FORMS AND FUNCTIONS OF VOTIVE TABLETS IN PRE-MODERN THAILAND

Mr. Clifford G. Davis

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Arts Program in Thai Studies

Faculty of Arts

Chulalongkorn University

Academic Year 2013

รูปแบบและบทบาทของพระพิมพ์ในประเทศไทยในยุคก่อนสมัยใหม่

นายคลิฟฟอร์ด กอร์ดอน เดวิส

วิทยานิพนธ์นี้เป็นส่วนหนึ่งของการศึกษาตามหลักสูตรปริญญาอักษรศาสตร์มหาบัณฑิต
สาขาวิชาไทยศึกษา
คณะอักษรศาสตร์ จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย
ปีการศึกษา 2556

Thesis Title	FORMS AND FUNCTIONS OF VOTIVE TABLETS IN PRE-MODERN THAILAND
By	Mr. Clifford G. Davis
Field of Study	Thai Studies
Thesis Advisor	Dinar Boontharm, Ph.D.

Accepted by the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Master's Degree

……....……..……Dean of the Faculty of Arts

(Assistant Professor Prapod Assavavirulhakarn, Ph.D.)

THESIS COMMITTEE

…….....Chairman

(Assistant Professor Carina Chotirawe, Ph.D.)

……...…...Thesis Advisor

(Dinar Boontharm, Ph.D.)

……External Examiner

(Associate Professor Dhiravat na Pombejra, Ph.D.)

คลิฟฟอร์ด กอร์ดอน เดวิส : รูปแบบและบทบาทของพระพิมพ์ในประเทศไทยในยุคก่อนสมัยใหม่ (FORMS AND FUNCTIONS OF VOTIVE TABLETS IN PRE-MODERN THAILAND) อ. ที่ปรึกษาวิทยานิพนธ์หลัก: อ. ดร. ดินาร์ บุญธรรม, 153 หน้า

วิทยานิพนธ์เรื่องนี้มุ่งศึกษารูปแบบและบทบาทของพระพิมพ์ในสังคมไทยยุคก่อนสมัยใหม่ โดยใช้กรอบแนวคิดทางโบราณคดี ประวัติศาสตร์ศิลปะ ประวัติศาสตร์จากหลักฐานประเภทจารึกและพงศาวดาร และสังคมวิทยา รวมทั้งการศึกษาผลงานทางประวัติศาสตร์และโบราณคดีที่เกี่ยวข้องกับพระพิมพ์ของนักวิชาการในอดีต เพื่อนำเสนอมุมมองใหม่เกี่ยวกับรูปแบบและบทบาทของพระพิมพ์

ผลการศึกษาพบว่าพระพิมพ์ในสังคมไทยก่อนสมัยใหม่มีรูปแบบที่แตกต่างหลากหลายไปตามยุคสมัย สัมพันธ์กับอิทธิพลของนิกายต่างๆในพระพุทธศาสนาที่เข้ามาในดินแดนประเทศไทยปัจจุบัน และรูปแบบของงานพุทธศิลป์อินเดียและลังกาที่เปลี่ยนแปลงไปตามยุคสมัยทางประวัติศาสตร์ด้วย ทั้งนี้พระพิมพ์ที่สร้างขึ้นในสังคมไทยก่อนสมัยใหม่ยังมีการถ่ายทอดอิทธิพลของรูปแบบอย่างต่อเนื่องกันมาด้วย ในด้านบทบาทนั้นพระพิมพ์มีบทบาทที่มากไปกว่าการเป็นวัตถุสำหรับแจกเป็นที่ระลึกให้ผู้คนที่เดินทางไปนมัสการ สังเวชนียสถานหรือเจดีย์สถานสำคัญต่างๆ หรือเพื่อบรรจุไว้ในกรุของสถูปเจดีย์เพื่อแสดงการสืบอายุพระพุทธศาสนา แต่พระพิมพ์ยังมีบทบาทในฐานะ ที่ ”ตถุบุญวั“ สร้างขึ้นด้วยจุดประสงค์ในการบำเพ็ญบุญกุศลของบุคคลต่างสถานะในสังคมไทยก่อนสมัยใหม่ ซึ่งสร้างพระพิมพ์ขึ้นแจกจ่ายแก่ผู้คน และแบ่งส่วนหนึ่งบรรจุไว้ในสถูปเจดีย์ เป็นหนึ่งในกระบวนการสำคัญของการสร้างสถูปเจดีย์ในยุคนั้น ส่วนการบรรจุพระพิมพ์ไว้ในกรุของสถูปเจดีย์นั้นสะท้อนบทบาทด้านความเชื่อในคุณความศักดิ์สิทธิ์ของพระพิมพ์เหล่านั้น โดยเฉพาะการแผ่พลังความศักดิ์สิทธิ์ให้กับองค์สถูปเจดีย์และพื้นที่ปริมณฑล อันน่าจะเป็นคติในพระพุทธศาสนาฝ่ายมหายานที่เข้ามาในภูมิภาคเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้และดินแดนที่เป็นประเทศไทยปัจจุบันและเป็นจุดกำเนิดของการสร้างพระพิมพ์ บทบาทที่สำคัญของพระพิมพ์อีกด้านหนึ่งคือการเป็นต้นแบบของวัฒนธรรมการสร้างและบูชาพระเครื่องและเครื่องรางของขลังในสังคมไทยที่ยังปรากฏอยู่จนถึงปัจจุบัน ดังจะพบว่าพระพิมพ์ 5 รูปแบบในสังคมไทยก่อนสมัยใหม่ได้รับการจัดกลุ่มในฐานะซึ่งนับถือกันว่าเป็นยอดแห่งพระเครื่องของสังคมไทยสมัยใหม่ ”พระเบญจภาคี”

สาขาวิชา ไทยศึกษา ลายมือชื่อนิสิต.....

ปีการศึกษา 2556 ลายมือชื่อ อ.ที่ปรึกษาวิทยานิพนธ์หลัก.....

5380355622 : MAJOR THAI STUDIES

KEYWORDS: VOTIVE TABLETS / THAI ART / THAI HISTORY /BUDDHISM / THAI RELIGION

CLIFFORD G. DAVIS : FORMS AND FUNCTIONS OF VOTIVE TABLETS IN PRE-MODERN THAILAND. ADVISOR: DINAR BOONTHARM, Ph.D., 153 pp.

Votive tablets, known also as sealings and referred to as phra phim in Thai, are the precursors of the modern Thai amulet tradition. These objects historically form a distinct category of Buddhist iconography by these two special qualities which set them apart—namely the practice of producing multiple copies from a single original type, and the intention to use one or more of these copies in some such way for making merit by being buried in stupas or placed within caves. Their use aside from merit-making activities is evident by way of their distribution over a wide geographical area, transmitting religious thought and practice throughout the relatively de-centralized political and cultural landscape of pre-modern Southeast Asia.

This paper is based on an examination of a selection of votive tablets in an art historical context, followed by a study using inscriptional evidence combined with the surviving archaeological record to determine what functions these objects may have served. Hardly touched upon by most works which deal in any way with the subject of votive tablets by placing them merely in an art historical context, here we have also attempted to derive some reasonable conclusions about pre-modern Thailand in so far as what votive tablets and their connections to various social and religious conditions may imply. Among the many factors to consider are the degree of distribution from the location of their production, the relationship of styles depicted or religious symbolism on votive tablets with larger Buddhist statuary and the connection of votive tablets to actual individuals and corresponding social categories.

The belief in their magical properties is especially interesting, in that by being buried away they came to be regarded as vehicles for the emission and transference of sacred power.

Linking them to stupa symbolism, associations become apparent between votive tablets and the ancient cult of relics, of changing notions of what is meant by dhamma as natural law aside from the historic person who preached it to the world, and ultimately to sources for much of the votive tablet tradition which stem from Mahāyāna beliefs. In what manner they may have been valued aside from their connection to stupas will also be explored.

Field of Study : Thai Studies ..... Student's Signature .....
Academic Year : 2013 ..... Advisor's Signature .....

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I first and foremost would like to thank my advisor Dr. Dinar Boontharm for his many important suggestions, both as regards the subject matter of the text as well as its formal structure; his many informative points on the subject of Thai art history were invaluable. Many thanks as well to Assistant Professor Dr. Carina Chotirawe, Associate Professor Dr. Dhirawat Na Pombejra and Professor Dr. Siraporn Nathalang for their considerable assistance, and to all the staff in the Thai Studies department for their helpful actions throughout my entire experience with the M.A. program at Chulalongkorn University.

Finally I would like to mention my immense gratitude to the spirits of my parents, whose discussions with me on art and beauty over a great number of years I shall never forget.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Votive tablets, known also as sealings and referred to as *phra phim* in Thai, are the precursors of the modern Thai amulet tradition. Phra phim means sacred stamp, implying that generally these objects were made from malleable materials like clay upon which a stamp was pressed. Various metal alloys were also used, while materials such as plants, paper from Buddhist manuscripts and even the ashes of highly revered monks were sometimes thrown into the mix—though presumably this latter ingredient was much more rare. Their importance extends far beyond purely aesthetic considerations, as their artistic styles largely parallel Buddhist iconography of other varieties and help to define the influence of various cultures on one another in Southeast Asia for many centuries, and which like the arts of Mesoamerica have particular importance when considering the paucity of textual records for the region.

This paper will focus on the function of votive tablets until the arrival of the modern era in Thailand, analyzing as well the various stylistic forms and physical shapes of these wonderful offerings which in some ways to their various functions are essentially related. No other major religion has produced images on objects which have the functions votive tablets seem to have served until the tradition largely died out by the nineteenth century throughout most of the Buddhist world. Even today it is not uncommon in many a market stall to see modern plate-like Buddhist objects being sold which are best defined as votive tablets, though the original purposes have long since changed from objects signifying the Buddhist faith and for placing out of sight to a more reductionist object of reverence and simple aesthetic beauty. Their transformation in modern times into amulets is equally radical in being worn around

the neck as an object of good fortune or protection. Once meant in all probability for burial beneath stupas or to be set within caves and portraying first and foremost an image of the Buddha or many buddhas or bodhisattvas depending on various traditions—many other aspects are also worthy of note and their functions are what set them apart in terms of how they are defined from other types of Buddhist iconography. Votive tablets are thus a highly significant iconographical representative of religious belief in pre-modern Thailand, especially when considering both their stylistic details which largely mirror other forms yet while existing in greater numbers, as well as through their *locational* aspects in which placement in stupas or caves was indicative of beliefs and values not wholly evident in other sculptural forms. Hardly touched upon by most works which deal in any way with the subject of votive tablets by placing them merely in an art historical context, here we have also attempted to derive some reasonable conclusions about pre-modern Thailand in so far as what votive tablets and their connections to various social and religious conditions may imply.

Some clarification may be useful regarding the terminology employed in the following pages. In speaking of the pre-modern era in Thailand, what is meant here is the time leading up to and including the Ayuttthaya period before Bangkok became the capital. The specific use of the word Thailand, a term designating a political entity not in existence until relatively recently will generally for purposes of simplicity also be used to discuss various cultures thriving in this part of Southeast Asia until the Bangkok era of greater political and cultural consolidation. In fact it was not until the late nineteenth century when the Chakri Dynasty began instituting a series of reforms in the political institutions of the country that this region could

collectively be considered a truly unified state, areas once only nominally under its control by this time having lost their separate status. Known until the time of Phibun as *Siam*, the country was renamed *Thailand* during his dictatorship in 1939 (Wyatt, 1984: 253). Then there is the added problem of how to define precisely what exactly is meant by Thai art and culture before the modern period, and perhaps especially before the coming of the Tai-speaking peoples who quickly began to dominate the region known now as Thailand starting in the thirteenth century. As the Mon/Dvāravatī culture for example preceded the political predominance of the Thai, it should be classified as something apart from the art of the Thai historically, though the fact that complete integration racially has all but occurred during the last few centuries effectively means that this period could be included in the art historical fold of the Thai population today.

It might also be instructive here to explain the use of the phrase *votive tablets*. Some would perhaps justifiably prefer the term *sealings*, though in this present work the usual phrase *votive tablets* has been retained. There is little doubt that these objects were in most respects produced for burial out of sight for purposes of making merit as a kind of religious offering, thus making this phrase legitimate despite the fact that it might carry some connotations that are more relevant to cultures outside the Buddhist world. Finally, the phrase *Lan Na* is used throughout this thesis to denote the historical northern Thai kingdom which some scholars refer to as *Lanna*.

As is standard practice when citing Thai authors, the references for this thesis follow this procedure while citing Western authors in the usual manner of last name first.

This study is divided into six chapters, comprised of the following: chapter one, the introduction; chapters two and three, the examination and analysis of the art historical styles of votive tablets of the pre-Thai and Thai periods respectively; chapter four, the functions of votive tablets; chapter five, the results of research; and finally chapter six, the conclusion of this study.

1.1Objectives

The objectives of this study are to examine the functions of votive tablets in a socio-religious context, as well as to analyze the artistic styles and related religious symbolisms in pre-modern Thailand in connection with these objects.

1.2 Research Questions

What were the established functions of votive tablets in pre-modern Thailand? The forms in terms of various artistic styles largely parallel other forms of Buddhist iconography and thus are easier to explain. Their forms in terms of physical shapes and sizes are best interpreted as a sub-category of their functions, though may also have been the result of purely aesthetic preference. The oft-repeated conception that votive tablets were made in order to prolong the faith after the period of five thousand years of its predicted duration and eventual demise is problematic and various other possibilities are here presented in the following chapters.

What is the connection to India, the birthplace of the founder of Buddhism and the source of the votive tablet tradition in Thailand, in so far as forms and functions developed in this transplanted arena of Buddhist civilization? Though the general concept of making votive tablets for purposes of merit surely is derived from India, there is no reason to assume all the different functions remained the same once the

various pre-modern cultures in Thailand adopted this activity in conjunction with their very original contributions to Buddhist iconography.

How did the forms and functions of votive tablets differ from one region or culture to another, or within a particular culture in pre-modern Thailand over time? Besides the very different artistic forms exhibited in different cultures, there is the added fact that widely different themes were employed pictorially, and locations such as caves rather than underneath stupas according to different cultures need to be considered in so far as locational variation may be indicative of a difference in function.

How central was the role of merit-making in the proliferation of votive tablets? It has long been thought to be the main reason for their production, though there are many other possibilities such as for use as souvenirs or as objects providing magical protection. Tablets inscribed with sacred verse or depicting an image of the Buddha and especially after being blessed by monks were thought to emit a radiance which gave greater sacredness and protection to stupas they were buried in, an idea which broadens the merit concept beyond the parameters of merit for oneself or others.

What socio-religious conditions may be determined from the study of the stylistic forms and functions of votive tablets? Besides their important role in ceremonies for the consecration or restoration of a stupa, whether they were commissioned by the wealthy but fashioned by commoners, handled as a matter of course by rich and poor alike or made mostly for burial in stupas for purposes of merit, what can be inferred from what we know of them may extend far beyond mere religious or art historical considerations. They may for example have been a religious icon which all could afford, or simply an object made mostly by and for monks or the wealthy as a way to

bring more merit through the quantitative aspect of easily producing larger numbers from a single image.

Besides function established through conscious intention, what unintended effects did votive tablets have? In being easily transportable and fairly durable in most if not all traditions, they may have had a larger role than many other religious objects in the exchange of general knowledge and cultural influence, spreading classical scripts and artistic symbolism signifying a wide variety of different forms of Buddhist belief and ritual.

1.3 **Significance of Research**

It is to be hoped that this research will provide a clearer understanding of a variety of religious as well as socio-cultural aspects of pre-modern Thailand, concentrating as it does on the functions of votive tablets yet while not neglecting their different styles and symbolisms in connection with religious belief.

1.4 **Methodology**

Votive tablets can be identified and studied mainly through examples extracted from the archaeological record, though textual sources may also reveal socio-religious factors not easy to glean through the examination of the objects by purely physical means. Some towering figures of Thai art history have made many contributions to our understanding of these objects and their carefully honed conclusions are invaluable, though nothing is as instructive as direct perception and the many examples of votive tablets on display in various museums are of great benefit to each succeeding generation of scholars. The National Museum in Bangkok has the largest collection on display in Thailand of votive tablets, exhibiting easily over one hundred in number from various regions of the country. Ancient

inscriptions by various rulers occasionally mention votive offerings, giving some insight into what their religious functions were in some more general social sense, and donor inscriptions on the tablets themselves reveal much regarding who commissioned them or was responsible for their offering as a form of merit, what religious group or sect was responsible for their design and production, etc. This analysis will thus focus largely on the objects themselves, either directly through museum collections or indirectly through pictorial representations from numerous scholarly sources, yet while combining this data with the available textual records in the hopes of understanding better the ultimate functions of these objects.

1.5 Literature Review

Very few works have been written exclusively on the subject of votive tablets and including works in Thai, though the sources available in English either by Westerners or Thai authors in translation are generally of a very high standard. Added to this is a wealth of material on votive tablets available from Thai art historical studies in which votive tablets are occasionally referred to and analyzed in an art historical or archaeological context. The lack of emphasis on their importance aside from these categories is one of the reasons for the research conducted for this thesis.

As with so many other subjects dealing with Thai cultural studies, the work of George Coedès represents the starting point for any investigation into the subject of votive tablets. His pioneering work, *Siamese Votive Tablets,* was the first study by anyone on this subject and is insightful and informative yet while representing more of an outline than a truly detailed study. One glaring omission, for example, is the nearly complete neglect of votive tablet traditions of northern Thai kingdoms. The

article is, however, greatly enriched by a wealth of pictorial examples which serves well the purpose of clarifying the author's point of view.

To the current author's knowledge only a single book-length volume to date has ever been published in the English language devoted exclusively to the subject of Thai votive tablets, M.L. Pattaratorn Chirapravati's *Votive Tablets in Thailand: Origins, Styles, and Uses*. In a clear and very concise manner it offers a great deal of information on Thai art history in conjunction with many interesting notions about how Buddha images have been perceived in Thailand historically which relate to votive tablets. As an extension of the votive tablet tradition in modern times, the final chapter deals with amulets and provides many interesting details not mentioned in other works on this fascinating subject.

Though only an article of less than thirty pages, Chalong Soontravanich's *The Regionalization of Local Buddhist Saints: Amulets and Crime and Violence in Post WWII Thai Society* is one of most complete works currently available at this time in the English language concerning many different aspects of Thai society related to amulets and how various societal changes have increased immensely their popularity. Technically a work which lies outside our theme, yet the Benchaphakee category of amulets which is well documented by this author is of great importance for our subject in that they are first and foremost votive tablets—with the exception of those fashioned by Somdet To, though treated as amulets by collectors and thus act as a bridge between these important miniature art forms.

Long considered *the* classic work on Thai Buddhist sculpture, Jean Boisselier's *The Heritage of Thai Sculpture* has the added benefit of examining votive tablets in

some detail. By being a work devoted to the complete survey of the Buddhist sculptural arts of the region now known as Thailand during pre-modern times, it also explains many features of the numerous artistic styles of Buddhist iconography which relate to votive tablets through their close association with other sculptural forms. Though written nearly forty years ago this volume has withstood the test of time fairly well and is still profoundly relevant.

One the most important works ever written on the art history of Thailand is a very recent volume by the famous Thai historian Piriya Krairiksh titled *The Roots of Thai Art*. Focusing on the periods prior to the Sukhothai era when Tai-speaking cultures became predominant, this is a welcome update to the aforementioned volume by Boisselier. Unusually rich in both descriptive detail as well as pictorial examples of votive tablets by a scholar of great and original ability, it is also important to note his more detailed and reasonable classification scheme of Thai art historical styles, disputing many past scholars of note with whole new ways of looking at past traditions.

Though a number of articles have been written on votive tablets in Thailand which will be duly noted in the chapters which follow, an article particularly worthy of praise is Peter Skilling's *Buddhist Sealings in Thailand and Southeast Asia: Iconography, Function, and Ritual Context*. Interesting questions are raised in this work regarding what the ultimate functions of votive tablets actually were, detailing along the way the many interpretations which different scholars hold. His superior linguistic tools are particularly useful when discussing donor inscriptions and other textual sources related to our theme.

An article of particular importance for the votive tablet tradition of the Dvāravatī period is Robert L. Brown's *The Śrāvastī Miracles in the Art of India and Dvāravatī*. This work admirably presents the Miracles at Śrāvastī in a socio-religious sense and shows what importance this episode of the Buddha's life had for the Mon/Dvāravatī votive tablet tradition. In particular it is interesting to compare this to the absence of this emphasis in later periods. If the Mon, like the people of the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya kingdoms were Theravāda Buddhists, the changes in emphasis both stylistically and thematically indicate possible changes in the functions of Buddhist iconography and including votive tablets.

One of the outstanding articles dealing with the votive tablet traditions in the south is *Buddhist Votive Tablets and Caves in Peninsular Thailand* by Stanley J. O'Connor. Here the author presents the interesting notion that placing votive tablets in caves instead of beneath stupas had a significance related to nature worship. This is a potentially very fruitful idea in that one of the main functions of votive tablets would then lie far outside the parameters of Buddhist orthodoxy of whatever persuasion and is well worth exploring further.

Another important work on southern votive tablets is M.L. Pattaratorn Chirapravati's *Development of Buddhist Traditions in Peninsular Thailand: A Study Based on Votive Tablets (Seventh to Eleventh Centuries)*, not only for the lucid presentation of its subject but also for its classification of votive tablets from this area of pre-modern Thailand in being much more detailed than other existing works on the same subject such as for example the aforementioned works by O'Connor and George Coedès.

Besides being a very useful volume for the basic study of the iconography of the Lan Na kingdom of the north, Carol Stratton's *Buddhist Sculpture of Northern Thailand* also contains a short but informative section on northern Thai votive tablets.

Prapod Assavavirulhakarn's *The Ascendancy of Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia* is particularly helpful in describing and translating into English various inscriptional material from the Dvāravatī period and including the writings on votive tablets, thus helping to clarify in what way they functioned as an integral part of Buddhist worship.

A relatively recent work comprising a collection of important essays on Ayutthaya art by several notable scholars in the field is *The Kingdom of Siam: The Art of Central Thailand, 1350-1800,* edited by Forrest McGill. This important volume provides a number of references to votive tablets with added pictorial examples from the art exhibition on which this series of articles is based. It is particularly relevant when considering the relatively few works available on Ayutthaya sculpture and including the subject of votive tablets from this sadly neglected period.

Along with the aforementioned *Roots of Thai Art*, Hiram W. Woodward Jr.'s *The Art and Architecture of Thailand from Pre-Historic Times Through the Thirteenth Century* is one of the most important studies of Thai art history to be published in the last several years and one of the most comprehensive works ever on the art history of Thailand prior to the coming of the Thai. For our purposes it is especially significant in presenting votive tablets as a more integral part of Thai art history than has often been the case in previous works.

With so few surviving historical sources, Prasert Na Nagara and A. B. Griswold's *Epigraphic and Historical Studies* is an invaluable resource and provides a great deal of information about religious practices in pre-modern Thailand. A monument of scholarship, this study is the most extensive collection of translated Thai inscriptions in English ever produced, remarkable for its scholarly detail which includes much in the way of cultural insight through abundant annotations. The inscriptions are mainly from the Sukhothai period.

CHAPTER II

ART HISTORICAL STYLES PART ONE: THE PRE-THAI PERIOD

Introduction

This chapter and the next shall investigate votive tablets in pre-modern Thailand from a mostly art historical perspective, yet while integrating wherever relevant the notion of function treated at length in chapter four. Broadly speaking, the main categories of Thai artistic culture are: the Mon/Dvāravatī style (sixth to eleventh centuries); Peninsular or Srivijaya style (eighth to thirteenth centuries); Khmer style (sixth to thirteenth centuries); Northern or Lan Na style (thirteenth to nineteenth centuries); Sukhothai style (thirteenth to fifteenth centuries); and finally the Ayutthaya style (thirteenth to eighteenth centuries). This is a very general framework and differs somewhat from the classification of other scholars (M.L. Pattaratorn Chirapravati, 1997: 9). Unlike Chinese art or other artistic traditions which have long been categorized by dynastic eras, this approach is not really appropriate or even possible for the art history of pre-modern Thailand, and no universal consensus has been reached on either how to divide up the different styles or even with categories agreed upon regarding what span of time is appropriate. The Dvāravatī period for example is sometimes extended to the thirteenth century to include the Mon culture of Haripunchai, and some scholars include another, separate school of U-Thong (M.C. Subhadradis Diskul, 1991) though here we have decided to place it with the early style of Ayutthaya, following Boisselier (Boisselier, 1975: 161-162) and in so doing have moved back the usual starting date of the Ayutthaya artistic period from the fourteenth to the thirteenth century. This was done somewhat for convenience but

also with the idea in mind that the three main U-Thong styles are really by this time a movement away from their antecedent forms of Khmer inspiration and a definite link to the Ayutthaya period which followed. We should also point out that from a purely political framework for defining different periods, this is in line with current research which strongly implies an earlier date for the beginning of the Ayutthaya kingdom, moving it back from the middle of the fourteenth century to several decades earlier (Baker, 2003: 41-62).

