A NEW CAREER IN A NEW TOWN: THE GRAPHIC HISTORY OF S. N. GOENKA'S *VIPASSANĀ* LINEAGE[1]

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses a gallery of paintings commissioned by S. N. Goenka and exhibited at the Global Vipassana Pagoda in Mumbai. The Pagoda's gallery is a full retelling of the Buddha's life, which blends "mainstream" Theravādan iconography with specific vipassanic themes. I first identify the main visual features of the gallery, and then explore the story in the paintings, which spans twenty-five centuries of Buddhadhamma. With the aid of audio and written commentaries, I address the gallery's visual, oral and written storytelling, discovering parallels in other modern Buddhist traditions, but also efforts to include Western India in the resulting narrative.

On the outskirts of Mumbai, a golden pagoda faces the Arabian Sea. It is a replica of the Shwedagon Pagoda of Yangon, Myanmar, only somewhat smaller, as a token of respect. Amid Catholic parishes and fisherman villages, between a jetty and a popular theme park, this Burmese architectural landmark is an eerie sight. But it was made on purpose. The Global Vipassana Pagoda – for such is its name – is designed as an homage to Myanmar, the country which, according to its builders, has preserved the original teachings of the Buddha for millennia, but also as an introduction to *vipassanā*[2] meditation for a global and Indian audience – which truly crowds the premises.

[1] I would like to thank Marijke J. Klokke, Daniel M. Stuart and the two anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier drafts of this article. When I started writing there were few publications on Goenka and his life, and many of the issues I tackled felt like uncharted territory. Stuart's recent ethnographic and historiographical research (2020, forthcoming) starts to fill this gap, and I am greatly indebted to it. I alone am responsible for any errors that remain.

[2] For technical terms and scriptural proper names, I will use Pāli rather than Sanskrit forms. This does not apply to anglicised combinations, such as "Global Vipassana Pagoda."

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The organization in charge of this massive construction (designed "to last for a thousand years")[3] is the *vipassanā* meditation lineage of S. N. Goenka (1924–2013) and his master Sayagyi U Ba Khin (1899–1971), who ran a meditation centre in the environs of the then capital of Burma, Rangoon (Yangon). Goenka, raised as a Hindu in an ethnic-Marwari household in Mandalay, met his teacher in 1955, and soon became a committed meditator, attending retreats and progressing fast in the path of insight meditation. In 1969, he was appointed as the carrier of *vipassanā* to India, according to a prophecy that 2.500 years after its discovery, the ancient technique would spread across the world.[4] Goenkaji, as he is known domestically, was based in India until his death in 2013; the Global Vipassana Pagoda of Mumbai, completed in 2008, was his last major project, intended as a memorial to his teacher and to his country of birth. Goenka and his followers have founded over 200 meditation centres, the greater part of which (90) are in Indian territory. Their courses have been taught in sixty languages.[5] This is a successful attempt to introduce Buddhist meditation to a largely unfamiliar environment – today, most countries in Western Europe and major cities of India have a Goenka centre of some kind.[6]

The Goenka tradition describes *vipassanā* meditation as a universal, scientific, non-sectarian, eminently practical technique of self-observation, which does not require any set of beliefs apart from those naturally springing from its gradual practice. Rather than a set of dogmas or rituals, *vipassanā* is conceived (and branded) as an "Art of Living," requiring nothing more than the will to improve one's psycho-emotional condition. The only desirable conversion, stated Goenka at the 2000 United Nations Millennium World Peace Summit, is not "from one organized

[3] "Construction and development," accessed March 29, 2021, https://www.globalpagoda.org/construction-and-development.

[4] It is worth noting that the prophecy was rejected "as contradictory and as lacking textual support" in the Sixth Buddhist Council, held in Rangoon from 1954 to 1956 (Pranke 2010: 466, n. 32). The Goenka-U Ba Khin lineage had adopted it before the Council and did not renounce this (now officially apocryphal) notion.

[5] "सयाजी ऊ एवं माताजी," accessed September 28, 2021, https://www.izi.travel/en/7148-vipshynaa-kaa-udgm-aur-vikaas/hi.

[6] "Locations," accessed March 29, 2021, https://www.dhamma.org/en/locations/directory#IN.

religion to another organized religion," but "conversion from misery to happiness" (Goenka 2013b). As a result, Goenka was widely perceived as having "made insight meditation a separate tradition in its own right" (Braun 2013b).

The visitors to the Mumbai Global Vipassana Pagoda, however, learn that the majestic 16.8-million-dollar building enshrines "genuine relics" of a revered Indian figure: Siddhattha Gotama, better known as the Buddha.[7] In a space called "Art Gallery," outside the pagoda's dome, the visitors find a collection of 122 paintings about the birth of *vipassanā*: some may be surprised to know that its origins are identical with those of the "religion" we today call Buddhism. As the construction itself has the shape of a Burmese Buddhist pagoda, the visitor may have conflicting impressions at the end of the tour – perhaps with a refreshment in hand in the Food Court, where there is local vegetarian fare, but also a display of "Burmese Murals for Culture & Art enthusiasts to learn about Burmese customs."[8] Questions might arise: is *vipassanā* meditation Burmese Buddhism? Is it Indian? Is it really universal?

This painting gallery is there to provide the answers. Inaugurated with the Pagoda in 2009, it has been called "the world's single largest collection of paintings on the life of Sammasambuddha Gotama"[9] and "the single largest thematic collection of paintings in the world."[10] It consists, for the most part, of new depictions of major events in the Buddha's life-story, accompanied by an audio commentary in six languages: English, Hindi, Marathi, Burmese, Sinhala and Thai, the first two "in Shri SN Goenka Ji's voice."[11] A book, available for sale in the compound, provides

[7] "Facts and Figures," accessed March 29, 2021, https://www.globalpagoda.org/facts-and-figures.

[8] "Places at Global Vipassana Pagoda," accessed March 29, 2021, https://www.globalpagoda.org/places-to-visit.

[9] "Global Vipassana Pagoda Photographs," last modified January 6, 2012, https://globalpagoda.blogspot.com/2012/01/global-vipassana-pagoda-photographs.html.

