

The Life of the Buddha in the Sumtsek

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A unique structure within the monastic complex of Alchi is the magnificent Three-Storey Temple, the Sumtsek. The temple is dedicated to a triad of gigantic *bodhisattvas* and their secondary deities, located in three niches. In one of the temple's inscriptions the three large *bodhisattvas* are identified as Maitreya, in the centre, Avalokiteshvara, located to the proper right of Maitreya, and Manjushri, located to the proper left of Maitreya.

Each of the three large *bodhisattvas* wears a beautifully decorated long dhoti (a cloth worn around the waist). These dhotis are not ornamented with the usual textile patterns; instead, each one is painted with a different theme. Avalokiteshvara's is decorated with holy places of Kashmir on a bright blue background (Goepper and Poncar, pp. 46-71). Manjushri's dhoti has unusual representations of the *mahasiddha* (tantric adepts said to have miraculous powers) painted into the spaces of a basic textile pattern (ibid., pp. 104-109). Maitreya's dhoti contains a painted cycle of the life of the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni (ibid., pp. 126-31). It is the cycle of the life of the Buddha represented on Maitreya's dhoti that we will discuss in this article.

Rather than adopting a fully frontal posture, Maitreya stands in a slight *tribhanga* (triple-flex) pose with the right leg positioned a little forward (Fig. 1). He is painted red, his face is gilded, and he has four arms. A four-headed Vairochana is depicted in the central point of his five-Buddha crown. The two right hands are in *abhaya mudra* (the gesture of fearlessness) and *varada mudra* (the gesture of giving; the fingers are slightly bent today). The upper left arm is raised towards the shoulder holding a white flower (Skt *nagakeshara* or *campaka*), while the lower hand probably once held a flask (Skt *kamandalu*). Maitreya is flanked by four seated goddesses; the lower ones have been quite badly restored. Above Maitreya's shoulders are two four-armed *apsarases*, again, completely restored.

The scenes on Maitreya's dhoti are rendered within a basic textile pattern, consisting of red circular medallions with a diameter of fifteen centimetres, on a blue background. The circles have a silver border forming figure-of-eight-shaped loops where the medallions touch each other. In the spaces between the medallions, framed red shapes enclose three deer, their ears forming a triangle in the centre. The upper edge and the bright blue used on some areas of the dhoti have been repainted.

The scenes of the Buddha's life are principally arranged in opposite directions through the horizontal groups of medallions. The chronological sequence on the dhoti begins below the belt of Maitreya's right leg and moves downwards through horizontal rows; then after crossing to the bottom of the left leg it continues, this time upwards. The scenes incorporated in the space between the legs are to be read from top to bottom and precede the two last scenes on the left leg. However, there are exceptions to this general arrangement, and the exact succession of the 48 scenes identified can be seen in Figure 2, in which the scenes are numbered according to their presumed narrative succession. While each complete roundel usually contains a scene, the incomplete medallions along the edge of the dhoti are filled with stupas, Buddhas and figures in attitudes of veneration. In some instances the half-roundels also contain

elements completing the scene beside them. In these cases they are numbered according to the scene they accompany.

In the first complete medallion, a frontally depicted teaching Buddha is flanked by two stupas (Scene 1). Two deities are seated to the sides of his head, their legs crossed at the ankles. The neighbouring scene shows the future Buddha Shakyamuni teaching in Tushita heaven, the heaven in which all future Buddhas are said to reside before their last birth on earth (Scene 2; Fig. 1a). This is before his Enlightenment, when the future Buddha was still a *bodhisattva*. However, he is depicted frontally and in Buddha dress, and above his head two deities hold a crown. He is flanked by seated and kneeling deities venerating him or conversing with him. The small red deity to his right, breaking the symmetry of the scene, is probably the next Buddha after Shakyamuni, Maitreya.

The following three medallions are dedicated to the consecration of the *bodhisattva* Maitreya as Shakyamuni's successor: the future Buddha Shakyamuni continues to be represented as a Buddha (in red and blue dress), while Maitreya is shown as a red *bodhisattva*. In the left roundel, Maitreya is shown kneeling in front of Shakyamuni, whose head is now turned towards him (Scene 3; Fig. 1b). Then, in Scene 4, Maitreya is seated on a similar lotus throne to the future Buddha Shakyamuni. Both are represented frontally and their heads are turned towards each other. Scene 5 shows the consecration itself (Fig. 1c). Shakyamuni is now shown standing to the side of Maitreya blessing his successor, while two *apsarases* hold a crown and a garland above them. Curiously, while normally there are no monks in Tushita heaven, a venerating monk is shown behind Shakyamuni. Thus, the monk holding a scarf represented in the half-medallion to the right of this roundel also refers to this scene (Scene 5a). The departure from Tushita heaven is shown in three medallions (Scenes 6, 6a and 6b). In the central scene the future Shakyamuni leaves Tushita heaven, while the neighbouring medallions show additional venerating figures (Fig. 1d). Among them are other Buddhas, the god Indra and the red, four-headed god Brahma. The kneeling *bodhisattva* is, once again, Maitreya.