Within some of these traditions the period of votive tablet production represents a much narrower range, and the reader may notice that the earliest three periods all ended by the thirteenth century, meaning by the arrival of Tai-speaking populations who after entering into Southeast Asia a couple of centuries earlier became politically dominant throughout much of what is now modern-day Thailand. For our purposes this provides a reasonable line of division for these categories of our investigation in which the pre-Thai periods may be fully treated here and the Thai periods which followed discussed in chapter three. As we shall discover in the following pages this overall classification is not wholly adequate, the art objects of our study defying clean lines of stylistic demarcation.

2.1 Some Problems with Classification

The long-established and highly workable set of historical categories mentioned above implies that a cultural or political entity which assumes dominance in a given area then controls the production of, or at the very least has the main access to resources which are needed to produce objects of art and an art historical tradition. Its disadvantage as a very general model is its inevitable misrepresentation of facts

concerning the degree to which some tradition or other may have exerted its influence over a certain given region. The Benchaphakee group of amulets in modern times—with the possible exception of those from the nineteenth century designed by Somdet To, are historically speaking votive tablets representing interesting examples of this problem by exhibiting styles which do not quite fit into the classical scheme for larger forms of Buddhist iconography as generally determined by art historians. The fact that so many of the works of Buddhist iconography in miniature—meaning here the art of votive tablets with imagery do in fact follow so closely the styles and symbolism of larger works of sculpture is an interesting feature of our subject whose significance may easily escape notice.

Other types of classification have recently been proposed, most recently by Piriya Krairiksh in which the usual schools based on either cultural and political areas of control have been replaced by largely religious categories (Piriya Krairiksh, 2012: 19, 2005: 1-16). There are advantages but also problems with this new and intriguing model. Though it avoids the over-generalization based on inadequate cultural or political categories, it manages in some ways to do no better. If two works of sculpture for example have similar styles yet while portraying religious symbolisms of different Buddhist traditions, it would seem that still placing them in the same general category is reasonable, though perhaps breaking down further the analysis to sub-categories representing these different schools and according to any number of other considerations. A votive tablet in the National Museum, soon to be discussed, is considered by modern art historians to be from the Dvāravatī period—an ethnic and geographical category with strong cultural overtones, and one considered by the use of Pali for an inscription it contains as most likely a Theravāda-inspired work, though

the symbolism actually reflects a Mūlasarvāstivāda source whose canon was written in Sanskrit.

2.2 Some Considerations Concerning the Disappearance of Old Traditions

Now that the political environment of pre-modern Southeast Asia through modern scholarship has been reassessed to determine a much less centralized condition of power structures through what is commonly known as the mandala system, one may wonder about any kind of classification which emphasizes a dominant culture over a particular range of time at the exclusion of others in this same general region, and which their political control over, nay, even extensive contact with, was most likely rather limited. This is particularly relevant for the subject of art history, whereby it has been the norm to say that a Buddha image for example from the fifteenth century found in the central region and which appears to be influenced in some way by Sukhothai aesthetics is simply referred to as a Sukhothai work of art.

The mandala concept proposed by Wolters (Wolters, 1999: 27-40) determined that a typical state known historically to be dominant in a given region was yet a power without much real control over surrounding areas save for an occasional bit of tribute, and has generally been accepted by most modern scholars as an alternative to more traditional ideas of what is meant by a kingdom in terms of the degree of actual political control. As implied above terms designating power centers such as Sukhothai and Ayutthaya have traditionally been used not only to define a sphere of political and cultural influence but artistic periods as well. Yet there may have been artistic traditions which had some prominence though without a long-lasting political entity associated with them, thus making divisions of time and degree of geographic

range of influence somewhat problematic. Indeed, the designation of Dvāravatī is an example of a long standing notion with mostly apolitical connotations and still currently in use, as is the occasional term Ariya used to designate a Theravāda sect having some influence as evidenced by the art historical record before the coming of the Thai in the thirteenth century, and even though its connection to any political entity is remains unknown. The old divisions are still workable, if still in need of some rather fine tuning.

When one encounters through the sedimentary record a shift from Dvāravatī culture in the Menam Basin around the eleventh century to one dominated by the Khmer, it might well be possible to infer that images found at a certain level in the ground and in the Dvāravatī style are no later than the period when Khmer influence became paramount. Yet it is well known how far the time span can sometimes be between scholars even regarding objects fairly easy to analyze within traditional parameters like empire or religious source. Griswold and Diskul, for example, each giving a date for an image of the Ayutthaya period before an inscription was unexpectedly found—making it the only Buddhist work of sculpture which can be dated from the Ayutthaya period with any precision, were each off by about a hundred years in opposite directions, making a difference of a couple of hundred for two of the most informative historians of their day (M.C. Subhadradis Diskul, 1961: 409-416). One must keep in mind the possibility that votive tablets discovered but without definite provenance and which historians might place in the tenth or eleventh century are actually from two or three centuries later, though stylistically this would not be implied and hardly provable without more purely scientific methods. There is of course the additional problem of new tablets being made from extant molds

fashioned decades or even centuries earlier. The correct dating of these objects would be of more than purely academic value, for in the end it might serve to show to what degree some culture or other when encountering another retained for a time its essential traits yet why in the end it was nevertheless absorbed.

The mandala system is in itself still a bit problematic, as the following may show. This kind of political condition based more on personal loyalties in a rather hierarchal manner implies that areas theoretically under the control of one or more larger *muang* or in other words city-states in most instances provided only occasional tribute as well as access to resources such as able people for military campaigns or public works. Yet under this system it is hard to see how in central Thailand for example after the decline of Dvāravatī culture votive tablets and other works of Buddhist sculpture would with apparent rapidity be replaced by Mahāyāna-inspired works previously less prevalent in this region. Another problem concerns why the Khmer left so much in the way of architectural remains in lands so far afield from their political and cultural centers if in fact their real control over these areas according to the mandala system was so limited. Thus the Khmer empire cannot quite be placed so firmly in the mandala framework. In the relatively secular Thailand of today a foreign power demanding little more than a small amount of tribute would hardly make it possible to convert the mostly Theravāda Buddhist population to a different Buddhist sect. In all probability, then, there was a series of invasions of numerous *muang* in various regions—by Khmer groups into Mon-occupied areas or later on Tai speakers into areas dominated by the Mon and Khmer, who within the mandala systems became the new leaders of these smaller power centers and in their wake brought about a different cultural paradigm or religious sect related more to a larger

power base from where they had originated. This therefore helped to establish a *cultural* rather than political empire, culturally as unified but politically less than the typical model of a pre-modern kingdom elsewhere conceived.

The old division of U-Thong styles into A, B and C groups and long accepted as a working model (Boisselier, 1975: 162-170) has quite reasonably been reclassified by way of geographical locations for the centers of production for these stylistic types, this emphasis on geography being of some use for other artistic categories, though only selectively (Fickle, 1989: 70-73). If the Mon/Dvāravatī period of cultural activity and including the production of votive tablets lasted only from the sixth to approximately the eleventh century or up to the thirteenth if we include the Mons of Haripunchai, this would seem to imply that there was a political form of control which changed significantly the cultural and social conditions by which artistic objects were conceived and later fashioned. We know now by using a much more workable mandala-like framework in a political sense that the control of the Sukhothai kingdom over an area outside of the ancient city of Sukhothai itself as well as a few neighboring cities such as Si Satchanalai was essentially nil for the majority of Sukhothai history, and even if the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription's depiction of this kingdom's extension during this famous king's reign has any basis which at any rate lasted for less than a generation. What happened, then, to these cultures which made up so much of the geographical area of pre-modern Thailand, overshadowed in historical frameworks now by other kingdoms revealing their plethora of images left to posterity yet while exercising little in the way of political or cultural influence beyond relatively local areas?

This brings to mind two of the many essential problems of Thai art history: the over-generalization of surviving images in which a great number of works are corralled into a limited and not very accurate categorization of style, and the problem of explaining how a once dominant culture which might not have been absorbed completely by another in any truly political sense, has left after a certain period of time no more legacy of art of any significance to match its former glory. And yet even though a great deal of cultural blending has gone on throughout the history of Buddhism in Southeast Asia, it is still more or less possible to describe the different types of votive tablets according to regional considerations by way of specific styles, and often though not always in connection with a relatively specific religious system which prevailed long enough historically to give distinction to the iconography associated with it.

2.3 Mon/Dvāravatī Votive Tablets

The Dvāravatī culture of central Thailand, often referred to as Mon/Dvāravatī to distinguish its cultural character from the Mons of neighboring Burma, is a somewhat mysterious historical phenomenon and prone to a good many misconceptions. They are not known for sure even to have had a nation-state in any definite sense, though in fact their artistic style is quite distinctive and represents one of the earliest Buddhist schools of any originality in Southeast Asia. Being in time closest to the parent culture of India they naturally exhibited much which can directly link them to Indian stylistic trends, and in fact at an initial glance one could almost think of Dvāravatī art as a branch of the Gupta style of India. The portrayal of the Buddha's monastic robes as a thin and ultra-transparent garment, in all probability as a way to depict the Great Master's highly radiant appearance, is but one very notable example.

A number of features set this tradition apart from direct Indian influence (Luce, 1965: 22-23). Of particular interest is the portrayal of the standing Buddha with legs straight and arms aligned with the hips, elbows bent with both hands raised and facing outward in vitarka mudrā, the gesture of teaching, though here this is usually thought of as representing the Buddha's descent from Tavatimsa Heaven; though not unknown, for standing Buddhas the depiction of both hands in this way was not particularly common in Indian art. Other features include the consistent emphasis on bisymmetry of the figure and as the aforementioned portrayal clearly shows, as well as a hieratic, virtually frontal emphasis. The faces of the Buddha were greatly altered from the Gupta style and as was often the case as Buddhism made its way far from the land of its birth to various other areas of the East, and in Dvāravatī art consistently exhibit what we may presume to be features at least generally characteristic of the local population of central pre-modern Thailand, with full lips and wide noses, rounded full faces of at times great expressive joy, seen for example in many stucco works on display in the National Museum in Bangkok.

Here we would like to focus on three specific votive tablets which give distinction and clarity to this tradition. The first tablet depicts iconographic features which are classic Dvāravatī; the second portrays the famous Srāvastī Miracles; and finally a tablet with a cakra, a Buddha and a stupa is discussed, representing a Buddhist triad of great symbolic meaning.

From the beginning of Buddhism in Southeast Asia artists were reasonably faithful to textual sources in producing orthodox renderings of the Buddha on votive tablets, like for example in the case of Dvāravatī artists referring to the Divyāvadāna text when depicting the miracles performed at Śrāvastī. Once depicted so often by the Dvāravatī culture in the Menam region of pre-modern Thailand, they were also a

common feature on votive tablets found in the lower area of Burma where the Mons prevailed or wherever their influence was felt, such as further north at Pagan. Eventually Pagan votive tablets showed strong Pala influences, usually depicting the Buddha as the central focus either exclusively or with subsidiary buddhas or other surrounding figures. With these the usual emphasis on strict symmetry is found, while with those produced by the Dvāravatī culture asymmetrical layouts occasionally occur. Although technically outside the scope of our study, we should also point out that the regions to the west in what is now Burma had a good many other cultures such as the Pyu which are relevant here in that they were not Mon ethnically and occasionally produced very distinctive and original votive tablets which do not fit so easily into the general categories normally used by scholars (Moore, 2006: 295, figures 27.17-27.19). The Pagan period was the height of votive tablet production in Burma, and shows a return to more direct Indian influence as a result of Bodhgaya's place as a pilgrimage center being emphasized more at this time than in earlier periods (Guy, 2002: 30). When considering Pagan historically as a great center of

Figure 1.

Dvāravatī style. National Museum, Bangkok. Author's photograph.

political power in Southeast Asia, this adds credence to the idea that wealth rather than humble and pious intent was more closely associated with their greater production. Both during the time of the great Pagan king Aniuruddha (Anawrahta) as well as later on and including the Mon tradition in the south the donor inscriptions on votive tablets were done largely by nobility or monks (Luce, 1969: 98-103).

As one might imagine from such an expressive and varied tradition, there would seem to be a fair number of relatively low quality, shall we deign to say in the least, crudely crafted images compared to those of the more formal classical schools (Griswold, 1966: 58) though the best of these have a naturalism of contours which sets them apart, and even if they do not quite reach the summit of creative expression (M.C. Subhadradis Diskul, 1956: 362-367). First we will examine a tablet which exhibits many features of the classical Dvāravatī style [Figure 1]. The face, like many from this tradition is one of the most aesthetically pleasing aspects of this work, with heavy, somewhat downcast eyes, a full face and slightly upturned lips forming an expression of quietude found only when the mind is fully engaged in one form or another of meditation. Supported by a lotus form underneath, the Buddha sits in the vajrāsana pose, meaning the lotus position of legs crossed with each foot resting above the opposite leg. This figure has a somewhat unusual and elongated form, which, as we shall point out later on, is characteristic of the U-Thong styles sometimes classified as B and C from the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries in which the Buddha figure developed this very distinctive trait, and such an early tablet as this bespeaks of some possible historical influences whose link is difficult to determine with any precision. The curls on the head are much larger than those on Buddhas made by other artistic schools, and typical for Dvāravatī sculpture, and though it is not particularly clear on this tablet the Buddhas from this tradition often have the

ushnīsa on top of the head crowned with a jewel or lotus-bud finial, which is a likely source for this trait in the tradition of Lan Na Buddhist imagery in its earlier period. The thin, halo-like band around virtually the entire figure is somewhat unusual in the Dvāravatī tradition or actually any other, and is most likely not purely decorative. Extending beyond the usual range of head and neck and terminating at the shoulders which different traditions have employed, it is interesting to ponder whether this related to a very simplified version of the round broad halo of the Indian Gupta tradition, and more generally to the notion of the Buddha's radiance to be discussed in more detail later on. The scenes depicted in Dvāravatī culture—in conjunction with an interdisciplinary approach, can tell us much which may not be immediately obvious at first glance. The question of whether or not the Mon in the central plain, judging by the sources they used for various religious themes in the plastic arts were mainly followers of Theravāda Buddhism or other Buddhist schools has received increasing attention in recent decades. Some scholars such as Piriya Krairiksh have claimed that the Sarvāstivāda sect was influential at Cula Pathom Cetiya (Nandana Chutiwongs, 1978: 133-151) while at nearby Wat Phra Men there are some indicators which point to definite Mahāyāna influence (Revire, 2010: 75-115). The Pali sources depict three miracles by the Buddha at Srāvastī: The creation of a mango tree after all others had been destroyed by his critics, the duplication of himself and the emission from his body of fire and water. Brown has pointed out that the Srāvastī Miracle depicted most often is that of the Buddha's multiplication of himself innumerably, a miracle not mentioned in the Pali Canon at all but extracted instead from the aforementioned Divyāvadāna text written in Sanskrit, the language of the Mūlasarvāstivāda sect which was active during this time of Mon predominance in the Menam Basin (Brown, 1984: 79-80). This is relevant since the Mon where

presumably Theravāda Buddhists and followed the Pali Canon which describes the Twin Miracle of the Buddha making a duplicate form of himself and for which it seems the Multiplication Miracle was easily mistaken. It could also be the case, however, that this latter event was simply a more attractive iconographic theme, and, as in the case of much borrowing from Mahāyāna traditions, was used to portray the Great Master and without much concern for strictest orthodoxy. At any rate it implies a region of religious and cultural diversity and one of definite knowledge of textual sources to which the craftsmen were relatively faithful while exhibiting stylistic variations of great vitality and charm.

Figure 2.

Dvāravatī style. National Museum, Bangkok. Author's photograph.

We come now to an examination of a wonderful and fairly large tablet in the National Museum in Bangkok which represents this famous episode in the Buddha's life [Figure 2]. Although alternative interpretations have been proposed such as Nandana Chutiwongs' view that the scene represents the eight-Buddha type of mandala of Mahāyāna inspiration (Nandana Chutiwongs, 2002: 227) the mango tree form above the head of the Buddha, along with the figures which move out and away

from him mostly on his right in this uncharacteristically asymmetrical work, strongly implies that the Srāvastī Miracle of the Buddha multiplying himself is here intended. The scene is rich in detail and unusual for its fluidity of movement, making it a tablet which stands apart yet while still within the Mon/Dvāravatī tradition. The sway of the standing figures—perhaps bodhisattvas, seem reminiscent of south Indian aesthetics most likely from the Pallava Dynasty and the tablet may be from either the seventh or eighth century. Bodhisattvas in the presence of the central figure do not, according to Brown, necessarily indicate that we are dealing with a Mahāyāna theme (Brown, 1984: 90). The fact that the two figures on either side of the Buddha are in each case holding a lotus bud, is, however, problematic and worth exploring further. It may simply be a fusion of different myths based either on confused interpretations or perhaps poetic license on the part of the craftsman or the individual who commissioned this very interesting tablet. The possible link to styles and perhaps even themes more characteristic of southern, essentially Mahāyāna traditions shows to what degree these distant locations were culturally connected.

One of the distinguishing features of Dvāravatī culture is the abundant remains of dhammacakra wheels, which may in fact be linked to an ancient association of the Buddha with the sun, or effectively the sun god, Surya. In fact Surya is occasionally portrayed in connection with some of the forty-odd dhammacakra wheels discovered thus far (Brown, 1996: 171). The tablet shown in figure 2 reveals in typical Dvāravatī fashion of bisymmetrical layout a disc on both the upper left and right-hand sides, a feature common in Dvāravatī tablets and subject to a variety of interpretations.

By being able to utilize the wide area along some two-dimensional stretch, bas-relief shares a common advantage with the art of painting as opposed to singular

works of sculpture in the round whereby only an attached surrounding frame or base allow for more complexity in connection to the main object presented. Whole forests may be shown through painting, numerous figures and such, in a way not always possible with the plastic arts. Votive tablets during the earlier period of Mon predominance in the central plain where a complex bridge between the two, with many scenes showing a kind of horror vacui of the surface area involving a great many components to a scene. In a sense amulets in modern times have completed the trend toward a single figure being presented or very few figures predominating in that their small size necessitates greater simplicity of design. Both the tablets from the south as well as those of Dvāravatī occasionally portray the triad of chakra-Buddha-stupa (Brown, 1996: 85-87) though in the latter tradition there is the connection to the dhammachakra wheels which are apparently not related to any other culture of Southeast Asia.

Figure 3.

Dvāravatī style, found in the south. National Museum, Bangkok. Author's photograph.

In an architectural sense the triad depicted on votive tablets is important in that this combination made possible in a single presentation might indicate how these objects as freestanding forms were placed in close proximity. Another important

feature concerns how some stupa forms depicted do not seem to indicate any actual known designs, historical or modern; this in itself is highly significant since virtually all large stupa forms from both the Dvāravatī and southern cultures have aside from their bases long since disappeared.

A tablet in the National Museum in Bangkok is one such example of this triad [Figure 3]. This tablet was actually found in the south, but is clearly of Dvāravatī inspiration and thus is included here. The Buddha in this classic style is seated in vajrāsana pose, and while the hands are brought together in his lap in dhyana mudrā, the gesture of meditation. One interpretation is that the sun represents a kind of brighter understanding, and that the wheel is solar, the stupa lunar and that the Buddha is the brightest of all, according to Woodward. It may also relate symbolically to the so-called solar and lunar dynasties during this period (Woodward, 2005: 69). Another interpretation is that this combination represents the triratna of Buddhism symbolically, or in other words the Buddha, dhamma and sangha. At a glance this is not so obvious, as it is unclear how the sangha especially is represented by one of these forms. It has been proposed, though not so convincingly, that besides the figure of the Buddha and the stupa representing the Buddha and his teachings respectively, the cakra wheel represents the sangha, in the sense that the turning of the wheel of the law when the Buddha gave his first sermon created the sangha community (Brown, 1996: 92-93). Actually it might make more sense to consider the image as the Buddha, the cakra wheel as the dhamma (since this is the eternal message first set into motion by the Buddha) and the stupa as the sangha. The idea that the stupa indicates enlightenment through symbolizing parinibbāna is not negated here, only that the stupa structure exists on temple grounds as a symbol of monastic life, and that the community of monks and nuns follow the dhamma in the direction

which leads to that enlightenment which the stupa ultimately symbolizes. As we shall encounter in chapter four, without a community of monks to give it sanctity a stupa may ultimately be regarded as less than completely sacred and become a ruin.

It is not so common with Dvāravatī votive tablets to depict the hands in any form extending outward like in the case of a standing Buddha, the essentially two-dimensional, plate-like shape of these objects making an extension outward toward the viewer liable to breakage. As was surmised by Boisselier, the large limestone images of the Buddha during the Dvāravatī period with the right hand in vitarka mudrā and the left resting palm upward on the left leg was a style abandoned for this same practical reason, due to the somewhat fragile and brittle nature of this material (Boisselier, 1975: 56). An unusual example of a small work of sculpture which we might say is a kind of quasi-votive tablet since it is only about 10 centimeters in height yet made of stone and thus was not one of a number of duplicate copies produced from a stamp or mold, was discovered some years ago in the ancient Dvāravatī site of Sab Champā. This work is interesting not only for portraying a seated Buddha in double vitarka mudrā but also for the fact that it is so unusual in style, and one which does not really fit into any preconceived categories except perhaps regarding south Indian influences (Wales, 1980: 46, figure 7).

2.4 Votive Tablets of the South

Of all the different types of votive tablets to be discussed here from pre-modern Thailand, those fashioned in the south, usually associated in some sense with the Srivijaya kingdom, are stylistically closest to Indian traditions, though numerous variations of style show notable influences from Dvāravatī culture and later from the Khmer. These, however, are most often imported objects and not the result of local

changes in religious outlook or production. Concerning other traditions of Southeast Asia, perhaps only the votive tablets of the Pagan period from Burma hold as close to Indian styles, most notably the tablets produced at Bodh Gaya during the Pala period.

The decentralization of this part of Asia, meaning in another sense the relative isolation of certain pockets of culture during the Dvāravatī period and despite a very conservative psychological framework toward religious expression in the arts, made for a certain inevitability of local variation. Though occurring in the south as well, the direct access to Indian culture through ports in which the southern Malay Peninsula served as a transport hub for Indian cultural trends from south Asia to a great many areas of the East, meant that more direct contact was consistently possible with the Indian arts at religious centers located at these ports than places farther afield. Votive stupas, for example, were more common in the southern regions than elsewhere farther north and we may presume that molds were surely brought from abroad as a not uncommon artifact (O'Connor, 1975: 60-63).

The best article on the subject thus far is by Pattaratorn Chirapravati, who in a very detailed manner classified the different southern styles into three main groups. This scheme differs from the single classification by Coedès and often referred to as the type II category of his pioneering work (M.L. Pattaratorn Chirapravati, 2000: 173). Here we must return for a moment to the problem of classification referred to at the beginning of this chapter. This can best be discussed in connection with a votive tablet in the National Museum in Bangkok [Figure 4]. Pattaratorn Chirapravati categorizes the southern tablets in terms of a first period corresponding generally to the seventh century, with works mostly showing Dvāravatī or south Indian influences. The second period according to her way of classifying ranged from about the eighth

to the eleventh centuries and is equivalent in type, meaning those objects generally speaking of Mahāyāna inspiration, to Coedès' type II category. Finally a third period, overlapping the second, spanned from approximately the ninth to tenth centuries and which show an increase in Vajrayāna trends. This differs in a few ways from her classification scheme mentioned elsewhere, though both are essentially based on the type of religion practiced and corresponding characteristics of style (M.L. Pattaratorn Chirapravati, 1997: 34-39). A final, perhaps unstated fourth period is really determined to be an extension of the Khmer type during an era of presumed influence on the peninsula for a couple of centuries preceding the coming of the Thai, an excellent example being a tablet from Nakhon Si Thammarat (O'Connor, 1975: 169, figure 7). It may be possible to place the tablet designated here as figure 4 in the second period when Mahāyāna influence became predominant, yet here we would like to approach it through a few issues of seemingly secondary importance having to do with mere size and shape, style unrelated to thematic concerns, and locational considerations regarding where votive tablets have been found.

Figure 4.

Dvāravatī style, found in the south. National Museum, Bangkok. Author's photograph.

This tablet looks quintessentially Dvāravatī, with the main figure of the Buddha in the posture of pralambapādāsana, or the so-called European manner in which the Buddha sits with both legs pendant and sitting beneath a tree which is most difficult to determine due in part to the severely worn condition of the object. A figure stands on each side of the Buddha—possibly bodhisattvas, and numerous others deities crowd the area surrounding. It is common knowledge that Dvāravatī culture as stated a bit in the previous pages was linked early on to the peninsula in a number of ways, making the relatively low number of tablets in the Dvāravatī style found in the south attributable to trade or perhaps local production by either transplanted populations from the central plain or others who had adopted Mon traditions, yet in a way which really only extends Dvāravatī influence from its origin and without the necessity of establishing a different classification for southern types. This is significant because if some foreign item is wrongly thought to be from the place where it was found it effects the historical notions of what was actually prevalent there culturally and what religious factors rather than others are relevant to its iconography. We must also mention in this context, by the way, the Mon votive tablet tradition in lower Burma where tablets have been found that are very similar to a certain type found in the south with a similarly fashioned central seated figure accompanied by a standing figure on each side and with three seated buddhas above, the latter group perhaps representing the historic Buddha at center, along with the buddhas of the past and future, Dīpankara and Maitreya (Moore and Win, 2007: 212-213).

