari needs further editing, I have used it as my primary source. The verses are printed in vol. I, pp. 180-182. For earlier versions of the text, see Kunjilal and Zadoo (1924) and also De Vreese (1936).

[3] Re-date of the text see Kumari's extensive discussion in 1973 (pp. 9-15). While there is no specific discussion in Ikari, the implications are that it is a layered text compiled mostly during the reign of the Karkoṭa dynasty (c. 626 to 855), likely in the 7th – 8th centuries.

[4] For instance, in any of the Hindu manuals of worship and religious almanacs no *paddhati* for the worship of the Buddha is included. Indeed, the whole issue of the inclusion of the Buddha among Vishnu's avatars needs to be thoroughly examined. By and large the Hindu attitude reflected in the *purānas* is that of tokenism where he is accepted in name only but derided as one who deludes the people with his teachings. True, the *Nīlamata* eschews such sectarianism but on the other hand limits the rites and rituals to the Śākyas rather than Brahmans.

[5] Discovered in the 1930s, the Gilgit manuscripts written on birch bark are important documents of early written texts discovered on the subcontinent. They were found in a stupa and represent the kind of books that were copied and given to Śākyas on the Buddha's birthday as per the *Nilamata*. These would also have been the type of books acquired by Xuanzang in the Valley.

[6] Indeed, the text also includes the *mayūra* or peacock among Vishnu's incarnations. The Buddha was born as a peacock as well. It should be further noted that it is in his Hamsa avatar that Vishnu recited the *Hamsagitā,* which constitutes chapters 226-342 in the text (Hazra 1958:192).

**Bibliography**

De Vreese, K. (ed). (1936). *Nīlamata.* Leiden.

Funayama, T. (1994). 'Remarks on Religious Predominance in Kashmir: Hindu Or Buddhist?' in Ikari, Yasuke (ed) (1994) *A Study of the Nīlmata: Aspects of Hinduism in Ancient Kashmir.* Kyoto: Institute for Research in Humanities, Kyoto University: 367-376.

Hazra, RC. (1958). *Studies in the Upapurānas* 1, Calcutta: Sanskrit College.

Ikari, Y. (ed). (1994). *A Study of the Nīlamata - Aspects of Hinduism in Ancient Kashmir.* Kyoto: Institute for Research in Humanities, Kyoto University.

Kumari, V. (1973). *The Nīlamata Purāna* (2 vols). Srinagar: J & K Academy of Art, Culture and Languages.

Kunjilal, R. and J. Zadoo. (eds). (1924). *Nīlamata Purāna.* Lahore.

Pal, P. (ed). (1984) *Light of Asia.* Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Pal, P. (1988). *Indian Sculpture* (2 vols). Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Pal, P. and J. Meech-Pekarik. (1988). *Buddhist Book Illuminations.* Paris and Hurstpierpoint (UK): Ravi Kumar and Richard Lyon.

Slusser, MS. (1982). *Nepal Mandala* (2 vols). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

# Legacy of the Indian 'Gymnosophists' through Greek Sources

ABDUL SAMAD

The naked philosophers of India, the so-called 'Gymnosophists' were mentioned frequently by the classical authors. This direct encounter with Indian doctrine left remarkable traces on the subsequent history of Macedonians.

According to Greek classical sources, the names of at least two Brahmans are preserved, (a) *Calanus/Kalanus*, who joined Alexander in 326 BCE near Taxila and (b) *Dandamis*, who refused to submit to the Macedonians. Some of the classical sources portrayed Alexander the Great as a seeker for truth, the reason being that for nearly two years, *Calanus* was present in Alexander's court and enjoyed royal goodwill.[1]

Megasthenese,[2] Arrian and Diodorus reported that *Calanus* accompanied Alexander to the west. Calanus was troubled by a constant abdominal complaint, and, rather than treatment, he insisted on suicide. With Alexander's unwilling permission, he had a pyre constructed. He jumped in that and was burned alive before a large audience. According to Diodorus (17.107.5, cf Bosworth 1998: 179), the suicide evoked sharply contrasting comments. Some admired Calanus' courage; others condemned his death as insanity or empty arrogance.

Consequently, to commit a suicide by burning oneself into flames emerged as a formal and accepted manner of death among the Macedonians, especially when Calanus suicide was ceremonially re-enacted for Augustus in 20 BCE. A similar case was with the suicide of *Peregrinus* at Olympia.[3]

Megasthenese visited Punjab in around 319 BCE[4], and had discussions with the Brahmans of Taxila who showed a hostile attitude towards Calanus due to his act of suicide. So far, this legacy of naked ascetics and their inspiration of the Greeks are confined to literary evidence, but before taking this discussion into more detail, it should be remarked that the Sanskrit equivalent of Calanus is '*Kalyāṇa*', which means the auspicious or prosperous.

A short paper published by O. Bopearachchi (1995: 8-9) presented an unusual type of coin type, issued by the Indo-Greek king Telephus (Figure 1). The date and succession of this king is still the matter of a controversial debate among numismatists. Cunningham placed him in 135 BCE, succeeding Hippostratus. He was followed by Whitehead who dated Telephus contemporary to Maues. According to Mitchiner, he ruled between 80 and 75 BCE. Interestingly, Tarn even called him a usurper (1957: 313) and hesitated to call him a king.[5] In this article, we assume an approximate date of around 80 BCE.[6] Our main concern, however, is the iconography and palaeography of his coinage, which has largely been ignored so far. The square copper coin depicted in Figure 1 can be described as follows:

*Obverse*: Zeus is sitting on a high throne and leaning to left with a sceptre in his left hand, while the right hand is outstretched. The Greek legend on the margin reads: *ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΕΥΕΡΓΕΤΟΥ ΤΗΛΕΦΟΥ*

*Reverse*: A naked ascetic squatting on the rocks, and holding a branch of tree on his shoulder.[7] The objects in front of him can be discerned as a *kamaṇḍalu* and a fire altar. The Kharoṣṭhī legend reads: *maharajasa kalaṇakramasa telephasa.*

This interesting coin shows two major aspects: (1) the naked ascetic (gymnosophist) on the reverse, and (2) the legend inscribed on this coin. Generally, on the obverse of the Indo-Greek coins, we find the portrait of the king, while the reverse side shows a Greek deity. According to this, we could interpret the naked male figure in terms of replacing the standard Greek deity.

