

Narrative Depiction of Descent from *Tāvatiṃsa*: The Buddha Life Story of Bagan Period

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Abstract

Buddhism has flourished in Myanmar before Bagan period and reached at its highest point in Bagan period. The glory of Bagan is its thousands of religious monuments. Among them, Buddha descending from *Tāvatiṃsa* is the important to event of Buddhist's life. This scene shows the Buddha teaching *Abhidhamma* to Māyādevi. The people of Bagan period, both elite class and commoners, had built religious monuments. Their major aim was that they wanted the Buddhism to last longer until 5000 years CE. They used to decorate the inner walls and ceilings of temples with mural paintings. One of the major themes of their paintings was the eight great scenes of the Buddha's life including descent from *Tāvatiṃsa* which was one of the most popular themes in Buddhist art of Myanmar. On the full moon day of Thatinkyut, the Buddha descended from *Tāvatiṃsa* after preaching *Abhidhamma* and people welcomed the Buddha with candles or oil-lamps. People of Bagan period might celebrate Thatinkyut Festival. The greatest aim of this paper is to present about Thatinkyut Festival which has been held from Bagan period to present day in Myanmar. One of the depictions of that scene might be related to know the gratitude of parents. The study applied field survey and the Buddhist Texts literature. This paper deals with the study of the scene of descent from *Tāvatiṃsa* in Bagan period.

Key Words: *Tāvatiṃsa*, eight scenes, Mural painting, Narrative Depiction

Introduction

The eight great scenes from the life of Gotama Buddha was one of the popular themes of mural painting in Bagan Period. One of the eight great scenes is Descent from *Tāvatiṃsa*. The story goes as follow: When the Buddha was alive, Gotama wanted to show his gratitude to the mother of his previous life. His mother of previous life became a god, *santusita*, on the *Tāvatiṃsa*, one of the celestial abodes. Gotama went to *Tāvatiṃsa* and preached the god *santusita* the *Abhidhamma*, one of the three *Pitakas*. He had resided on the *paṇḍhukambalā* throne (emerald throne) under *kathic* tree (*Erythrina arborescens*) for three months. The Buddha preached the *Abhidhamma* not only to *santusita* but also to other gods and Brahmas such as *Añkura*, *Indra*, etc. The Buddha had preached the *Abhidhamma* days and nights for three months. When the Buddha went around for the alms food, Gotama left the image, *Nimmita*, to continue to preach the *Abhidhamma*. The Buddha went around for the alms food with brown stone alms bowl, which was donated by four kings of god. The Buddha used to go to the North Island, and

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partake the alms food at Anotatta Lake. After that, Gotama went to Sandalwood forest to clean himself, and went back to *Tāvatiṃsa*. And then, he continued to preach the *Abhidhamma*.

Buddha's life story takes the most important role in Buddhism. It had been found in descriptive form in mural paintings. In ancient archaeological landscape of Myanmar, the great scene of descent from *Tāvatiṃsa* was mainly exposed in mural paintings. People of Bagan Period used to depict the Great Eight Scene as follows:

1. Mt. Meru
2. Preaching *Abhidhamma*
3. Preaching *Abhidhamma* and descending from *Tāvatiṃsa* along the Three Stairways
4. Descending from *Tāvatiṃsa* along the Three Stairways
5. Descending from *Tāvatiṃsa* without Three Stairways
6. Ascending to *Tāvatiṃsa*, Preaching *Abhidhamma* and descending from *Tāvatiṃsa*

Among them, Preaching *Abhidhamma* was focused in this paper. According to the present survey, total numbers of four temples, have been found, including usual style of decent from *Tāvatiṃsa* scene of mural paintings.

Temple No. 1192 (Nagayon Temple)

Nagayon Temple is situated on the southeast of Apeyadana Temple and on the South of Myinkabas Village. (94°51'35.5" E & 21°09'N) It is one story temple building with huge Sikhara (Minbu Aung Kyaing, လက်ရာအစုံ နဂါးရုံ (*The Nagayon Temple*), Yangon, Tun Foundation Bank, 2009, p. 15-22). The main temple has sanctum with one corridor. The large vestibule faces North. The whole temple is decorated with beautiful paintings (See Fig. 1). It was built in eleventh century CE (Pichard, *Inventory of Monument at Bagan*, Vol. II, France, United Nation, 1993, p. 404). According to the ink inscription of That Taw Ya Pagoda, Nagayone Temple was built by King Kyansittha and his consort Abeyadana (Aung Kyaing, *Nagayon*, pp. 2-3). That Taw Ya Pagoda is situated inside the Abeyadana Temple enclosure wall. Ceilings and inner walls were adorned with mural paintings. The paintings depicted twenty eight Buddhas, five hundred fifty jataka stories, the Prophecy of Dīpaṅkarā Buddha, *sattaṭṭhāna* (seven places) where Buddha stayed seven days on each place, Eight scenes of the Buddha life, Enlightenment, the Nativity, the Twin Miracles, the Descent from *Tāvatiṃsa*, Taming of the *Nālāgiri* elephant, the First Sermon, *Parileyaka* Retreat and the *Parinirvana*, some illustrations of a few suttas especially for paritta-defence, painted figures of dancers, drummers, cymbalists, players on percussion instruments etc. are beautifully painted on the walls and backdrop of the temple. Most of the scenes have ink writing in old Mon and Pali. The main theme of the painting was the teaching of *Abhidhamma* in *Tāvatiṃsa* and it was drawn on the outer wall of sanctum at Southeast corner. It is 7' 6" long and 7' 3" wide.