If this particular object may lack some of the normal indicators which would link it in a more definitive way to the Srāvastī Miracles, yet this is not enough justification to give it a more Mahāyāna degree of symbolism as a replacement framework for

understanding as some scholars have. It was probably fashioned in the central plain and carried to the south, or made in the south but wholly in the spirit of the Dvāravatī tradition farther north as indicated by its style which holds too close to Dvāravatī trends to reject its classification within this tradition. Its lack of particular characteristics linking it with other tablets depicting this same theme are not as serious as one would suppose, with the Buddha seated under a tree of an undetermined type being a case in point. Though certainly seated under a tree of some kind, its ambiguity due in part to the weathered state of the tablet does not preclude the possibility that a mango tree was meant to be depicted, a symbol which if present would strongly imply the Srāvastī Miracles. A naga supports the lotus throne, and the left hand of the Buddha is turned up and placed on the left leg while the right exhibits vitarka mudrā, and very much in line with classic Dvāravatī aesthetics. Unlike nearly all tablets fashioned in the south, this one is baked and in the end the whole feeling of the crowded layout with the seated Buddha in the center seems to indicate a close association with the Miracles of Srāvastī, as Coedes had believed, though it should be noted that it would also not be too unreasonable to assume some Mahāyāna influence. If one were to examine the images on either side of the Buddha on this tablet with their apparent headdresses and determine that they are bodhisattvas, one could compare these to those on either side of the Buddha on the large famous plate on display at Wat Suthat with figures having headdresses as well and yet the stylized mango tree above the Buddha on the top of its two panels clearly indicate without a doubt that the Srāvastī Miracles are being depicted (Boisselier, 1975: 81-82). As to the subject of shape, we need only look at the tablet discussed earlier and referred to as figure 2 to see the similarity, a shape not at all common in the south as regards the middle or second period when Mahāyāna

influences began to take hold. Indeed such an apparently trivial feature may be of some importance, in that the rarity of the teardrop shape for example outside of the south if found elsewhere would immediately bring to mind a tradition connected to that part of pre-modern Thailand.

It already should be obvious that more than one scene on votive tablets is sometimes represented from the Buddha's life, such as for example the Miracles at Srāvastī yet with the wheel on the throne of the Buddha which therefore would also indicate the First Sermon, as shown on a tablet from a private collection in Los Angeles (Brown, 1984: 90-91). In fact technically speaking two of the three miracles performed at Srāvastī are usually joined in Dvāravatī art as a matter of course, those being the multiplication of the Buddha (or simply his duplication) and while sitting under the mango tree, the growth of the tree itself being the first miracle performed. In the end the diversions from standard Dvāravatī representations make this tablet a problematic object perfectly

Figure 5.

Srivijaya style. National Museum, Bangkok.
Author's photograph.

representative of the imperfections of modern classifications of art historical styles of Southeast Asia.

A beautiful tablet from Surat Thani will now be discussed [Figure 5]. This is very similar to another which according to Piriya Krairiksh is most likely from a mold originating in ninth-century Bengal (Piriya Krairiksh, 2012: 255-256). A deity holds the familiar attributes of the stem of a lotus and a book in his lower and upper left hands, while his upper right holds a string of beads and the lower right gives the gesture of abhaya mudrā. The slight turn of the head as well as at the waist together are like the tribhanga pose yet with the lower bend missing since the figure is seated in vajrāsana pose, and it is obvious by looking at this tablet that the Buddhist culture of the Malay Peninsula was strongly affected by Hindu aesthetic considerations. The slight protuberance of the stomach around the naval and the crisscrossing of beads on the torso are further refinements quite impressive on so small on object as this, as is the small stupa on his right in the bell-like, Sri Lankan style. These attributes show that this deity is Lokanatha, which is another name for Avalokiteśvara, meaning the "world-honored one," or "lord of the world." (Huntington and Bangdel, 2003: 180). In the headdress of Lokanatha should be Amithaba Buddha yet which is not so easy to determine, and this is yet another example of a tablet that is so thoroughly Indian in inspiration that one must agree that its origin is actually India and that a good many of the votive tablets from the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna periods in the south are in fact either Indian works or works that were pressed locally with Indian molds brought over from abroad. As a final point we may notice the halo-like band around its head and recall how this was encountered in Dvāravatī art as depicted in figure 1.

Other sculptural designs on votive tablets holding very close to Indian models are also worthy of note, including the eight Bodhisattva group surrounding a central figure [Figure 6]. This tablet was found in Trang province and a few other locations in the south such as Gua Berkhala and apparently from the same mold (Lamb, 1964: 47, 63, plate 5; Taha, 1993: 77, 78, figure 9, 79). Though one might imagine any number of possibilities for the central figure such as Adi-Buddha or perhaps Amitābha, most scholars are in agreement that the central figure is the Bodhisattva Vairocana. Piriya Krairiksh dates this object to the eleventh to twelfth centuries (Piriya Krairiksh, 2012: 354-255), other scholars a couple of centuries earlier (M.L. Pattaratorn Chirapravati, 2000: 190-191). Vairocana is one of the Dhyani Buddhas of the Vajrayāna pantheon, and his central role in this tablet is connected to this group of bodhisattvas which form a mandala that enjoyed great popularity during the height of the Vajrayāna period in India and Southeast Asia. This was based on the Ashtamandalaka Sūtra, which by being translated into Chinese in the eighth century means that it could not be of a later date. Considering the small size of this tablet and

Figure 6.

Srivijaya style. National Museum, Bangkok. Author's photograph.

the relative complexity of depicting the various figures with their corresponding attributes, definite identification of all of them with any certainty is quite difficult. One wonders if in actuality a complex system of deities became in time a more simplified mandala concept based merely on personal preference, depicting a central deity of one's choice surrounded by eight figures in line with established convention. At any rate according to this famous sutra the various bodhisattvas are thought to represent, from the upper right side and going clockwise as follows: Kshitigarbha, Sarvanivāranavishkambhī, Mañjuśrī, Vajrapāni, Maitreya, Samantabhadra, Avalokiteśvara and finally Ākāśagarbha. These bodhisattvas in this arrangement relate to another depiction from central Asia, to be mentioned briefly in chapter four (Granoff, 1968/69: 90-91). Pal has suggested that this group of eight deities, which Granoff believes represents the four cardinal points and the halfway points between, is also connected to the Eight Guardians of Brahminism, the number eight of course having significance in Indian culture in a variety of ways (Pal, 1972/73: 73).

2.5 Khmer Votive Tablets

The art historical period of the Khmer, lasting in pre-modern Thailand from perhaps the six to the thirteenth centuries, is indeed much narrower in regards to the specific subject of votive tablets. Being a pan-Buddhist form of iconography and related function exclusive to this religion, the predominantly Hindu culture of the ancient Khmer for most of its history meant that not until about the eleventh or twelfth century did Khmer culture exhibit any definite and thriving votive tablet tradition. For the next two hundred years, however, this art form represented a great profusion of beautiful, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna-inspired tablets which are immediately recognizable by the characteristics mirroring larger works of Khmer

statuary of the time, the depiction of various bodhisattvas in the context of largely Tantric symbolism and often in a setting of richly complex ornamentation of design. Portrayals of three figures together were particularly popular, usually representing the Buddha at center and with Avalokiteśvara on his right and Prajñāpāramitā on his left, or Dīpankara and Maitreya, the Buddhas of the past and future respectively. Other aspects involved the use of mandala forms created by multiple figures, such as for example Hevajra surrounded by a host of yoginis and numerous bodhisattvas. The Buddha at center in these depictions is probably not the historic Siddhartha Gautama but instead a Buddha in some more transcendent sense. He may even represent a fusion of some sort of Buddha nature and Khmer kingship, when realizing the myth of Khmer royalty being descended from a Brahmin and a daughter of the king of the Nagas and the close association Khmer kings had with this kind of symbolism (Coedès, 1968: 37).

The Tantric associations in Khmer art at this time in pre-modern Thailand are obvious in all the plastic arts and including those connected to temple designs, most notably beginning at Phimai in the late eleventh century as well as at the Bayon temple in the old city of Angkor about a century later. It took a bit of time for the votive tablet tradition to get going and it was not until the early twelfth century that in fact votive tablets in any significant way were fashioned by the Khmer, and curiously the capital city of Angkor seems not to have played much of a part in their production since so few tablets have been discovered there (M.L. Pattaratorn Chirapravati, 1997: 40). Generally Khmer votive tablets may be divided into two main types, that of the Angkor Wat style and spanning most the twelfth century and those in the Bayon style which immediately followed and lasting for the decades which correspond roughly to

the reign of Jayavarman VII. This king of extraordinary energy changed the state religion to Mahāyāna Buddhism and his long reign of nearly forty years witnessed a splendid production of Mahāyāna and Vajrayana Buddhist imagery. Unlike Dvāravatī votive tablets or those fashioned in the south, Khmer votive tablets were made both of terracotta and metal, with the latter consisting of such metals as pewter, bronze, silver or lead. The clay types are usually earlier, dating from the tenth or eleventh centuries (M.L. Pattaratorn Chirapravati, 1997: 40). Their shapes are almost always square at the bottom and arched at the top, either triangular, curvilinear or trefoil in shape, and whether they are more or less about as wide as they are long or if in some instances they happen to have a shape very nearly rectangular.

The ornate detail in Khmer votive tablets, along with their emphasis on Tantric elements such as mandalas and numerous bodhisattvas which exude a sense of transcendent spiritual powers, continued the Dvāravatī tradition of magical or mythic elements of design, though the treatment is much more formal. The possible influences are interesting to trace, for example the portrayal in many cases of the Buddha or buddhas as underneath a stylized architectural frame of one sort or other, usually classified as a *prang* and characteristic of Khmer temple architecture. Aside from the curving leaves for ornamental trim which surely signify the Bodhi tree under which the Great Master achieved enlightenment, the display of sheltered figures in this way—though only indirectly, may represent influences from Pagan-period tablets holding close to Indian models.

The standards of technical skill in fashioning votive tablets during the Khmer period were very high, and certainly up to the task of meeting the essential aim of presenting and expounding a complex religious system on a very small object.

Mirroring quite closely this tradition's larger works of sculpture, yet this makes by necessity the formal aspects of line and volume predominant; larger works which are more or less life-size creations may present the same data though with the face of the central figure exuding a wonderful serenity which is one of the glories of Khmer art yet as something hardly possible when the faces on votive tablets are so exceedingly small. Incidentally this also makes some of the bodhi**s**attva figures difficult to identify by the usual method of determining their attributes, and in the end one is left in the more complex arrangements of these works with a mere dazzling array of forms. When we arrive at the Sukhothai period it will become obvious through the greater simplicity of design and emphasis on the historic Buddha what a change had occurred when the Theravāda-inspired culture become predominant. In effect this meant a rediscovery as it were of the Buddha's humanity as revealed in the sculptural arts.

Figure 7.

Khmer/U-Thong style. National Museum, Bangkok. Author's photograph.

For this period we would like to discuss four votive tablets which are interesting either for their unusual set of features which thus make it somewhat problematic for comprehension and analysis, or which in some important manner seem representative of the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna trends which characterize this tradition. The first tablet might have been produced by the so-called Ariya tradition (Piriya Krairiksh, 2012: 343, 362) meaning a work by the Theravāda culture that began to have more influence in the thirteenth century in pre-modern Thailand, though still amid a more Mahāyāna or Tantric-inspired atmosphere in the Menam Plain and preceding the political ascendancy of the Thai [Figure 7]. The Buddha in this tablet sits in the half lotus, or Virāsana pose, with the maravijaya mudrā, both of which are classic stylistic features favored by the Theravāda and which from this time forward came to be representative of most Thai Buddhist iconographical traditions. The form on the top of the head is pyramidal in shape and composed of levels of receding size toward the top and characteristic of other works from Khmer sculpture of this time. The frame around the figure as a trefoil shape has a trim of Bodhi leaves which are almost life-like and in contrast to the row of angular forms which appear more like razor dentals in their abstract stylization on much of Khmer statuary. The face with its somewhat square jaw is reminiscent of Khmer aesthetics, the form of the figure as a whole portraying a verticality somewhat less than those of later U-Thong types, and the shoulders are unusually narrow. In fact if one were to detach the figure from the frame which encases it the connection with U-Thong styles, or, in our way of classifying these types of tablets with the early Ayutthaya period would immediately become apparent.

The second tablet is one with the Buddha sheltered by a naga accompanied by Prajñāpāramitā and Avalokiteśvara [Figure 8.]. Many scholars feel it is probably safe to assume, due to the Tantric emphasis in Cambodia during its Mahāyāna Buddhist period, that the central figure in being sheltered by a naga does not represent the historic person Siddhartha Gautama, as mentioned previously, but some kind of bodhisattva, not easily determined. At any rate Avalokiteśvara clearly represents the male aspect of reality and signifying compassion while Prajñāpāramitā signifies wisdom, the both together signifying enlightenment as represented by the central Buddha figure (Woodward, 1994/1995: 106). This group is often referred to as the Buddhist Triad, particular to Cambodian culture and beginning so far as inscriptional evidence can indicate around the time that Buddhism began to grow roots in Khmer culture around the tenth century (Woodward, 2004: 348-349). The naga-protected Buddha first appeared in India during the first two centuries C.E., in Sri Lanka according to general consensus by about the seventh or eighth, and though not particularly common in the art of Dvāravatī there are a few examples which seem to indicate some influence on Khmer statuary (Gaston-Aubert, 2010: 116-140). With a depiction of relative complexity such as this it is of course easy to be mistaken as regards the posture and mudrā of each deity and what not, but it would appear that the Buddha sits in vajrāsana pose, the lotus position. He holds his hands in dhyana mudrā, and although the triad makes it clear beyond a doubt that this is a Khmer work, the portrayal of the Buddha under the naga in which this mudrā is displayed rather than the maravijaya mudrā is another indication that aids in determining this work as before the transition period from Khmer-dominated artistic trends to the gradual predominance of Theravāda art which takes hold around the middle of the thirteenth century. Though their attributes are not so easy to identify, yet by a

narrowing of the margin of error through known relationships of what gods are commonly portrayed together and what items they hold in their hands we can be sure that the figure on the left of the Buddha is the goddess of wisdom Prajñāpāramitā, who often holds a lotus in her left hand and a book in her right, though occasionally it is the other way around. If it were possible to see that her skirt has a pleated form which dips down and curves in a crescent shape, this would be a stylistic indicator placing it in the late twelve or early thirteenth centuries (Piriya Krairiksh, 2012: 294-295, figures 2.265-2.266). She is actually the embodiment of transcendent wisdom generally, but specifically of the Prajñāpāramitā Sutra of eight thousand verses, meaning the personification of this sacred text (Conze, 1975) which explains in part the reason why she holds a book. It will be pointed out in chapter four that the Mahāyāna tradition developed the cult of the book which in turn influenced the votive tablet tradition of pre-modern Thailand, and this is a supreme example of that trend. This depiction of Prajñāpāramitā is the standard type with only one head as was common in India, though in Khmer culture more than one is occasionally depicted

Figure 8.

Khmer style. National Museum, Bangkok. Author's photograph.

(Lerner, 1984:110). Avalokiteśvara stands to the Buddha's right, with only two arms holding unrecognizable objects; if having four arms this deity would normally hold a vase, book, rosary and lotus bud (Boisselier, 1989: 21).

The fact that the culture of Sukhothai was influenced more than any other tradition by Theravāda Buddhism from Sri Lanka in the south of Asia, whereas the maravijaya mudrā is a northern style which the Khmer never or very rarely adapted, shows to what degree influence came from many directions and including Mahāyāna influences to be discussed at some length in chapter four. The coils of the naga upon which the Buddha rests are of nearly equal width, a feature which speaks of an earlier date than the thirteenth century. By this time these began to be shown as receding in size from top to bottom, as indicated quite clearly in one of the few dated Buddha images of the time, the Buddha of Grahi, found near Chaiya in the south and traditionally dated to 1183 C.E. (Surasak Srisamang, 2008: 68-69). This date is disputed by many scholars despite the inscription which like so many others may often be interpreted in multiple ways and due to the fact that the maravijaya mudrā and other symbolic features it displays which were not common until many decades later (Boisselier, 1975, 102). While the other six naga heads extend outward only partially, the main head directly above the Buddha on this tablet is shown fully protruding and at a distance from the figure greater than the others, characteristics typical of twelve-century Khmer statuary (Woodward, 1994/1995: 109, figure 4).

One of the most interesting features of the triad mentioned above is the fact that in ancient Khmer culture the combination of bodhisattvas such as Avalokiteśvara-Buddha-Prajñāpāramitā was used symbolically to objectify spiritual ideals not only in sculptural form, but also through subjective association regarding the people for

whom the statues were set up in some particular temple. This obviously would relate almost exclusively to royalty, or at least influential figures of sufficient wealth to build a structure with lasting materials to serve as a shrine for a particular family member. Thoughtful inference can probably not go very far in the direction of applying this to votive tablets whose usual function would not be to set them up like larger statuary for purposes of reverence and worship, though still it is possible that they were placed in stupas not only as a simple act of merit but also with a particular person in mind as represented by bodhisattva imagery (Gaston-Aubert, 2010: 137-138).

Figure 9.

Khmer/Ariya style. National Museum, Bangkok. Author's photograph.

We now turn to a votive tablet which depicts three Buddha figures [Figure 9]. These presumably represent the historic Buddha in the center in maravijaya mudrā, with Maitreya the future Buddha on his left and Dīpankara, the Buddha of the past on his right. According to Mahāyāna notions these latter two are both derived from Prajñāpāramitā, and the cult of the book in the history of Buddhism in Southeast Asia and influential regarding this type of Buddhist iconography is yet another example of

how this region essentially followed and at times rather passively cultural and religious developments on the sub-continent (Kinnard, 2001: 124). Straight away when looking at this tablet it should be recalled what was stated before about the fact that Khmer culture did not emphasize the maravijaya mudrā in its iconography. This leads one thus to place this object, when considering its other very Khmer traits, in the century perhaps before the rise of the Thai when different cultures were mixing and a general Khmer cultural style was being significantly transformed. The extreme ornateness of the work is impressive on so small an object, especially the antefixes on the sides of the main *prang* which mirror rather nicely actual *prang* structures of the time as well as the curving Bodhi leaves surrounding, and despite its dense solidity is impressive most of all for its proportions and clarity of design.

Figure 10.

Khmer style. National Museum, Bangkok. Author's photograph.

A final discussion about the Tantric side of Khmer culture should complete the survey about its artistic symbolism and aesthetic sensibilities in connection with votive tablets. One of the most popular Tantric deities was Hevajra, a figure often

depicted surrounded by eight yoginis in a whirlwind of circular form and with numerous rows of bodhisattvas presented on a single tablet (Boeles, 1966: 16, figure 4). The mold for this type of tablet shown here has a shape with cusps on each side which by ending in a point give the object an overall leaf-like appearance [Figure 10]. Boeles has shown how this votive tablet in the form of a mandala is based on the Hevajra Tantra text, with the lower row of figures along with Hevajra above and the eight yoginis surrounding him representing the Buddha's Nirmānakāya, or "body of appearance," the next set of rows above this numbering seven and then five figures representing the Sambhogakāya, or "body of enjoyment," and finally rows of three and then two and finally the single Buddha on the very top representing the Dharmakāya of the Buddha, or "dhamma-body," his timeless transcendent nature (Boeles, 1966: 23-25). The top figure, probably Adi Buddha who is without beginning and without end, is in characteristically Khmer fashion seated beneath a naga. This is an extremely complex mandala design, dense with symbolic meaning reaching far beyond the parameters of ideas indicated by traditional stylistic forms.

The Buddha protected by a naga sits supreme as the Enlightened One in a visually traditional manner, though here not only the historic Buddha but the Adi-Buddha—or perhaps all buddhas are represented. If in fact some scholars claim that the naga-protected Buddha through many depictions but definitely in a thoroughly Tantric context does not represent the historic Buddha at all, nor for that matter is the naga who protects him, Mucilinda, we might still consider how the historic Buddha remained as a perennial conceptualization, a kind of symbolic fossil during a period of time when this same iconographical symbol was transplanted into whole new contexts of Mahāyāna or Tantric belief (Gaston-Aubert, 2010: 136-137). Here we see

the broadening of design to accommodate the beliefs and values constituting what is in the end an essentially different religion, however the same the ultimate goal may be.

> Then the Goddess asks about the mandala, and the Master of Mighty knowledge, blissful and self-collected, draws it there himself. There is one circle, surrounded by flames of different hues, with four doors and four portals, adorned with vajra-threads and the series of five colours. He draws then the eight vessels, all done with powder made from the five kinds of gem or from rice and so on, or else from cemetery bricks or the charcoal from the funeral pyre. In the centre he draws a lotus with its pericarp and eight petals. At the centre of this he draws a skull, white and in three sections. Then on the north-east petal he draws a lion, on the south-east a monk, on the south-west a wheel and on the north-west a vajra, on the eastern a knife, on the southern a drum, on the western a tortoise, and on the northern a serpent. These are the eight symbols of the goddesses in accordance with their different categories. In the centre he draws a white skull signed with a crossed-vajra, and (to the east) he places the sacred Vessel of Victory with branches in it and enwrapped with cloth, the five gems inside and filled with śālija . But why more? The mandala-ritual should be performed as it is given in the Tattvasaṃgraha…….Then the Goddess asked: "What is that moment like? May the Great Lord please me." The Lord replied: "There is no beginning, no end, no middle; there is neither saṃsāra nor nirvāna. It is the great and perfect bliss, where there is neither self nor other……" (Snellgrove, 1959: 113-114).

An alternative name for this different outlook which retains the Buddhist guise besides Vajrayāna is Mantrayāna, with its emphasis on ritual either in accordance with or quite aside from what is to be regarded as traditional forms of meditation. Its emphasis on magical elements believed to be a gateway to ultimate reality has been shown to have socio-political aspects as well, which is hardly surprising if this approach to reality is followed through to its logical conclusions (Woodward, 2004: 331). If this practice is a means to extraordinary powers then those who seek it would

hardly be likely to share it with competitors, either from the outside or internally regarding layers of social position.

The conceptual architecture which created this phenomenon through the richness of symbolism had placed the historic Buddha far into the background of perceived reality and focus for the follower of this particular creed. This votive tablet itself appears to be in the shape of a prāsāda, meaning a multiple-storied tower also known to represent a kūtāgāra, in this sense a fictitious temple occupied by the Buddha while in this mother's womb and later briefly as a new-born before it was taken up to the abode of the gods to be worshipped. This is based on the Mahāyāna text the Lalitavistara, which describes this event in some detail (Dharmachakra Translation Committee, 2013: 64). What is considered a representation of this has possibly been identified as a small architectural element at the Khmer temple of Phimai (Bimāya) and whose shape is very close to this votive tablet we're discussing (Boeles, 1960: 74-78, figure 6). Thus the shape of this object is itself a model of ultimate reality in a related way to the relief sculpture pointed out by Boeles and on display in the National Museum in Bangkok which does not show the Buddha at all in human form, but instead by the small structure or kūtāgāra where he first resided while in his mother's womb; the Buddha nature is ultimately transcendent according to Vajrayāna ideals, invisible yet revealed through ritualistic means.

CHAPTER III

ART HISTORICAL STYLES PART TWO:

THE THAI PERIOD

Introduction

This chapter shall deal with votive tablets of the Thai period which strictly speaking begins in the thirteenth century, a time of great transformation in Southeast Asia when the Tai-speaking peoples become prominent both politically and culturally in the region. Carving out a number of kingdoms in which their influence was felt from the far south to the north and northeast of what is now modern-day Thailand, their preference for Theravāda Buddhism practiced by all political entities most likely had an effect on the making of votive tablets which though accepted as an inherited and legitimate feature of Buddhist religious practice was always one inspired more by Mahāyāna trends. This led then to a further reduction of emphasis on such ideas as the cult of the book, inscriptions in connection to votive tablets produced for burial under stupas and the probable restriction of production to ceremonial practices in larger power centers like capital cities for merit-making purposes.

3.1 Sukhothai Votive Tablets

The kingdom of Sukhothai, whose dates are normally given as 1238 to 1438 C.E. when they were absorbed by the Kingdom of Ayutthaya after a generation of vassal status, is considered the classical period of Thai artistic culture, and rightly so. Even if we assume that Theravāda traditions were widespread in at least the central part of pre-modern Thailand and present elsewhere though not as influential as the Mahāyāna for example in areas where Khmer culture thrived, it is remarkable to what

degree this kingdom emphasized Theravāda orthodoxy and in turn set in motion an original style which was to have an effect on several centuries following its demise. The main style of stupa or *chedi* developed in the Sukhothai period aside from such original types such as those with a lotus-bud finial, one may recall, was in the tradition of bell-shaped structures derived from Sri Lanka, the center of Theravāda Buddhism, and away from other inherited styles such as the Khmer *prang* which still retains a presence at a few of the older structures in the ancient city of Sukhothai. Its form of Buddhism seemed to take the forest monastic tradition somewhat more seriously than other Buddhist schools, and was reflected in the artistic forms and styles of how the Buddha was portrayed. It must be admitted that these works do not always represent the most classical of proportions normally guiding one's position on such matters, and yet the overall spirituality of the famous Walking Buddhas is universally acknowledged.

