

The Conqueror's cage

A dream of the 5 arhats

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One morning in 2016, I woke up dreaming of a gathering of meditators who have gathered together in groups of 5, each person ready to enter and sit with a beautiful cage all made of different kinds of colourful and fragrant flowers. These flower cages are grouped together in fives: four of them around the fifth in the centre—like the mandala of 5 arhats described in **the (Aparā Ditṭhi) Aññatara Brahma Sutta** (S 6.5), SD 54.18 (which I translated only in 2019). In my dream, the Buddha sitting in our midst is peacefully instructing us how to meditate in our flower-cage.

Upon waking, and as I write this reflection (2016), it is clear to me that the five symbolizes the 5 **spiritual faculties** of faith, wisdom, effort and samadhi,¹ forming a box, with mindfulness right in the centre, balancing the other pairs of faculties: faith with wisdom, effort with samadhi.

The protection

As I mused over the dream, I realized it must be the result of reading a scholarly article about a well known *paritta* or “protective chant”² that I first learned in my teen years (the mid-1960s) when I first came in contact with Buddhism in Melaka, Malaysia. This *paritta* was called **the Jina,pañjara**, “the Conqueror's cage.”

The *paritta* – in 22 verses – opens with:

- (1-2) an invocation and invitation to the 28 Buddhas;
- (3) establishing the 3 jewels on the head, eyes and chest;
- (4-9) establishing various arhats in various parts of the body;
- (10-11) establishing the *paritta* texts around the body;
- (12) affirming our fully protected state;
- (13-17) request for protection;
- (18-19) affirmation and establishing the 3 jewels, various arhats and other powerful beings in and around us;
- (20-22) closing request for protection.

The effect of the *paritta* is clearly to mentally visualize a protective cage or castle around our body which has been divinized. The Ratana Sutta (Khp 6) is in front of us; the Karaṇīya Metta Sutta (Khp 9 = Sn 8) on the right; the Dhajagga Sutta (S 1:219 f) behind; the Aṅgulimāla on the

¹ On the 5 spiritual faculties (*pañc'indriya*), see SD 10.4.

² This is the article by Roger R Jackson, “A Tantric echo in Sinhalese Theravāda? *Pirit* ritual, the book of *Paritta* and the *Jinapañjaraya*,” *Dhīh* 19 1994:121-140, sent to me by Jo Wee of Malaysia who obtained it from Jackson himself.

left. The Khandha Paritta,³ the Mora Paritta (J 2:33-35), and the Āṭānāṭiya Sutta (D 32) cover the sky like a roof.

Apparently, the shorter Siamese Paritta, with only the first 16 verses, is older. It is also called **the Ratana,pañjara**, “the jewelled cage.” It was said to have been composed in Chiangmai, north Thailand around 1580.⁴ The Sinhalese version is very close to the Siamese one, but they have some variant readings. The Sinhalese paritta has 22 verses. The closing 6 verses (17-22) are simply invocations for protection, and were probably added later in Sri Lanka.⁵

Jackson, in his article discussing the Jina,pañjara, concludes that, although the paritta is not a Tantric work, it is “tantra-influenced” (1994:136). Whether the Jina,pañjara was composed in Chiangmai or in Sri Lanka, both regions were for a significant period under the sway of Tantric Buddhism, before Theravāda was officially established as the mainstream faith.

It is also important to understand the term “Theravāda” itself is quite a broad one, encompassing the ascetic forest monks of the meditation tradition, the popular mainstream lay practice, and the Tantra-influenced magical Buddhism of spells and amulets.

Vaitulyavādā or Vaipulyavāda is the technical name for Mahāyāna in traditional Sinhalese works. Mahāyāna, especially of the popular magical type, was an integral part of Sri Lankan Buddhism for over a thousand years, from the time it first gained a foothold in the Abhayagiri monastery in Anuradhapura in the 1st century CE until well after the pro-Theravāda reform and establishment of the Sangha by the Polonnaruwa king Parākramabāhu 1 in the 12th century.⁶

Thailand, too, had a long history of Mahāyāna influence. During the 5th to 13th centuries, south-east Asian empires were “indianized,” that is, influenced directly from India, and followed the Mahāyāna. The Chinese pilgrim Yijing, however, noted in his travels that all the major sects of Indian Buddhism flourished.⁷ Srivijaya to the south, in Indonesia, and the Khmer empire to the east and north competed for influence and their art expressed the rich Mahāyāna pantheon of Bodhisattvas. From the 9th to the 13th centuries, the Mahāyāna and Hindu Khmer empire dominated much of the southeast Asian peninsula.

³ V 2:110; A 2:72 ff; J 2:145-147.

⁴ Jackson, quoting Lily de Silva (“Paritta: A historical and religious study of the Buddhist ceremony of peace and prosperity in Sri Lanka,” *Spolia Zeylanica* 36,1 1981:9), says that the Thai version was composed during the reign of Rāma II (1808-1809) by a monk named Buḍḍhācariya, ie, Somdet Phra Phutthacharn (To Brahmaramsi) (1788-1872), said to be renowned for his magical powers. Also in Justin Thomas McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand*, NY: Columbia Univ Press, 2011:81-84. See following note.

⁵ Mahamakut, *Prawat Kāthā Chinnabanchorn* [Thai: History of the Jinapañjara Gāthā], Bangkok, 1986, quoted in Piyasilo, *Buddhist Prayer*, Malaysia, 1990c:74. See preceding note.

⁶ See pioneer study by S Paranavitana, “Mahayanism in Ceylon,” *Ceylon Journal of Science*, sect G, 2 1928:35-71. A more thorough survey by N Mudiyanse, *Mahayana Monuments in Ceylon*, Colombo: M D Gunasena, 1967. See also J C Holt, *Buddha in the Crown: Avalokiteśvara in the Buddhist traditions of Sri Lanka*, Oxford, OUP, 1991.

⁷ Sujato Bhikkhu. *Sects & Sectarianism: The Origins of Buddhist Schools*, Bindanoon (Australia), 2006:72.

Besides the historical background of such mantra-like parittas as the Jina,pañjara, there is also the immediate needs and inclination of the more worldly laity. In order to win their faith and patronage, innovative monks and teachers introduced religious rituals that are “other-power” in nature. Instead of looking by way “self-effort,” the people are given the option of seeking solace and succour by more magical and material means. This is the Buddhism of the world.

Internalizing the practice

To build a bridge for the worldly Buddhists to educate themselves in the safer, more lasting and truly spiritual benefits of Buddhism, monastics and teachers should teach them to “internalize” the practice and understand a more wholesome meaning and purpose of life. The monastics and teachers should, of course, themselves live exemplary Buddhist lives to inspire the laity.

In the case of the Jina,pañjara, people should be told that Buddhas and arhats are only properly worshipped by our inner practice: the “**supreme worship**”⁸. We should reflect on the qualities of the Buddha as “recollection of the Buddha” (*buddhânussati*), study the suttas and recall them as “recollection of the Dharma” (*dhammânussati*), and on the virtues of the arhats, as “recollection of the sangha” (*saṅghânussati*). The Jinapañjara should be used in this way: to help us recall the qualities of the 3 jewels.

If we follow a worldly Buddhism, our habits will be worldly, and in no time, we will fall to subhuman levels. Practising the Dharma internally, keeps the Dharma with us everywhere, and uplifts us into divine levels even here and more, blessing us with true peace, joy and success. This also prepares us for awakening within this life itself.⁹

R623 Revisioning Buddhism 242

[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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⁸ See Reflection, “Supreme worship,” R378, 2015.

⁹ See Reflection, “Streamwinning in this life,” R 414, 2015.