In the scene, the Buddha was teaching *Abhidhamma* to devas or celestial beings on seven mountain ranges in *Dharmacakra mudrā*. The seven mountain ranges were neatly drawn below, beside and above the preaching Buddha. The mountain ranges were drawn horizontally and filled with black and white. On the left side of the Buddha were four rows of four devas, total seventeen devas and they all were paying respect to the Buddha in sitting position. On the right side of the preaching Buddha was three rows of thirteen devas, total, thirty nine devas. In the scene, the Buddha was wearing reddish brown robes which cover both shoulders of the Buddha. The Buddha was sitting in cross-legged position in *Dharmacakra mudrā*. Hair of the Buddha was painted in black. The gods, who were paying respects to the Buddha, were painted in yellow. There were white halos behind the heads of the gods. All devas were painted yellow. The ink writing is under the scene but it is a bit hard to read (See Fig. 2).

Temple No. 1554/867 (Thayanbu)

Thayanbu Temple is located on the southeast of Lokaokshaung (94° 51' 50.709" E and 21° 9' 44.673" N). The temple is medium size with four vestibules. It is surmounted by a stupa which faces to the East (See Fig. 3). It was built in 13th century CE. On the inner walls of the temple were adorned with Buddhas of the past, five hundred fifty jataka stories, the scenes from the life of the Buddha, Future Buddha and *bodhi* tree (banyan tree). The scene of the Buddha preaching *Abhidhamma* can be seen on the north wall of the shrine. The size of the panel is 4' 6" high and 3' 7" wide.

In the scene, the Buddha was preaching *Abhidhamma* to the gods on the Mount Meru. The scene of the mountain was depicted in detail. In Buddhist cosmology, the earth is composed of four continents, seven oceans and seven mountain ranges. All these components of the earth can be seen in the painting. The painting also represents the feature of a stupa. The seven mountain ranges were depicted as the seven terraces of the stupa. Above the terraces, square tower was dawning. The square tower was surmounted by small stupa. The seven oceans were depicted as the wavy line beneath the terraces. Actually these wavy lines represent large fish, Ānanda. The terraces and square tower were dawning as mountain ranges. The top of the mountain is more like a small temple in which the Buddha was preaching *Abhidhamma*. In the scene, the Buddha was being surrounded by Sakka, Brahma, and gods who were listening to the Buddha preaching (See Fig. 4).

Temple No. 711 (Let Put Kan Temple)

Let Put Kan Temple is situated on the Southwest and on the northwest of Min Nan Thu Village (21° 10' 7.413" N and 94° 53' 46.564" E). There is a stone inscription inside the temple and the inscription says that pagoda slaves and land were donated by Soe Min, grandson of Tha Khin

Phaw Gyi in 603 ME (1241 CE) and 604 ME (1242 CE) (U Bo Kay, *ပုဂံသုတေသနလမ်းညွှန် (Guide in Bagan Research)*, Yangon, Sarpay Beik Man, 2015, p. 265). Let Put Kan temple is a medium size single storey temple with four entrances at the cardinal points of the temple. It is surmounted with a stupa (See Fig. 5). It was built in 13th century CE (Pichard, *Inventory*, p. 405). On the ceilings and inner walls of the temple were adorned with painting. Circle patterns with small Buddha figures, friezes with pointed obovals, twenty eight Buddha figures, Buddha's footprint, and the scenes from the life of the Buddha were painted on the ceilings and inner walls of the temple. The scene of Preaching *Abhidhamma* can be observed on the east wall north of the east entrance. The scene is 2' 3" wide and 2' 10" high.

In the scene, the Buddha was preaching *Abhidhamma* on the Mt. Meru. The Mt. Meru is flanked by Seven Mountain Ranges on which the Buddha was preaching *Abhidhamma* to the gods. There are thirty eight god figures on each side of the Buddha. Some gods were riding clouds (See Fig. 6).