The story continues with six scenes dedicated to the events around Shakyamuni's birth. It begins with the conception, when Shakyamuni's mother, Queen Maya, dreams of a small white elephant entering her womb (Scene 7). Queen Maya then narrates this dream to her husband, King Shuddhodana, in their palace in the city of Kapilavastu (Scene 8). In the following medallion, Queen Maya, grasping the branch of an *ashoka* tree in Lumbini garden, gives birth to Shakyamuni, who emerges from her right side and is received by Maya's female attendants (Scene 9; Fig. 1e). Brahma and Indra, who, according to literary tradition are said to receive the child, are not represented. The tree is flanked by two elephant-eared creatures blowing a conch,

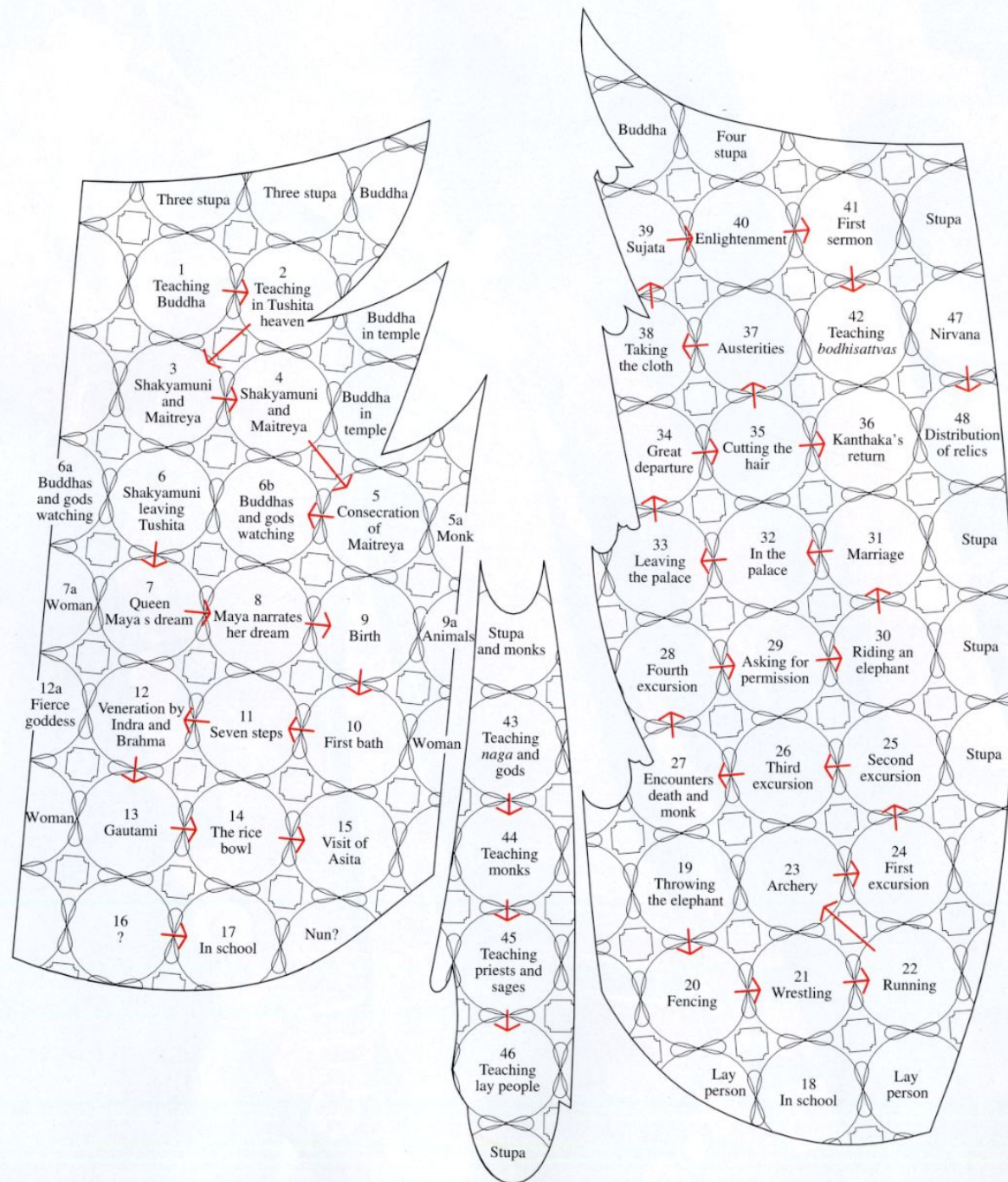


(Fig. 1) Maitreya
Main niche, ground floor, Sumtsek, Alchi
Late 12th/early 13th century
Clay with colour
Height 4.63 m

the musical instrument of the gods. The animals in the neighbouring half-roundel represent the beings which are born simultaneously with the *bodhisattva*. In the medallion directly below the birth, the two *naga*-kings, Nanda and Upananda, bathe the child with cold and warm water (Scene 10; see the central roundel in Fig. 1e). Both *nagas* have four arms and hold what appears to be a conch in one of their lower hands. In the next representation, Shakyamuni is surrounded by the lotuses that grew under his feet as he made seven steps in each of the six cardinal directions (Scene 11). Among the gods gathered round him are again two elephant-eared creatures blowing conches. The following medallion, badly preserved, shows Indra,

