

Prince and Ascetic: Mapping the Congruence between the Symbolism in a Southern Version of the Dīpaṃkara Buddha Story and Three Types of Avalokiteśvara Images

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Abstract: *The aim of this study is to map the congruence between the symbolism in the Dīpaṃkara Buddha story as recorded in the Jātakaṭṭhakatha and three types of images of Avalokiteśvara found in Gandhara, Sri Lanka, and ancient India. Analysis shows that the symbolism associated with Sumedha in the story matches the traits of the three types of Avalokiteśvara images. The study provides one more piece of evidence to corroborate the theory that Avalokiteśvara's iconography is based on Sumedha in the Dīpaṃkara Buddha story. The implications of the findings for interpreting relevant Buddhist images are discussed.*

Keywords: *Dīpaṃkara Buddha, Avalokiteśvara, Sumedha, Gandhara*

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Introduction

A recent theory argues that Avalokiteśvara, the most important Mahāyāna Bodhisattva, is a composite character created by early Mahāyāna Buddhists to represent the entire Bodhisattva aspect of the Buddha. His iconography is based on Sumedha (the Buddha-to-be) in the Dīpaṃkara Buddha story; his title is based on the Buddha's recount of how he surveyed the world upon awakening.¹ In terms of its research method, the theory has relied on inductive reasoning by analyzing the symbols and symbolic actions associated with Avalokiteśvara's iconography and those associated with Sumedha in different versions of the Dīpaṃkara Buddha story. The symbols and symbolic actions include the following: (1) princely image, (2) pensive gesture, (3) deerskin, (4) blue lotus flower, (5) matted hair, (6) water bottle, (7) the prophecy of becoming a buddha (represented by the buddha image in the headdress or in the matted hair), (8) the vow to renounce everything (represented by either the *abhayamudrā* or the *varadamudra*),² (9) resemblance to gods or rebirth into gods such as Brahmā and Śakra (represented by multiple arms),³ and (10) the narrative on practicing Brahmā-viharas (their

eleven benefits represented by eleven heads).⁴ When a new theory is developed through inductive reasoning, its viability needs to be tested with new studies using deductive reasoning. The viability of a theory is measured by a set of criteria developed in natural science and social science. These criteria are comprehensiveness, falsifiability, parsimony, empirical validity, heuristic value, and applied value.⁵ The current deductive study serves as a test of the above theory and at the same time is intended to generate new knowledge. Specifically, it shows that Sumedha's image in the Dīpaṃkara Buddha story as recorded in the *Jātakatṭhakatha* is the foundation of three types of Avalokiteśvara images found in ancient Gandhara, Sri Lanka, and India. The underlying methodological assumption is that ancient Buddhist images were, in general, based on sutra texts.⁶ In the following text, I will first summarize the Dīpaṃkara Buddha story as recorded in the *Jātakatṭhakatha* and highlight the symbols and symbolic actions associated with Sumedha. I will then demonstrate that the story's symbolism is the foundation of three types of Avalokiteśvara images. Lastly, I will discuss the implications of the finding to interpret some ancient Buddhist images.

I. The Dīpaṃkara Buddha story in the *Jātakatṭhakathā*⁷

Eons ago there lived a Brahmin called Sumedha. He was of noble birth on both sides. When his parents died, the official in charge of his wealth brought the book of accounts to Sumedha and opened for him the room filled with treasures. He said to Sumedha: "Prince, so much belonged to your mother, so much to your father . . ." He asked Sumedha to make good use of the wealth. But Sumedha gave all of his wealth to charity. One day, Sumedha was in solitude in his splendid mansion; as he sat cross-legged, he began to reflection birth, decay, disease, and death. He then renounced everything he had and went to the Himalayas to become an ascetic and evolve his powers of insight. At the time, the Dīpaṃkara Buddha was visiting the city of Ramma. The whole city prepared for the welcoming ceremony. Sumedha went to see the Buddha. He was amazed by the perfection of the beauty of the Dīpaṃkara Buddha. He untied his hair; spread the black mud on his deerskin, matted locks, and bark garment; and lay down in the mire, wishing for the Buddha to tread on his back. The Dīpaṃkara Buddha prophesied that Sumedha would become the Śākyamuni Buddha.