The classical Pali Canon mentions thirty-two marks of the Buddha which signify his state of enlightenment in physical terms, several features of which were incorporated into Sukhothai art. These included such traits as his legs being shaped like those of antelopes, his physique having seven convex curves and that his arms were long enough to reach the knees (Walsh, 1995: 441-442), all of which goes a long way toward explaining the wonderful curving lines, the smoothness of volume and strange disproportion of the upper thighs so characteristic of Sukhothai Walking Buddhas (Griswold, 1967: 45-47, figures 44a-b). The faces too are worthy of note, and highly original. Abandoning the continuous eyebrow of Dvāravatī sculpture which had been incorporated into the art of the Khmer, the deep circular eyebrows are an impressive feature in which each separately joins the bridge of the nose and gives

distinction to the eyes which have a serenity quite equal in effect yet somehow less mysterious than those of the Khmer tradition. The eyes themselves like birds seen afar in profile, the nose aquiline in shape, the lips flowing to the edge before turning up in a gentle, spirited smile—we see in this new set of rules for classical proportions established by the Sukhothai tradition the beginning of a long process in the Thai visual arts in which salient, flowing lines often end in a pointed form and join together to make ornately beautiful patterns. This has become a standard feature in the decorative arts in Thailand, the flame-like design called kanok being perhaps the most perennial (Warren and Tettoni, 1996: 102, 113, 116). Besides the treatment of the robes on Buddha figures, the flame or *rasmi* above the ushnisha is yet another original feature at least in the particular form created in this tradition and a good example of this tendency in sculpture emphasizing pointed saliency for visual effect.

It has been proposed in recent years that the Walking Buddha is actually not a Sukhothai invention, since Buddha images formerly concealed on walls on the outside of a stupa renovated in the early thirteenth century in Lamphun clearly are depicted in this way and which pre-date these types of images created in Sukhothai by a number of decades (Piriya Krairiksh, 1988/1989: 169-183). This discovery on its own is a wonder, and its implications either far reaching or perhaps of merely academic value: if the Walking Buddhas discovered at Wat Mahathat in Lamphun are an isolated set, which appears to be the case so far as anyone knows, it seems unlikely that these alone would be influential elsewhere but not in Lamphun itself or in other Mon-occupied areas which could have been influenced by this artistic style, and thus an independent development in Sukhothai seems the more likely explanation.

The Sukhothai period may in fact represent the beginning, though it might not be so obvious at first, of the decline of the votive tablet tradition in pre-modern Thailand. Most aspects, however foreign they may seem from a somewhat distant view, after being incorporated for whatever reason in a culture take a great period of time finally to fade, unless of course there is some sort of iconoclast conservatism with political connections to force some sort of change, yet the tradition of making votive tablets based originally on Mahāyāna-inspired ideals continued but in time became more uniform in terms of style and religious symbolism. Though there are as one would expect a variety of types, many of the votive tablets of the period focus on the Walking Buddha, meaning as well of course that the shape of the object tends to be long and rectangular to accompany the walking image, and is usually square at the bottom, curving to a point at the top and may be a mere couple of inches or up to a foot in length. The Sukhothai kingdom continued the Khmer practice of fashioning tablets in both clay and metal, and Khmer influence on style early on is evident by the Phra Ruang votive tablet which is a very popular type for modern amulet enthusiasts. The votive tablet varieties of this category often portray a standing image with frontal posture and crown very much in the Khmer manner.

One of the most important stylistic traits of the votive tablet tradition regarding Sukhothai tablets is the attempt on the part of the craftsmen who fashioned them to remain faithful in at least a quasi-realistic way to the notion of depicting the Walking Buddha in three dimensional terms. The partial turning of the figure as if in movement, with one foot, usually the right portrayed with heel off the ground as if in the middle of a step is one of the hallmarks and most charming aspects of this noble tradition. Griswold is probably right in thinking that the emphasis on depicting the

Buddha in this manner which is so uniquely characteristic of this artistic school is the result of the Sukhothai culture at this time being extremely orthodox, and in effect therefore attempting to depict the Walking Buddha as an indicator of the forest monk tradition. This would explain the portrayal of these walking figures with monastic robes in the open rather than closed mode as determined by monastic rules, and differing from standing Buddhas who therefore represent urban-dwelling monks residing in a temple located within a city where they would likely encounter lay folk as a matter of course. The open mode would correspond to wandering ascetics—the Walking Buddha being symbolic of this activity, who are often solitary and this is the type of figure represented most often by Sukhothai votive tablets. This means that for burial in stupas or even in the general sense these more orthodox symbols of devotion were preferred as being images more purely representative of the Buddha's teaching (Griswold, 1967: 24).

The Buddha shown by Sukhothai artists in the walking manner almost always displays the abhaya mudrā with one hand while the other is down and in alignment with the body. An important article on the Walking Buddha spanning the history of Buddhist iconography was written some years ago by Brown, who showed how the Buddha was portrayed in a purely symbolic sense as walking during one particular scene or other before anthropomorphic depictions became the norm, and how after this time the portrayal of the Great Ascetic as in some way actually walking occurred only rarely and less literally than the Walking Buddhas of Sukhothai. This is probably due to the fact that although technically a man, the Buddha has always been regarded as at least on the same level as a god and certainly higher than any king, and even, more particularly, a chakravartin. Since these other figures would never be

shown walking on the ground on the same level as a common individual, artists were then hesitant to portray the Buddha in this way (Brown, 1990: 95-96). We may add that not only did the Sukhothai culture become the first to depict the Buddha in a truly realistic sense as walking—no doubt an important aspect of his life for many months a year and hitherto neglected in the iconography of other cultures, but this brought the Buddha as an actual man back into the framework of general Buddhist perspectives, however godlike he inevitably remained. Incidentally Buddha footprints do not appear much in any area of pre-modern Thailand until the Sukhothai period, obviously then as a result of this change of emphasis regarding how the Buddha was perceived (Brown, 1990: 101, 106). Although modern nationalistic sentiments might tend to over-exaggerate the purity of the Sukhothai kingdom for Thai culture and the role of the father-like king which became more and more distant during the Ayutthaya period when Khmer culture as a foreign influence played an increasingly important role, it does in fact appear probable and as evidenced by the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription as well as the iconography of the Walking Buddha that a

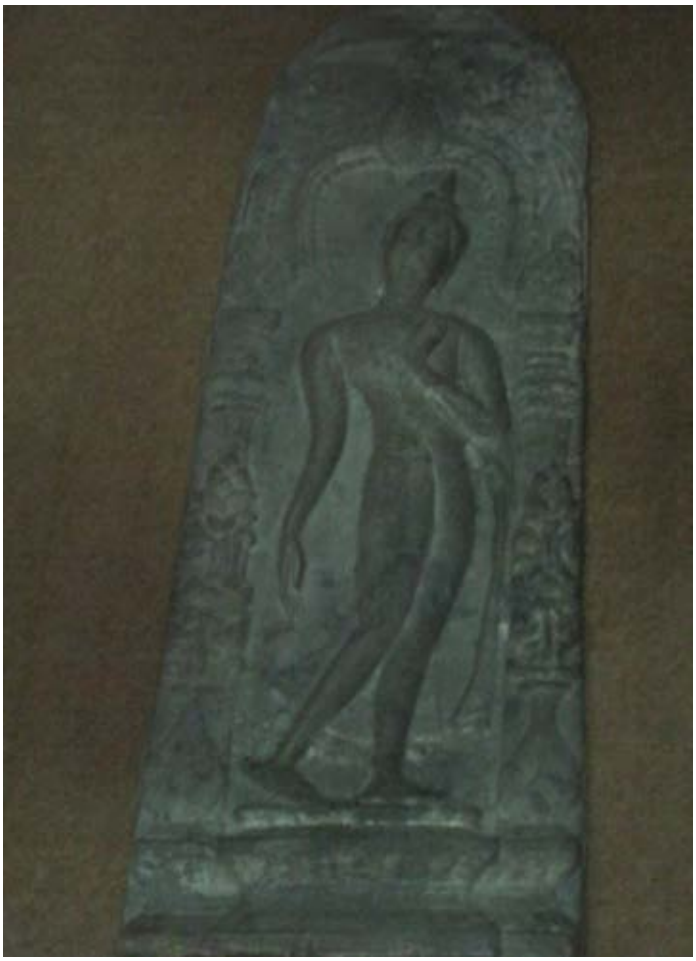

Figure 11.

Sukhothai style. National Museum, Bangkok. Author's photograph.

much more personal relationship than that of later periods occurred at this time between rulers and their subjects (Brown, 1990: 104).

The Walking Buddha type of votive tablet is distinctive in both a technical and stylistic manner by avoiding the purely frontal emphasis of other tablet styles normally required on such an essentially two-dimensional frame. One type of Sukhothai image is typically made of metal, most probably tin and perhaps about a foot or more in length and four to five inches wide, square at the bottom and curving to a point at the top. [Figure11]. The right arm extends in an unusually long manner, with the palm of the hand facing the body and in line with statuary of more life-size dimensions, and once again in showing Indian influence in a manner not at all like Dvāravatī or Khmer traditions the right knee is bent, the heel of the foot turned up as if in movement while the left hip bends to the left, as does the head of the Buddha figure—very much in the tribhanga posture of classical Indian sculpture. The work is much more decorative than certain other tablets of the Sukhothai era, such as those now considered amulets by modern collectors which are much more straight forward in showing the Buddha figure only and of much smaller size. Another interesting feature is the clear portrayal of the Buddha's feet as extremely flat, virtually plate-like in their shape, a trait listed among the thirty-two he was supposed to have as determined by the Pali Canon. The depiction of flower vases on either side, occasionally seen from here on into the Ayuthaya period with both seated and standing Buddhas, is somewhat of a mystery for scholars who have been unable to trace its origins in either Sri Lankan or Indian art, and earlier in Southeast Asia in only in a few places such as Borobudur in Java (McGill, 2005: 116).

Here we see another way, besides the attempt by Sukhothai craftsmen or rather the individuals who commissioned such works to create an original style for Buddha images, to attain some degree of independence from former Khmer influences in the treatment of the surrounding frame which if it were not for the extreme orthodoxy of this time period would almost make one believe it was purely decorative and with no religious symbolism to convey: the panoply of flowing curves and intricate features in the space around the Buddha seem contrary to the philosophy of simplicity the Walking Buddha image represents.

Figure 12.

Sukhothai style. National Museum, Bangkok. Author's photograph.

The seated Buddha images are also distinct, and here is where proportion in more conventional terms whereby divisions of volume are more balanced is supreme. A type of votive tablet from the Sukhothai period—if we so wish to classify it in such a manner, is called by modern collectors of the Benchaphakee set of five the Phra Somkor (Chalong Soontravanich, 2005: 7). Even a casual glance at one of these objects or as is more likely the case an excellent reproduction easily available from any number of modern amulet markets, shows that its proportions of the width of the

legs of the figure seated in virāsana pose in relation to the height is very similar to the classical image perfected in larger statuary during the Sukhothai period while its flame-like finial is another feature connecting it to Sukhothai iconography. These extremely small tablets, easily held in the palm of one's hand, are monuments to beauty through simplicity and depict a figure almost abstract in form due in part to the difficulty of greater precision of design on so small a work of sculpture yet while still exhibiting these aforementioned qualities which make it easily distinguishable from other tablets. Another type from the Benchaphakee group is the Phra Nang Phraya votive tablet which is triangular in shape and the soft molding of the arms especially is why it is known as the "queen of amulets." The big round shoulders, very long arms in which the right displays maravijaya mudrā and the proportions of the body are all characteristics of Sukhothai iconography for seated Buddhas.

Next we would like to examine two very similar tablets from the Sukhothai period. The first of these shows the Buddha seated in meditation under a highly stylized architectural unit with a Bodhi tree above [Figure 12]. As was pointed out earlier seated Buddha images are arguably the most finely proportioned in terms of the balance of different volumes making up a work of Sukhothai sculpture, and in a search for possible origins of the Sukhothai seated Buddha style, Woodward has pointed to a work of probable Burmese influence which despite its much smaller head and different facial expression represents through its large round shoulders and proportion of height to length a possible precursor and important source for tracing the beginnings of Sukhothai seated images (Woodward, 1980: 174, figure 23). At first glance the tablet represented by figure 12 may remind one of one of the many varieties of the Phra Nang Phraya votive tablets in Phitsanulok from perhaps the

fourteenth century (Chalong Soontravanich, 2005: 7) though the curvature of the right hand reaching down in maravijaya mudrā sways over to rest on the right knee rather than straight down to the ground. Nonetheless the soft feeling of the molding, giving it the "queen of amulets," appearance like the Phra Nang Phraya coupled with the same triangular shape of the object and finally the location of both being discovered in the traditional cultural sphere of Sukhothai points to some likely connection. The fact that the image of Figure 12 is so very stylized makes one suspect a later date, the influence of Ayutthaya after its takeover of Sukhothai culture creating this wonderful if somewhat conspicuous indication of future decline. What is meant here is the almost inevitable direction of the arts of any culture, in which a great and confident simplicity of style later proceeds into a baroque period as it were in which ornamentation begins to formalize and make less vibrant the established classical style. The rounded frame above the image pointing downward in the middle and ending in makara snakes with open jaws, the kali mouth with curving row of teeth above the image, the Bodhi tree above the frame spiraling with large leaves of minimal detail perhaps because of the worn state of the tablet and in a charming, nearly circular flow, all show probable Khmer influence. Pots with sprouting flowers and vegetation all round from both sides of the unusually wide base create the horror vacui effect not encountered perhaps in such a dense manner since the Dvāravatī period. The *rasmi* or flame-like form above the image is a Sukhothai feature, as are the general proportions of the seated image in virāsana pose, maravijaya mudrā and with large round shoulders.

It is interesting to see the close relationship of this tablet with that of another which displays almost identical formal design and general proportional layout, though

with some very notable differences to discover upon closer inspection [Figure 13]. Though we may consider the blank space between the edge of the tablet all around and the actual stamped portion to be potentially attributable to purely practical application, this work is in fact compared to figure 12 less concerned with complete absorption of available space by sculptural detail, though the program itself aside from the outer vegetal forms is almost identical. The circular Bodhi tree above the architectural frame which encases the figure is more precisely detailed, and the beaded columns on each side contrast with those of figure 12 though again this may in fact be due to wear and tear. The image itself is the most interesting feature of the tablet to contrast with figure 12, not only for its somewhat greater verticality and leaner proportions but also for the general shape of the head in being more rectangular than oval and closer to Khmer aesthetics. We may conclude that figure 13 is later than figure 12, being closer to Khmer styles influencing Ayutthaya iconography and correspondingly the development of ornamentation of Sukhothai aesthetics in which the influence of Ayutthaya was now playing a

Figure 13.

Sukhothai style. National Museum, Bangkok. Author's photograph.

significant role. Perhaps both belong to the fifteenth or sixteenth century. A fascinating tablet found at Wat Mahathat in the old city of Sukhothai shows definite Burmese influences, its main shrine flanked by two smaller ones in the style of Bodh Gaya in India and which appears to indicate a connection to the so-called Ariya Hīnayāna trend that was gaining ground at about this time (Woodward, 1991: 434-425, figure 3). This is an excellent example of an object found somewhere which in regards to both style and religious iconography precedes the time when its symbolism would represent the predominant religion of a given region. The style points to a century before the rise of the Thai kingdom which took over what was probably a Khmer stronghold, and though belonging more to a Burmese categorization its formal design with the Buddha in maravijaya mudrā points to changes in Buddhist iconography later adopted in Sukhothai.

3.2 Northern Thai Votive Tablets

This category, though worthy of separate mention, has received less attention than the others in part because its tradition does not seem as noteworthy or singular, its main representative types largely associated with the cultures of Burma, the Mon, the Khmer or Sukhothai. This might go far in explaining why Coedès somewhat curiously omitted it altogether in his famous survey (Coedès, 1926-27: 7). In inspecting tablets found in the north and in at least some cases mostly produced there, one has to step back somewhat and consider Coedès' omission of this group, and find it not unreasonable. The northern tablets representing the Mon culture of Haripunchai have been classified previously into four main groups starting with eighth to ninth-century types dealing with Dvāravatī, then Gupta and Pala, Pagan and finally Khmer (Lopburi) influences and thus one suspects a good deal of imported

tablets found in the local soil. Although technically the Mon kingdom of Haripunchai should or could be classified as part of the Mon/Dvāravatī cultural period discussed earlier on, really it belongs as much to northern traditions, the classification here thus being based less on ethnic types than regional and especially when considering the influence from a rather wider area of surrounding cultures. Stratton's presentation of votive tablets in her work on the Buddhist sculpture of northern Thailand reveals to what extent outside influences played a role (Stratton, 2004: 307-310).

There are, however, a few interesting considerations worthy of note, and the late period did produce styles with some distinctive qualities, even if obvious influences abound. One tablet style with its triangular shape is often at a sharper angle than other types whose shape is similar, and exhibits the Mon culture's love of showing multiple figures by depicting a kind of crowded hierarchal range of buddhas covered by architectural forms. Though distinct enough to stand out as a product of the northern tradition, it nonetheless shows strong stylistic features associated with votive tablets from Burma and ultimately Bodh Gaya (Woodward, 2005: 172, plate 56). One of the Benchaphakee amulets called Phra Rod, found at a site in the ancient Mon city of Lamphun and dating from the twelfth-century is an example of a tablet which appears to be a hybrid form from a variety of outside influences. This is yet another good example of a votive tablet which does not quite fit into any pre-established categorical scheme, though its maravijaya gesture and vajrāsana pose would allow one to place it in some general historical context, more or less showing the influence of North India though by way of some more generally local traditions. According to Pattaratorn Chirapravati this tablet along with similar types such as Phra Kong and Phra Bang may be the result of the introduction of the Ariya groups who practiced

Hīnayāna Buddhism based on Burmese influence during the century or two prior to the predominance of the Thai and their Theravāda Buddhism. They may date as far back as the eleventh century, did not contain the ye dhammā verse and were made in very large quantities (Pattaratorn Chirapravati, 1997: 30-31). Since the Phra Rod votive tablets in particular do not have any verse written on them and are uncharacteristically small, it might be tempting to consider them as having been handled in some form by the general population of the city where they were found, in effect being tablets every individual could afford, though personal use in terms of function seems quite unlikely when considering the large amount of these types found mainly in ruined stupas.

The Lan Na culture in an iconographical sense is perhaps most famous for its Sihing Buddha, the "lion type," so to speak, though there is another category which comes later and shows more Sukhothai influence. One aspect of tablets fashioned in the north which strikes the observant viewer straight away—conspicuous by its absence, is the fact that the famous Sihing Buddha style is not really depicted on votive tablets much at all which come from this region. If this statement is correct, it adds an intriguing idea concerning the tradition of copying famous images, which by being highly revered were thought to possess magical properties of protection and which often served as palladiums for a kingdom. Thus a famous image, believed to capture the essence of the Buddha, would be copied over and over again based on the belief that another image that captured the likeness of the one it was a copy of would contain something of its power. Originally it was assumed that the images from old Lan Na dated back to the early thirteenth century and were the oldest of all the Tai-speaking peoples, though Griswold's pioneering work disputes this and in

conjunction with actual dated Buddha images from the north surmises that the earliest ones are later than those of Sukhothai (Griswold, 1957). Of course it could be argued that no attempt was made to make tablets in the Sihing style, the tablets themselves being too small for such a purpose. The Walking Buddhas of Sukhothai, however, and countless other styles have indeed been consciously fashioned with the specific details which define them as being of a certain type and thus it would not seem too difficult to produce a definitively Sihing style on votive tablets.

If the Sihing Buddha style and others were really older than the Buddha images of Sukhothai then one would have expected to find a corresponding style of votive tablets from this proposed early period which in actuality is absent. A later tablet, however, found in Wat Ratchaburana in Ayutthaya, has an appearance which may link it to both the north as well as the far south at Nakhon Si Thammarat, and its style would appear to be of a relatively early date, perhaps the thirteenth century. The central figure's jewel or perhaps lotus bud finial, vajrāsana pose and maravijaya mudrā in which the right hand rests on the right knee instead of farther over on the leg, all speak of an early date and in the northern tradition of Lan Na. It is well known that there is a connection between the far southern and northern styles, the Sihing Buddha of each of these places claiming to be the true Sihing Buddha of historical fame and in competition with a third of the same designation situated in Bangkok (Woodward, 1997: 509-510, figure 4).

In a criticism by Boisselier of Griswold's dating of these Lan Na images we have an interesting perspective, very modern and Western in its approach, which relates to the subject of votive tablets. Boisselier states that Griswold's view, though intriguing, cannot ultimately be tenable based on the general rule that two different

styles do not exist in any given period (Boisselier, 1975: 150). It is true that in many cultures over the last few hundred years political and social cohesion has meant that a modern movement in the arts tends to bring about the demise of its predecessor, though throughout pre-modern Thailand it is actually quite easy to see how parallel developments could occur when realizing more than anything else the decentralized political conditions of the time. We have, however, encountered just exactly this problem in our study—namely, the fact that styles tend to disappear fairly quickly once political change occurs in connection with a different religious persuasion and Boisselier's opinion is relevant and important to keep in mind. At any rate after the Mon period ends in the north in the thirteenth century tablets become more recognizable as representing a truly distinct tradition regarding style.

One popular tablet type during the Lan Na period was the so-called Phra Khamphang Ha-rawy, meaning essentially a depiction of five hundred Buddhas, or less literally of some rather large number. This is another type whose style shows probable Burmese influence as this kind of tablet had been popular in Burma since the Pagan period (Pattaratorn Chirapravati, 1997: 60).

The closer connection to Burma obviously had an effect on the arts of Lan Na in many significant ways, which of course is inevitable when considering the political control of the north of Thailand by the Burmese over a number of extended periods. With so much exposure to neighboring cultures this may have had an effect on this region's ingenuity which is difficult for any traditional culture even in the most favorable of conditions.

3.3 Ayutthaya Votive Tablets

The Ayutthaya Kingdom, whose duration lasted for over four hundred years, has an artistic tradition much less appreciated and studied than the earlier periods we have been discussing thus far. Incorporating a variety of cultural trends, it is best known for images which are mainly categorized as having strong Sukhothai or Khmer influences, the latter consisting of varieties ranging from those which correspond to very traditional Khmer styles to later developments such as crowned Buddha types which are remarkable for their intricacy of detail. As is so often the case and as something which in general in our modern era has been much less appreciated than in former times, the final period went through a process of complete and utter elaboration of design. By the seventeenth century Ayutthaya art regarding crowned Buddha images evolved from a Buddha adorned with a mere crown or a crown and decorative necklace with pendant form, to one with bandoliers with so-called flying scarves and finally with a similarly complex décor but in even more elaborate detail (McGill, 1977: 240-245). By the final period a century later extremely tall crown finials were added as well as bejeweled dress from nearly head to toe, rings on all the fingers, and so on. It is possible that images were made of former rulers and revered, and when considering the absence in any form of personal portrayal as portraiture it is likely that some of the images thought to be a Buddha are really meant to represent actual individuals, i.e., rulers or family members of the rulers who commissioned them. Another reason for these crowned images was presumably the myth of Jambupati. Sri Lankan ambassadors who visited Ayutthaya in 1756 were shocked and apparently dismayed by the sight of Buddhas being adorned in such a splendid manner, which, in traditional orthodox terms, could theoretically be conceived as

highly unorthodox. The response was that the Buddhas represented the Jambupati myth which involves a conceited king who believes the Buddha is not worth his time but is soon humbled by the Great Master who adorns himself in magnificently bejeweled dress which overwhelms the king by its infinite splendor. Another view is that the crowned images have Tantric associations, though at this stage in Ayutthaya history this seems much less likely (Woodward, 2005: 54-56).

No doubt the greater role Ayutthaya played regarding trade in Southeast Asia and this region's relationship to the outer world compared to previous eras gave it greater access to metals which served the purpose of allowing for an increase in Buddha image production in the form of bronzes, or, more correctly stated, copper alloys. Improved techniques in bronze-casting also played a part in this, which by the sixteenth century allowed for the production of images in some instances not much more than a millimeter in thickness, thus making it possible for this expensive medium to be utilized in a less costly way than ever before (Boisselier, 1975: 52-53). This over-production in connection with the importance of court ceremonies, Khmer-inspired ideas about symbols of kingship, further attempts at merit-making thought possible through image production and so on, may have affected the purity of spirit concerning the approach to the making of images—in effect leading to inevitable decline, or at least aesthetically speaking. In Buddhist terms we might say that the loss of self—or at any rate the temporary suspension of its presence normally concerned with fame or approval and which in its absence may allow for a purer sense of purpose when producing a work of art, was in effect less possible under these conditions of state-sponsored production connected to propaganda or perhaps some self-promoting dynasty or individual.

Ayutthaya art is best approached by disregarding the large volume of works of either mediocre quality or which portray an overly hieratic style, the latter limiting both the humanity of the Buddha and the gracefulness depicted in the best of other schools, yet while keeping in mind the fact that many works produced during this period are often of a very high order, remarkable for their technical display and occasionally for that mysterious gaze which was such a hallmark of the Khmer tradition out of which this culture arose.