Brahma and other gods venerating the newly born infant, who is depicted here as a Buddha (Scene 12). The fierce goddess in the neighbouring half-circle, which is hidden behind Maitreya's *mala* (a garland, or rosary, of flowers), also appears to be part of this scene (12a). She is painted red and holds a skull cup in her right hand.

The last roundels decorating this leg are concerned with events shortly after the birth but already within the palace in the city of Kapilavastu. According to literary sources Queen Maya dies seven days after giving birth, and Shakyamuni is taken to the city. The badly preserved thirteenth scene appears to show the moment when the child is given into the care of Gautami,



(Fig. 2) Numerical arrangement of scenes on Maitreya's dhoti



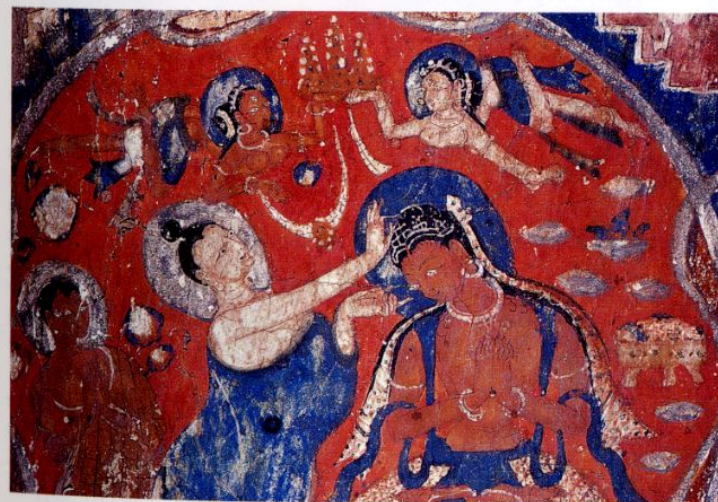
(Fig. 1a) Detail of Figure 1 showing the future Buddha Shakyamuni teaching the gods in Tushita heaven (Scene 2)



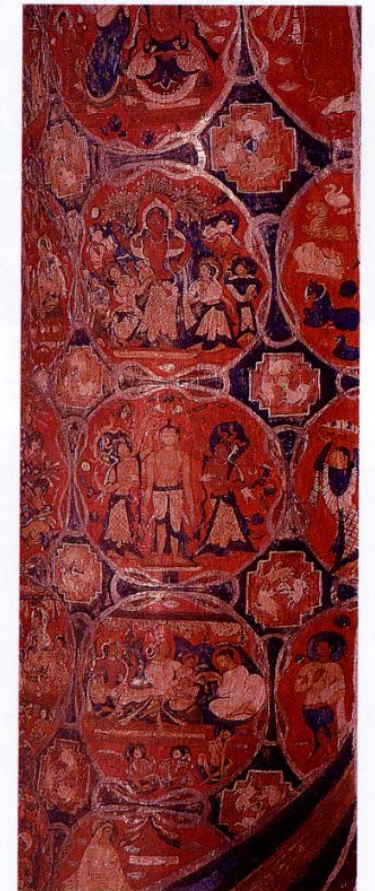
(Fig. 1d) Detail of Figure 1 showing Shakyamuni's departure from Tushita heaven (Scene 6b)



(Fig. 1b) Detail of Figure 1 showing the future Buddha Shakyamuni and Maitreya (Scene 3)



(Fig. 1c) Detail of Figure 1 showing the consecration of Maitreya (Scene 5)