The story in the *Jātakatṭhakathā* portrays two types of images of Sumedha: Type (A), a prince, and Type (B), an ascetic. The symbols and symbolic actions in Type (A) include (1) prince, (2) pensive gesture (reflected in the cross-legged pose), and (3) compassionate renunciation. The symbols and symbolic actions in Type (B) include (1) matted locks, (2) deerskin, and (3) the prophecy to become a buddha. Thus, six of Avalokiteśvara's iconographic traits identified in past literature are present in this version of the story. The *Jātakatṭhakatha* story is one of the few known versions of the Dīpaṃkara Buddha story, in which Sumedha was depicted as a prince and then an ascetic. All other available versions of the story preserved in the northern Buddhist texts depicted him only as an ascetic. In addition, the *Jātakatṭhakatha* story is less dramatic and sophisticated than the northern versions of the story are. These indicate the former is among the earliest versions of the Dīpaṃkara Buddha story and was the textual foundation of three types of Avalokiteśvara images.

II. Three Types of Avalokiteśvara Images

The symbolism in the *Jātakatṭhakatha* story significantly matches the traits of three types of Avalokiteśvara images, showing that the story, or a similar version of it, is the textual foundation of the ancient stone and metal images. The three types of images are (1) images found in ancient Gandhara that feature Avalokiteśvara as a prince, (2) images found in Sri Lanka that feature Avalokiteśvara as an ascetic, and (3) images found in the Indian subcontinent that feature Avalokiteśvara as both a prince and an ascetic.

1. Type (A): the princely images. The Avalokiteśvara images in Figures 1–4 were created in ancient Gandhara in or around the third century. His headdress, necklace, garment, moustache, sandals, and often highly embellished seat and back drop indicate that he is a prince; he is often seen in the pensive gesture (Figures 1–2); some images show him in a seated or standing pose, with the *abhaya mudrā* (Figures 3–4); and some feature a buddha image in his headdress (Figure 4). These respectively match the narrative and symbolism in the *Jātakaṭṭhakatha* story: Sumedha is a prince; he is “seated cross-legged” and reflected on life, death, and nirvana; he compassionately gave away all his wealth and finally; and he was prophesied to become a buddha. In addition to the above exact matching traits, however, there are important traits in Type (A) images that are not referred to in the *Jātakaṭṭhakatha* story—namely, the lotus flower (Figures 1–2) and the water bottle (Figure 3) that Avalokiteśvara holds. These features need more analysis because both are important in other types of Avalokiteśvara images. Regarding the lotus flower, Matsumura Junko observed that one of the greatest discrepancies between the northern versions of the Dīpaṃkara Buddha story and the Pāli versions of the story is they lack the motif of Sumedha offering lotus flowers to the Dīpaṃkara Buddha.⁸ At the same time, she cited a study that noted one Pāli version of the story does describe Sumedha offering lotus flowers.⁹ The stories preserved in the northern Buddhist texts generally contain the narrative that Sumedha bought blue lotus flowers from a young girl and offered them to the Dīpaṃkara Buddha. The event occurred when Sumedha was an ascetic, and none of the stories portrayed him as a prince. Regarding the water bottle, two stories preserved in the northern Buddhist texts explicitly narrate that the ascetic Sumedha held a water bottle on his way to visit the Dīpaṃkara Buddha.¹⁰

Based on the above information, the following inferences can be made: The lotus flower and the bottle in Avalokiteśvara’s hand in Figures 1–4 might be based on a version of the story that is close to the *Jātakaṭṭhakatha* story but contains the narrative of Sumedha offering flowers; or they were

