

# An Attempted Laudatory Suicide in the *Sakon Nakhon Chronicle:* a query

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The question is what might have inspired Chao Phraya Suwanna-phingkhara to behead himself in honor of the Lord Buddha. It arose when translating the *Sakon Nakhon Chronicle*, which was compiled about 80 years ago by some of Sakon Nakhon's leading citizens (Phraya Prajantapratheethani *et al.*, 1997). Part One of the *Chronicle* is composed of extracts from the *Urangkha-nithan* (*the Legend of the Breastbone Relic*), also known as *Tamnan Phra That Phanom* (*The Legends of the That Phanom Shrine*). This is a traditional Buddhist History (*tamnan*) of the middle Mekong basin, and it begins with events leading up to the installation of a relic of the Lord Buddha's breastbone at the region's most sacred shrine, That Phanom, about 65 kms southeast of Sakon Nakhon. A version of this work has been translated into English by Pruess (1976).

The *Legend of the Breastbone Relic* was probably composed in the seventeenth century, "a construction of a mythical past from bits and pieces of historical legends, none of which had any necessary tie to the [That Phanom] monument itself" (Woodward, 1977: 203). Phiset Jiajanphong (1978) argues that it was written to support the claim to the throne of Lan Xang of King Suriyawongsa of Lan Xang, who reigned in Vientiane from the 1633 to the 1690 (Viravong, 1964: 76-77).

The episode takes place in the course of a miraculous journey to the middle Mekong basin made by the Lord Buddha, according to the *Legend of the Breastbone Relic*, shortly before his entry into Nirvana:

We now continue our chronicle of Muang Nong Han Luang<sup>1</sup> following the third book<sup>2</sup> of the *Urangkha-nithan*, which is concerned with the dispensation of Our Lord Buddha Gotama.

The Perfectly Enlightened One, accompanied by 1,500 arhat disciples, left Muang Si Khottabun<sup>3</sup> to take his repast at Phu Kamphra,<sup>4</sup> sometimes called Doi Khen Jai. Reflecting on custom, he said, "This place is the repository of the breastbone relics of the three Buddhas who have already entered Nirvana, and all of these have left an impression of their footprints at Phu Nam Lawt".<sup>5</sup> Preternaturally foreseeing his own imminent entry into Nirvana, he led his disciples to Phu Nam Lawt Choeng Chum, to bestow the imprint of his foot. Thao Suwanna Nak,<sup>6</sup> guardian of the earth there, arose to receive it, and the Lord Buddha superimposed his footprint upon those of his predecessors in the slab of stone.

Chao Phraya Suwanna-phingkhara and Phra Nang Chao [Narai] Jeng Weng, his queen, having come with their people to receive him, the Blessed One performed a miraculous sign. He caused three precious gems to come forth from his mouth, one after another, and then disappear; and then there came forth a single gem radiation a glorious brilliance which lit up the earth and the sky. So overcome with awe were all beholders that their hair stood on end.

On being asked by Chao Phraya Suwanna-phingkhara to interpret this sign, the Lord Buddha gave this teaching, "This is a place most precious to the five attaining Enlightenment in this fortunate eon. Each vowed to the others when first setting out on the path to Buddhahood that, on attaining Enlightenment, he would come here to leave his footprint with those of the others. Thus the first of the three gems coming forth from my mouth represented the Buddha Kakusandha, the second, the Buddha Konagamana, and the third, the Buddha Kassapa. These three have entered Nirvana. The fourth gem represented the Buddha Gotama here before you. After the elapse of the 5,000 years that my dispensation will endure, there is yet the Buddha Maitreya, who, on attaining Enlightenment, will come here to leave his footprint before the current eon has reached its end."

Learning thus how fortunate his domain was to be situated in so excellent a place, Chao Phraya Suwanna-phingkhara was taken up in joyous ecstasy and drew his sword, intending to cut off his head and offer it in homage to this teaching of the Lord Buddha. Seeing him so transported, Nang Narai Jeng Weng grasped his hand to wrest from it the sword and said, "If you live a long life, you will be able to care for the Footprints of the Buddhas, propagate the Buddhist faith, and gain merit." Her words shook his consciousness, and he became recollected upon the Triple Gems. With whole-hearted devotion to the Footprints of the Buddhas, he removed from his head his royal crown,

its gold and jewels weighing 100,000 *tamleung*,<sup>7</sup> and placed it upon the Footprints as a token of homage. Then, the stone slab bearing the Footprints descended into the earth of Phu Nam Lawt.