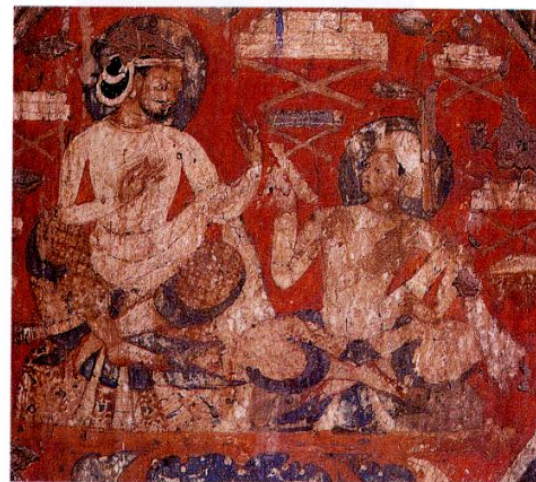
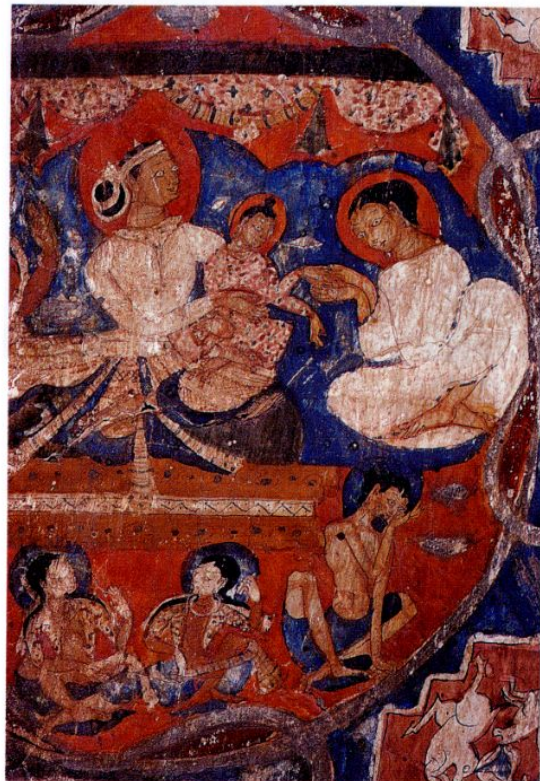


(Fig. 1e) Detail of Figure 1 showing Maitreya's right leg with Scenes 9 (the birth), 10 (bathing the child) and 15 (the visit of the sage Asita)

(Fig. 1f) Detail of Figure 1 possibly showing the *bodhisattva* lifting the rice bowl (in this depiction a vase) (Scene 14)



(Fig. 1g) Detail of Figure 1 showing Asita's prediction of the Enlightenment (Scene 15)



(Fig. 1h) Detail of Figure 1 showing Shakyamuni in school (Scene 18)

Maya's sister. In the following palace scene a young person appears to offer a vase to Shakyamuni, who is seated on the lap of his father, Shuddhodana (Scene 14; Fig. 1f). Gautami sits opposite, while below them animal-headed creatures are seated, probably playing musical instruments. This painting may represent the story of the golden rice bowl which nobody but the infant could lift (although the vessel depicted here is a silver vase). In the following roundel, the aged sage Asita predicts the future Enlightenment of the child (Scene 15; Fig. 1g). Asita is depicted weeping as he realizes that he will not be alive when Shakyamuni attains Enlightenment. Of the next roundel (Scene 16) only fragments are preserved, showing a seated woman. From the composition, it would seem to be another scene within the palace.

Two medallions are then dedicated to Shakyamuni in school. The last medallion on Maitreya's right leg shows the child in conversation with his teacher (Scene 17). He is now represented as a young boy wearing a turban. The bottom roundel on Maitreya's left leg contains a very similar scene (Scene 18; Fig. 1h). Books are placed all around Shakyamuni and his teacher, and Shakyamuni himself holds two folios. While the first scene in school does not give any specific narrative clue, the second scene clearly refers to the episode in which Shakyamuni mentions the names of 64 scripts.

The story continues on Maitreya's left leg. Five scenes are dedicated to the display of Shakyamuni's skills in the worldly arts during a series of competitions. Scene 19, somewhat out of position, shows the *bodhisattva* as he throws an elephant out of the city after it has been killed by his cousin Devadatta. This happens on the way to the competitions which take place outside the city. The competitions depicted in the other medallions are fencing, shown in Figure 1i, wrestling, running and archery (Scenes 20-23). Scene 19 may also simply be understood as another competition proving the physical strength of the *bodhisattva*. In this case it would not necessarily need to precede the other competition scenes.

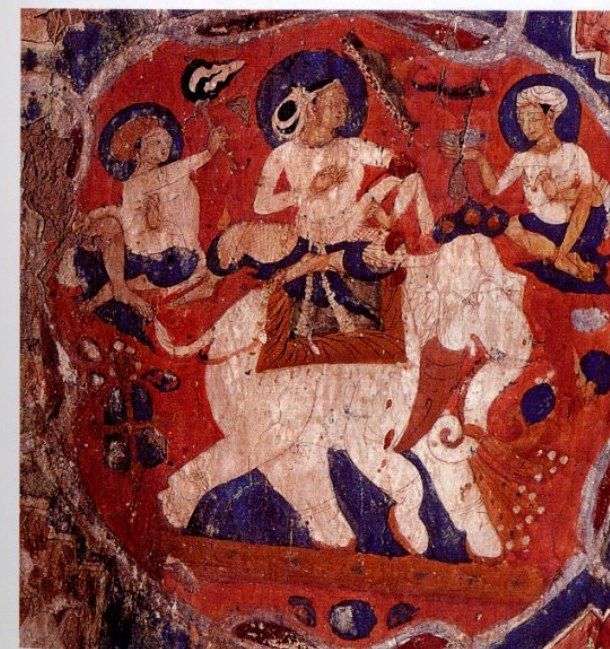
In the following five medallions, the four encounters on the way to the pleasure garden are depicted. During four successive excursions the *bodhisattva* encounters an old man, a sick man, a corpse (death) and a monk. In the composition on the dhoti four roundels contain only two riders each – the *bodhisattva*