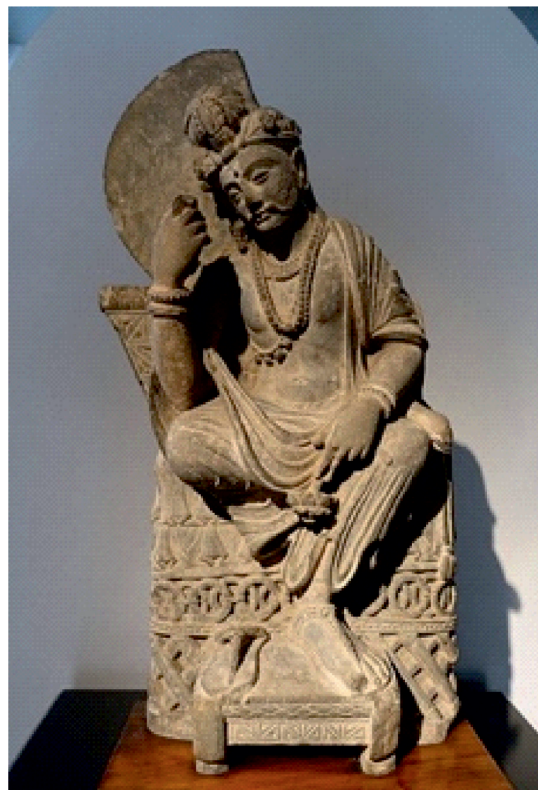


Figure 1: *Avalokiteśvara*, third century, Gandhara. The Matsuoka Museum, Tokyo, Japan

influenced by images that were based on stories that feature a flower offering. The water bottle might simply be a symbol to indicate Buddha's Brahmin identity. In the *Āgama* sutras, for example, a water bottle is an important accessory for a Brahmin: "(The Brahmins) held gold bottles, rods, staffs, and umbrellas and went to see the Buddha. . . ." "(Today's Brahmins) cover their bodies with rags, and hold a stick and a water bottle."¹¹



Figure 2: *Statue of Avalokitesvara Contemplating with One Leg in the Lap*, second to third centuries, Gandhara. Hirayama Ikuo Silkroad Museum, Hokuto-shi, Yamanashi, Japan



Figure 3: *Padmapani (Avalokiteshvara)*, first to third century, Gandhara, photo from the Huntington Archive. The Indian Museum, Kolkata, India



Figure 4: *Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara*, ca. third century CE, Gandhara. The Guimet Museum, MA 12128

2. Type (B): The ascetic images. Figures 5-7 fit the ascetic image of Sumedha as depicted in the *Jātakatthakatha* story. All three images were found in Sri Lanka, and therefore they were most likely based on a Pāli version of the story. Avalokiteśvara is a barely clothed ascetic and sports matted locks; he wears an animal skin, most vividly represented by the two legs attached to the skin in Figure 6; a buddha image appears in Figures 6–7, indicating he was prophesied to become a buddha. His right-hand gesture in Figures 5–6 is most likely a variant of the *abhayamudrā* instead of holding a once existing flower. In addition to the above traits that exactly match the story’s symbolism, there are traits that are not part of the story’s narrative. Avalokiteśvara in Figures 5–6 does not hold a flower, but in Figure 7 he holds a flower. Such a trait might have been based on a Pāli version that contains the narrative of flower offering¹² or is a result of the influence of Avalokiteśvara images in the Indian subcontinent that in general hold a flower, considering the image was made in the ninth century. In

addition, the ascetic image in Figure 5, like the prince image in Figures 1–3, does not feature a small buddha image in the headdress. A plausible explanation is that in the ancient artist's interpretation of the story, Sumedha, either as a prince or ascetic, was not yet prophesied to be a buddha.



Figure 5: *Bronze Statue of Avalokiteśvar*, ca. 750 CE, Sri Lanka. Birmingham Museum of Art.
Photo by Sean Pathasema



Figure 6: *Avalokiteśvara, the Bodhisattva of Infinite Compassion*, ca. late seventh to first half of the eighth century, Anuradhapura period, Sri Lanka. The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Figure 7: A bronze figure of the *Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara*, ninth century, Sri Lanka. Museum number 1898,0702.135