Telephus's coin is the only example of the depiction of an Indian Brahman among the Indo-Greek coinage. Furthermore, the Gandhāri *kalaṇakramasa* seems to be the same as Sanskrit *kalyāṇakrama*, which is the epithet of *euergetos* (*ΕΥΕΡΓΕΤΟΥ*), which means 'auspicious deed or prospers deed'. This legend is interesting in combination with the Brahman figure. Telephus was the second Indo-Greek ruler after Antimachus Nikephorus who did not use his own portrait on coins. In fact, the legend '*kalaṇakramasa*' is not only used on the Brahman type, but also on some of his other issues. The coin in Figure 2 shows on its obverse a triton with the Greek legend *ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΕΥΕΡΓΕΤΟΥ ΤΗΛΕΦΟΥ*, and on the reverse a Helios radiate and Selene with the Kharoṣṭhī legend: *maharajasa kalaṇakramasa telephasa.* This legend shows the standard epithet Telephus, which does not only refer to the Brahman on the reverse, but also to the king himself.

The figure of Brahman is depicted as a squatting bearded old man holding a staff on his shoulder with a *kamaṇḍalu* placed in front of him and the fire altar. It may be noted that altar is not the usual Persian fire altar but is of a typical Indian type. The ascetic is sitting on rocks. Its visual appearance can be compared with the description of Indian 'Gymnosophists' of the Alexanderian period. One can pose the interesting question as to why Telephus as an Indo-Greek king should depict an Indian Brahman on his coin instead of a Greek deity. It is too simple to assume – as Tarn did - that he was a follower of non-Greek beliefs. It seems to be more probable, that he took up Alexander's attitude as 'a truth seeker'. At the same time, he might have used a Brahman portrait to gain the support of the local population, especially in the declining period of Indo-Greek power. It cannot be excluded that the depiction of a Brahman on Telephus' coin was influenced by his epithet *kalyānakarma*, a translation of the Greek *euergetos*. It is quite possible that this Indian rendering recalled the name of Calanus (Skt. kalyāṇa), the popular 'gymnosophist' who met Alexander the Great and was even living in his court. By depicting an Indian Brahman Telephos took up this tradition and presented himself as a 'true follower' of Alexander the Great.

Telephus' coin is significant in several respects: firstly, it is the only example of an Indo-Greek ruler who used the portrait of a Brahman, and secondly, it also contributes to our knowledge of the early popular religious beliefs of the Indian northwest. The influence of Greek mythology is common in early northwestern religion, but 'the integration of the northwestern beliefs by the Greeks' is a much less popular phenomenon. Therefore, the period of Telephus could be considered as an early and yet unexplored phase of the Indianization of foreign religious ideas.[8]

## Notes

1. There are several Greek references mentioning Calanus meetings with Alexander and later his suicide, i.e. Strabo. 15.1.68 (717). Arrian 7.3.1-2 mentions Calanus' illness and determination to die; for other general

account Diodorus. 17.107.1-5; and Plut. Al.69.6-70.2; Ael.VH 5.6., Arrian. 7.3.6 and 7.13.2, 14.7, 24.2, 7.3.2, 15.1.68 (717), 11.11.3 (515), Plut: Al.69.7. Diodotus: 17.106.5, Onesicritus, who witnessed the suicide of Calanus also mentioned it in FGrH 134 F 18.

2. FGrH715 F 34a. cf. Strabo: 15.1.68 (718).
3. Strabo. 15.1.73, 720. cf. Bosworth: 1998; 177.
4. Arrian Indica. 5.3 and Arr. 7.2.4 (FGrH 715 F 34b).
5. Even though Telephus used the title 'maharajasa', the great king.
6. This date is the most agreeable among numismatics, beside here the intention is not to jump in the discussion of Telephus' 'Date and succession'.
7. Usually in Gandharan iconography, the Brahman is shown using tree branch as a staff.
8 Agathocles was the first to depict Saṃkṛṣṇa and Vāsudeva on his coins.

## Bibliography

Bopearachchi, O. (1995). 'Indian Brahman on a Coin of Indo-Greek Telephus', *ONS* (Oriental Numismatic society), Newsletter No.145: 8-9.

Bosworth, B. (1998). 'Calanus and the Brahman Opposition', in Wolfgang Will (ed.), *Alexander der Grosse. Eine Welteroperung und ihr Hintergrund* Bonn: 173-203

Gardner, P. (1966). *Catalogue of Indian Coins in the British museum. Greek and Scythic kings of Bactria and India*. Chicago: 171.

Lahiri, AN. (1965). *Corpus of Indo-Greek Coins*, Calcutta: 184-185

Mitchiner, M. (1975). *Indo-Greek and Indo-Scythian Coinage*, Vol.3, The decline of the Indo-Greeks, London:269

Tarn, WW. (1985). *The Greeks In Bactria & India,* Chicago (3rd Edition).

Whitehead, RB. (1914). *Catalogue of Coins in the Panjab Museum, Lahore, Indo Greek coins*, Vol.1, Oxford: 80.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3