[10] "Global Pagoda and the Kamma Inheritance," last modified September 21, 2009, https://globalpagoda.blogspot.com/2009/09/global-pagoda-and-kamma-inheritance.html.

[11] "Places at Global Vipassana Pagoda," accessed March 29, 2021, https://www.globalpagoda.org/places-to-visit. The audio commentaries have recently been made available on the Global Vipassana Pagoda Audio Tour App, and on the platform izi.TRAVEL ("The Origin and Spread of Vipassana," accessed March 29, 2021, https://www.izi.travel/en/7148-the-origin-and-spread-of-vipassana/en).

a lengthier commentary (abbreviated here as "G"). All the paintings are numbered, and captioned in English and Hindi.

As one of the stated goals of the pagoda is to become a place "to come to learn [about] Sakyamuni Gotama Buddha," and to remove "misconceptions about him,"[12] this educational gallery is central to its mission. It is open to everyone and visit "is highly recommended." The painters, as is usual in traditional Buddhist art, are unknown to us: Goenka (2013a) writes that the gallery "has been prepared here in consultation with me by artists from Myanmar who worked with a lot of perseverance and reverence under the able guidance and supervision of Mr. Vasudev Kamath, a renowned artist" from Mumbai. Elsewhere we hear of "paintings by leading artists in Burma, Thailand and India."[13]

In its anonymity, the gallery is in line with Buddhist monastic art, where "the artist is rarely identified, known, or even acknowledged" (McDaniel 2011a: 248). Some of the paintings depict classic scenes of (modern) Theravādan temple murals, from Sri Lanka to the Mekong Delta. Other scenes are less well-known, if not unique to this gallery. The selection of some themes, characters and episodes (and the avoidance of others) betrays contemporary, context-specific concerns, and the depiction and narratives abound in intentional modifications.

These paintings are not confined to their original gallery in Mumbai. Goenka's intercontinental network of meditation centres is impressive, but his paintings may be reaching even more people. They circulate online on Buddhist sites, videos and forums, often without mentioning Goenka or his lineage (as in DT). For many of the canonical scenes and characters, they appear near the top of Google Images searches in the Roman, Burmese, Thai or Devanagari script. The images are leading an independent life in these contexts, and yet, as we will see, they carry a seed of Goenka's ideas and personality in them.

In recent decades, Buddhist art scholarship shows a marked tendency to de-emphasize the role of "official" discourses in Buddhist art making, positing a more complex interrelation between the visual and the textual,

[12] "Mission of the Global Vipassana Pagoda," accessed March 29, 2021, https://www.globalpagoda.org/why-pagoda.

[13] "Global Pagoda Developmental Projects – Phase Two," last modified December 22, 2009, https://globalpagoda.blogspot.com/2009/12/global-pagoda-developmental-projects.html.

and between reproduction and innovation. This shift takes place in the midst of a "materialist turn" in the discipline (Mann 2014). The following statement is characteristic, "Individuals assemble and express their own constantly changing repertoires; they do not simply reproduce accepted values, aesthetics ideals, or visual protocols" (McDaniel 2008: 61). Though one may wonder if repertoires do change "constantly" (as the very word implies some fixed, at most rotating, "tunes"), it has become clearer that following canonically sanctioned texts is a lesser concern in the minds of some artists, if such texts are known at all, and if they are known *in the same form* as they are known to the scholar, who is often separated by a gap of centuries (Fontein 2000). As another researcher notes, "the authority of sūtras, as the embodiment of the Buddha's word, has led scholars to over-rely on textual evidence" (Fraser 2004: 195). What if certain depictions of Gotama's past lives are means to summon the Buddha's own presence, rather than attempts at Buddhist pedagogy (Brown 1997)? What if animal representations in Buddhist scenes do not mean anything remotely "Buddhist" (McDaniel 2014)? And what if visual culture moulds our understanding of the concepts represented (Teiser 2006: 239–254)?

What follows is a more traditional analysis. The paintings that concern us are didactic and unashamedly "canonical": they were directly supervised by Goenka and carry his voice and narrations. Though other contemporary Buddha-life painters and muralists are known to paint "largely from visual memories rather than from textual sources" (Cate 2003: 89), it is difficult to conceive this gallery without precise instructions inspired by Theravādin scriptures (which the written commentary quotes side by side with the images). All the paintings are monoscenic, depicting single scenes which require "the viewer's recognition of the story" (Dehejia 1990: 374): since the stories are supposedly unknown to the target audience, the commentaries are as important as the images. The titles below the paintings merely name the main event or character(s) in them.

A second factor leads us to focus on the content, rather than the form, of the paintings: as the style is neutral and naturalistic in the extreme, and as nothing certain is known about the identities, number, working context(s), materials and even nationalities of the artists, connections with established Theravādan pictorial traditions remain largely speculative. Not only the painters, but the very *style* is anonymous. This is

not to say that an art historical comparative is impossible, and our gallery remains open to it. The present article will focus on the relation between traditional Buddhist narratives and Goenka's interpretation of them: the story in the paintings, but also the story behind the paintings. The Buddha's life-story, but also Goenkan *vipassanā*'s self-perceived position in history, and how it relates – and adds – to other (hi)stories of Buddhism.

Iconographic aspects

The visitor who has been to a modern Southeast Asian Theravādan temple will not feel out of place in Goenka's gallery: many of the scenes are found in murals across the Theravāda world, and the rendering is vaguely familiar, perhaps due to the Burmese/Thai origin of the anonymous painters. While the drawing style of Vasudeo Kamath is apparent in most, the scenes do not conform to a single pre-existing aesthetic. Some modern Buddhist ideologists have embraced an "international" aesthetic, equidistant to regional conventions (e.g., Tartakov 2012b), and that seems to be the case of Goenka as well. His paintings have their own, distinct conventions: a predominantly warm, muted palette, sturdy-to-chubby (non-monastic) male figures, and a somewhat sandy texture are some of their most perceptible features.