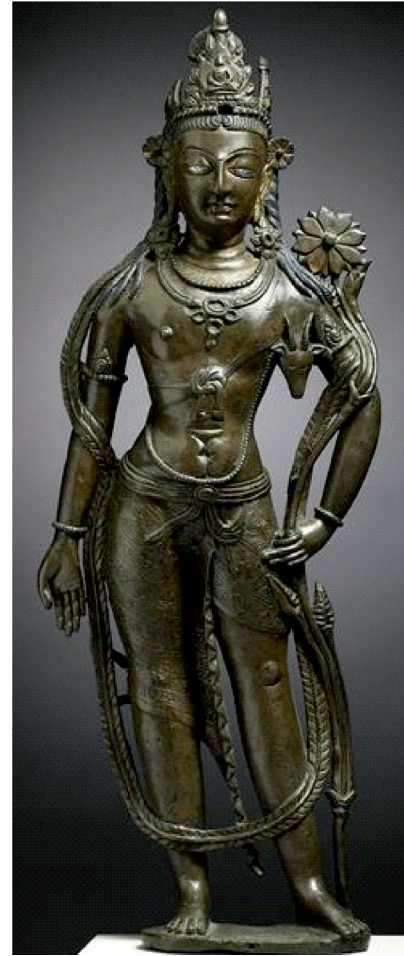


Figure 8: *Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara Padmapani*, brass with silver inlay, tenth–eleventh century, Western Tibet or ancient Tibetan kingdom of Ladakh. The Musée Guimet, Paris

3. Type (C): The prince and ascetic images. This type of Avalokiteśvara image features him as both a prince and an ascetic, as is shown in Figures 8–10. In the images, Avalokiteśvara wears a crown and a deer skin, showing he was a prince and now an ascetic. His right hand shows *varadamudra* (Figures 8 and 10) or *abhayamudrā* (Figure 9), and there is a buddha image in his headdress. I could not locate an image with a pensive gesture, but the above traits basically match the symbolism in the *Jātakaṭṭhakatha* story. At the same time, in these images, Avalokiteśvara holds lotus flowers, a trait not narrated in this version of the story. It is likely the Type (C) images were based on a story that is close to the *Jātakaṭṭhakatha* story but that contains the flower offering narrative, or they are a result of the influence of other types of Avalokiteśvara images. Regardless, the prince identity found in Gandhara images is manifested in the Type (C) images.

Conclusion

In summary, the three types of Avalokiteśvara images in the above analysis significantly match the images of Sumedha in the *Jātakaṭṭhakatha* story. The finding provides one more piece of evidence to corroborate the theory that Avalokiteśvara's iconography is based on Sumedha in the Dīpaṃkara Buddha story. It also points to the strong possibility that the starkly different types of images of



Figure 9: *Avalokiteshvara in His Padmapani Form*, bronze with copper inlay, tenth century, Kashmir. The Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