Chao Phraya Suwanna-phingkhara invited the Lord Buddha and his 1,500 disciples to receive offerings of food at his palace. Having completed their meal and bestowed their blessings for this offering of Chao Phraya Suwanna-phingkhara, the Lord Buddha and his disciples withdrew to the Sila-at Throne on Doi Khu-ha mountain<sup>8</sup> to retire for the night. There, the Lord Buddha told Phra Maha Katsampa, the most senior of those who had purged themselves of all defilements "When I enter into Nirvana, you shall enshrine the relic closest to my heart, that is, my breastbone, at Phu Kamphra after the custom of the Buddhas." After receiving this command, Phra Maha Katsampa took his leave of the Lord and returned to his place in Rajagrha. For his part, the Lord Buddha continued journeying from place to place and showing mercy to all creatures until at last he reached kusinagara, where he entered into Nirvana.

Meanwhile, at the place where the stone slab had descended into the earth, Chao Phraya Suwanna-phingkhara, Nang Narai Jeng Weng, and their people constructed a vault upon which they erected stones in the form of a chedi, and this Chao Phraya Suwanna-phingkhara named the Choeng Chum,<sup>9</sup> or Rom Chum,<sup>10</sup> Chedi. (Phraya Prajantaprateththani, et al., 1977: 3-4).

This episode is similar to others in the account of the Lord Buddha's journey in *The Legend of the Breasbone Relic* also to those found in a description of a journey by the Lord Buddha in the Mekong and Upper Chao Phraya basins found in *The Ngoen Yang Chiang Saen Chronicle (Collected Chronicles* vol. 33, 1969: 253-261)—the Lord Buddha comes to a certain site, encounters a man or other being native to that locale, and performs a miracle or utters a prophesy, and this act of the Lord Buddha gives to that site its significance, and often its name, and also often to some member of that community claim to certain rights. The similarity is not fortuitous; Lan Na and Lan Xang shared a common religious and literary tradition. From the Mon country in the west, this spread during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries first to Lan Na and then to Lan Xang. *The Ngoen Yang Chiang Saen Chronicle (Collected Chronicles* vol.33, 1969: 263), for instance, reports that an ancient chronicle, which probably contained the account of the Lord Buddha's journey, was removed from "Wat Si Khrom Kham" in Phayao<sup>11</sup> toward the end of the sixteenth century and taken to Vientiane,

where a copy was made and returned to Phayao. Within this tradition, there may well be attempted suicides like that of Jao Phraya Suwanna-phingkhara, but perhaps decapitating one's self in homage to the Lord Buddha is foreign. Indeed, there is no mention of a suicide attempt in the version translated by Pruess. There, at the conclusion of the Lord Buddha's prophesy, Chao Phraya Suwanna-phingkhara behaves with much greater decorum:

When [Chao Phraya Suwanna-phingkhara] reflected upon these words, he was extremely impressed and satisfied. In his heart he felt a need to bow his head and venerate the footprint. At that moment, his consort said, "If your lordship wishes to live a long life and accumulate much future merit, you should not [worship] in this manner." Upon hearing these words, the king removed his crown before venerating [the Footprint] (Pruess, 1976: 23).

With the extension of Lan Xang to the south and the translation of its capital from Luang Prabang to Vientiane in the sixteenth century, its religious and literary tradition increasingly encountered ancient shrines. In the words of Archaimbault (1964: 63), "Whereas the Laotians of the North settled on a site where they met no significant trace of a former civilization which might have impelled them to feelings of modesty, the Laotians who came into the South discovered to their astonishment the vestiges of a grandiose past." Le May viewed That Phanom 70 years ago and wrote:

Here I saw, greatly to my astonishment, a large figure of the Buddha seated on a lotus-throne turning the Wheel of the Law or 'preaching the first sermon.' The style reminded me of the Amaravati school, but whether this is so or not, the figures show a clear relationship to early Indian forms and cannot be later than the sixth or seventh century A.D. The other scenes were most lively figures of elephants with riders, men galloping on horses, and men walking in procession, all apparently in a proto-Khmer style (Le May, 1954: 37).

Questions about the carvings on the shrines, as Phiset Jiajanphong (1976: 157) suggested, may well have inspired episodes in the *Legend*, and so it may be that a carving somewhere, perhaps now effaced or plastered over, was the prototype of Joa Phraya Suwanna-phingkhara.