The votive tablet tradition during the Ayutthaya period, far from giving any indication of decline, produced a great variety of types, no doubt in part from the more international flavor of the wealthy and trade-oriented capital city as well as the greater connection of the capital to outer provinces and corresponding differences in style. It has sometimes been proposed that the tradition produced a more uniform style than earlier periods, as indeed it has been pointed out in this very paper on the subject, though the collection of votive tablets in the National Museum in Bangkok show a surprisingly rich and unexpected variety of types, some quite in line with more life-size statuary, others in a more provincial style or even made in a folk-art manner that establishes some independence from any obvious tradition. In a more purely classical vein the last two centuries of Ayutthaya history produced beautiful tablets which mostly have to do with the main events of the Buddha's life in which he is portrayed as a lone figure surrounded by a receding set of frames obviously reminiscent of Khmer architectural forms. An important Benchaphakee votive tablet from Suphanburi which can more or less be classified as being from the early Ayutthaya period is called Phra Phong Suphan and thought to be from the fourteenth century (Chalong Soontravanich, 2005: 7). Its elongation of the seated figure is

essentially U-Thong B or C in style in terms of the older classification scheme based on the extreme verticality of the image as well as the *rasmi* above the head which does not occur in the style of U-Thong A (Boisselier, 1975: 162-166). Its protruding chest is an interesting feature that establishes uniqueness for this particular type, perhaps developed as a somewhat accidental outcome from the creative process. Incidentally by modern classification methods the earlier U-Thong A style is associated with the province of Suphanburi, the same province where this type of votive tablet was found and named after and thus a somewhat problematic aspect of this new form of classification is evidenced by the Phra Phong Suphan votive tablet. Another type from Suphanburi redefined as an amulet by modern amulet collectors is the Phra Khun Phaen and named after the famous character of the Thai historical tale Khun Chang Khun Phaen, though in reality this is a recent designation and the amulets utilized in this story are essentially animist.

The Ayutthaya votive tablets on display in the National Museum in Bangkok present a number of stylistic features not seen as often or at all in larger forms of statuary of the period. We would now like to focus on four tablets from the Ayutthaya era from this museum's collection, all of which give some insight into the religious or aesthetic values of the time. The first is a relatively simple type showing strong Khmer influences [Figure 14]. Absent a crown which some votive tablets might have at least by the middle period, the hair has an almost Baphuon-period bulbous shape, and the tall *rasmi* above the ushnisha is derived from Sukhothai art. The arch above the head of this standing figure is quite simple, being but two bands moving down from where they meet at the top and turning up around the ear on both sides of the head. The right arm is tucked in close to the body with elbow bent and

hand at the chest facing outward in abhaya mudrā, the left hand exhibiting the same with the arm stretched down and alongside the body, unlike the usual position of palm facing inward. With no indenting frame around the figure, the feet are inevitably depicted in alignment yet with each pointed outward to the side, the portrayal of feet being a perennial problem throughout the history of Khmer statuary. Its lower garment with a wide waistband is also Khmer-like, leaving the torso to look apparently bare, though actually the Buddha images of this type are portrayed with both shoulders covered and here indicated only by a slight line around the neck along with the winged shapes which flare out on either side a bit above the ankles, tapering toward the upper torso and indicating his long outer garment (Boisselier, 1975: 169, 173). The Buddha's head bends ever so slightly to his right with eyes closed—which in combination exudes a depth of thoughtful meditation or focus. Here and there amid the rust and general deterioration one may detect the original red color used for the background.

Figure 14.

Ayutthaya style. National Museum, Bangkok. Author's photograph.

This tablet probably can be dated to the fifteenth or sixteenth century, but in no way with any certainty. The aforementioned Khmer features in combination with the Sukhothai-style *rasmi* in a work not yet showing the tendency toward greater elaboration which characterizes the later period is the reason for this estimation. Modern aesthetics are in love with the ruins of time, and the weathered, partially broken tablet is only made more beautiful and mysterious by this condition.

Figure 15.

Ayutthaya style. National Museum, Bangkok. Author's photograph.

The next tablet represents what is perhaps considered the classic Ayutthaya style, with only the Buddha depicted and surrounded by a frame of receding layers [Figure 15]. Here the decorative elements reveal a late style, perhaps the seventeenth or eighteenth century, as evidenced by not only the general complexity of design but in particular the prabhāmandala form around the figure ending in flames on each side around the head, the phra thip or "sacred cloth" which runs from his legs down the front of the throne upon which he sits as well as the sharpness of detail whereby the whole votive tablet comprises a solidarity of angled line or features; the receding, multi-layer bordering

around the figure is a trait which reveals in these late-period votive tablets a truly original style. The crown on this tablet is another interesting feature to consider, being a set of two or three plain discs which unlike other features of the tablet do not correspond as much to larger Ayutthaya statuary of the time; many larger works this late would wear a crown much taller and more ornate. This simpler style of crown is probably done for aesthetic reasons on a good many votive tablets of this type, which throughout the rest of the tablet reveal no lack of interest in ornamentation. Naturally the texture of the object has been affected by the way the molding process is able to extenuate detail, though the fact that so much is presented here on such a small tablet reveals a very high level of technical artistry.

Some final points regarding figure 15 are important to consider. What appears as a formal design cover over the image is too close to the shape of a *prang* not to denote a connection with Khmer architecture, especially when considering Khmer civilization as the main culture from which Ayutthaya civilization evolved, and the consistent portrayal in the Khmer votive tablet tradition of one to three *prangs* encasing Buddha figures. One may recall the fact that the Buddha achieved enlightenment at Bodh Gaya, and thus to represent this episode the Buddha is portrayed at that very moment when enlightenment occurred, or actually the moment immediately prior when he touched the ground amid the myriad distractions by Mara to alert the earth goddess of his resolve. In this type of iconography we are discussing the Buddha is shown in maravijaya mudrā—with hand touching the ground as the quintessential enlightenment scene, covered by a frame common in many votive tablet traditions and representative of the Bodh Gaya temple at the center of the Buddhist world, while below this on this tablet as the closest element of the

protective covering over the Buddha an arch rises up on both sides just above his shoulders in a flame-like form. In earlier centuries, most famously with regard to the Phra Chinnarat—if we can believe its date as being sometime in the early fifteenth century, these flame-like forms are naga heads. Moving backwards in a kind of search for causes through a train of metamorphic change, we may encounter flame, than naga head, then Mucilinda—king of the nagas which once was used so commonly to cover Buddha images during the earlier Khmer period. Regarding the frame as a whole, one moves from abstract form to Khmer *prang*, to Bodhgaya temple to the original stupa used to cover the Buddha's ashes, and finally to a mountain form whose spirit was revered both before and after the coming of Buddhism to Southeast Asia. This represents then essentially the union of nature and spirit, the mountainous form and naga elements most likely unconscious additions to the more purely human and psychological approaches to the founder of the Middle Way.

Figure 16.

Ayutthaya style. National Museum, Bangkok. Author's photograph.

We would now like to present an object representing the logical outcome of the tablet just discussed, meaning in a stylistic sense through the increasing use of decorative elements and corresponding detail to portray the Buddha in iconographic form [Figure 16]. At this point we have more or less reached the limit of complexity in regards to depicting a singular figure and the farthest distance from the Sukhothai-era preference for simplicity and gracefulness of line with its emphasis on the attire similar to what the Buddha *actually* wore, meaning surely one or two simple sheets wrapped around for purposes of modesty and warmth. The standing Buddha here is highly vertical and no doubt done this way for visual effect, with the unusually long legs not noticeable at first as a result of the outer garment being so thoroughly decorative. Three distinct rows with so-called flying scarf designs cross the area below the waste, the waste area itself and upward along the torso to the neck a tapestry of minuteness, and with bracelets, armlets and a tall pointed finial adding further bedazzlement to the mix.

The surrounding arch encasing the figure has become more like a true architectural entrance, with molded platform, cleaner lines of vertical design on each side with simpler flame or Bodhi leaf elements, and while the inner arch has now become a trefoil shape roughly in alignment with the Buddha's head and crown. By placing the figure inside a niche, the craftsman has allowed for the depiction of the feet facing outward while not extending them past the edge of the frame on either side; rather than protecting the feet from possible breakage which is less relevant on a tablet made of metal, this feature is of benefit more for the way it makes possible the depiction of the feet realistically. A rare breath of fresh air is the plain space behind the figure which stands out through its deep red hue in contrast to the gold color of the body and

corresponding ornamentation of the rest of the object, though done it may be presumed only for extenuation of these designs which otherwise could become blurred in a visual maze. Yet in stepping back a bit to admire at least the skill in blending such an array of visual splendor into a definite proportional harmony, one may also wonder if something else not always appreciated has long escaped the notice of a good many scholars who have generally derided the sculpture of the Ayutthaya period. It is hard to imagine any aspect of a Buddha image—or for that matter an image of any anthropomorphic variety, being more important for depicting profound humanity than that of a human face. The glow on the face of this Buddha is serenely calm and beautiful, though mirroring perhaps less depth than innocence.

Figure 17.

Ayutthaya style. National Museum, Bangkok. Author's photograph.

Finally, a tablet worth discussing is presented here due to its highly unusual style [Figure 17]. It is hardly by any means of approaching it a tablet which one would consider from the Ayutthaya era, or for that matter of any Buddhist period. Whether or not it should even be considered a votive tablet is also worth considering, in

wondering if in fact it was created as part of a duplicating process from an original form. At any rate its characteristics belong more to primitive art, this phrase not meant in any way to imply a degradation, in fact quite the contrary. African or Oceanic styles could possibly come to mind, or art designed by or for children in which the creative expression has a vitality difficult to portray once technical proficiency is wholly utilized. Found in Ayutthaya province, without more information regarding its provenance the Bangkok National Museum object is difficult to analyze. There are, however, several features specific enough and especially in combination with each other to consider it within the Thai iconographic fold. The shape, like many works of standing Buddhas of either the Sukhothai or Ayutthaya periods, is highly elongated and which tapers at the top, though unlike more refined works this tablet has rounded corners at the bottom and a great number of cusped areas along each side, this uneven linear course in conjunction with the bumpy interior giving it a particularly handmade appearance. The *rasmi* at the top is quite prominent and rests down through the hair to reach the scalp, effectively creating a volume above the head which is divided into three sections. The Buddha figure itself—if it is in fact the Buddha, is highly elongated, the dimensions of which would not be too out of sync with so many of the saintly figures of the sculptural panels on the outside of the cathedral of Chartres. The feet—actually just a continuation of the lines which represent the legs, are made separate by a crossing horizontal line signifying the lower hem of the figure's long outer garment, which then on each side slices its way back upward toward the torso. The incised lines throughout in fact are the only means of indicating the clothing the figure wears, with two lines in parallel course from the inner left shoulder to the banded waist and following down past the hem of the outer garment finally to represent the inside of

each foot. Four incisions at the end of each curving hand imply fingers above which are another pair of incisions to imply the hem of each upper garment sleeve—one would be tempted to say the uttarāsanga, the traditional name for the type of clothing used in this way, but for the fact that this is not at all the normal means of depiction. From the middle two lines mentioned above extending from the left shoulder to the waist and normally referred to as a samghati, two other angled lines—note that virtually everything is in pairs, are incised on the right torso extending to the side and implying the topmost hem of the upper garment and thus with the right shoulder bare, the usual manner in which a monk or the Buddha would be portrayed in Thai iconography in the araññavasi manner. A pair of lines on each arm are presented midway between elbow and shoulder, perhaps for decorative reasons. In not a few places—most notably along the samghati there is a break in the line due to the rapid movement of the incising tool, without too much concern for technical precision. In fact the lines on the arms extend in each case beyond to the flat surface adjacent, yet were not smoothed away as they presumably could have been and remain clearly noticeable. The face retains elements from Sukhothai traditions, or perhaps it is better to say it is possible to point out features that are more or less like those of Sukhothai art such as prominent, circular eyebrows that meet at the upper area of a long aquiline nose, though actually the eyebrows of classical Sukhothai sculpture generally do not meet as in the case of this tablet. The shape of the head has that rounded appearance giving the impression of a partially elliptical, egg-shaped volume tapered toward the chin, characteristic of later Ayutthaya statuary and clearly visible on figure 16. The small, slightly smiling mouth in a semi-circular manner is also classic late-Ayutthaya, and points to some similarity with the Buddhist iconography of Burma.

CHAPTER IV

THE FUNCTIONS OF VOTIVE TABLETS

Introduction

After completing our analysis of the styles of votive tablets in pre-modern Thailand comprising chapters two and three, here we would like to focus more particularly on their functions. In determining function as a way to define these objects two distinguishing features at the outset should be mentioned which set votive tablets apart from other forms of Buddhist iconography: the use of stamps or molds for multiple copies of an individual work, and the burial of these objects for purposes of merit. We would also do well to compare them to votive stupas to which they are akin through the shared sacred spaces inside of larger stupas or caves where these objects were deposited. Merit as a reason given for why such burials occurred, however, even at times when explicitly referred to in historical accounts, is most unsatisfactory. Reasons connected to belief in Buddha images as having supernatural power, political advantage or promotion of one's position through the production of these images, pious interest in distributing these objects which by way of multiple copies might make these affordable and accessible to all—merit is thus an umbrella term which should be divided into sub-categories of religious belief or intention. These might include such actions as the making of votive tablets as pilgrim mementoes or souvenirs, or as a kind of merit-making act of producing images for specific ceremonies such as those related to the building or restoration of a stupa. Why they were buried out of sight and thus without the possibility of direct reverence may have also been the result of the belief in how a Buddha image's radiance could make a stupa form more sacred, or in the limited duration of Buddhism, the latter

belief leading the pious to imagine how these objects discovered later among stupa ruins might serve to prolong the great religion further.

It seems reasonable to begin with the Indian origins of this practice, followed by an analysis of what a stupa ultimately symbolized and thus the reason why these objects were buried in stupa forms. From here we hope to unravel the different possible reasons mentioned above for their creation as inferred by historical accounts and the known archaeological record. Linking them to stupa symbolism, associations become apparent between votive tablets and the ancient cult of relics, of changing notions of what is meant by dhamma as natural law aside from the historic person who preached it to the world, and ultimately to sources for much of the votive tablet tradition which stem from Mahāyāna beliefs. Whether or not they were made only in connection with stupas will also be explored.

4.1 Indian Origins of Votive Tablets

After the Buddha died in Kusinagara in northern India some two thousand five hundred years ago, perhaps another five hundred years then followed before the first iconographic images meant to represent him were created. The Parinibbāna Sutta records how he felt about his death and the way in which his followers could remember him, and speaks of the relics of his physical form being deposited at eight sacred sites throughout the sub-continent (Walshe, 1995: 276-277). Known as *chedi* in Thai, Stupa forms were erected to house these relics, and aside from places associated with the Buddha's life other reminders such as imagery and scripture became increasingly important over time and were even regarded by some trends of thought as not merely representational symbols but quite literally the Enlightened

One himself. These reminders are mainly of four kinds: dhātucetiya, meaning stupas containing relics; paribhogacetiya or reminders by association, like for example the Bodhi tree under which the Buddha achieved enlightenment; dhammacetiya or doctrinal reminders and thus related to cannonical scripture; and finally uddesikacetiya, meaning indicative reminders such as for example sculpture or other pictorial forms in which the Buddha is portrayed (H.R.H. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, 1982: vi). Technically speaking votive tablets (or seals as they are sometimes called) with only script impressed upon the material used and known as dhāranī are dhammacetiya—related to sacred writ, while images of the Buddha or multiple buddhas are uddesikacetiya or indicative reminders and which over time became the dominant type throughout pre-modern Thailand. As we shall discuss in more detail later on, the physical body of the Buddha in terms of his relics eventually came to be thought of as just one form of relic representing him, while scripture as well as imagery were regarded as other ways to express his presence given the logical definition of his body being impermanent but his message one of pure unchanging law. An obvious practical advantage of this change in outlook no doubt relates to the fact that while every temple would want to have a stupa to represent the Great Master's ultimate parinibbāna, there was obviously only a limited number of relics of his actual body to go around. Thus these reminders in the form of tablets were connected to stupa symbolism just as much as the bodily relics for which stupas were originally intended. To put it another way, these other kinds of reminders came to be thought of during the rise of the Mahāyāna tradition as forms of dharmakāya, or the body of the Buddha in his true, transcendent form (Fickle, 1989: 4).

Huge deposits of votive stupas and tablets have been unearthed at various locations in south Asia and including Bodh Gaya, the site of the Buddha's enlightenment and thus the most important place of pilgrimage in the entire Buddhist world (Cunningham, 1892: 46-52). Small models of reasonable accuracy in depicting the great temple at Bodh Gaya as it apparently existed before its nineteenth-century restoration have also been found in a number of places outside of India and especially Burma, and thus it is not surprising then that there should be a quasi-replica of this temple at Pagan as well as others in neighboring Thailand such as Wat Chet Yot in Chiang Mai, the design of which is clearly inspired by this temple if not representing its form very precisely (Guy, 1991: 356-367).

As stated previously the phrase used for votive tablets in Thai is *phra phim*, and is apparently of relatively modern derivation (Skilling, 2008: 250). Historical records in the form of inscriptions or chronicles do not usually describe Buddha images as being of some particular type, and Prasert Na Nagara and A. B. Griswold's monumental work on a number of inscriptions from mostly the Sukhothai era mention votive tablets only twice, though references to Buddha images generally are especially numerous (Prasert Na Nagara and Griswold, 1992: 772, 776). In some cases a substance mentioned like clay or a specific metal such as tin in connection with Buddha images is a reasonable indicator that what are being referred to are votive tablets. In Tibet the phrase for votive tablets is *tsha tsha*, derived probably from the Sanskrit sat-chaya, or other similar terms from Prakrit for example, and meaning image or reproduction, according to the scholar Tucci (Taddei, 1970: 79). Another possible interpretation is from a word Skilling transcribes as sañcaka, a name used in

the north of India for the stamping of votive tablets known through ritual texts but not inscriptions (Skilling, 2008: 249).

Comparing votive tablets to other forms of Buddhist sculpture of similar dimensions though not produced from a stamp or mold may be a useful starting point for determining their possible functions, and a beautiful and portable Buddhist shrine from central Asia dating from around 900 C.E. is a case in point (Granoff, 1968/1969: 90-91; Pal, 1972/1973: 71-73). Small and easily transportable, its design in the form of a triptych involves folding sides which cover up the central scene and is easily imagined as being meant for transport or simply private worship rather than burial in a stupa. This contrasts sharply with common belief in Thailand that not until the time of King Mongkut from about the middle of the nineteenth century did the general population ever keep Buddha images away from temples which were thought of as the only places suitable for these sacred objects (M.L. Pattaratorn Chirapravati, 1997: 67). In most Mahāyāna Buddhist cultures this has certainly not been the case historically, another example being a type of shrine used by Tibetan pilgrims called a *gao* and worn around the neck or on one's side while traveling and which dates back at least to the eighteenth century (Pal, 1991: 136-137).

Endless examples could we present, though for our purposes one more will suffice from south Asia which is particularly relevant since it was made about the time or perhaps just a bit after the votive tablet tradition was being transplanted from India to Southeast Asia and including Thailand. In the north of Sri Lanka several decades ago farmers found a small work of stone sculpture about the size of a votive tablet in being small enough to hold in one's hand and dating from the Pala period, meaning from the eighth to twelfth centuries (Prematilleke, 1972: 162-168). The fact that this

item from the area where Mahāyāna schools were centered and which produced the most votive tablets made its way to this island so far south and dominated by the Theravāda sect, shows to what degree a Buddha image which would not have been meant for placing in a temple could be thought of as a personal talisman or souvenir by a traveling pilgrim.

The shape of this object is also worth noting, and leads us to a more general consideration regarding the reason for the shapes of votive objects. Carved from stone, it obviously is one of a kind, but its flat backside is the same as tablets typically are. We have here then another dimension to consider, and one which continued in this way when votive tablets were produced during a great many centuries in Southeast Asia. A malleable material being used implies that in conjunction with a stamp or mold endless versions can easily and rapidly be created, and the ease in which items which are according to some types flat in shape can be stacked one upon another suggests that votive tablets *generally* could have been meant for deposit somewhere such as in stupas and caves—the places where they have been found in the greatest numbers, and not as pilgrim souvenirs or objects for personal worship. Yet in comparing this rather singular work of art which was carried around by someone long ago for a great many miles to stamps used for the creation of copies of a certain individual image, we must also consider the possibility of easy distribution and affordability as the reasons for the production of multiple images in this way.

4.2 Votive Stupas and Images, Dhāranī and the Cult of the Book

Besides the wide variety of miscellaneous items which might have been thought appropriate for placement in a stupa for a kind of merit-making activity, there are

really three essential votive objects created through stamps or molds: votive stupas, votive images and objects with only writing or writing as the main subject matter and known as dhāranī [Figure 18]. In the case of dhāranī the inscription was often the famous paticcasamuppāda statement by the Buddha which evokes the so-called law of dependent origination, or else the ye dhammā verse (ye dhammā in Pali, ye dharmā in Sanskrit). The ye dhammā verse in Pali is as follows:

Ye dhammā hetuppabhavā tesam hetum Tathāgato āha

Tesam ca yo nirodho evamvādiī Mahāsamano ti

The conditions which arise from a cause,

Of these the Tathāgata has stated the cause,

Also the way of suppressing these same:

This is the teaching of the Great Ascetic (Coedès, 1926-1927: 5).

This is considered a shortened version of the message of paticcasamuppāda or dependent origination, yet is itself not emphasized much at all in the Pali Canon. In fact it is found in only a few places in scriptures from various schools, and is taken from a story which describes the conversion of Sāriputta and Moggallāna, two of the most important disciples of the Buddha who originally followed an acetic named Sañjaya. Unable to make much progress in their practices, one day Sāriputta met an early disciple of the Buddha named Assaji who uttered these famous lines. Sāriputta then recited them to Moggallāna, the first hearing for both resulting in immediate conversion (Boucher, 1991: 5-6).

The enshrining of verses is intimately connected to stupa symbolism, and was according to some scholars introduced to Sri Lanka through Mahāyāna influence

dating back at least to the second century C.E. in India (Prapod Assavavirulhakarn, 2010: 100). When one calls to mind the immense erudition of Buddhaghosa and his importance for the history of Theravāda Buddhism, it may be a bit surprising to discover that Fa-Hien, the early fifth-century Chinese traveler to India and a contemporary of the great south Asian scholar, was hard-pressed to find even a single written copy of the Vinaya Pitaka during his travels throughout the sub-continent (Fa-Hien, 1965: 98-99). Though it is of course a well-established fact that the Mahāyāna tradition starting around the first-century C.E. gave rise to the worship of Buddha images, images which Foucher believed evolved initially from Greek inspiration and whose birthplace was the region of Gandhara (Foucher, 1917: 1-27; Coomaraswamy, 1927: 287-329), much less has been the emphasis on the probable influence of the Mahāyāna schools on the so-called cult of the book, meaning here the belief in the sacredness of Buddhist scripture and even to the point of regarding an actual book as something worthy of being worshiped. Mahāyāna texts such as the Saddharma-

Figure 18.

Dhāranī seal from India. National Museum, Bangkok. Author's photograph.

Pundarika, or Lotus of the True Law state quite clearly that the worship of important Buddhist texts is meritorious and that these are worthy of worship in and of themselves. This important development represents an abstraction away from the central and more easily understood pictorial representation of the Buddha presented in painting or sculpture, and was paramount in the impetus for creating dhāranī seals (Kern, 1990: 214). If monumental stupa forms were used wherever possible to house relics of the Buddha and if the dhamma itself came to be thought of as representing the Buddha every bit as much in a literal sense as relics from his actual body, it makes sense that dhāranī seals were placed inside of votive stupas which then were put in larger ones and often in very great numbers, as indeed occurred in India and noted by the seventh-century Chinese traveler Hiuen-Tsiang, more commonly referred to as Hsüan-Tsang (Hiuen-Tsiang, 1884: 146-147). I-Tsing, another traveler from China from about the same time noticed the prevalence of votive stupas and the wide variety of conditions in which they were made:

Figure 19.

Indian votive stupa. National Museum, Bangkok. Author's photograph.

"The priests and the laymen in India make Kaityas or images with earth, or impress the Buddha's image on silk or paper, and worship it with offerings wherever they go. Sometimes they build Stupas

of the Buddha by making a pile and surrounding it with bricks. They sometimes form these Stupas in lonely fields, and leave them to fall in ruins. Any one may thus employ himself in making the objects for worship. Again, when the people make images and Kaityas which consist of gold, silver, copper, iron, earth, lacquer, bricks and stone, or when they heap up the snowy sand (lit. sand-snow), they put in the images or Kaityas two kinds of Sarīras. 1. The relics of the Great Teacher. 2. The Gatha of the Chain of Causation." (I-Tsing, 1896: 150).