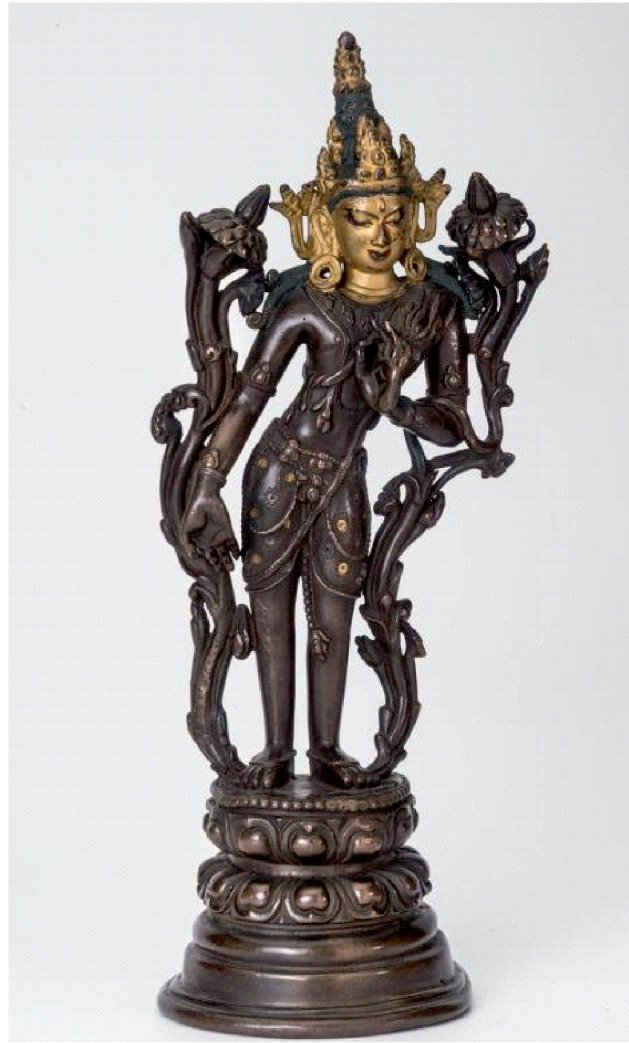


Figure 10: *Avalokiteshvara*, seventeenth–eighteenth century, Tibet, copper alloy with cold gold, silver, and copper inlay. The Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, Russia.

Avalokiteśvara found in ancient India and its surrounding regions were based on the different images of Sumedha in different versions of the Dīpaṃkara Buddha story. To test the hypothesis, however, a separate study would be required. The table below summarizes the findings of the current study. The presence of the traits in the images used for the current study is indicated by an “O.” The table shows that the combined traits of type (A) image in column 3 and type (B) image in column 4 completely match the traits portrayed by the story in column 2. The table also shows that the *Jātakaṭṭhakatha* story lacks the narrative about the Buddha-to-be practicing the *brahmavihārās* and had been reborn as gods, which are found in the versions of the Dīpaṃkara Buddha story preserved in the Northern Buddhist texts.

Implications of the Findings

The above analysis raises questions regarding the so-called “acolyte” bodhisattva, or “flanking bodhisattva.” For example, when a bodhisattva image appears next to the Buddha, he is usually construed as the Buddha’s “acolyte.”¹³ If Avalokiteśvara is the Buddha’s bodhisattva aspect, then he cannot be the latter’s acolyte. It is merely that the ancient artists placed his Bodhisattva image next to

Table 1: Symbolism associated with Sumedha in the *Jātakaṭṭhakatha* story and three types of Avalokiteśvara images, with the presence of the symbols represented by O.

1	2	3	4	5
<i>Key traits of Avalokiteśvara’s iconography identified by archeologists</i>	<i>Symbolism associated with Sumedha in the <i>Jātakaṭṭhakatha</i> story</i>	<i>Presence of the traits in the Gandharaprinclery images (A)</i>	<i>Presence of the traits in the Sri Lanka ascetic images (B)</i>	<i>Presence of the traits in the princely and ascetic images (C)</i>
Prince image	O	O		O
Pensive gesture	O	O		
Water bottle		O		
Vow to renounce (fearless/giving)	O	O	O	O
Practiced brahmavihārās				
Likeness to god/ Reborn as god				
Matted hair	O		O	O
Deer skin	O		O	O
Lotus flower		O	O	O
Prophecy to become a Buddha	O	O	O	O

the enlightened Buddha, as shown in Figure 11, in which the pensive Bodhisattva next to the Buddha is without doubt Avalokiteśvara, or the Buddha-to-be.



Figure 11: *Preaching of the Buddha*, Gandhara, 3rd or 4th century AD. John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida

The image in Figure 11 may also provide clues to interpreting the images in the Mohammad Nari stele, which has long perplexed scholars of Buddhist studies.¹⁴ Some of the princely images in the stele, in particular the four who are seated cross-legged inside the pavilions within the imposed frames by this author, show significant resemblance to the independent princely images of Avalokiteśvara found in Gandhara, who show pensive gestures or hold flowers. Could they represent Avalokiteśvara? This is highly likely if we consider the four buddha images in the stele. In many Buddhist narratives, four buddhas, including the Śākyamuni Buddha, appeared during the Bhadra Kalpa. The three buddhas that appeared before the Śākyamuni Buddha are Buddha Krakucchanda, Buddha Kanakamuni, and Buddha Kāśyapa. Devotionalism toward the three past buddhas can be found in the early Buddhist texts, Mahāyāna texts, and Chinese Buddhists' travelogues. For example, the verse in the introduction to the *Ekottara Āgama* states that “the past three buddhas all divided their teachings into three parts” to legitimize the way the Tripiṭaka are organized.¹⁵ The verse of an EA sutra narrates, “Now in this Good Kalpa four Buddhas appeared again.”¹⁶ The same narrative appears in the DA: “In this Good Kalpa, during the innumerable nayutas of years, four great immortals, Krakucchanda, Kanakamuni, Kāśyapa, and Śākyamuni, out of compassion for sentient beings, appeared.”¹⁷ During the Śākyamuni Buddha's lifetime, it appears that the place where the four buddhas once dwelled was a destination for visits by