If there is an element that pervades the whole collection, it is naturalism. Theravādan lands have experienced a shift towards greater pictorial naturalism in the past two centuries, influenced by Western techniques of spatialization and perspective, whether reformulating previous iconographic traditions (Ringis 1990, Guéret-Demangeon 2015, Fraser-Lu 2015: 71) or marking an end to them (Holt 1996: 50). In Goenka's gallery, this trend is pushed to the limit: the background and characters look as naturalistic as possible, from the perspective of present-day India. The Buddha's marriage to Yasodharā, for instance, resembles a contemporary wedding – one would only need to exchange the clothes for less revealing ones (no. 10).[14] Brahmins look like today's Brahmins, whereas monks

[14] I number the paintings according to their order at DT; there is a list of images as an appendix. I will refer to three commentaries, an English-language book (G) and English

and ascetics are depicted as present-day Theravādin monks, and the maroon tint of some of their robes brings to mind the specific lineages of Myanmar (no. 33). Still, the artists take care to distinguish the robes of the ascetic seen by prince Siddhattha in his fourth encounter, before renouncing the world, from the average (Buddhist-looking) monk of the paintings (no. 11). Ascetics, Brahmins and monks are rarely hieratical, and sometimes show more than a glimmer of humanity: when the group of five ascetics abandon Gotama, they are "in disgust" (E 5:00) and make gestures of frustration.

Some of the paintings are dramatic, in an understated way. The vulture and barren land around the corpse encountered by prince Siddhattha (no. 11) or the emaciated ascetics practicing austerities under equally veined trees (no. 17) are some of the highlights of the collection. The creatures in Māra's attack, the only visually non-realistic episode, would seem to belong to modern fantasy comics or movies (no. 21), a source of inspiration for contemporary Buddhist painters, particularly Thai muralists (Cate 2003: 99–101, McDaniel 2011b: 213), as possibly were some of our anonymous artists.

A major departure from conventional Theravādan temple paintings is the attention paid to Buddhist nuns, including the episode of the foundation of the female monastic order at Mahāpajāpatī's request (no. 57). Depictions of that scene do not abound in traditional Theravādan art, as the female order had died out by the thirteenth century and for long remained a hazy memory (Skilling 1993–1994). For some reason – perhaps this shortage of precedents – our artists portrayed the *bhikkhunī*s (nuns) as different from their male counterparts, wearing their robes over their shoulders and heads (Figure 1). Nothing in the scriptural sources suggests this difference: the (presumably visible) "shaven heads" of the nuns are mentioned (Vin 4.224), and, as such, depicted in earlier Buddhist art (see Handlin [2016]). One reason may be the desire to make the imagery familiar to its intended Indian audience: certainly, Goenka's *bhikkhunī*s look more similar to present-day (Śvetāmbara) Jain nuns than to Buddhist renouncers of any given school. These similarities might be catering to

(E) and Hindi (H) video commentaries. On Goenka's different languages/registers, see Melnikova 2014b: 14, Stuart 2020: 117–118, 131–134.



Figure 1: Bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā instructing her former husband, Visākha (MN 44). https://www.dhammatalks.net/images/vimuttisukha/a76.jpg

Jains, many of whom were *vipassanā* enthusiasts (Stuart 2017: 168–171). However, in contrast to Jain art, full nudity is nowhere depicted in the gallery: a naked ascetic's genitals are covered with leaves (no. 25), in the Christian/Western fashion.

The architectural style, or rather styles, of the scenes projects an imaginary of a "classical" Buddhist India onto the Northeast India of the Buddha's time, filling in the gaps of the archaeological record, which barely covers that period. One interior scene, prince Siddhattha's silent abandonment of his wife and child (no. 12), shows unpainted stone reliefs evoking post-Mauryan Indian temples. But the star of this reimagined landscape is the Great Stupa of Sāñcī (third century BCE), whose magnificent gateway appears recurrently in the background (nos. 9, 33, 40, 94). Like other Buddhist monuments in India, Sāñcī was only restored in the early twentieth century (1912–1919), a reason why it was hardly an inspiration in earlier Buddhist art, but soon became a symbol for modern Indian Buddhism (Tartakov 2012a).

Other familiar elements, such as *ghats* or straw-roofed huts (no. 52), could be deduced from the canonical texts themselves. It is even conceivable

that buildings employed wheel-shaped designs, but their proliferation here must be, again, a visual means to communicate that we are in the "Dharmic" age of India (nos. 9, 35–37, 48, 67–68, 70, 80, 84, 91, 94). The wheel is, of course, a symbol of the Buddhist and Hindu Dharmas in general – and of Goenka's organization in particular –, but also, in today's India, of the great Buddhist emperor Asoka and his golden age of union and tolerance (Josh 2012), as the national flag reminds us. Both the wheels and the Sāñcī-style gateways foreshadow Asoka's "Buddhist" empire, celebrated at various points of the pagoda compound (one of the entrances is inspired by the Sāñcī arch).

The gallery is, thus, at once naturalistic and selectively anachronistic, its reconstructed landscape treading the thin line between the symbolic and the historically plausible. The figure of the Buddha, however, is exempted from such licences: traditional expectations must be satisfied. Even though he is called "shaven-headed" in the commentary to the paintings (and in the canonical Pāli texts), he preserves his usual black hair, as well as long ears and a protruding head, without which he would hardly be recognizable to the spectators. He possesses these and other physical marks of a "great man" (G 23, 157),[15] as well as eternal youthfulness and an ever-present halo, and yet his facial features are not idealized, his attitude and demeanour not quite majestic.

One of the recurring themes in the collection is the Buddha's compassion and loving-kindness (*mettā*). Even prince Siddhattha's training in princely arts (archery, riding horses) is softened, in all three commentaries, by allusions to his love and non-violence (G 13–15). We see the Buddha averting wars and conflicts (nos. 41, 99), and tenderly nursing a sick monk (Vin 1.302), an action that is described by Goenka as the "practical aspect of *vipassanā*" (E 22:00) – this story is, however, an isolated instance in the Buddha's canonical career. Similarly, the rescue of the orphan Sopāka by a group of *bhikkhu*s (no. 61), organized by the Buddha, draws a lesson from a significantly altered minor episode: in the original narrative he is saved by a deity (Th-a i.100).