(Fig. 1i) Detail of Figure 1 showing Shakyamuni fencing (Scene 20)

and a companion – accompanied by two guards (Scenes 24-26 and 28; Fig. 1j). The fifth roundel then shows the last two encounters (Scene 27; Fig. 1k). On the left side two men are carrying a coffin and on the right side a monk is depicted. The old man and the sick man are not represented.

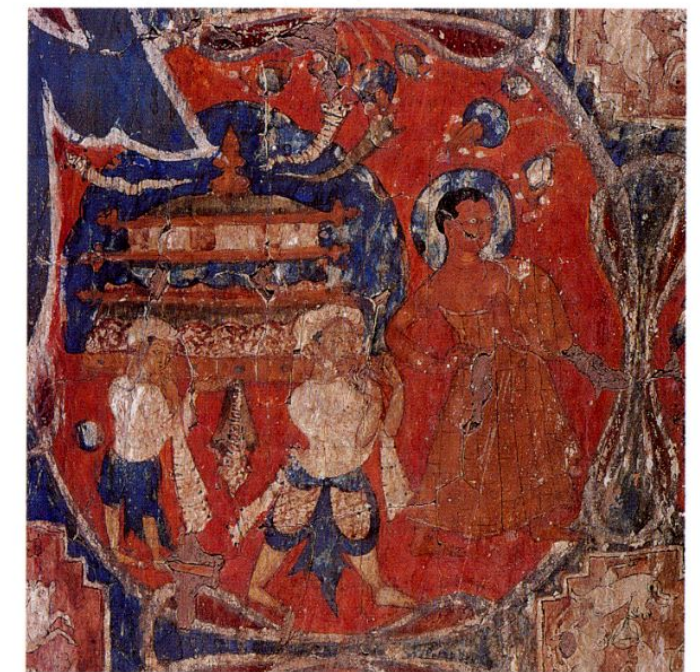
Following the four encounters, Shakyamuni decides to leave the palace to become an ascetic. Therefore he meets his father to inform him of his decision and to seek his permission to do so (Scene 29). However, his father would rather see his son as his successor and tries to make life at the palace as pleasant as possible. These efforts may be represented by one of the most beautiful scenes on the dhoti: the *bodhisattva* riding a white elephant which holds a scarf in its trunk (Scene 30; Fig. 1l). Behind Shakyamuni, a servant waves a fly whisk while another holds an offering plate. The *bodhisattva* is probably riding to his marriage, which most likely is shown in the largely damaged roundel above (Scene 31). In the next medallion the *bodhisattva* and his wife Gopa, each with an attendant, are shown seated inside the palace (Scene 32).



(Fig. 1l) Detail of Figure 1 showing Shakyamuni riding an elephant (Scene 30)



(Fig. 1j) Detail of Figure 1 showing Shakyamuni's fourth excursion (Scene 28)



(Fig. 1k) Detail of Figure 1 showing two encounters, with death and a monk (Scene 27)

However, despite the birth of a son (Rahula), the *bodhisattva* leaves home, as shown in the following two medallions (Scenes 33 and 34). In the lower one the palace is shown. Next to it, in the lower left corner, Gopa nurses Rahula on her lap. In the upper part of the scene, Shakyamuni is virtually drawn out of the palace by a four-armed flying deity (Fig. 1m). Chandaka, the horseman, is represented beside Shakyamuni, while the guards are sleeping. In the upper roundel the *bodhisattva* silently and secretly rides away on the horse, Kanthaka, whose legs are held by gods. The *bodhisattva* then removes his clothing and jewellery and cuts his hair with a sword (Scene 35; Fig. 1n). Chandaka is kneeling in front of him, holding his turban. Two flying goddesses are also shown: they will gather Shakyamuni's hair and build a stupa for it. This is represented in the right part of the medallion. Chandaka then leaves the *bodhisattva* and returns with the horse to Kapilavastu carrying Shakyamuni



(Fig. 1m) Detail of Figure 1 showing the bodhisattva leaving the palace (Scene 33)



(Fig. 1n) Detail of Figure 1 showing the bodhisattva cutting his hair (Scene 35)

mini's jewellery. Scene 36 shows the grieving women of the palace surrounding the returned horse (see the lower medallion in Fig. 1r).