Another possibility is that the episode preserves elements of some now otherwise forgotten earlier culture of the locality. The question is which one, for Sakon Nakhon—the name may be translated "universal city"—seems to have long been a catholic community composed of a assortment of peoples, and the That Phanom sanctuary is seen to have been from early times a meeting ground for disparate peoples from the north, south, east, and west (Phiset Jiajanphong, 1976: 156).

The only parallel to Chao Phraya Suwanna-phingkhara's behavior I have come across is in an account of an audience with the Sultan of Mul-Jawa by the fourteenth-century Berber traveller Ibn Battuta, a native of Tangier (Newby, 1986: 32-33):

While I was sitting in audience, I saw a man with a knife in his hand resembling a bookbinder's tool. He put the knife to his own neck, and delivered a long speech which I did not understand, then gripped it with both hands and cut his own throat. So sharp was the knife and so strong his grip that his head fell to the ground, I was amazed at his action.

The sultan said to me, "Does anyone do this in your country?"

I replied, "I have never seen such a thing."

Then he laughed and said, "These are our slaves, who kill themselves for love of us." He gave orders that the body should be carried away and burned, and the sultan's lieutenants, the officers of state, the troops, and the citizens went out to the cremation. The sultan assigned a large pension to his children, wife, and brothers, and they were held in high esteem because of this act.

One of those present at this audience told me that the speech made by the man was a declaration of affection for the sultan, and that he was slaying himself for love of him, as his father had slain himself for love of the sultan's father, and his grandfather for love of the sultan's grandfather. Thereafter, I withdrew from the audience (Ibn Battuta, 1986: 352).

The suicide Ibn Battuta observed can be regarded as a custom. He seems to have travelled in Southeast Asia in the 1340s, and at that time, Mul-Jawa was apparently used by some Arab authors to refer to the Malay Peninsula (Coedes, 1968: 231). The people of the Sakon Nakhon area with the greatest cultural affinity

to the presumed inhabitants of Mul-Jawa were the Cham, a Malayo-Polynesian speaking people whose culture incorporated many elements of Indian civilization. They appear in history in the second century A. D. on the coast of the South China Sea, about 300 kilometers east of Sakon Nakhon (Coedes, 1968: 43) and persisted there for about a millennium. The components of the That Phanom shrine, which originally was probably a Brahmin rather than a Buddhist sanctuary (Phiset Jiajanphong, 1976: 154) built between the seventh and the ninth centuries A. D. (Phiset Jiajanphong, 1976: 158), are said to be like those of Cham shrines (Phiset Jiajanphong, 1976: 157).

I would welcome insights into what might have inspired Chao Phraya Suwanna-phingkhara to behead himself in honor of the Lord Buddha.

## Footnote

<sup>1</sup> Muang Nong Hang Luang is the name of Sakon Nakhon in this part of the *Chronicle*. Nong Han is the large lake on whose western shore stands the town of Sakon Nakhon. In the Chronicle, it is called Nong Han Luang, while Nong Han Kumphawapi, another large lake some 120 km to the west, is called Nong Han Noi.

<sup>2</sup> The third bundle (*phuk*, พุก) of palm leaves on which the *Legend of the Breastbone Relic* was written

<sup>3</sup> The principality in the *Legend of the Breastbone Relic* located closest to That Phanom.

<sup>4</sup> Phu Kamphra is the name of the site on the bank of the Mekong River on which the That Phanom reliquary was built.

<sup>5</sup> Phu Nam Lawt is the site on the shore of Nong Han on which the That Choeng Chum shrine was built.

<sup>6</sup> A naga lord figuring in the *Legend of the Breastbone Relic*.

<sup>7</sup> A Thai unit of weight equal to four *baht*, or 60 grams

<sup>8</sup> The location of the Sila-at Throne and of Doi Khu-ha mountain are unknown.

<sup>9</sup> *Choeng Chum* is understood to mean "[where] feet (*choeng*) gather together (*chum*)". Today, this, the most sacred shrine in the province, stands in the chief monastery in the town of Sakon Nakhon and is known as That Choeng Chum.

<sup>10</sup> The meaning of *Rom Chum* (ຮົມຈຸມ) is unknown; *rom* may be related to "hom" (ຮູມ), a word in a local language, Phu Thai, meaning "gather together"

<sup>11</sup> Phayao is about 470 kilometers northwest by west of Sakon Nakhon.

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