[15] On the Buddha's body in connection with the Global Pagoda, see Vipassana Meditation, "Enshrining of the Relics of The Buddha at Global Vipassana Pagoda," YouTube video, 44:07, December 20, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDlq721YGw0.

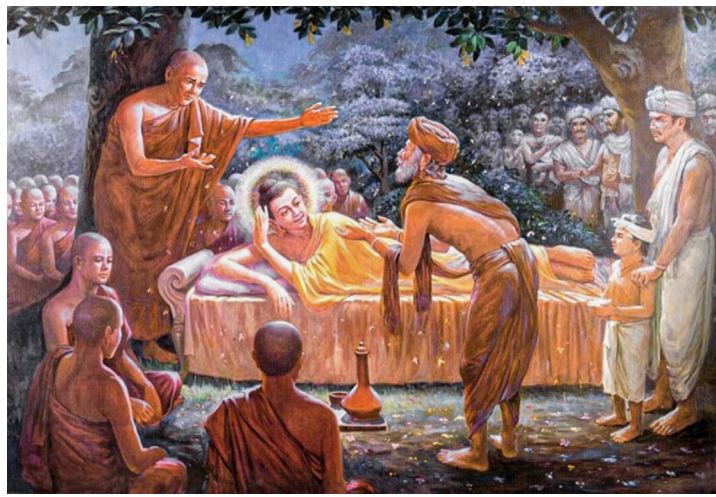


Figure 2: The Buddha with his last convert, Subhadda, shortly before his death (DN 16). https://www.dhammatalks.net/images/vimuttisukha/a101.jpg

This exceedingly compassionate Buddha has an expressive face (nos. 64, 73, 87). He often seems to be attentively listening to the others, and sometimes bends his body as if trying to listen better. This sharply contrasts with a more detached, hieratic attitude found in most traditions, and the scene of the Buddha's death (at age 80) is unique: instead of an otherworldly sage approaching the final mystery of *parinibbāna*, we see a smiling, relaxed young man gesturing to Ānanda (Figure 2). One of the selected canonical episodes, his refusal to step on a royal cloth (no. 44; MN 85), is also at odds with a traditional tendency to depict him in royal regalia (not least in Myanmar, the land of the crowned Mahāmuni Buddha).

Early in his career, when he had gathered 60 *arahant* disciples, the Buddha started to organize the spread of his Dhamma for the welfare of the many (no. 28, H 33:00). This missionary scene is, again, historically rare in art, but central to an organization attempting to reintroduce buddhic meditation into its "native" India. To fully grasp its importance, we need to understand what made India first export, then import *vipassanā* meditation.

Historical themes

Vipassanā-*centrism*

We may have lost sight, by now, of the fact that the images analysed claim to portray "The Origin & Spread of Vipassana," and *not* of Buddhism as an organized religion, from which Goenka's movement distances itself. This confusion is understandable, since so far we have encountered, in our paintings, little more than the traditional stories of the Buddha and his immediate followers. However, *vipassanā* lurks behind almost every scene, since for Goenka meditators it is the *core* of what the Buddha taught.

This paper lacks the space to examine the particularities of Goenka's *vipassanā* technique, or to contrast it with meditation in the early Buddhist sources; we should nevertheless note that it diverges in significant ways from other contemporary reconstructions of early Buddhism (Anālayo 2011: 168, Melnikova 2014a: 82–84).[16] This makes the commentaries of our images somewhat daring, since *vipassanā* is regularly put in the mouths of characters who, in the canonical sources, do not use the word or even the concept. For example, if a commentary portrays the nun Sīsupacālā as saying, "I've eradicated all my lust by the practice of *vipassanā*" (E 23:53), the canonical verse reads instead, "Everywhere delight is defeated / the mass of darkness, pierced" (Thī 8.1). When, in the written commentary, Māra claims that the Buddha's followers "have become expert in large numbers in teaching Vipassana meditation" (G 199), the closest the original gets is "they practice in conformity with the Dhamma" (DN 16). Even though it may be true that in modern India "the very word 'Vipassana' had been forgotten,"[17] in Goenka's historical recreation the characters must be forcibly "reminded" of the word all the time.

[16] For a more possibilistic approach, see Anālayo's earlier 2006, Cousins 1994–1996: 56–58. For one of the main points of divergence, see Stuart 2020: 136–140.

[17] "Life of S. N. Goenka," accessed March 29, 2021, https://www.vridhamma.org/S.N.-Goenka#ToIndia. Goenka claimed that, prior to his mission, *vipassanā* had been absent from India for "an interval of approximately two thousand years" (2020: 253), and dated its return to his own arrival in June 1969. As other Buddhist traditions remained in India for much longer – and as the Mahasi *vipassanā* tradition had arrived earlier than Goenka's (Pryor 2006) – this points to a lineage-specific understanding of what "*vipassanā*" means in such historical narratives, and it is this understanding that I assume in the present section.

Similarly, the prophecy of the seer Asita (that prince Siddhattha would become a buddha) explicitly mentions the discovery of *vipassanā* (E 1:35), and even the Tipiṭaka is offhandedly defined as a corpus "containing information on *vipassanā*" (E 32:45). The calm, peaceful appearance of Buddhist monks is here described as being "radiant with *vipassanā*" (E 9:57). King Anawratha of Pagan received from Shin Arahan not just orthodox and scholarly Theravāda, but "the true *vipassanā*-Dhamma" (E 32:00). We have Pāli neologisms such as *vipassī-bhikkhu-saṅgha* or *vipassī-licchavi*,[18] and references to meditation "centres" in ancient, pre-Buddhist India (E 4:40), and into Buddhist times. The great emperor Asoka not only converted to Buddhism, as is well known, but also practiced *vipassanā*, and some of his rock edicts prove that he "must have himself experienced the beneficial results of this technique."[19] Even the doctrinal *Brahmajālasutta* (DN 1) would teach "the way to achieve full liberation through the practice of Vipassana" (G 238), and the specifics of Goenka's technique have been related to a single, repeated sentence in this text (Panth 2010).