In his quest for enlightenment, the *bodhisattva* first practises extreme asceticism and fasting, during which his body becomes completely emaciated (Scene 37; see Fig. 1r, left side). However, he realizes that this is not the right way to achieve enlightenment, and decides to practise another kind of meditation and to take food again. In a cemetery, he takes the cloth from a deceased girl to make himself a robe (Scene 38; Fig. 1o). He then takes the food prepared for him by the girl Sujata (Scene 39). Finally the *bodhisattva* proceeds to the place of Enlightenment under the *bodhi* tree. As usual, his Enlightenment is depicted by the conquest of Mara, the embodiment of evil forces (Scene 40; Fig. 1p). Shakyamuni is seated on a rocky throne, the base of which is wrapped by the tails of two *nagas*. His right hand is stretched towards the ground to call the earth goddess to witness. The earth goddess is shown emerging from the earth in front of the throne. Four daughters of Mara flank the *bodhisattva* and try to seduce him, while two creatures blow conches into his ears. Two more three-headed creatures are seated behind them, each of them brandishing three snakes at his head in order to distract him. Mara himself is depicted twice: to the left he fires an arrow at the *bodhisattva*, while to the right he realizes that all his efforts are in vain.



(Fig. 1o) Detail of Figure 1 showing the bodhisattva taking cloth from a deceased girl (Scene 38)



(Fig. 1p) Detail of Figure 1 showing the Enlightenment (Scene 40)

Scene 41 is dedicated to Shakyamuni's first sermon in Sarnath after converting the five sages who practised austerities with him (see the upper medallion in Fig. 1r). However, the depiction is unusual in that eight monks are represented listening to his teaching. Moreover, the two deer usually associated with this event, and even symbolizing the first sermon when shown flanking a wheel, are completely absent. This scene introduces the following five medallions, which demonstrate the teaching of the Buddha in a general way (Scene 42, shown in Fig. 1q, and Scenes 43-46). In these five roundels he teaches five different audiences. Scene 42 shows him teaching two *bodhisattvas*; the one seated to the proper right of the Buddha holding a rosary and a red lotus can be identified as Avalokiteshvara. In the roundels on the middle fold of the dhoti between Maitreya's legs the four other audiences are shown. These are *nagas* and gods, monks, priests and sages, and lay followers.

The two last scenes are squeezed onto the far edge of the dhoti on Maitreya's left leg next to the scenes of the first sermon and Kanthaka's return. The upper roundel shows the Buddha's *parinirvana*, his physical death (Scene 47; visible in Fig. 1r); the Buddha is lying on a bed-like structure with three stupas behind it. The lower roundel is dedicated to the distribution of relics (Scene 48). After the cremation of his body, the ashes of the Buddha were divided into eight parts and given to the kings of the surrounding countries so that they could build stupas for them. Here, two monks sit next to a stupa, plates heaped with ashes before them.

From this survey and identification of the scenes it is clear that a complete life of the Buddha is represented on the dhoti. The story commences with Shakyamuni as a *bodhisattva* in Tushita heaven when he decides to be reborn for the last time, and ends with the distribution of relics after his *parinirvana*.

The main groups of major events are arranged in horizontal rows (see Fig. 2). The transition from one group to another is always placed to the side of a row. Thus, on Maitreya's right leg one can differentiate the Tushita scenes (the three upper rows; Scenes 1-6), the birth scenes (rows 4 and 5; Scenes 7-12) and the youth scenes (rows 6 and 7; Scenes 13-17). On Maitreya's left leg the scene in the bottom row (Scene 18) corresponds with the last scene on the right leg. Then five rows are dedicated to the *bodhisattva's* life as a prince, and the top three rows to events after leaving home.

Only a circular medallion with a diameter of fifteen centimetres could be used for the composition of the scenes. Neighbouring medallions rarely refer to the same scene. In four cases, one Tushita scene and three birth scenes, the half-medallions at the edges complement the event depicted in the neighbouring medallions (Scenes 5a and 7a, 9a and 12a, respectively; see Fig. 2). Two exceptions to the rule, in which complete neighbouring medallions refer to the same event, are the representation of the departure from Tushita in two medallions (Scenes 6 and 6b), and the way the four encounters are represented. Among the five scenes depicting the encounters (Scenes 24-28), Scenes 25 to 27 evidently refer to each other, with the riders and the representation of death and the monk directed towards each other in the same horizontal row.

When the scenes are not related to neighbouring ones, or do not show movement, the composition of a scene is often strictly symmetrical. The setting in which an event takes place is represented in certain stereotypes. Events outside only sometimes have a stupa or trees in the background, but usually have



(Fig. 1q) Detail of Figure 1 showing the Buddha teaching the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (Scene 42)

no landscape, except in the case of the fasting *bodhisattva*, where stylized mountains are shown. In the cases where stupas occur they also have an iconographic meaning, as in Scene 35, showing the haircutting (see Fig. 1n), or in the cemetery (Scene 38; see Fig. 1o). Palace scenes are differentiated by a horizontal valance or a roof in the upper part of the medallion. Interestingly, in this way, the competitions (Scenes 19-23) and the return of Kanthaka (Scene 36) are marked as palace scenes while the school scenes and the elephant-riding scene take place outside the palace (Scenes 17 and 18, and Scene 30, respectively; see Figs 1h and 1i). Only once, in the first scene of the great departure, is an entire building other than a stupa shown (the palace in Scene 33; see Fig. 1m). The manner in which this event is depicted is unique.