Temple No. 1323/637 (Myinkaba Gubyauk Gyi Temple)

Myinkaba Gubyauk Gyi Temple lies near Myazedi stupa in Myinkabha village. (94°51'39.3" E and 21°09'26.5" N) (Bo Kay, *Guide in Bagan Research*, p. 212) It is a big temple with double sikhara on the roof. The vestibule faces East (See Fig. 7). The temple has beautiful wall paintings inside (Pichard, *Inventory*, p. 406). The Rajakuma, son of king Kyansitha and Queen Tilokavasamṭakā devī, made a gold Buddha Image and donated it to the temple before his father died. He also donated the three slaves villages, which were given to him by his father, to the temple. He recorded his good deeds on two square sandstone columns and these writings were in four different languages, Pyu, Mon, Myanmar and Pali. The two sandstone columns were discovered near Myazedi stupa in Myinkaba village, therefore it is also called Myazedi inscription. In brief, the sandstone inscriptions are not concerned with Myazedi stupa, therefore, these columns should be called 'Rajakuma Inscriptions' (These inscription were first discovered by Duroisal in 1886). The temple was decorated with beautiful and interesting wall paintings on the inner walls of the temple. The various events and scenes of Buddha life stories were painted on the walls of the temples, such as, beautiful lotus and floral patterns, the figures of Myanmar cosmology, five hundred and fifty Jataka stories, Ten-zats-the last ten stories of Buddha life (Ten jataka storie are memorized by a short verse 'Te ja su ne ma bhū caṃ nā vi ve'. They are 'Temiya Zat, Mahājanakka Zat, Suvaṃṃasāma Zat, Nemi Zat, Mahosadhā Zat, Buridatta Zat, Candakumāra Zat, Nārada Zat, Vidhūra Zat, Vessantra Zat). The scene of ascend to *Tāvatiṃsa* is painted on the southern wall above the middle sandstone window. It is 3' 5" long and 4' wide.

Buddha ascended to *Tāvatiṃsa* to teach *Abhidhamma* to his mother, who passed away after his birth and now she is in celestial realm, with *Tripataka Hasta mudrā*. The yellow

complexion, the red robe, the black hair, the white halo of the Buddha were neatly painted in the scene. Full blown lotuses are in front of the Buddha. Above, under, left and right of the Buddha are the seven mountain ranges with peaks. The seven mountain ranges were drawn horizontally and used black and white to represent the mountain ranges. Above the seven mountain ranges is 'the *kathic* Tree' (See Fig. 8). Under the scene is the old Mon ink writing.

Conclusion

Decorating the ceilings and inner walls of the temples with mural paintings had been popular in Bagan period. Major themes of the paintings were derived from Buddha teaching including 550 jatakas, the last great ten lives of the Buddha, 28 Buddhas in the past and the great eight scenes from the life of the Buddha. The aim of the paintings was not only for decoration but also for educating the public. Among the depiction of the paintings, one of the most interesting scenes is the scene of Descent from *Tāvātimsa* and Preaching *Abhidhamma*. The scene was used to draw on the inner wall of vestibule of temples. In Bagan period, the paintings were composed of the scene of the Buddha Preaching *Abhidhamma* on the Mount Meru, or on the seven mountain ranges that had been more popular in later Bagan period.

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Fig. (1) Temple No. 1192 (Nagayon Temple)



Fig. (2) Preaching *Abhidhamma* (Nagayon Temple)

Photo by Than Zaw (Geology)



Fig. (3) Temple No. 1554/867 (Thayanbu)

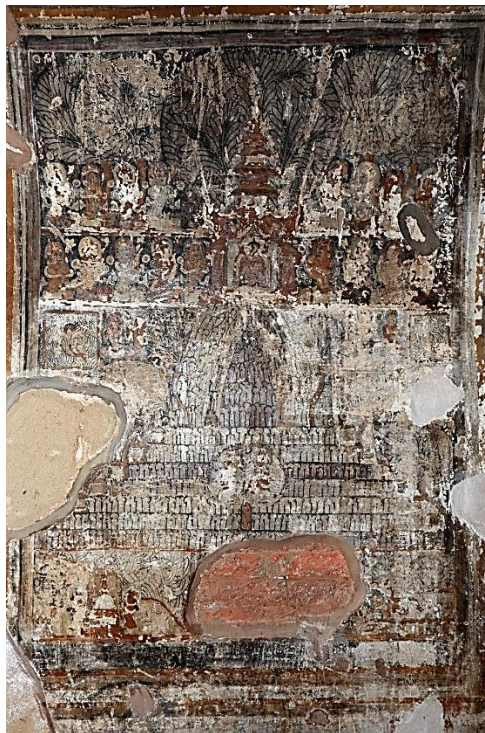


Fig. (4) Preaching *Abhidhamma* (Thayanbu Temple)
Photo by Than Zaw (Geology)



Fig. (5) Monument No. 711 (Let Put Kan Temple)



Fig. (6) Preaching *Abhidhamma* (Let Put Kan Temple)

Photo by Than Zaw (Geology)



Fig. (7) Temple No. 1323/637 (Myinkaba Gubyauk Gyi Temple)



Fig. (8) Buddha ascends to *Tāvātimsā* to teach *Abhidhamma* to his mother
Photo by Than Zaw (Geology)