This is confirmed by what has been uncovered at various archaeological sites such as Gazni, where inscriptions were stamped on an isolated object or object placed inside a votive stupa for the consecration of a larger stupa form [Figure 19], or stamped, though much less commonly it seems, on votive tablets with images. This latter combination of script and image became quite common in pre-modern Thailand during the Srivijaya period in the south as well as with the Dvāravatī culture in the central plain. Inscriptions on Dvāravatī tablets include portions of both canonical and post-canonical works, with the ye dhammā inscription being by far the most abundant (Prapod Assavavirulhakarn, 2010: 72-90). The strong connection with north Indian Buddhist culture is proven by the Gupta artistic influence on Dvāravatī culture especially, as well as the wide prevalence of the votive tablet tradition and including the practice of burying verses in stupas which in south India was much less common (Skilling, 1997: 102). We have here then a tradition originating in India and transplanted—and significantly transformed, in the Buddhist cultures of Southeast Asia, involving such objects as votive stupas, votive seals with text, and tablets stamped with imagery, as well these in combination such as votive stupas with text or tablets with text and imagery together. The transformation of objects from pious offering of merit to quasi-relic or even actual relic albeit in a more transcendent sense, emerged through the influence of the Mahāyāna cult of the book, with

numerous texts explicitly extolling the meritorious value of depositing verses in stupas. A fine example is the Sutra on the Merit of Building a Stupa Spoken by the Buddha. What follows is a complete translation by Boucher of this very short work:

Thus have I heard at one time. The Buddha was in the heaven of the thirty-three *devas* on a pure jade seat, together with an immeasurable assembly of great *bhiksus*, *bodhisattvas*, as well as the lord of the *devas*, Indra. At that time Brahmā, Nārāyana-deva, Mahésvara and the five *gandharva* kings, each with his retinue, came to where the Buddha was. They desired to ask the Tathāgatha the method of building a *stūpa* and the amount of merit that would be produced by the *stūpa*.

In the mist of this assembly, there was a bodhisattva named Avalokiteśvara, who, knowing their wishes, rose from his seat, bared his right shoulder, and placed his right knee on the ground. With palms together in salutation, he faced the Buddha and made this statement: "World-Honored One, the reason that these gods, *gandharvas*, and others have come here today is that they desire to request of the Tathāgatha the method of building a *stūpa* and the amount of merit that would be produced by this *stūpa*. I only desire that the World-Honored One expound this for them, benefitting all the innumerable beings."

At that time the World-Honored One explained to the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteśvara: "Noble son, among the heavenly being present here and all the living being of future generations, whoever is able to erect a *stūpa* wherever there is a place without one—whether its form be so exaltedly marvelous as to surpass the *triloka* or so extremely small as an *āmalaka* fruit; whether its mast ascends to the *brahma* heaven or is as extremely small as an extremely small like a jujube leaf—and if inside this *stūpa* one encloses the [body of the] Tathāgatha down to even one minute portion of his relics, hair, teeth, beard, or fingernails; or else if one deposits the twelve section scripture, which is the storehouse of the Tathāgatha's *dharma*, down to even one four line verse, this person's merit will be as great as the *brahma* heaven. At the end of one's life, he will be born in the *brahmaloka*. When his long life reaches its end in that realm, he will be born in the five pure abodes; there he will be no different than the gods. Noble son, of such matters have I spoken—the magnitude of these *stupas* and the cause of their merit. You and all the heavenly being should study and observe this.

At that time the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteśvara once again addressed the Buddha, saying: "World-Honored One, I have accepted and upheld what you have just taught concerning the installing of relics or scriptures in the stūpa. But I do not understand the meaning of the four line (verse) of the Tathāgatha. I only wish that this could be separately explained to me." At that time the World-Honored One uttered this verse:

All Dharmas arise from a cause.
I have explained the cause.
When the cause is exhausted, there is cessation.
I have produced such a teaching.

"Noble son, this verse signifies the *Buddha-dharmakāya*. You should write [this verse] and place it inside the stūpa. Why? Because all causes and the *dharma*-nature of all things that are produced are empty. This is the reason that I call it the *dharmakāya*. If a living being understood the import of such causes, you should know that this person would then see the Buddha.

At that time, the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteśvara and the whole multitude of heavenly being, *gandharvas,* and so forth heard what the Buddha taught. All were greatly delighted to faithfully receive and carry out the Sutra on the Merit of Building a Stūpa (Boucher, 1991: 8-10).

Although this attitude of the Mahāyāna schools may imply a source for Theravāda trends later on in pre-modern Thailand starting with Dvāravatī culture for a similar approach to stupas and the placement of texts inside, one might be tempted to consider a possible development from Theravāda sources. If the inspiration originally was from Mahāyāna influence yet the focus at the heart of this is just that of the rational method of the earlier Theravāda tradition, emphasizing at it does the law of dhamma as the timeless message which survived when the Great Master who preached it had passed away.

In order to clarify still further what their functions theoretically were, it may be helpful now to compare votive tablets with some other objects related to Buddhist religious practice. Buddha footprints, at least ideally, could involve repetition, though without burial underground; luk nimit or boundary stones on the other hand are buried underground and without repetition of their form. Buddha footprints may have been made in some cases from a mold and because of their unrealistically large size cannot of course be considered a true paribhogacetiya or reminder by association, and at any rate only a few it may be presumed of any particular design were ever made, and in most cases, only one. They are mentioned numerous times in Sukhothai inscriptions (Prasert Na Nagara and Griswold, 1992: 206, 404, 465, 529, 560-561, 563, 565, 766-767). The fact that Buddha footprints were very definitely meant to be seen and worshiped implies a different category of reverence than votive objects which once buried in a stupa could not be worshiped since in succeeding generations the contents within stupa forms by being out of sight would remain unknown. Luk nimit are sometimes worshiped initially before their burial beneath the bai sema structures above ground which serve to designate the parameters of the sacred space of the ordination hall or *ubosot* of Thai Theravāda temples. Bai sema are placed at each corner of the building as well as midway along each side for a total of eight markers, with a luk nimit placed directly beneath each one, along with a ninth stone unique to the Thai tradition which is placed under the ground in the main hall directly below or right in front of the main image (H.R.H. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, 1991: 68). According to M. C. Subhadradis Diskul this additional stone is inscribed with information on the founding of the structure (H.R.H. Damrong Rajanubhab, 1991: 230). Luk nimit are mentioned in the Pali Canon as being boundary markers and sometimes in a way not clearly separate from bai sema, and at least some aspects of

their use in Thailand even today represent pre-Buddhist aspects of ritual which long ago merged with Buddhist practice (Wright, 1990: 43-53). Prince Vajirañānavarovasa states that bai sema according to ancient Pali scripture could be considered rivers or mountains or other natural boundaries, and luk nimit were not found at all at Wat Mahathat in the old city of Sukhothai when he investigated the ancient city in the nineteenth century (Somdet Phra Mahā Samana Chao Khroma Phrayā Vajirañānavarovasa, 2010: 14-48). Without a connection to a temple or knowledge by the faithful that a footprint of the Buddha exists, its discovery would have been thought of as a *rediscovery* of its value, that value ever present yet unnoticed for a time. Boundary stones or luk nimit, on the other hand, have no sacredness whatever until their *locational association* with an ubosot is established; otherwise they are merely stone. Buddha images of all varieties and including votive tablets which are able to be observed and worshiped are in a similar category as footprints, votive objects midway between these and luk nimit buried out of sight. The distinctive difference between inherent sacred value and acquired value is an important one. If a dhāranī seal is broken, the Doctrine yet remains; if, on the other hand, a Buddha image is damaged it may no longer represent the Buddha, though its presumed sacralization at its completion means the substance out of which it was made retains some sacred power. This explains why broken votive tablets have often been ground up and used for the making of amulets in modern times.

4.3 Stupa Symbolism

The original function of a stupa, as one would suppose is universally acknowledged, was to remind people of the Buddha and his teachings, with the added and important corollary that in connection with general notions of mounds

representing burial structures it also symbolizes his parinibbāna. Since his death meant total enlightenment, stupas have always represented then at least three essential things: The Buddha and his teachings, his death, and the goal as enlightenment found to be the death of continual rebirth when his teachings are completely understood. A few points at the outset are worthy of our consideration. The first is that we would be wise to separate what may have been an original or long-standing meaning associated with some architectural feature or other of a stupa, and obviously then considered by some believers as a timeless sign not subject to alteration, from a certain symbolism based on beliefs which in any period may not be in accordance with previous views. The view that this sense of relativity is not important is a major point of criticism which Fussman makes against Snodgrass (Fussman, 1986: 38). Here we are dealing with something more purely psychological, since we are approaching the subject of the functions of votive tablets in connection with stupas through what is implied by *conscious* belief of one sort or other, at different times or even for different people of a particular cultural era. Very few Buddhists today would look at the dais or four-sided frame which rests upon the bell-shaped middle section of a *chedi* in the Sri Lankan style, and sense its ultimate connection to the fence called a harmika and which in ancient India was set around certain trees considered sacred (Craven, 1976: 69). When realizing that the form above it could be compared to the tiered umbrellas which sometimes are placed on different types of stupa structures in a tree-like, albeit somewhat abstract manner, this point is easier to imagine, but for most its function is purely decorative [Figure 20]. To know more about specific changes of a secondary nature in perspective concerning stupas or votive tablets over many centuries would require better historical and archaeological evidence than currently exists and thus at this stage is hardly impossible. It is probably safe to say, however, that the general

view today of most Theravāda Buddhists in Thailand, though with a lingering residue of other former beliefs having to do with relic worship and so on, is that the *chedi* is simply a reminder of these three essential aspects—The Buddha, his death and corresponding enlightenment, and thus the secular age in reducing the emphasis on belief in things lacking empirical support have brought the supreme religious symbol of the founder of Buddhism nearly back to its original point of departure.

Figure 20.

Sri Lankan-style stupa (chedi). Sukhothai Historical Park. Author's photograph.

Most likely out of the cult of relics evolved the idea that the stupa is literally the Buddha (Fussman, 1986: 46), though this need not have been the case at all, relics or stupas considered by some to be mere symbols with perhaps some supernatural powers associated with them like for example the relics of Christian saints in Medieval Europe. The association of a stupa with the Buddha himself is likely connected to the Mahāyāna notion of Dharmakāya, as stated previously, though we must remember King Asoka's spreading of relics to be buried in stupas across his realm from centuries earlier than the beginning of any Mahāyāna tradition. Looking at stupas more specifically in connection with votive tablets, we

should first clarify the difference between a stupa—or *chedi* in Thai, and a *thât*. A *chedi* is a monument without a relic, a monument with a relic is a *thât*, (or dhātu from the Pali and hence dhātucetiya) according to very old usage, though in Thai culture today it is said that these names more or less also refer to *chedi* types, a bell-shaped stupa in the Sri Lankan style being known as a *chedi*, with the word thât a term for other types such as those with alternate shapes and even including ones which resemble Khmer-style monuments which the Thai would normally refer to as a *prang* (Woodward, 1993: 76-77). It is worth pointing out that in many of the inscriptions of the Sukhothai period a *chedi* with relics does not include, or at least in any obvious way, votive images or images of the Buddha of any type, though naturally there are many exceptions. Apparently the relic as an obvious part of the Buddha in a less abstract manner than representative images or seals with texts made the addition of these latter objects unnecessary.

Aside from considering the importance of a Thai *chedi* (or *thât*) as a depository of the Buddha's relics as well as a symbol of his parinibbāna, we may now ask what role the chedi may have had in pre-modern times as regards its possible symbolism as a cosmic diagram, or representation of Mount Meru, or as something which in a Buddhist sense is connected to the worship of mountains. We know that mountains have long been considered sacred places of nature in Southeast Asian cultures, as the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription clearly shows (Prasert Na Nagara and Griswold, 1992: 276). We have in fact already encountered this idea in chapter two when dealing with stylistic trends of the votive tablets from the south, in which the depositing of votive objects in caves was no doubt related to beliefs in mountains as sacred places in nature (O'Connor, 1974: 83). It is easy to see the stupa then as a man-made, perhaps

transcendental image of a mountain, or akin to natural monuments of sufficient grandeur and beauty to be thought of as worthy of worship, and that a stupa from Hindu influence has always had a connection to the idea of Mount Meru as well as to cosmic relations between heaven and earth. In representing a kind of grandest symbol for the heart of a Buddhist nation, it would yet appear that this idea is prevalent mostly in nations affected more by purely Mahāyāna trends (Fussman, 1986: 48).

Figure 21

Stupas (*chedi*) at Wat Mahathat, Sukhothai Historical Park. Author's photograph.

Chedi in the Thai Buddhist tradition historically were thought to possess some degree or store of merit, and, correspondingly, some such powers of protection from sacralized images deposited within [Figure 21]. An interesting article by Byrne speaks of the relationship between *chedi* and the Thai Buddhist population, and how when a *chedi* falls into ruin, or if a clergy connected to it is unpopular—though this condition has probably only rarely occurred, it may lose something of its sanctity (Byrne, 1995: 272). Historically speaking it is worth questioning whether or not people in pre-modern times digging into ruined stupas for items such as votive

tablets, or hauling away their bricks for other purposes, were really disrespecting these structures as desecrators in the sense of how they by nearly all in our time would invariably be conceived (Byrne, 1995: 276). While a Christian church is more or less merely a place for the pious to meet and worship, a Buddhist *chedi* may come very close symbolically to the Buddha himself by way of containing one of his relics or objects reflecting essential dhamma as in the case of votive tablets. We may rephrase this by saying that *chedi* are on the one hand monumental structures which may indeed surpass all else in visual grandeur and corresponding respect, yet while remaining subservient to relics or other forms of sacra for their own place of importance in the Theravāda Buddhist community.

4.4 The Buddha Radiance Theory Regarding Stupas

As mentioned earlier in chapter three with regard to Sukhothai art, the Pali Canon mentions a number of marks or indicators of enlightenment, thirty two of particular importance. Some would be impossible to show in sculpture or are not aesthetically suitable, while others have very definitely determined the way Buddha images have been fashioned, naturally with a good deal of regional variation, since their inception starting around two thousand years ago in south Asia in the region of either Gandhara or Mathura. One of these was the golden radiance of the Buddha's appearance, a notion affecting the way Buddha images were fashioned in pre-modern Thailand and even up to the present time in several important ways.

This radiance was not purely physical. It emanated from the Buddha's inward enlightenment and calm, and images correctly showing the anatomical features appropriate for depicting the Great Master and especially when blessed by monks

contained and radiated this same vital energy. Relics as well were thought to emit this brilliancy as is apparent in the surviving inscriptions which speak of a golden, sometimes blinding light emanating from relics when first being exposed to the open air after being buried away in a stupa for may a year (Prasert Na Nagara and Griswold, 1992: 236, 333, 399-404, 622, 753), and in a way which is not how images are usually described which have long been present for all to see in a certain hall of worship. The most distinctive legacy of this belief on Thai sculptural traditions may be the *rasmi*, or flame-like spire set above the ushnisha or tuff of hair meant to imply additional intelligence, the *rasmi* perhaps signifying the life force resulting from this level of higher understanding.

When considering this supernatural element of the Buddha's physical state in contrast to his essentially rational teachings which might have been at least potentially agnostic, one can't help but get the feeling that this development was more a reactionary response to disbelievers of other faiths who spoke of their own gods or god-like saints as above the level of normal human qualities. In Buddhist traditions everywhere from very far back in time the use of gold or more commonly gold-leaf for Buddha images has been employed as another way of representing this radiant quality. The use of gold corresponds nicely with other factors of Buddhist worship related to political power or royalty whereby this expensive material was an indicator of abundant religious patronage, implying no doubt a greater amount of merit in showing the absence of greed through a donor's willingness to part with such valuable worldly wealth.

Votive tablets, of nearly all varieties, are delightfully free of these tendencies. Gold or gilt Buddhas are a perennial type in the art history of Thailand, and a great

many are striking and astonishingly beautiful, the Phra Chinnarat image of Phitsanulok being a most excellent example. There is, however, amid the grandeur of this golden elegance the loss of freer, more rustic qualities whereby the surfaces of an image are more likely to reveal subtle nuances of texture or beautiful color tones in the patina which gilt images left for centuries in the ground and discovered later on have shown. In the art of the Gupta period in India this golden radiance was expressed quite ingeniously through the portrayal of the Buddha in sculpture with exceedingly transparent, drape-like monastic clothing [Figure 22], though without a bit of education regarding the belief in the Buddha's radiant qualities the reason for this kind of depiction is not immediately obvious (Boisselier, 1975: 196).

Figure 22.

Standing Indian Buddha. Gupta period. National Museum, Bangkok. Author's photograph.

Although modern scholars have attempted to portray the Buddha as a completely rational thinker (Griswold, 1968: 9-11), this is clearly a distortion when considering all the examples of magical acts, remembrances of past lives in many forms and the different ways of referring to a certain subject according to what audience was

present, though it may be counter argued that these were simply techniques for delivering his message according to the varied levels of understanding his audiences possessed. Yet here we must still keep in mind just how Buddha images of all types and including votive tablets were regarded as sacred and endowed with potentially supernatural powers by most of the population. There had to be a way to imagine the Buddha as still somehow present to his followers who possessed strong beliefs in mystical or magical experience, and thus a Buddha image was regarded not only as a reminder of his teachings but also as an object of radiant guidance and protection:

> We can now begin to see why such miniatures were made in huge quantities to be buried away inside stupas and colossal images. They were a sort of electric charge, suffusing the stupas or the statue with *teja*: even if most of them proved to be inert, or nearly so, on the basis of probability at least a few of them would turn out to be particularly effective. Looked at in another way, they were intended to assure the durability, the invulnerability, of the Reminder that contained them: and even if they failed in that, and the Reminder was ever broken open, they would pour forth in an explosion of fiery energy, teja, conferring *teja* benefits as reminders and protectors far and wide upon future generations (Griswold, 1968: 24-25).

This view of Griswold that the belief that Buddha images shine forth with this energy was partly responsible for their being deposited in stupas implies further belief in a quantitative sense that an increase in the number of images located in a certain place should increase this degree of radiance, and thus that this power could be passed on to stupas when buried inside of them and serve in this way to attract more individuals to the Buddha's teachings.

It was therefore taken for granted that this radiant energy continued to exist as long as the image remained intact, whether seen or not by anyone and proven by the

descriptions of Buddha images or relics which when discovered from ruined *chedi* were often described as emitting a brilliant light (Wyatt, 1994: 46).

4.5 Belief Concerning the Five-Thousand Year Duration of Buddhism

One of the main reasons given by some scholars for the deposit of votive tablets in stupas or caves was the belief in the limited duration of the Buddhist religion, in fact in accordance with the laws of impermanence which the doctrine itself proposes yet varying from school to school regarding its ultimate length of time. Coedès stated this with great elegance in his famous article on the subject written in 1925 and published a year later, or in other words in 2468 and 2469 of the Buddhist era:

> Let us suppose for an instant the prophecy to have been fulfilled, that limits the total duration of the Buddhist religion to 5000 years, or allows it only 2532 years to endure from this present time. Let us allow a cataclysm (which I for one am far from desiring) that shall have swept away all vestiges of this religion, temples, images, books, all,--with the sole exception of its Brah Bimh. What might very well happen? These humble residua would enable the archaeologist of the 45th century to attest the at-one-time existence of an all-powerful religion holding sway over a great part of the regions that we now call the Far East. They would reveal to him the representation of its founder (naturally the supreme object of the adoration of the faithful), interpreted according to the artistic perceptions of the different countries in which, and epochs at which, this cult was followed. They would show to him the principal deities that by degrees invaded, and contributed a pantheon to a doctrine originally atheist. And, provided our imaginary archaeologist were capable of interpreting the brief inscription on most of these effigies, they would make known to him, embalmed in a single sentence of striking laconism, the whole quintessence of the very religion itself! Thus it may be seen how precious are these little Brah Bimh and how important is their pious preservation (Coedès, 1926/1927: 15-16).

There are some good reasons for supporting this theory, and ancient inscriptions often mention the deposit of many things and including Buddha images within stupas

for just this very reason (Prasert Na Nagara and Griswold, 1992: 105, 328-329, 452-455, 618, 778, 793). Buddhist sects historically believed in many other time spans for Buddhism's limited duration (Nattier, 1991: 56-69), though only the span of five hundred years is in the Pali Canon, dealing with the irrational prediction of the demise of Buddhism resulting from the ordination of women (Bhikkyu Bodhi, 2012: 1191-1192). The five-thousand year span evidently sets the Theravāda tradition apart from other Buddhist schools and emerges only during the time of Buddhaghosa.

Buddhaghosa in his Manorathapūniī, a commentary on the Anguttara Nikāya, postulates that the decline over a period of five thousand years will occur through five main periods, each lasting a thousand years: the disappearance of attainments (ability to attain arhatship); the disappearance of method (keeping of precepts); the disappearance of learning (loss of the Tipitaka); the disappearance of signs (symbols of monkhood such as proper robes, etc.); and finally in the last thousand years the disappearance of relics (Nattier, 1991: 56-68). It is noteworthy to point out that in the Sukhothai-period inscription of Mahādharmarājā I this explanation is relatively similar to that of Buddhaghosa:

> If anyone asks, "how much longer will the Lord's religion survive?" let this answer be given him: "three thousand and ninety-nine years after this relic is enshrined, the Lord's religion will come to an end.
>
> In the year of the boar, ninety-nine years from the year this relic in enshrined, the Three Pitakas will disappear. There will be no one who really knows them, though there will still be some who know a little bit of them. As for preaching the Dharma, such as the Mahajati, there will be no one who can recite it; as for the other Dharmajatakas, if the beginning is known the end will not be, or if the end is known the beginning will not be; and as for the Abhidhamma collection, the Patthana and the yammaka will disappear at that time.

A thousand years later there will still be monks who observe the [first] four moral precepts, but there will be none at all [who observe] a great number of monastic rules.

A thousand years later there will be no monks at all who wear the civara, but there will still be some who have a little bit of yellow cloth to stick behind the ear so that the Lord's religion may be recognized.

A Thousand years later there will be no civara cloth whatever and no monks at all (by which the religion) can be recognized; but our Lord's relics, both here and at other places, will still endure. Last of all, in the year when the Lord Buddha's religion will disappear altogether, a year of the rat, on Saturday the full moon day of the sixth month, a "ray sann" day in the Tai reckoning, when the moon is in the rksa of Baisakha, on that day all the Lord's relics on this earth, as well as in the Devaloka and the Nagaloka, will fly through the sky, assemble together in Lankadvipa, enter the ratanamalikamahastupa, and then fly to the srimahabodhi tree where the Lord Buddha attained the omniscience of Buddhahood long ago. Then a huge fire will consume the relics completely, and the flames will leap up to the Brahmaloka: the Buddha's religion will disappear on that day as declared. From that time on there will be no one at all among mankind who is acquainted with the various (sorts of) meritorious action: people will constantly commit sins and be reborn in hell." (Prasert Na Nagara and Griswold, 1992: 452-455).

A convincing argument for the belief in the limited duration of Buddhism *not* being the reason for the deposit of votive tablets in stupas or caves concerning many Buddhist sects is presented in the archaeological record. Of all the main forms of votive objects found in places throughout the Buddhist world such as Gazni in south Asia for example (Taddei, 1970: 70, 79), or in the south of Thailand (Steffen and Annandale, 1902: 177-180), or most importantly Bodh Gaya (Cunningham, 1892: 46-52) many were made of unbaked clay and thus have not withstood the ravages of time as well as tablets which were fired. Since clearly by this time throughout Asia it was known that the firing of clay objects increased immensely their durability, this

implies that the makers of these objects were not particularly obsessed with extending their longevity.

Examples in pre-modern Thailand abound especially in the south, where Mahāyāna sects before the dominance of the Theravāda starting in the thirteenth century produced large numbers of votive objects for deposit in caves and often with materials which were taken right from the ground nearby or perhaps within the cave itself, stamped and abandoned with very few complete specimens recovered do to the unbaked, highly fragile quality of the materials used (Graham, 1922: 7).

4.6 Pilgrim-Memento and Souvenir Theories

Ever since the beginnings of Buddhist archaeology it has generally been believed that the votive tablets uncovered at least at the sites representing the four main events of the Buddha's life—his birth at Lumbini (modern Nepal), his enlightenment at Bodh Gaya, his first sermon at nearby Sarnath and finally his death or parinibbāna at Kusinagara—were mementoes for pilgrims visiting these sites and especially Bodh Gaya, the most important of them all and where such an extraordinary number of tablets have been found. In his typically elegant style Foucher stated that:

> In order that we may grasp at once the germ and the directing principle of Buddhist art, it is necessary and sufficient to admit that the Indian pilgrims were pleased to bring back from these four holy places a small material souvenir of what they had there seen. We can scarcely believe that the reader will refuse to grant us this small postulate. Can he be so ignorant of the outer world that he does not know the universal empire of the mania, innocent in itself, for souvenirs of travels? The innumerable manufactures and shopkeepers who everywhere live by it would quickly demonstrate it to him. Has he never in the course of his migrations, whatever may have been the object or the cause of them, bought curios, collected photographs, or sent away picture post-cards? These are only the latest

modes and a profane extension of an immemorial and sacred custom. If he doubt this, let him lean, for example, over one the cases at the Cluny Museum, which contain the emblematic metal insignia of all the great pilgrimages of the Middle Ages, as they have been fished out of the Seine in Paris. Medieval India has also left by hundreds the evidences of this custom. Most frequently they are simple clay balls, moulded or stamped with a seal, and without doubt within the reach of all pockets, which served at the same time as memento and as *ex-voto* (Foucher, 1917: 11).

We can easily see from the above account that what is considered a common human desire which transcends the particularities of any culture allows Foucher and others to maintain the view that the interest in acquiring material objects to remember some important experience in one's life—such as for example a long and difficult pilgrimage to one of the great sites related to Buddhism's founder by one from far-away Southeast Asia, is irresistible. Yet we still have fundamental problems to solve regarding the large numbers of votive tablets left by the archaeological record in Southeast Asia, though presented here in a way which might strike the reader as moving in the opposite direction from what is implied by such abundance—namely, the unanswered questions of where did the objects go, what do they tell us about the change in the type of worship over time and how all this relates to social or religious practice.