The projection of current *vipassanā* methods onto the Buddha's time engenders other conceptual anachronisms: for example, the Buddha discovered the existence of "tiny little sub-atomic particles," and "termed them *kalāpa*" (G vi), a notion that does not appear in the canonical literature, though it is widely used in Burmese *vipassanā* traditions (van Oosterwijk 2012: 67). Other canonical passages are translated into Goenka's characteristic meditative terminology: instead of "the entire world is shaking (*pakampito*)" (Thī 8.1), we read that "all the realms are nothing but vibrations" (G 99).

Burma-centrism

The systematic stress on *vipassanā* and its categories creates a seeming divergence between the history narrated by Goenka and canonical accounts of early Buddhism. There are divergences even in our first painting. The

[18] The compound *vipassaka-bhikkhu* is found in commentarial literature (Dhp-a iii.165), but not as a separate *saṅgha* or collective.

[19] "Era of Emperor Asoka," accessed March 29, 2021, https://www.vridhamma.org/Era-of-Emperor-Asoka.



Figure 3: The ascetic Sumedha receives the prophecy of buddhahood from Dīpaṅkara Buddha (Bv 3).
https://www.dhammatalks.net/images/vimuttisukha/a02.jpg

collection starts in a very traditional way, with the prediction of buddhahood to the ascetic Sumedha, by Dīpaṅkara Buddha (Figure 3), many aeons before Gotama and other buddhas of our age (G 1, H 0:39). Whether intentionally or not, the naturalism of the image helps to conceal the character's origins: Dīpaṅkara Buddha was thought to be over 30 meters tall and to have lived one hundred thousand years, and in this scene he would be surrounded by visible *deva*s pouring down flowers (Bv 2-3). He is certainly not a historically attested figure, but his prediction sets in motion the multi-life-story of Gotama, "a completely historical person" (Goenka 1997b).

In this and the next sections, I will compare Goenka's history with external historical claims. By contrasting these different versions of Buddhist history, I intend to better understand and outline the specificity of Goenka's, not to use historicism, naturalism or religious modernism as a cross-cultural gold standard by which to measure Goenka. I have previously argued that a cross-cultural hermeneutic foundation would be closer to what we call "myth" than to such discourses (Carrera 2019). It is Goenka who

consistently shuns the (overtly) mythical and resorts to "history" and "science" as sources of epistemic legitimacy, though it is clear that for him they have no ultimate value. Nowhere is this recourse more apparent than in his narrations about Gotama and his followers.

Central to our gallery and its commentaries is the visit of two merchants, Tapussa and Bhallika, who became the first lay disciples of the Buddha. They are portrayed as two distinctively Burmese men (no. 24), reflecting the regional legend that both merchants came from ancient Burma. Tapussa and Bhallika offer the Buddha his first meal as a buddha, and are dressed in Burmese "traditional" clothing – as known to us today. Nevertheless, there are reasons to believe that the merchants were once conceived of as citizens of Utkala, in today's Orissa, India (Malalasekera 1937: s.v. "Ukkalā"). In the written commentary, Goenka describes a city called Ukkala in Burma – built by people from Utkala, India – and provides Balkh, Afghanistan, as the birthplace of the two merchants: they were not born Burmese, but the first post-enlightenment meal of the Buddha, "rice and honey cakes," was brought from Burma – "Ukkala" (G 45). This complex interpretation would explain the name "*Bhal*lika" and the similarities between "Utkala" and "Okkalapa" (Yangon).

The Burmese story of Tapussa and Bhallika is an assortment of traditions (Pe Maung Tin 1934), and no specific source has so far been identified for Goenka's version. Here as elsewhere, he transmits the outlines of the legend, and indeed, according to Stadtner (2010: 72), "most Burmese are familiar only with the bare outlines of the myth." Goenka echoes the commentarial notion (Th-a 50) that the merchants met the Buddha a second time and were instructed in the Dhamma; Tapussa became a lay stream-enterer (*sotāpanna*) and Bhallika an *arahant* monk. But Goenka also elaborates on this story: Tapussa and Bhallika "gave a few hair relics of the Buddha to Myanmar," taught the Dhamma to the Burmese, and later built a second stupa in the land of their ancestors, "a small town named Asitanjana near Balakha." They were therefore "instrumental in building stupas and enshrining the hair relics in both the eastern and the western neighbouring countries of India" (G 45).[20]

[20] Within the lineage, this "missionary" variation of the legend seems to date to Goenka's leadership. His teacher U Ba Khin (1954b: 11) only mentions the first encounter

Goenka's history of Buddhism leans repeatedly towards Myanmar, in the spirit of the old Burmese chronicles. Only eight years after the Buddha's demise, a second Indian *arahant* brought *vipassanā* to Myanmar.[21] His name was Gavampati and he planned "to teach the Dhamma to his brother of a past life, Siharaja, as well as to other people" living in southern Burma, and indeed he appears as a founding figure in Mon and Burmese literature (Lagirarde 2019: 192).

Two centuries later, the Indian emperor Asoka discovered the *vipassanā*-Dhamma, and spread it to faraway lands. Asoka's missionaries to the East (Suvaṇṇabhūmi), Soṇa and Uttara, are here explicitly sent "to Myanmar" (G 238). They would therefore constitute the third wave of evangelizers of Myanmar, the land of the first Buddhists, the land repeatedly visited by *arahant*s, the only land where *vipassanā* meditation was preserved in its pristine purity, "in the Mon kingdom in the south" (G 219). And, if the higher degrees of sanctity (*ariya-phala*) "can be reached only through the practice of Vipassana,"[22] this means that it has also been for centuries the only land where *there could be* saints. This close association between Myanmar and true Buddhism is common to other Burmese *vipassanā* lineages, and indeed *vipassanā* was intensely promoted as the "traditional Burmese method" by the nationalist government of U Nu, even though he tended to favour the Mahasi lineage (Houtman 1999: 205–207).[23]

Goenka's VRI website states that countries as remote as Japan, Korea, Indonesia or Tibet received the *vipassanā*-Dhamma, but most eventually forgot it. The introduction of *vipassanā* in the wider Buddhist world is also presented as a historical restoration, and popular Mahāyāna saints, such as

with the Buddha and adds that the two Rangoonites "were disciples only by faith, without a taste of the Buddha Dhamma in actual practice which alone could give them deliverance from suffering and death."