Figure 12: *The Mohammad Nari Stele*, third–fourth century, Gandhara. Lahore Museum, Lahore, Pakistan

Buddhists. An EA sutra, for example, mentioned that “at one time, Venerable Aniruddha toured the place where the four buddhas once dwelled.”¹⁸ Chinese Buddhist monk Faxian (337–422 AD) reported seeing stupas in India marking the sites where “the past three buddhas and the Śākyamuni Buddha sat and walked” and where “the buddhas’ images were made. All are featured with stupas.”¹⁹ He also observed that Devadatta’s followers made offerings to the past three buddhas but not to Śākyamuni Buddha.²⁰ Xuanzang (602–664 CE) reported in his travelogue on a number of occasions of visiting places where “the past three buddhas had sat and walked.”²¹ The *Abhiniṣkramaṇa Sūtra*, which narrates the multi-life stories of the Buddha, recorded a story in which a dragon king offered his palace to the Buddha right after the latter became enlightened. The king said to the Buddha that he offered the palace to the “past three buddhas” and they all accepted it. Now he wished the Buddha to accept it as well so that he could have the merit of “offering a palace to four buddhas.” The Buddha accepted the offering

Based on the above narratives, I argue that the Mohammad Nari stele depicts the Śākyamuni Buddha and his past lives (Avalokiteśvara) during the Good Kalpa, in which three past buddhas also appeared. The visual narrative of the stele is organized by the four buddha images and the four princely images that are respectively seated in the arched pavilions. Each princely image, which resembles the independent Avalokiteśvara images, is placed right next to a buddha. The large buddha image in the center represents the Śākyamuni Buddha; the three smaller buddha images represent the three past buddhas. Three of the princely images in the arched pavilions that are seated closely to the three smaller buddhas present Avalokiteśvara at the time of the past three buddhas. The fourth princely image in the pavilion on the left side of the stele (from the viewer’s perspective) most likely represents the last worldly life of the Buddha—namely, prince Siddhārtha. As to other figures in the stele, some are clearly lay devotees, whereas others might be gods, kings, or the Buddha’s past lives when there were no buddhas present.

Notes

1. Zhang (2017).
2. In the EA (T 125, 2.599b03) version of the Dīpaṃkara Buddha story, the Dīpaṃkara Buddha spoke a verse to Sumedha: “You shall endure eons of suffering/And give your head, body, ears, and eyes/Wives, children, countries, treasures/Chariots, horses, and servants/Should you be able to do that/I would now make a prophecy.” To this Sumedha replied, “Even if a mountain as heated as fire/is placed on top of me/I would endure the suffering for eons/And it won’t change my resolve/Please now make your prophecy”. As such, the vow to fearlessly renounce everything can be either represented by *abhayamudrā* or the *varadamudrā*.
3. In the EA 10.7 (T 125, 2. 565b28; AN.7.62. Metta Sutta), the Buddha states that in his past lives he practiced loving-kindness: “Bhikṣus, in the former times, for seven years I practiced loving-kindness. I was reborn into the Avrha Heaven; I was once reborn as Brahmā, heading the devas and governing the ten-thousand worlds; for thirty- seven times, I turned into Indra, and for numerous times, I turned into chakravartins.” 比丘。昔我自念七年行慈心。復過七劫不來此世。復於七劫中生光音天。復於七劫生空梵天處為大梵天。無與等者統百千世界。三十六反為天帝釋形。無數世為轉輪王。 Also see SA.264 (T 99, 2. 67c18).
4. In the EA (T125, 2.806a20), the Buddha speaks of the eleven benefits of practicing the Brahmā-viharas: “If a sentient being practices loving-kindness and widely spreads its meanings, he will be rewarded with eleven benefits. Which eleven benefits? Sleeping in comfort; waking in comfort; dreaming no evil dreams; deities guard him; dear to human being; poison, weapon, fire, water, and robbers do not affect him. He appears in Brahmā’s world if he dies.”
5. Cramer, “Six criteria of a viable theory.” Comprehensiveness refers to a theory’s ability to explain a wide range of phenomena with internal consistency; precision means the theory should be testable through