Where there is a greater distance between two successive scenes, it is apparent that they follow an identical composition. The school scene, for example, was repeated, once with and once without books (Scenes 17 and 18; see Fig. 2). In this way it is easy for the viewer to find the successive scenes on the two legs. Likewise, the preaching scenes are all quite similar in their composition, and they have no particular chronological succession (Scenes 41-46).

The mode of narration is often simple, with the focal character in a scene depicted larger, and only a few secondary details added. The protagonist of the story, Shakyamuni, is not always represented in the same way. As a Buddha he may wear a blue or a red robe, and as an infant he may be large, when in the centre, for example, or small, when sitting in his father's lap. If the identification is correct, Scene 14 is the only one in which Shakyamuni is represented twice: once seated on the lap and once holding the bowl (actually a vase) in the centre (see Fig. 1f). Otherwise only Mara is repeated in the Enlightenment scene, once attacking and once giving up his efforts, which is quite a common pictorial representation (Scene 40; see Fig. 1p).

Considering the composition of some scenes, it appears unlikely that this representation of the Buddha's life on the dhoti is based on a tradition in paintings. Maya's dream, the birth, the Enlightenment, the first bath, archery, cutting his hair, practising austerities and the *parinirvana* are quite commonly represented, and are consequently easily identifiable. However,

(Fig. 1r) Detail of Figure 1 showing Maitreya's left leg, with the Enlightenment; the first sermon; practising austerities; teaching the *bodhisattvas*; the *parinirvana*; Shakyamuni cutting his hair; the return of Kanthaka and the distribution of the relics (Scenes 40, 41, 37, 42, 47, 35, 36 and 48, respectively)



some events are depicted in an unusual manner: for example, the seven steps in Scene 11 and the two scenes showing the great departure (Scenes 33 and 34). More decisive is that several of the scenes are not known from anywhere else, or are rarely represented; for example, Shakyamuni and Maitreya (Scenes 3 and 4), Shakyamuni leaving Tushita (Scenes 6, 6a and 6b), veneration by Brahma and Indra (Scene 12), the inclusion of Gautami (Scene 13), the rice bowl scene (Scene 14), riding an elephant (Scene 30), leaving the palace (Scene 33) and Kanthaka's return (Scene 36).

The majority of the 48 scenes identified are dedicated to the events between Tushita heaven and the first sermon in Sarnath (Scene 41). To these 41 episodes five preaching scenes and two scenes about the *parinirvana* are added. While the preaching scenes are located in a prominent position, the *parinirvana* scenes are nearly hidden.

This general distribution of the narrative themes reflects the textual situation of the earliest preserved canonical literature. One must be aware that in India a consecutive, complete life story was only known from the non-canonical literature, such as Ashvaghosha's *Buddhacarita*, a poem in 28 parts. In the canonical biographies of the Buddha, the section dealing with his birth, youth and Enlightenment usually ends at an early stage in his teaching career. The *parinirvana* is dealt with in another part of the same text, or in a separate text, the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*. The events in between – the teaching events and the miracles – are to a large extent included in the *Vinaya*,

the literature explaining monastic rules. There, the narrative frame provides a context for the various rules. By contrast, in China and Tibet (as earlier in Gandhara), the need for a consecutive, all-inclusive life story was felt. Tibetan scholars, for example Butön (1290-1364), had to summarize the Buddha's life by extracting it from the canonical sources, basically the *Mulasarvastivadin Vinaya* (the book of the monastic rules of the Mulasarvastivada School, the only *Vinaya* translated into Tibetan), the *Lalitavistara* and the *Abhiniskramana Sutra*. (This is of course just a crude summary of the history of the different extant literary versions of the life of the Buddha. A comprehensive summary, including Chinese and Sinhalese sources, can be found in Lamotte, pp. 648-62). These texts were also possible sources for the paintings on Maitreya's dhoti at Alchi.

The life of the Buddha from his time in Tushita heaven to the first sermon is described in the *Lalitavistara*, the latest extant Sanskrit hagiography of the Buddha (c. 8th century). This text would also be a basic source for the scenes on the dhoti. Nevertheless, some depictions can only be explained by taking other sources, particularly the *Vinaya* and/or the *Abhiniskramana Sutra*, into account. The story of the rice bowl stems from the *Mulasarvastivadin Vinaya*. Also the representation of Shakyamuni's marriage after the four encounters derives from the *Vinaya*, where Shakyamuni marries three women – the second, Gopa, after the four encounters.