[21] According to Goenka's VRI website: "Myanmar: Teacher-Disciple Tradition," accessed March 29, 2021, https://www.vridhamma.org/Myanmar-Teacher-Disciple-Tradition.

[22] Ibid.

[23] The Mahasi history of Buddhism shares with Goenka's the figures of Soṇa and Uttara, and the theme of Southern Burma as a stronghold of Dhamma: the first encounter between the head of the lineage and his future supporter, U Nu, took place in Thaton (Mon State), where the two *arahant*s established Buddhism in Burma after flying all the way from Laṅkā (Jordt 2007: 28–29).

Padmasambhava and Atiśa, are reclaimed as *vipassanā*-messengers.[24] Hence, practicing (U Ba Khin-style) *vipassanā* becomes the best way to honour the founders and patriarchs of East Asian or Tibetan Buddhism.

Our gallery pays close attention to this Burma-centred history of Buddhism, including Soṇa and Uttara's mission (no. 104), but also the adventures of Mahinda and Saṅghamittā (nos. 106–107), the Dhamma-messengers of Sri Lanka. It never forgets that "the sacred land of Myanmar" (Goenka 1999) owes its glory to the "ancestral holy land of India" (Goenka 1997a), where most episodes are set. These two "holy lands" are connected by the missionary arc of the restoration of the Dhamma in modern India, but also in values, lifestyles, goals and even scenery: the Mandalay fort would have been "constructed in line with the Buddha's instructions" (G 209), as the Asokan forts of old.

The final part of the collection includes a review of the six Buddhist councils (as per the Burmese reckoning), which concludes, in the English video, with an actual picture of the 1954–1956 Rangoon Council (E 32: 34–33:30): from the nebulous times of Dīpaṅkara Buddha, we emerge to the light of photographed history. The Dhamma is presented not only as a stream of virtue, concentration and wisdom, but also, in this section, as a continuing human institution, a Sāsana bridging India, Laṅkā and modern Burma.

However, as Goenka often said, the most important continuity is that of practice. After the missionaries Soṇa and Uttara (re)established *vipassanā* for the Burmese, there was a lineage of anonymous masters who preserved the real teachings of the Buddha. This lineage came to the surface, eventually, in the person of the Ledi Sayadaw, the master of the master of the master of S. N. Goenka, after a twenty-century hidden transmission.

The "chain of teachers"

The last pictures of our collection portray the final links of the spiritual chain which starts with the Buddha and ends in S. N. Goenka. Goenka

[24] "History and Spread of Vipassana," accessed March 29, 2021, https://www.vridhamma.org/History-and-Spread-of-Vipassana.

is, of course, the last one, and preceding him are portraits of his master Sayagyi U Ba Khin, his master's master Saya Thetgyi, and the Ledi Sayadaw, the first modern figure in the lineage. The Fifth (1871) and Sixth (1954–1956) Buddhist councils complete the modern period; the previous image is set "about a thousand years ago" (H 2:31:18) and, before that, we are in Laṅkā in 29 BCE (H 2:30:41). Where are the missing links? What happened in the more than two thousand years between the emperor Asoka and the nineteenth century?

Like the current Imam for the Twelver Shiites, *vipassanā* went into hiding. Before the nineteenth century, it was preserved by a few anonymous monks and hermits, living in forests or caves.[25] This notion is not exclusive to Goenka, but common across Burmese *vipassanā* lineages (Houtman 1990b: 89–90, Nyanaponika [1962] 2005: 95). In contrast to the Zen or Tibetan traditions, Burmese *vipassanā* generally keeps few memories of potential masters between the purported founders and the mid-nineteenth century, with the exception of the renowned Shin Arahan, from the eleventh century (G 219). The lack of speculation on this matter is arguably one of the modern features of the traditions. The gaps in the spiritual lineage would surely have been easier to fill in earlier times – a time less wary of mythopoiesis.

The insistence on a pure, unbroken lineage is characteristic of Goenka, who considered adulterating the teaching as a "monumental sin" (Confalonieri 1999: 18). According to Braun (2013a: 159), none of Goenka's known predecessors "put so much stress on a perfectly preserved technique." While U Ba Khin allowed meditators to use mantras from their own religions (King 1961: 52), or to take refuge in Jesus instead of the Buddha (Confalonieri 1999: 42–43), Goenka forbids any external ritual, and the mixing of techniques even in the same centre (Kornfield 2007). His claim is that "no changes in the technique were made by anyone in this tradition" since the Buddha's time (Confalonieri 1999: 90).

According to Melnikova (2014a: 70, n. 9), U Ba Khin, "unlike Goenka, […] did not identify his specific technique with *vipassanā* as such." This leniency does not amount to perennialism of any sort, since U Ba Khin

[25] "Myanmar: Teacher-Disciple Tradition," accessed March 29, 2021, https://www.vridhamma.org/Myanmar-Teacher-Disciple-Tradition.

remained strictly Burmese Buddhist at heart and, in private, "quite critical of many other traditions of meditation" (Stuart 2020: 90). His relatively more flexible approach must be linked, rather, to his privileged access to supernormal forces and agents (Stuart 2020: 47–48): he could harness destructive forces and get help from enlightened *deva*s and *brahmā*s, and was considered as a *bodhisatta* by his followers. Goenka tried to standardize a method which could still be fruitful without the embodied presence of the master (who already took steps in that direction late in life), and, from an early stage, this project precluded external innovations (Stuart 2020: 104–106). The exacting, meticulous routine of a Goenka centre is, in this sense, a literal "routinization" of U Ba Khin's charismatic powers.