falsifiable hypotheses; parsimony means frugality; empirical validity refers to the ability to correctly predict and control phenomena and manage disconfirming evidence; heuristic value is the ability to generate new thoughts and perspectives in other fields; applied value refers to the ability to offer effective solutions to real-world problems.

6. See relevant discussions in Huntington (2017) and Vesna (2019).
7. Jayawickrama (2002), 3-33.
8. Matsumura (2010), 111.
9. Matsumura (2010), 112.
10. T 3.184. *Xiuxing benqi jing* 修行本起經 (Caryā-nidāna-sūtra), translated by Mahābal 竺大力 and Kang Mengxiang 康孟祥 (Eastern Han Dynasty, 25-220 CE). *Zengyi ahan jing* 增壹阿含經 (*Ekottara-Āgama*), first translated by Dharmanandi (Tanmonanti 曇摩難提) in 384 CE and retranslated by Sanghadeva (Sengqietipo 僧伽提婆) in 398 CE.
11. T 99.2.12c18. 執持金瓶。杖枝。傘蓋。往詣佛所 (SA. 53)。T 99.2.63c15. 龕衣以蔽形。執杖持水瓶。(SA. 255)
12. Matsumura (2010), 112.
13. See Miyaji (2008).
14. Some scholars argued that the stele depicted the Miracle of Multiplication at Śrāvastī, in which Śākyamuni created an array of Buddhas who filled the sky (proposed by Alfred Foucher). Some argued that it depicted the moment the Buddha taught Mahāyāna sutras (proposed by Nakao Odani and Akira Miyaji). Some argued that it depicted Amitābha preaching in the Sukhāvātī paradise (proposed by John Huntington); Some scholars, agreeing with the second theory, identified Avalokiteśvara in the stele, who is depicted as an acolyte of the Amitābha in some sutras. See Harrison and Luczanits (2012) and Rosenfield (2011).
15. EA. 1 (T 125, 2.0549c27). 過去三佛皆三分。契經律法爲三藏。
16. EA.48.4 (T 125, 2.0790b11). 今日賢劫中。四佛復出世。
17. DA.1 (T 1, 1.2a01). 今此賢劫中。無數那維歲。有四大仙人。愍眾生故出。拘樓孫那舍。迦葉釋迦文。
18. EA.42.6 (T 125, 2.754a12). 一時。尊者阿那律遊在四佛所居之處。
19. *Gaosenseng Faxian zhuan* 高僧法顯傳 (Biography of the Eminent Monk Faxian, T 2085, 51.860a02). *Guoqu sanfo bing shijiawenfo zuo ji jingxing chu* 過去三佛并釋迦文佛坐處經行處。 *Ji zuo zhufu xingxiang chu* 及作諸佛形像處。 *Jing you ta* 盡有塔。
20. *Gaosenseng Faxian zhuan* 高僧法顯傳 (T 2085, 51.0861a12). *Tiaoda yi youzhong zai* 調達亦有眾在。 *Chang gongyang guoqu sanfo* 常供養過去三佛。 *weibu gongyang shijiawenfo* 唯不供養釋迦文佛。
21. Here I cite two examples. *Datang xiyu ji* (大唐西域記 Records from the Regions West of the Great Tang, T 2087, 51.905b29). *Guoqu sanfo zuo ji jingxing yiji zhisuo* 過去三佛坐及經行遺迹之所; T 2087, 51.907c06. *Qice zeyou guoqu sanfo zuo ji jingxing zhichu* 其側則有過去三佛坐及經行遺迹之處。

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