However, the depictions on the dhoti do not follow these

texts alone, but clearly also derive from other sources. The influence of another narrative tradition – which could have been in oral or written form – is evidenced by a number of unusual representations. With five scenes dedicated to the Tushita events, these are given unusual prominence when compared to the textual sources and other representations of the life of the Buddha (Scenes 2-6). On one hand, it underlines the importance attached to Shakyamuni's consecration of his successor Maitreya (Scene 5; see Fig. 1c). On the other hand, these events may also have been emphasized because the narrative is represented on the dhoti of a Maitreya image. It is no accident that Maitreya is consistently represented as a red *bodhisattva*, which is the same colour used for the clay image. The prominence given to the departure from Tushita is also unusual.

Similarly, the number of events dedicated to the early youth of Shakyamuni in the palace of Kapilavastu stands out. Scenes 12 to 14 (showing the veneration of Indra and Brahma, Gautami taking care of the infant, and the child lifting the rice bowl) have no direct comparison, and it is unclear what was depicted in the palace in Scene 16.

The influence of philosophical ideas about the nature of the Buddha on the narrative becomes particularly apparent in the representation of the teaching period between the first sermon and the *parinirvana* (Scenes 41-47). Remarkably, neither the main teaching events, as described in the *Vinaya* literature, nor the miracles, which already had a long pictorial tradition, are depicted. Instead, there is an attempt to demonstrate the teaching quality of a Buddha, which in a Mahayana context is the ability to teach each audience according to its capability and is called *upayakaushalya* ('skill in means') – indeed, this also helps explain the apparent contradictions between authoritative Buddhist sources from different periods. As already noted, the five preaching scenes have no chronological or narrative succession, but show the accomplished Buddha teaching different audiences (Scenes 42-46). However, the scenes are organized from top to bottom, with the beings considered higher by Buddhists placed above. Thus *bodhisattvas* are placed above gods, gods and *nagas* above monks, monks above sages and (brahmanical) priests, and the latter two above lay people. The five scenes can also be read as a single teaching event where all the audiences are present. Such a teaching event usually forms the narrative frame of a Mahayana text.

Further, in Scene 1, the frontally depicted preaching Buddha is simply flanked by stupas, with two gods in the background, but there is no apparent narrative content. The flanking stupas may be interpreted as referring to the Buddhas of the past and the future. Together with the central image – the Buddha of the present – this introductory scene represents the eternity of the Buddha's teaching.

In addition, Shakyamuni is represented as a Buddha even before his Enlightenment, when he is surrounded by gods in the Tushita scenes and when he is venerated by Indra and Brahma in Scene 12. Thus, it is the eternal nature of the Buddha and the Buddhist teaching which is stressed. With the development of Mahayana, a deification of the Buddha took place, and the human existence of Shakyamuni was understood as an apparition produced by the Buddha for the sake of sentient beings. Consequently, Scene 1 on the dhoti may also be interpreted as the accomplished Buddha, who performs or teaches the following narrative in order to release sentient beings from rebirth.

It is quite likely that the Alchi paintings – as well as the paintings from the related monuments – were executed by Kashmiri artists. This is suggested not only by the depiction of

Kashmiri temples on the Avalokiteshvara dhoti in the Sumtsek, but also by the fact that this sophisticated and somewhat mannered painting style found no major successors in Ladakh or other regions of western Tibet. In fact, the monuments at Alchi and the nearby settlements of Mangyu and Sumda are found within a very restricted geographical area, and are attributable to the relatively short period of approximately two generations (Goepper and Poncar, p. 18). Only a few later Ladakhi stupas contain a very simplified variation of the Alchi style. The Alchi group of monuments also preserves peculiar themes and iconographies, such as the four-armed Maitreya attributed to Vairochana's family.

To show the life of the Buddha on Maitreya's dhoti makes perfect sense. It is Maitreya who will next become Buddha in this world and who will perform the deeds of a *bodhisattva*'s last life. The last existence of every Buddha is thought to follow the same principal pattern. His name, his family and the caste he is born into (or in which he takes his rebirth) may alter, but the events he lives through in his last existence are identical (see the *Mahavadana Sutra* and the *Bhadrakalpika Sutra*).

The Sumtsek depiction of the legend on Maitreya's dhoti is a fully developed and unique interpretation of the Buddha's life that not only incorporates the different authoritative traditions, but successfully hints at the true nature of the Buddha in Mahayana. As a real dhoti of an extremely sophisticated and expensive material still has only a temporary function, so a Buddha's worldly life is just a temporary display. The life of a Buddha, and thus also of the future Buddha Maitreya, is nothing other than the marvellous dress of a super-human as represented by the large four-armed image of Maitreya, while Maitreya himself is none other than an emanation of the true nature of a Buddha, represented as Vairochana in his crown.

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