Some other details in the lives of Goenka's predecessors suggest a more creative and polyvalent learning than is now acknowledged. First of all, there is at present no evidence that the Ledi Sayadaw, the first known modern master in the lineage, had a teacher of meditation, apart from perhaps the writings of U Hpo Hlaing (Braun 2013a: 157). His successor, the layman Saya Thetgyi (U Po Thet), is also a blurry figure: the lineage has him as a disciple of the Ledi Sayadaw during seven or perhaps fourteen years (Confalonieri 1999: 79, Chit Tin 1982: 27), after which period he was formally authorized to teach. A *vipassanā* historian, however, claims that Ledi "personally never taught the unordained on any scale" (Houtman 2014: 95), and several internal sources stress the influence of the sayadaw's *meditation manuals* on Saya Thetgyi, who "almost knew them by heart" (Tint Yee 1988: 12), checked his own findings against them (Paññāsiha n.d.: 124), and continued to use them "as a reference" for thirty years (Confalonieri 1999: 81–82). To complicate matters, all the sources agree that Saya Thetgyi had previously gone to "many of the Sayadaws and lay teachers," including the lay Saya Nyunt (Tint Yee 1988: 6) or Ledi's monastic disciple U Tiloka (Stuart forthcoming).

Saya Thetgyi's disciple, U Ba Khin, had a keen interest in science and atomic theory, and was an experimentalist in matters of meditation. Popular science literature in English played a role in the conceptualization of his technique (Nottingham 1960: 10–12), which resulted in a distinctive "Buddhist-hybrid" scientific jargon. U Ba Khin's blending of Buddhist/*weikza* categories and scientific notions of his time is fascinating, and

deserves a study of its own. In the words of one of his close disciples (and biographer), his approach to the Dhamma was "modern and scientific … [H]e had developed a technique of his own, more suited to the demands of modern times, after ceaseless practical research and experimentation" (Ko Lay 1972: 11).

Meditative self-learning is not unique to the Goenka lineage: in Burma, Pranke (2010: 457) dates the earliest "*vipassanā* manuals in the vernacular" to the second half of the eighteenth century. Learning meditation from books and manuals was made easier by the introduction of the printing press, and by the modern translations of canonical and commentarial sources. However, this partial self-education does cast a shadow on the purported unadulteration of the transmission. To be sure, in the Goenka/U Ba Khin lineage the transmission is considered to have an extra-historical side: what is "transmitted" is, in essence, direct access to Nibbāna (*nibbāna-dhātu*) and to helping deities that were enlightened in the Buddha's time.[26] To keep this door open, Goenka took care to standardize the courses and videotape his speeches, ensuring the homogeneity of the teaching, but this "teaching" he struggled so much to preserve seems to have had different shapes, contours and concerns for each teacher and phase.

The very linearity of the notion of a "chain of teachers" is problematic in a lineage that has been simplified both vertically and horizontally. U Ba Khin authorized several other students to teach his technique, but there is no trace of them in the gallery or in its commentaries. Not only was Goenka one authorized teacher among others, but also a disciple of U Ba Khin's co-teacher in Burma, Mya Thwin, known as Mother Sayamagyi, who parted ways with Goenka in 1981 (Stuart 2020: 108–112). Our gallery ignores these previous commitments and has Goenka as the single depositary of the ancient technique, with his "wife Elaichi Devi to help me" (E 35:09). This reduction of past and present ramifications to a single line is, in many ways, "the act of faith that founds the Goenka tradition" as we know it today (Demers 2010: 201). Whether or not "historical" at its core, the process of transmission remains, even in the

[26] I am grateful to Daniel Stuart for pointing out the limits of a historical analysis of the transmission.

past few decades, multifocal and elusive, its complexity watered down by the construction of a "chain" of which only the beginning and the end are clearly visible – an ancient history for modern Buddhism.

Modern(ist) themes

The ideological influences of this gallery go beyond Burma. Some belong to a sphere which we may simply call Buddhist modernism (McMahan 2008), a trans-national set of themes originated in the nineteenth century. This is not to say that Goenka as an individual was a "Buddhist modernist" – in fact, he owes at least as much to modern Hindu reformism – but that his paintings reflect themes of this wide pool, complementing their Indo-Burmese episodic history of the religion with modernist-attuned topics and reflections.

One modern discourse which has deeply influenced Buddhism (and Goenka) is nationalism. The Burma-centrism of Goenka's history of Buddhism is indebted to the country's indigenous *legendarium*, but also to its vigorous embrace of this ideology. This is hardly surprising for the social historian, since the popularization of *vipassanā* meditation in Burma has been linked to the rise of anti-colonial sentiments and concerns about the future of Buddhism (Braun 2013a, Turner 2014: 140–141), and its golden age of the 1950s coincided with the country's first independent government. The tone of Goenka's history, where the full Dhamma is preserved only in Burma and saints can only be Burmese, is even reminiscent of some campaigns by the later military junta, such as the quixotic quest to find the origins of man in the "Golden Land" (Houtman 1999: 142–147).

Our collection of paintings does not consider "Myanmar" or "India" as places with diverse boundaries and identities over the centuries, but as units geographically and chronologically tied by some essential features. The depiction of Gotama's first prophetic dream identifies the seas surrounding "our world" (in the complex ancient Indian cosmography of islands and oceans) with the geography of the Republic of India as we know it today, a landmass without political unity for most of its recorded history (no. 18). Where the canonical passage reads, "The Himalaya, king of mountains, was his pillow. His left hand rested on the eastern sea,

his right hand rested on the western sea, and both feet on the southern sea" (AN 5.196), Goenka says, "From the Himalayas in the north to the Indian ocean in the South, from the Bay of Bengal in the East to […] Arabian Sea in the West" (E 5:28). Rather than a projection of present-day India onto an ancient cosmography, this is seen as an insight into pre-existing national realities: "the first representation of Nepal and India's geographical boundaries" (G 33; H 16:25).[27] As a backdrop, we find the rhetoric of the Buddha as "the son of India" or, in Vivekananda's words, "India's gift to the world," developed after a united modern India came into existence. Vivekananda (1992) was one of the first to include the Buddha in the pantheon of Indian cultural nationalism, and the image of *vipassanā* spreading from "the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal, and Arabian Sea" arose in Goenka's mind in connection with his legacy (Stuart 2020: 85–86). There is also a touch of Arya Samaj-style Hindutva fundamentalism in Goenka's "imaginary of a pure and perennial Dharma of an ideal ancient India" (Stuart 2020: 18), though this imaginary is almost turned upside down – Hindutva becomes *Bauddhatva*, and everything great about India lies in the buddhic Dharma it has lost.[28]