It is important to remember that a stamp or mold in the hands of any craftsman in such a place for example as central Thailand where there is an abundance of clay deposits, could produce huge numbers of tablets in a very short period of time. We may only look at our own modern era in which the amount of amulets created for some religious event or other in Thailand is likely to run into the thousands for just this one event in order to satisfy demand [Figure 23]. Hundreds of thousands—nay, millions one would expect to find through the practice of votive tablets being buried

in stupas, stupas which now have long since become the ruins of time and revealed their treasures within. Even a few million would be a paltry figure given the span of time we are dealing with, yet one which would be larger in all probability than all the surviving numbers ever revealed, and thus without higher numbers it is easy to imagine that the practice was done only sporadically and mostly in connection with the building or restoration of stupas, and not in terms of items stamped and given to pilgrims either as mementos from a long and difficult journey from another part of Southeast Asia, nor as simple souvenirs which one might have been able to acquire at any time.

Figure 23.

Amulets for sale, Bangkok. Author's photograph.

Yet even if the production of votive tablets were only for stupa burial, a lack of variation in the behavior of any large group of humanity being quite impossible would mean that we could account for the certain numbers of votive tablets which might be scattered over a certain area away from where they were originally made as being due to pilgrims carrying these small portable items on their wandering ways.

They might also, though not very convincingly, imply some relative expansion of one culture into another's geographical homeland: a large number of Srivijaya-style tablets for example have been found in the Menam region ranging from about 800 to 1000 C.E. and causing some scholars to infer that this implies political control during this specific duration of time (Boisselier, 1975: 73).

4.7 Merit in Connection with Votive Tablets

In the Pali canonical tradition the making of merit may generally be thought of as possible through giving, morality or meditation (Walshe, 1995: 485). Later in post-canonical works the number of ways expanded to include at least another seven, designed perhaps to increase the possibilities of making merit either for oneself or for others in a way not exclusively related to purely individual effort. Besides the original three, the others included respect or reverence; service in helping others; transference of merit to others; rejoicing in another's merit; listening to the Dhamma; instructing the Dhamma; and finally thinking correctly (Davids, 1910: 146). Note that five out of these seven pertain to the bestowing of something positive to other individuals, at least indirectly. This explains the increase in the making of images and the votive tablet tradition, the Theravāda school appearing at first glance as a somewhat passive receiver of Mahāyāna beliefs resulting from its canon already being established during a time of increasing Mahāyāna texts, though perhaps in fact contributing its own developments in belief and ritual which largely parallel Mahāyāna trends.

The predominance of merit making in both pre-modern Thailand and the Thailand of today is striking in its emphasis on an accumulation or "store" of results through

positive thought and deed, designed to reduce the negative effects of kamma. Kamma, meant to imply a moral law of cause and effect determining one's conditions of existence was borrowed from Hinduism which does not stress in the same strict manner the idea that nothing at all has permanence, and is thus an unwieldy term for Buddhism yet at any rate should mean something negative in connection with immoral and ignorant intentions and results accumulating on and onward if not offset by positive ones which eventually reduce the kammic "store" to utter nothing, resulting in enlightenment. This nothingness means complete and utter extinction, free from future rebirth or consciousness of any kind. Thus the "store" of merit (positive) in Buddhist Thailand is inversely proportional to the kamma (negative) one possesses, and the production of votive tablets may have been a way to produce a greater store of merit in conjunction with this view. Although it is unlikely that most worshipers were so analytical about a simple religious act, yet it may in fact have lingered in the minds of many that the offering of votive tablets simultaneously satisfied several forms of merit: Giving, in the general sense; respect or reverence—for the Buddha but also for those for whom a donation could be made; service, in helping another person; and the transference of merit, all mentioned above.

The making of merit as the reason for doing anything in a religious sense in pre-modern Thailand in so far as what can be gathered from historical records is so prevalent as to cause some suspicion regarding the notion that this was always why such actions occurred, either in the form of donations to the clergy or deposits of some kind to be deposited in *chedi*. Inscriptional evidence in which a donor specifically mentions the depositing of such objects as Buddha images in *chedi* for purposes of merit is proof enough that this was one of the main reasons for the

fashioning of votive tablets in Thailand in the pre-modern period (Prasert Na Nagara and Griswold, 1992: 28-32, 54-56, 199-201, 235-240, 279, 331-336, 337-338, 388-396, 399-404, 412-416, 471, 495-496, 512), yet in strange contrast to the thousands of votive tablets found in the crypt of the early fifteenth-century Wat Ratchaburana of Ayutthaya (M.L. Pattaratorn Chirapravati, 2005: 83), the Nan Chronicle mentions how king Mahādharmarājā I of Sukhothai in gratitude for an alliance against Ayutthaya presented a much smaller number of only twenty gold and twenty silver tablets to King Cao Kan Müang of Nan and obviously done for more purely political reasons (Wyatt, 1994: 46). The Nan king Tao Kha Kan in the following century after digging up relics buried alongside these same votive tablets then instructed all these objects to be kept in the city for a month before re-depositing them in a new *chedi* constructed over the ruins where they were initially unearthed. This of course meant treating them in a manner related more to the making of merit and showing quite clearly the different possible approaches to votive objects depending on time and circumstance (Wyatt, 1994: 56-57).

Inscriptions naturally were more common earlier on when paper or other writing materials were less available, and few were created from the Ayutthaya period onward. Since these texts are usually engraved in stone and meant to celebrate some important political or religious event, evidence concerning votive tablets gleaned from inscriptions are invariably related to such occurrences and thus other than inferences drawn mostly from archaeological deposits, to what degree votive tablets were produced outside of ceremonial activities is difficult to determine. If they were meant very generally for depositing in stupas, then only at the time when a stupa was being built or later restored—both no doubt requiring a special ceremony, would

votive tablets then be produced. It is a bit odd at first after being introduced to the idea that votive tablets were important objects for burial in stupas in ancient India and beyond as evidenced by their large numbers found at places such as Bodh Gaya, to hear about so many archaeological locations in Thailand such as the Dvāravatī site of Kantaravisai (Wales, 1980: 46), or the Khmer-dominated site of Prasat Muang Singh (M.C. Subhadradis Diskul, 1981: 167) to name merely two, where very few tablets have been found. Dvāravatī inscriptions on votive tablets during this period when they were the most common in pre-modern Thailand depict most often the ye dhammā verse, though statements in which a donor's name is mentioned are also common and tell us much about the personal aspirations of the pious (Skilling, 2008: 257-259). Quite often they are for themselves, though requests for the transfer of merit to others are also common. When considering the role of Mahāyāna beliefs in the earliest centuries C.E. in regards to the production of images, script on its own for burial in stupas as a means of gaining merit, a more general emphasis on spiritual progress merely through faith and ritual or Buddha-to-be individuals delaying intentionally their own nirvana in order to guide less developed personalities along the path—we see in all this the potential for wanting to interpret the emphasis on merit the Theravadins later developed as a reaction to, or substitution for, these notions of enlightenment being approached in small, compassionate steps as opposed to the Theravāda consideration of enlightenment being a purely personal road, a journey every individual must make and wholly alone. During the reign of Mongkut when scriptural orthodoxy and rationalism were being reintroduced into Thai Theravāda Buddhism the influential monk Buddhasiri who resided at the same temple as the king during his years of monkhood stated that:

> Name and form which were born in the past ceased even there; there is nothing that has come over to this existence from the past. Name and form which will be born in the future will cease even there; there is nothing that will come over to this existence. Name and form which were born in the present cease there; there is nothing that will have come over to the future from the present (Somdet Phra Vanarat [Buddhasiri], 2004: 34).

This point of view if followed too closely could make all merit making seem essentially futile, in that it presents the classical perspective that merit and demerit, or any action based on need is conditional, making any action and its opposite as action of another sort, or intention of any sort and its opposite intention part of the same cloth of conditional relations, of paticcasamuppāda in strict philosophical terms (Buddhaghosa Bhandantācariya, 1992: 622, 626). This obviously explains why the inaction of compete silence of the mind through any form of Buddhist meditative practice is considered by some to be more meritorious than any definite action within the conditions of the world, if in fact merit in this way may even play a role.

The emphasis on metaphysics and mystical concerns so characteristic of various Mahāyāna schools has never been as important in Theravāda monastic culture, a case in point being the latter's Abhidhamma books which though impressively analytical are essentially devoid of metaphysical speculation. The gifting to another, so to speak, of steps toward that final goal stands in stark contrast to the rational basis of the Four Noble Truths and enlightenment through one's own individual effort of learning through rationality and calm which characterizes the central wisdom of Pali Canonical scripture. Of course in actuality the magical elements from various sources including local animist beliefs have surely always been predominant regarding the whole population of all pre-modern cultures in Thailand and must have

been as influential as the desire to make merit regarding the production of votive tablets. Thus we see that the act thought meritorious of depositing an object symbolizing the Buddha implies a highly dependent belief on forces beyond one's own individual effort, and correspondingly how the idea of merit transfer represents a development away from classical Theravāda doctrine.

CHAPTER V

RESULTS OF RESEARCH

Introduction

This chapter begins with a section on inferences about votive tablets derived from styles of the art historical periods discussed in chapters two and three, followed by a section which deals with some socio-religious implications of these studies. Among the many factors to consider are the degree of distribution from the location of their production, the relationship of styles depicted or religious symbolism on votive tablets with larger Buddhist statuary and finally the connection of votive tablets to actual individuals and corresponding social categories. The several sections remaining are concerned more specifically with the functions of votive tablets discussed in chapter four. We can safely assume that votive tablets served different purposes at widely ranging periods of time, both within a given tradition as well as concerning differing traditions whereby this outcome would not be unexpected.

5.1 Styles of Votive Tablets and What They Imply

Style, in all varieties, is infused with untold meaning. What is meant by originality may be the product of conscious intention, implying either a natural pregnancy of inspired vision or a restlessness resulting from dissatisfaction with the norm. A lack of originality may indicate the death of a certain field of scholarly research, though in the arts a continuity of established rules of iconography does not necessarily mean static decay or loss of inspiration and has often been the framework for a greater depth of technical development and clarity of aesthetic expression, as in the West for example the art of Byzantium had shown. Here we want to concentrate

on style as it relates to definite intention, meaning from conscious thought or desire, and secondarily examine unintended results whereby votive tablets were an influential cause in some such way.

The Dvāravatī period seems to represent a culture intent on close associations with Indian prototypes, as evidenced by its iconography which adhered initially to Gupta Indian models, though a rather de-centralized area of civilization made local variation and development inevitable. Added to this was its concern for mythical depictions from the Buddha's life such as the Srāvastī Miracles portrayed so frequently on votive tablets and without much variation from established texts. The inscriptions on votive tablets from the Dvāravatī period expressing the ye dhammā verse in many variations of Pali but also Sanskrit prove that decentralization of not only political control but also persuasion through common knowledge was the order of the day at this time. No one seems to have much to say about why this particular creed became so popular, but at any rate its prevalence during the Dvāravatī period seems to indicate two essential points: that inscriptions on votive objects in being so popular yet originally as a Mahāyāna innovation show how strongly Mahāyāna traditions were felt during this period and all out of proportion to what might normally be implied when considering the use of Pali for the majority of inscriptions, the language of Theravāda Buddhism; and secondly that Dvāravatī culture was highly orthodox or at least without much interest in *intentional* variation. This may account for the naturalism of the facial expressions of so many works that is the hallmark of some of the best of Dvāravatī sculpture, yet while dooming it to inevitable repetition and dullness, but for the fact that so much decentralization made isolated developments still possible. Naturally it would not have been unorthodox to use the Four Noble

Truths which occasionally occurred on other objects (Prapod Assavavirulhakarn, 2010: 76) as an inscription which really would appear more appropriate, or any other beautiful and profound statements taken from various canonical sources. The fact that this particular verse became so popular is therefore quite extraordinary. As a benefit to modern linguists, in the absence of a great many other sources for early Mon writing votive tablets have offered interesting if only occasional uses of the Mon language, especially in the north (Bauer, 1991a: 31-83, 1991b: 61-80).

Although Indianization is a term without the approval it once had for describing the absorption and development of south Asian cultural traditions throughout much of Southeast Asia, this region in many if not most ways followed Indian developments closely. This is shown most definitely by the fact that the ye dhammā verse which began to fall into disuse by around the tenth to twelfth centuries in India (M.L. Pattaratorn Chirapravati, 1997: 6). died out at virtually the same time in pre-modern Thailand. Buddhism in India at this stage was breathing its last while the votive tablet tradition continued in Southeast Asia for a number of centuries after, and thus it is rather telling that the disuse of this famous inscription at its origins would cause such a faithful correspondence in its range so far afield.

As may now be readily apparent toward the conclusion of this thesis, the focus on magic or myth has been losing ground compared to the memory or reminder element in the votive tablet tradition over time. When one compares the emphasis of Dvāravatī culture on miracles for their pictorial arts which declined during the later Sukhothai and Ayutthaya eras, the former with its famous Walking Buddhas as the predominant form, the latter with its receded molding around figures of the Buddha seated with legs pendant or lying in the position implying his parinibbāna and

generally with little reference to some event outside the scope of natural events, this trend is irrefutable. After the Dvāravatī period it seems there was much less emphasis on inscriptions placed on votive tablets and the ye dhammā verse—or writing in general and including donor statements correspondingly fell by the wayside, leaving the pictorial presentation paramount. The reasons for why this happened are somewhat mysterious and represent one of the most interesting changes in the votive tablet tradition of Buddhist Asia.

Collectively the southern styles are an interesting link with Khmer culture farther north, the latter not affecting the former's iconography until rather late in the day if at all, and yet the two share Mahāyāna trends generally absent in the other periods under our consideration, at least as regards the type of religious iconography employed; as was pointed out in chapter four on the functions of votive tablets the tradition as a whole was largely inspired by Mahāyāna beliefs. Like in the case of Dvāravatī culture the intention to remain faithful to Indian traditions was very strong in the south, though with different results and its constant contact with fresh arrivals through ports—both persons of strong religious persuasion as well as the votive tablet molds they carried with them from abroad, made room for little in the way of local innovation.

When encountering such a majority of images depicting the deity Avalokiteśvara, we may then begin to see why the emphasis on the burial of votive tablets in caves was so prevalent in the south where Mahāyāna or Vajrayāna ideals were predominant. The abode of Avalokiteśvara is in the mountains, and this protector of humanity in various forms was worshipped in part through the production and deposit of votive tablets bearing his image in caves where his compassionate spirit dwells. Mountains themselves were often regarded as living forms, and mountain spirit cults were

common throughout Southeast Asia in pre-modern times (Tarling, 1992: 283-285). By such an intentional act of choosing caves within a tradition in which stupas would otherwise have been chosen as the place of burial for votive tablets, a pre-Buddhist emphasis on mountain worship is a logical conclusion for its cause. We have already referred to Ram Khamhaeng's inscription in chapter four in which the "spirit of the mountain" was noted, and on at least one other occasion in Sukhothai inscriptions another similar reference is made (Prasert Na Nagara and Griswold, 1992: 84-86).

The shapes of at least some of the tablets of the south preclude the notion that they were made for anything but burial out of sight. Unlike many other varieties with a flat backside potentially applicable for any number of purposes--easy transport as a souvenir, placement in a niche of a temple wall or any number of possibilities conjured up by the imagination, many southern varieties are a bit ungainly in shape, either as relatively small and unevenly shaped objects not much larger than modern amulets or as much larger teardrop-shaped objects flattened on the front by a mold to produce an image and on the back with one or more inscriptions. Added to this is their fragile condition due to the fact that few were ever fired, and even when handled gently may be subject to wear and crumbling.

With the rise of the votive tablet tradition in Khmer culture, it is clear that at least some inspiration for votive tablet production was for purposes of meditation through ritual. In Khmer Mahāyāna Buddhism, from the standpoint of visual representation the humanity of the Buddha which once held center stage was replaced by a panoply of religious symbolism through exuberant pictorial forms. The sufficiently complex iconography of Tantra-inspired Khmer tablets and especially when considering their abundant esoteric associations, means that their fashioning merely for burial purposes

in stupas as acts of merit seems hardly possible. Even if the majority of votive tablets from the Khmer period were recovered from inside of stupas or at least in a stupa's vicinity, yet still it seems reasonable to assume that such complex, mandala-like votive tablets such as those depicting Hevajra and his yoginis were at least in some instances used for meditation and reflection or other kinds of devotional activity, given the secretive or semi-secretive nature of Tantric practices. With fewer inscriptions on the objects themselves and when considering their complex iconography as much more detailed than would be necessary to create a simple object for merit, merit regarding Khmer votive tablets was probably less a factor than one would normally presume.

The north, in being affected less by Mahāyāna influences has correspondingly bequeathed to posterity a somewhat less distinctive votive tablet tradition. Perhaps this inference may appear a bit unwieldy at first, in that this region of pre-modern Thailand simply by having had less contact with Mahāyāna beliefs therefore seems to have been less inspired by a symbolism related to such practices. Yet this would explain somewhat their less inspired tradition fairly well. Showing strong influences from Burmese, Khmer and Sukhothai cultures, yet in the Lan Na period a new and original style did arise and curiously which links it with the very far south. Though no doubt there were instances of large or perhaps even gigantic Buddha images transported from one location to another some fairly great distance away, most of the time the means by which new styles were introduced to a given region from the outside was probably through the importation and distribution of votive tablets, if only on a relatively small scale. This is one of the most significant aspects of historical importance connected to all votive tablet traditions: that aside from function

as *intended* use, votive tablets had the *unintended* capacity to bring about changes when carried by individuals far beyond the borders where they were made, acting as stylistic ambassadors of a particular place and religious affiliation.

The styles of Sukhothai votive tablets follow closely those of larger statuary, and the high number of very small amulet-size tablets from the Sukhothai era found in ruined stupas may imply a greater emphasis, aside from thoughts of personal merit or merit transfer, on the Buddha radiance or five-thousand year duration theories regarding the reasons why votive tablets were buried in stupas. The simplicity of the type with a single figure is perhaps indicative of the change in attitude toward religious iconography, and in comparison with pre-Thai votive tablets this alone represents a somewhat remarkable development. The portrayal of the Buddha as walking with a three-dimensional stance in which he appears to be taking a step is unique in style and technical execution compared to all other votive tablet traditions. In the late Sukhothai period, however, and in this sense to meaning into the years in which Sukhothai culture was either a vassal of Ayutthaya or an outright part of the Ayutthaya kingdom, this tradition appears to have become more decorative and in line with changing tastes and influences away from more purely Theravāda sentiments.

Ayutthaya votive tablets present a further extension away from myth and complex symbolism which characterized the pre-Thai periods, though formal execution and technical emphasis moved the tradition far from the aesthetics of simplicity characteristic of classical Sukhothai. It is obvious through the greater emphasis on the devaraja concept and the development of the crowned Buddha in the Ayutthaya era that *aesthetic preference* largely gave way in most respects to *symbolic*

association, meaning effectively that Buddha images had by this time become in some manner less objects of simple reverence than political tools of propaganda linking Ayutthaya rulers with the Buddhist faith, and votive tablets followed a similar pattern of aesthetic development in this way.

Although the Ayutthaya period produced an original style with receding borders lining the figure of the Buddha and often representing the most important events of his life such as his moment of enlightenment or his parinibbāna, other styles remained largely derivative. On the other hand Ayutthaya did produce a more varied tradition than has often been realized, at least in so far as what may be implied by the collection in the National Museum in Bangkok in which an unusual range of very un-classical tablets is presented. The last one analyzed and referred to as figure 17 in this paper is particularly noteworthy in this respect and may be indicative of a more folk-oriented tradition long neglected by scholars.

5.2 Some Socio-Religious Considerations

If votive tablets were made throughout much of the Srivijaya period in the south until this kingdom's demise by the thirteenth century and the rise of the Tai-speaking peoples throughout pre-modern Thailand, yet the inspiration for the making of these objects which Tai speakers who were largely followers of the Theravāda tradition clearly had should have produced either a different range of religious symbolism derived from an alternative Buddhist sect, or a parallel development of the old and new which one could imagine in this region of the world where religious tolerance is famed.

Yet with this change in the type of Buddhism practiced and promoted by the ruling elite in the Malay Peninsula the Mahāyāna trends of artistic development practiced by these earlier peoples largely died out, along with their votive tablet traditions. Votive tablets from after the thirteenth century are never or rarely mentioned by scholars as having been discovered in the south. With regard to the Khmer tradition in the Menam Basin a similar fate occurred. Even today in Thailand along the border with Cambodia there is a significant population of ethnic Khmers and yet starting in the thirteenth century when Tai speakers became politically dominant the Khmer-inspired Tantric tradition of votive tablets virtually disappeared.

If we compare these examples to the influence of the Sukhothai tradition inspired by Theravāda ideals on that of Ayutthaya which also followed this particular Buddhist school, a clearer picture then begins to emerge. As is well known the Ayutthaya kingdom with its connection historically to the U-Thong region and general Khmer culture, absorbed both Sukhothai artistic traditions while at the same time utilizing Khmer trends in sculpture as well as a whole range of cultural facets having to do with socio-political dimensions of its kingdom. Why one school of Buddhism lost its artistic tradition entirely when a more dominant political power favoring another religious belief system entered the scene, while Ayutthaya after it became powerful did freely absorb Sukhothai trends derived from the same religious sect to which Ayutthaya itself belonged, implies that the makers of Buddhist iconography in various forms such as votive tablets were usually inclined to follow their own particular creed, and when another sect became dominant it brought about a swift and rapid decline of other traditions in terms of their own religious symbolism yet while allowing their influence in much more subtle ways of craft and artistic style.

We have then from the relatively abrupt disappearance of certain religious traditions as revealed through surviving votive tablets, three possible considerations. The first is that the new and more dominant sect in any of the periods we have been considering was exceedingly intolerant of former pre-existing artistic and religious schools, stamping them out when it gained firm political control; the second possibility is that each new political power, while not intolerant, was yet essentially indifferent to religious persuasions contrary to their own, and these in turn died by being starved of funds to keep them going, meaning in effect for their temples and artistic patronage; and lastly we might conclude that the votive tablet traditions of pre-modern Thailand had very little to do with anyone but the upper classes of society. This latter notion, which actually could relate to the other two in various ways, seems the most probable and would also go far in explaining why there are not thousands of tablets in every ancient location ever discovered, which is what one would expect if merit-making through the production of tablets was universally believed in. The Wat Bāng Sanuk Inscription which Prasert Na Nagara and Griswold had dated to 1339 C.E. (Prasert Na Nagara and Griswold, 1992: 769) has now been convincingly re-dated to 1219 C.E. (Penth, 1996: 5-16). Wyatt notes that the inscription includes information on a celebration in which most of the Sukhothai population was invited to take part in the stamping of votive tablets, but that the slave class, which might or might not at this time have been very large, was apparently excluded. This implies a counterpoint to what has just been said above, but for the fact that the *production* was still in the hands of the political class or clergy (Wyatt, 2001: 33-34).

We may determine that the fashioning of votive tablets, or art objects in general—or at least those made from materials destined to survive the ravages of time, was not something done in every village or realm, or that the idea of merit was clearly emphasized by the general population in such a way that votive tablets were often produced as offerings to *chedi* or for purposes of private distribution and worship. One never hears of a poor farmer, either formerly or today, as one with a rather large store of religious merit, unless, of course, they have been a practicing and pious monk for many a year; thus merit at least under lay conditions is intricately linked to social stratification and material wealth, and some reference has already been made to donor inscriptions on Dvāravatī tablets offered almost exclusively by the ruling classes or monks. In this context one would imagine the production of votive tablets as being done *mainly* by the poor in order to gain more merit, and yet the surviving archaeological record runs contrary to this view.

Regarding who the people were who actually fashioned votive tablets, an important key ingredient in the equation is the close association between the iconographic styles of votive tablets and that of larger, life-size or monumental statuary. If one were trained in a certain tradition, then the same or a similar style concerning all types of statuary is easily explained. If the common individual, however, the slave or free farmer or merchant city-dweller were inclined to make merit through the making of votive tablets on their own, rather like a peasant engaged in basketry or woodcarving of one kind or other, then surely a somewhat different technique would be employed and corresponding aesthetic compared to those of craftsmen more classically trained and producing commissioned works by temples or the wealthy. Until all surviving tablets and statuary are cataloged on a central

database or at least as regards museum collections in which thousands of objects may be given more minute attention for cross-referencing all kinds of techniques and artistic peculiarities, the survey of most periods of Southeast Asian art history is apt to remain vague. It may even be that in some instances a single craftsman, either traveling like medieval European sculptors from one cathedral site to another or as is more likely in being carried away as a war captive by an invading army during this time of limited manpower, was responsible for a kind of style thought to be from a longer range of time, or even a sub-category of some particular artistic school.

In the case of many pre-modern societies—Renaissance Europe being a notable exception, the artist or craftsman was often thought of as a kind of workhorse or mere laborer, underneath the status of the designer or planner of a given work or project. The Sukhothai era does mention in at least one inscription, though there are probably others, the gifting of an individual to a temple who is referred to as "the image caster." (Prasert Na Nagara and Griswold, 1992: 720). A related point has to do with the status of craftsmen who fashioned larger statuary, in particular a historical development derived from tracing the source for the length of fingers on some Buddha images which presumably not until the Phra Chinnarat from the early fifteenth century in Thailand had fingers of equal length. This tradition without any obvious contact with Thai culture came to be common regarding Buddha images in modern Burma fashioned in traditional styles. The likely cause, as Prince Damrong once noted, was the capturing of craftsmen during one of Thailand's former wars with the Burmese and who as war captives then exerted an influence from this time forward on Burmese statuary (H.R.H. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, 1936: 44). It would appear then that the individuals who crafted images were not the ones the

images were for, nor that in most cases were they encouraged or allowed to handle them after their completion, according to custom. Earlier it was pointed out that it has long been believed that not until the reign of King Mongkut in nineteenth-century Thailand was it considered proper for an individual to keep a Buddha image in their home. Two shipwrecks from the Ayutthaya era, no doubt raided by looters before they were treated in a more scientific manner for historical study, revealed heaps of ceramics and a good many other items yet apparently not a single Buddha image of any kind (Pensak Chagsuchinda Howitz, 1977: 1-22). Though votive tablets were clearly carried far and wide by some in pre-modern Thailand, it would appear that images were made primarily for temples by monks or commoner-craftsmen, and that the artistic remains as some of the most powerful tools for studying the history of this region where textual records are scant do not necessarily indicate a population particularly concerned with classical religious symbolism.

The styles of votive tablets, unlike folk craft traditions, do not generally show any independent course in their pictorial or symbolic forms away from classical models, thus indicating almost beyond a doubt that they were made by the same class of people in society as those who fashioned larger works of sculpture. If votive tablets were made by all groups of society, they would not likely then mirror in any coherent manner—which they actually do and in a way which is quite remarkable, the iconography of larger statuary which because of the great expense involved was surely commissioned by the wealthy. Today across the border from Thailand in neighboring Laos and as a country that appears to any traveler visiting just the urban centers as primarily Theravāda Buddhist, only two in every three individuals follow this creed, in part because of the less developed state of the country as a whole. This

is in stark contrast to neighboring Thailand, and what is implied here is that as urban centers grow they tend to influence through their ideas the recent arrivals from the countryside much more than the other way around. The consistent influx of new people into the more developed centers in pre-modern Thailand, taken as slaves from the hill tribe populations or areas not yet under cultivation or who arrived at these centers quite free and on their own, meant that the majority of people in both urban centers as well as in rural areas until perhaps just the last couple of hundred years, were largely animist.

This in fact may be a key ingredient for the cause of the modern craze for amulets as a lingering historical phenomenon, and is strongly implied by the relatively rapid changeover which occurred in all votive tablet traditions whenever a political power entered the scene with different religious beliefs: animist objects made of natural and perishable materials have not left much to posterity, and stylistic and pictorial changes in works made of stone or metal did not affect the general population living outside of urban centers yet comprising the majority of people in pre-modern Thailand.

5.3 Mahāyāna Influences

As in the case of Buddha images, the idea that placing inscribed objects in stupas does not ultimately derive from Mahāyāna influence seems most unlikely, since Mahāyāna believers specifically venerated books which led to this practice—unlike the Theravadins, and only after the rise of the Mahāyāna in areas alongside the Theravāda did the latter begin to produce votive tablets, and no satisfactory explanation is available to account for independent development. This also would

explain why Theravāda Buddhism which existed during the time when Cambodia was largely Hindu left no votive tablets to posterity, and in fact their production corresponds only with the rise of Mahāyāna influence around the time of Jayavarman VII who went against tradition and made Buddhism the official state religion of the Khmer (Skilling, 1997: 102). When considering the fact that Hindu gods have often been worshiped side by side with the Buddha or buddhas in Theravāda culture and as representative of great religious tolerance, it is indeed telling that few votive tablets with Hindu deities have ever been found, though some have been recovered depicting the Buddha with Indra and Brahma descending from Tavatimsa Heaven (Wyatt, 2001: 10). One final consideration, however, makes the influence of Mahāyāna doctrines irrefutable. It is indeed curious that by the time of the rise of the Thai and with the establishment of the Sukhothai kingdom in the thirteenth century, we apparently find once again fewer influences from the cult of the book and related emphasis on the burial of texts in stupas. In all of the inscriptions from the Sukhothai period translated by Prasert Na Nagara and Griswold, the practice of burying a text as a kind of votive offering is barely mentioned among all the items deposited in stupas newly built or renovated (Prasert Na Nagara and Griswold, 1992: 415). Thus with the decline of votive stupas along with votive seals with text, the Tai-speaking peoples with their preference for Theravāda Buddhism began to bring about, though perhaps unwittingly, a decline in the votive tablet tradition and including votive imagery. This is one of the most surprising conclusions arrived at from this study. The Lan Na kingdom of the north, less affected by Mahāyāna trends, was correspondingly less influenced by the cult of the book and despite the fact that many historically important manuscripts survive from this part of Thailand (Veidlinger, 2006: 438).

5.4 Stupa Symbolism

Concerning stupa symbolism and its connection to the practice of depositing objects inside of stupas such as votive tablets, we may presume that the non-representational form of the Buddha in terms of stupa designs has by way of tradition and visual monumentality a permanent place in Buddhist architecture and general religious worship, yet its form requires additional sacred elements in order to be truly representative of the Buddha and his parinibbāna. Absent a representative image, or association with a relic or at least a community of monks who revere it as a symbol of the Great Master, the stupa *almost* could be thought of as a mere stylized pile of bricks. It seems the Theravāda tradition in pre-modern Thailand did not quite reach the point of absolute interchangeability of Buddha and dhamma, or either of these and representative objects, leading gradually to a decline in the more abstract representations of the Buddha and his teachings over time. Graham stated back in the 1920's how abandoned stupas were torn down to make way for the railway system and their bricks used for other construction needs, a surprising or even shocking revelation in our day with its emphasis on historical and cultural preservation (Graham, 1922: 8).

Although not with complete acceptance of a once foreign idea that the script itself is *actually* a kind of relic of the Buddha in terms of being a dharmakāya, there was obviously a movement in this direction by Theravāda traditions in both south and Southeast Asia considering various associations as reflecting the Great Master in his true transcendent form. In this regard we may consider a somewhat parallel development, spurred on by exposure to certain Mahāyāna ideas yet *inspired* by inherent traditions. As stated previously luk nimit stones before burial are sometimes

worshipped, even though they possess no characteristics such as sacred script or imagery.

Presently the extremely abstract symbolism of worshiping a stone merely by *association* with an idea and its *space*, has surprisingly remained more or less intact while the slightly less abstract forms which still lack iconographic representation of the religion's founder—namely tablets with script and votive stupas, have virtually disappeared. One could technically say the same for the main votive tablet tradition which involves depictions of the Buddha, yet only in terms of the *function* of tablets for merit related to their *locational* aspect of burial out of sight. In effect this tradition thrives like never before by way of votive tablets functioning as amulets for protection by being worn on a worshipper's body. Thus the act of burying votive tablets out of sight was connected to highly mystical or supernatural beliefs now transferred to the practice of wearing amulets, though it would hardly appear this way to the modern believer in whom habit through tradition has long set in and affected spontaneous perception. The change in function from stupa burial to personal talisman implies these older beliefs, yet is really part of a framework for activity which has survived long after the inspirations which gave rise to it have passed.

The idea that a tree under which the Buddha achieved enlightenment produced seeds for other trees, which in turn produced seeds for more trees and on and on for a great many succeeding generations, and such that a modern descendent, crawling with bugs and decaying even through its beautiful sprawling growth, somehow emits a sacred power to those who come near to encounter its presence, is indeed fantastical. As an indicative reminder, however, one could say that this symbolism has a way of releasing an inward sense of something sacred and true, normally latent

and moving one toward clearer thought and morality in action. Votive tablets, on the other hand, may not technically be considered reminders until they are rediscovered after a *chedi* has fallen into ruin. They are thus capable of worship but were not meant to be according to the merit theory regarding their *exclusive* placement in stupas.

Whereas a symbol of the Buddha as some sort of a reminder was meant to create mindfulness concerning right thought and action, it came to be regarded later as a vehicle for the emission and transference of sacred power. We should be careful not to confuse a type of classification such as some type of reminder or other with an original intention for why a thing was made; an object which reminds one of something or somebody was in many instances not created for that purpose. Yet it is still reasonable to emphasize the fact that by definition an image of the Buddha, of whatever type or material used, is an uddesikacetiya or indicative reminder. No mindfulness is possible, however, if an object acting as such is buried away out of visual or any other sort of recognition. This is one of the strongest arguments for disbelieving the idea that votive tablets were, at least in the Theravāda tradition, *exclusively* meant for burial. Aside from luk nimit stones buried only under bai sema, votive objects such as votive stupas or dhāranī seals, though sometimes worshiped while still visible were not necessarily approached in such a way, votive stupas and luk nimit often considered sacred only by association and dhāranī seals even less; as we pointed out earlier the cult of the book was a much more Mahāyāna form of practice which the Theravadins never wholly adapted.

This may also make one wonder if it is completely accurate to say that votive tablets, or at least votive tablets with imagery, were never meant to be seen. It may

be supposed that neither votive stupas nor dhāranī seals with only script left much room for creative artistry, though as regards votive tablets with imagery this is quite another matter. Perhaps in pre-modern Thailand the concern for making Buddha images technically and esthetically beautiful was as natural as any routine involved in daily worship, with these images in the form of votive tablets proudly shown when first created before given away as souvenirs to locals or wandering pilgrims, or as was usually the case piously offered for burial in stupas and then imagined later as being seen in some far away distant time, objects born from a culture's extraordinary sense of beauty.

5.5 Buddha Radiance

Concerning the radiance theory as a reason for the burial of votive tablets as advocated for example by Griswold, we can say that since a number of inscriptions mention this radiance explicitly it clearly was believed in, though the lack of direct reference to it as a reason for providing a chedi with more sacredness and power and in contrast to explicit references to merit-making increases the likelihood of radiance being of only secondary importance. On the other hand it is not irrelevant to point out that in the post-canonical period of Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia there developed a belief in radiance which extended beyond the same or similar notions held in ancient India. This is evidenced by such Southeast Asian works as the Pathamasambodhi which lists the Ketumālā or flame above the head, more commonly known as a *rasmi* in Thai, as one of the eighty minor characteristics of a great man such as the enlightened Buddha is thought to have exhibited, separate from the original thirty-two of the Lakkhana Sutta from the Pali Canon and in a way not emphasized to the same degree in other traditions (Woodward, 1973: 187-191).

Though probably considered a benefit for oneself or others for whom merit was desired by depositing votive tablets thought to emit this sacred light, the radiance theory, though attractive in its obvious connection to known belief in the supernatural powers of Buddha images, is ultimately untenable as a reason of any significance for why votive objects were deposited in stupas. To put it another way, tablets representative of the Buddha and his teachings, whether pictorially or in terms of sacred writ inscribed on dhāranī, were probably thought of in more general terms as amulets are today in which radiance is a mere symbolic indicator of sacredness associated with these objects.

5.6 Belief in Buddhism's Limited Duration

Since both the belief in Buddhism's limited duration and the production of votive tablets were not confined to any particular sect, if such a belief generally speaking is established as a cause for the production of votive tablets in the Theravāda tradition, we may also be tempted to consider this cause as essentially pan-Buddhist. As was pointed out earlier the limited duration of Buddhism is mentioned in many Sukhothai inscriptions as the reason for depositing certain objects, most notably Buddha images, yet it has been duly noted that no such view was prevalent in the northern areas where the majority of votive tablets in India were made (Skilling, 2008: 249). We are thus left with the more specific notion that this belief did in all probability play some role in the production of votive tablets by Theravāda Buddhists in pre-modern Thailand, though not in the Mahāyāna-inspired cultures in the south or in the case of the Khmer during the time when they controlled the central plain and were inspired by Mahāyāna beliefs.

5.7 Pilgrim-Memento and Souvenir Theories

The idea that votive objects were originally meant as mementoes from sacred sites in India for pilgrims visiting from far and wide is perhaps a view which applies mostly to these specific places, and when considering a memento as generally a category of souvenir we may treat these somewhat different theories concerning pre-modern Thailand as more or less the same. It is likely that the making of images from the stamping of clay or by using an isolated metal such as tin was a cheap way to produce numerous amounts of what would normally be a very expensive object, and at least occasionally became part of certain ceremonies where this sort of production was thought especially important. This also might explain why so many have been found in some ancient sites but not others, the production of tablets for depositing inside a stupa numbering from one ceremony in the thousands, at other times for local distribution and thus their scattering over a very wide region. Though the largest numbers of votive tablets have been found in ruined stupas, their mass production and easy way of transport causes common sense to define them in part as souvenirs or mementoes for wandering pilgrims. Since tablets have indeed been found fairly often in places thought to be far from the location where they were fashioned, as well as the fact that few tablets indeed have at certain historic sites been unearthed where one would have expected a rather large number, their production most likely served multiple purposes determined by different kinds of ceremonies or socio-religious needs.

If meant in many instances for burial in stupas and as a way of making merit, their deposit in these structures instead of local distribution to individual worshipers has the unfair advantage of larger numbers found in a single location and leading to the

presumption that they were *exclusively* made for stupa burial. A fascinating document thought to be from Ayutthaya just prior to the city's conquest by the Burmese, or perhaps from the early Bangkok period which describes this city before its fall, mentions at least two market areas where votive images or Buddhas were sold (Baker, 2011: 60, 63). The descriptions are not explicit enough about how these objects may have been acquired and handled afterwards, yet it seems incredible that no individual would ever consider taking them back to where they lived in light of the belief in a Buddha image's powers of protection or perhaps for daily personal worship. How much change in attitude occurred toward Buddha images over many centuries up until this time is difficult to determine, though from this evidence alone we may conclude that indeed Buddha images were carried around by some, in all likelihood a small percentage of the population who were of the wealthier classes and comprising a majority of the population who became monks or nuns, though even commoners perhaps would have occasionally kept some Buddha images in their homes or carried them as souvenirs or talismans on journeys abroad.

5.8 Concluding Remarks Regarding Merit

Though on its own the idea that merit as a reason for the production and burial of votive tablets is beyond dispute, yet a few further comments here may be worthy of consideration. As the Theravāda Canon became fixed by the time of Buddhaghosa in the early fifth-century and around the period when votive object production was on the rise, Theravāda culture, unlike the Mahāyāna, embraced no new writings which became part of its canon to deal with growing belief in merit-making acts, belief which yet expressed this change through ritual rather than formal paths of religious speculation whose sacred gates were closed; though of course and as mentioned

previously some post-canonical works did incorporate these views. We may conclude that the deposit of votive tablets in stupas or caves for purposes of merit is the product of post-canonical trends, based as it is on the idea of either merit transfer, or simply of accumulating merit which philosophically appears so much at odds with the Four Noble Truths which lie at the heart of classical Theravāda doctrine. Wrong view keeps the viewer chained to dependent origination, though a surprisingly simple reason may present itself for why such enthusiasm for merit has dominated Thai Buddhist culture for so long. While still *in* the world of action the important element of compassion would hardly seem real if ever residing in some aloof, inactive state, and the truth or falsity of some perspective as the cause of any action is less worthy of consideration than the intention which inspired it.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In a very real sense the search for understanding in any shape or form, aside of course from interrelated truth, is really a search for origins—the initial cause or causes which have played a role in a certain particular development, and accordingly which serve to define and establish the reality of what one wishes to examine. Yet one's foot with its five digits is not the hand-like form of its forerunner if traced back through the branches of evolution, and the stylistic traditions represented by Buddhist iconography fashioned by the cultures of pre-modern Thailand are in many respects and in each case in a class all their own, derivative yet original in a number of varied and unique expressions. But they do have a relationship with the past. The art historian of Southeast Asia has a more difficult task than many who study the art of other cultures, in that the textual and archaeological record is less abundant, and correspondingly the search for origins often is limited to a particular religious sect or political entity, or cultural sphere with wide angles of time incapable of being analyzed with great precision. This is a far cry from the study of the art of Van Gogh, for example, whereby one may begin with the man himself, or his native Holland, or artistic movements of his generation in nineteenth-century Europe, linking these as well to the friends he knew and loved or the particular social conditions of his time. There is so to speak a kind of DNA of pictorial forms, which is, one might assume will ever be the case, not suspect to the laws of verification.

In the words of Malraux:

The part played by Hellenistic art in Asia was not that of a model, but that of a chrysalis……..Then—as at Palmyra, in Gupta art and presently in Byzantium—there reappeared in China one of the most

effective devices for spiritualizing faces: the drawing of thick rims around the mouth and eyes. This was now to spread across Asia—to Yun Kang, Lung-Men, Japan, Cambodia and Java—and to outlast fourteen centuries; that device which, when Egypt had forgotten it, made its reappearance far back in Macedonian Asia, where "the green-bronze horsemen of the mighty causeways" were in their death throes, and it was not to disappear until the eighteenth century. Then in the fullness of time the great adventure of Buddhist art came to an end, and the Siamese pagodas drowsing below the endless tinkling of their bells, lost forever, with the coming of their new East India Company décor, the last metamorphosis of Apollo. (Malraux, 1953: 169-172).

Aside from modern traditions of Buddhist iconography largely derived from past styles in which the classical forms of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya play a very large role, the amulet tradition is one of the wonders of modern Thai culture which continues these historical styles within a wide variation of original types. Even if one disputes the idea that the prominent eyebrow of classical Thai art has an ultimate source in Greek culture, however remote, yet Malraux's view is an important one in pointing out how stylistic features from a far distant culture often have a lingering influence on another not obvious at first to the untrained viewer, and that these origins when discovered may help to reveal what interactions occurred between different groups, or what is actually original in a particular culture and what inherited. Aside from the technique referred to above and adopted by many a culture over a wide geography and a great number of centuries until almost our modern age—the point is that these features which appear to us in the here and now as only this, are in fact symbols of many different occurrences and cross-cultural references over time and are as such the duty and pleasure of the art historian to ponder.

It has long been the case that art historians have tended to treat votive tablets simply as smaller versions of other forms of statuary, when in fact they represent a

difference in *function* which sets them apart and in a way potentially revealing about religious belief of one culture or another not otherwise known. The deposit of votive tablets in caves instead of stupas during the Srivijaya period and most indicative of mountain worship is but one notable example of this. Added to this is the fact that multiple copies of a single image made by a stamp or mold has naturally meant that some archaeological sites have revealed numerous copies of a single type of tablet compared to larger works of sculpture which are in each case essentially unique, lessoning further the perceived value of this smaller kind of Buddhist iconography.

Votive tablets historically form a distinct category of Buddhist iconography by these two special qualities which set them apart—namely the practice of producing multiple copies from a single original type, and the intention to use one or more of these copies in some such way for purposes of merit, often as objects to be buried out of sight. Their difference in size is also noteworthy for both intended and *unintended* reasons. The Tibetan Gao as a small object worn on the body of a pilgrim is but one example from another part of the Buddhist world in which diminutive size compared to other objects implies a difference in function, namely in this context the portability of these objects for use as a shrine by wandering pilgrims. Buddha images of gigantic scale have been made not only for aesthetic reasons of proportion by which they satisfy the requirements for the main image at the end of a very large interior of a building, but mostly for inspiring awe and astonishment in which a subtler message of philosophical truth may affect the worshipper more by a sculptural grandeur of experience. From here we are led back to what is meant by a reminder, and of the different types according to traditional methods of classification. As was pointed out earlier the votive tablets of pre-modern Thailand are considered uddesikacetiya, or

indicative reminders, as are all Buddha images. If what is meant by a reminder is simply something that serves to help one maintain one's focus on the importance of the Buddha's teachings, say for example that one in the midst of modern urban society should go from experience to experience and keep in mind the need to adhere to the five rules of a lay person, then this, it must be admitted, was never meant to be the only or even the essential purpose of Buddha images and including votive tablets. The magical element was always there, and the placement of a reminder out of sight where its power of reminding would be thwarted is proof of this, and was characteristic, regarding their association with either stupas or caves, of all votive tablet traditions of Southeast Asia in pre-modern times. This conclusion, by the way, runs contrary to the general notion held at the beginning of this study that Buddha images were originally fashioned as simple reminders, and without any necessary association with magical belief.

Though the modern outlook and including one which might link monetary value to an object of some antiquity surely considers a singular object of importance as more valuable than one of many produced from a duplicating process, it is unlikely that in the past this view was too widely held, especially when considering the fact that art itself was not a separate category from interpretation of religious objects and a Buddha image quite aside from the possibility that duplicate forms existed, was valued mainly for its association with the Buddha himself or in a related way to the magical powers it possessed. This belief in the power of magic in connection to a votive tablet's convenient size meant that from the general population having little contact with Buddhist iconography, some individuals—it may be surmised and in defense of common sense, carried these objects as talismans and their distribution

over time was a major factor in the spread of doctrine and artistic style between the different cultures comprising Buddhist Asia. The proof that they were occasionally transported is evident in the archaeological record, and despite the fact that either access to, or interest in votive tablets by the majority of the population must have been relatively low based on the view that these images had an energy and sanctity not suitable for the everyday secular life of the common person.

Some mention here and there has been made in the preceding pages of votive tablets referred to by modern amulet collectors as Benchaphakee, a group of five which are the most highly regarded, at least very generally, of all amulets in Thailand and the fact that most of them were found in ruined stupas of some antiquity has naturally added to their fame. Besides the aforementioned Phra Rod, Phra Nang Phraya, Phra Somkor and Phra Phong Suphan, an amulet type of more recent creation called Phra Somdet completes the series, created by the famous monk Somdet To who died in 1872. This group along with other tablets now highly prized—and, for good or ill, commercialized as items for exchange not just for aesthetic appreciation but financial profit, have helped to make the tradition of votive tablets—refashioned in our time as amulets, more popular and accessible to all than ever before. The commercialization then of Buddhism as evidenced by the spread of amulet production and sale has also served to act as a benefit for the religion in producing these "reminders" of the Great Master's teachings, though somewhat ironically in their continuing context of commercial enterprise and ultimately the belief in their magical powers of good fortune and protection. Somdet To himself is part of this transition period in Thai history and belief, known more for his fashioning of amulets than for any of the interesting ideas he may have had philosophically about life or for his

knowledge of the Pali Scriptures (McDonald, 2011: 53-69). Thai Buddhism of the general population historically, shall we say a non-classical world of supernatural spirits and what not, has been carried into modern secular life—a splendid autumnal glow, in which aesthetic sensibilities have found a still appropriate outlook in the wide proliferation of Buddhist amulet types. It is obvious that in modern times votive tablets have simply been re-interpreted in being defined as amulets, the personal sense of connection replacing the former emphasis of limited contact with images in which once briefly handled they were deposited away. The sense of magic connected to a Buddha image remains, as does the belief that through prayer and ritual an image may be utilized for the benefit of oneself or others. In this sense then the change from votive tablet to amulet is simply a *spatial* one in which the efficacy of an image is oriented toward a person's presence *directly*, rather than toward the symbols of the Great Master such as a stupa where votive tablets would be buried which then *indirectly* could bestow favor upon the worshipper, perhaps in a way not unlike a ruler granting a wish to a sincere and humble subject of his realm.

As in the case of the term "reminder" with regard to the making of Buddhist iconography and often used as a monolithic term which conceals further causes, the notion of "merit" upon examination reveals not a singular cause but rather an alluvial fan of personal or religious intention. If all actions performed with the Buddha's teachings in mind are simply defined as acts of merit—forgiving another for grave personal wrongdoing, worshipping at a nearby temple or the giving of alms to beggars who live in the squalor nearby, than merit as a term begins to lose its clear and salient relation to thought and deed. In the end a personal sense of salvation is the most likely factor for the way votive tablets were handled, the radiance thought to

resonate from a Buddha image, the belief in the limited duration of the faith and other causes for votive tablet production being largely secondary.

Throughout the vast writings of Buddhist philosophical thought, the notion of mutability ever lurks, sometimes shadow-like, sometimes in more direct terms such as in the Four Noble Truths at the heart of the Buddha's teachings. Though the image of the restless artist in modern culture somehow explains the logical connection between a mental state unsatisfied and the corresponding need for creative action, the quiet subtleties revealed in the small religious objects of our investigation are important reminders that this perspective is in no way all-encompassing. The votive tablets of all traditions of pre-modern Thailand—with such care employed in their technical execution of design and the contemplative expressions on the faces of the Buddha images, consistently reach that summit of mirrored expression whereby artistic creation is a gateway to an examination of spirit. These objects, created no doubt to appease uncertainty in a world of many trials and with the hope of using the magical power from sacred objects to turn the laws of mutability in one's favor, nonetheless hold their own in the quiet presence of their representative figures, formally executed and faithful to established textual sources from tradition. Irrationality and fear seem nowhere in the composite origins of these miniature miracles of spatial form and silence, and more than a few are beautiful and true masterpieces of Buddhist art.

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BIOGRAPHY

Clifford G. Davis was born in the USA and has spent most of his years in Southern California and San Francisco. In 1985 he received a B.A. in History from UCLA and since then has worked mostly in library institutions and as a merchant of Asian imports before moving to Bangkok, Thailand in 2010.