In a sense, these are the narratives of Burmese Buddhist nationalism fitting into an Indian Hindu nationalist scheme. There are other influences and contexts. At the turn of the twentieth century, the Buddha was frequently portrayed as a fighter for human equality and against the caste regulations of the Brahmins. This has led to the assumption that "the very 'essence' or 'spirit' of Buddhism involves a commitment to social engagement" (see Yarnall 2003: 290). The early texts, however, give us a different view. Although the Buddha of these texts consistently disregards caste differences on a soteriological level, it is no less true that he respects the social structures of his time, sometimes evaluates Brahmins as per their caste duties (AN 5.191) and praises the *khattiya* (Skt. *kṣatriya*) condition (AN 11.10; DN 3). A clear picture of the Buddha as a "fighter

[27] Boundaries that have to be defended – on the Buddha's advice ("How to Defend the Republic! – Discourses by Mr. S. N. Goenka," accessed October 24, 2021, https://vridhamma.org/discourses/How-to-Defend-the-Republic).

[28] Goenka would of course phrase it differently (in less sectarian terms [G iv]).

for equality" did not take shape until modern times – Victorian sensibility being very much to blame (Almond 1988: 69–77).

The ambiguity of the tradition in this regard is echoed in the commentary to our paintings. On the one hand, "the brutal caste system based on one's birth" is strongly condemned; on the other, some caste-related differences are viewed as natural realities: consider the fair skin of the Buddha and his relatives, or the argument that Ānanda was "evidently a high-class khattiya," and recognized as such by outcasts, because he was "extremely handsome, fair-complexioned and endowed with a very impressive personality" (G 149) – all innate traits of a *khattiya*.

Even though caste is seen as natural to some extent, on the whole our gallery denounces caste-based discrimination. It gathers stories about "empowered" outcast individuals: an outcast woman who is allowed to give water to Ānanda (no. 62), the Sakyas requesting the Buddha to ordain the barber Upāli before them (no. 39), or the going forth of Sunīta the scavenger (no. 60). The commentary considers "caste conceit" as a trigger for war (E 29:07) and the Buddha as an "annihilator of caste system" (E 25:47), an expression borrowed from B. R. Ambedkar (2016), the influential leader of the low-caste peoples of India, and a key figure in the popularization of "engaged" Buddhism in South Asia. Immediately afterwards, the Buddha is called the "founder of human equality" (E 25:50). The fourth dream of the *bodhisatta* is interpreted in a similar manner: people of all castes come to the Buddha to be "freed from caste division" (H 18:30). As founders of India's most visible modern Buddhist movements, Ambedkar and Goenka have forcefully stressed the non-casteist side of early Buddhism.

As for gender discrimination, an effort is made to depict Buddhist women and their history, particularly within the order of nuns, as already mentioned. The written commentary selects episodes where women are praised, such as the dialogue between the Buddha and Pasenadi about a daughter's worth (G 236) or the Buddha's appreciation of his former wife (G 71). The self-effacing attitude recommended to wives and daughters-in-law is, however, in tune with the roles assigned to women in the Buddha's time (G 169, 235).

The Buddha's career has sometimes been accused, in modern times, of selfishness: in particular, his abandonment of wife and child in his

quest for salvation has been seen as irresponsible or cold-hearted. This question is addressed in countless popular Buddhist publications, from the early *Buddhist Catechism* (Olcott 1881: 3) to a recent novel about Yasodharā's plight (Constans 2009). Our paintings and their commentary would seem to respond to this accusation by emphasizing princess Yasodharā's complete conformity with, and support to, her former husband, from the traditional scene where she bows down to his feet (no. 37) to an episode in which she "sings the praises of the qualities of Buddha to their son" (E 10:55), inspired by a sub-commentary (G 75). The canonical scene where Yasodharā sends Rāhula to get his inheritance from the Buddha (G 77, Vin 1.82) is reinterpreted so that Yasodharā secretly longs for their son's ordination (the eventual outcome). Goenka concludes that "it would be wrong to say that Yasodhara was not at all unhappy," but that there was no lasting grief or resentment on her part because the Tipiṭaka gives no description of it (G 71).

One modernist Buddhist constant is the portrayal of a rationalistic Gotama combating the rituals and superstitions of his time – particularly, again, those of the Brahmins. Our gallery compiles canonical stories against animal sacrifice (no. 82; DN 5), ablutions (no. 75; Thī 12.1), displays of miracles (no. 43; Vin 2.112) or anxieties about the afterlife (no. 52; inspired in SN 42.6, 55.21), represented (somewhat freely) in our paintings. None of them are common elsewhere in the Theravāda world, where cosmological and supernormal contents remain, or even have multiplied in the past century (Ferguson and Johannsen 1976). A flying monk, whether Mahā Moggallāna or Phra Malai, is a far more common sight than the laying down of a prohibition against miracles.

As mentioned earlier, the naturalistic style of the Pagoda's paintings is in line with changes in modern Theravādan art. The difference is that here the contents are as naturalistic as the form: they have been rationalized to a higher degree. The most striking aspect is that there are almost no supernormal beings. No episode includes a retinue of *deva*s, as is customary in several moments of Gotama's life, and the central visit of the Buddha to the Tāvatiṃsa heaven (and his majestic descent) is entirely missing in our gallery. The couple of scenes with supernormal characters (excluding the Uruvela *nāga*, here a "cobra") are part of the traditional "eight victories" of the Buddha (Green 2018: 142–144): victory over



Figure 4: A glimpse of the supernormal: the *yakkha* Ālavaka (SN 10.12). https://www.dhammatalks.net/images/vimuttisukha/a49.jpg

Māra and his army (and his daughters), and over the *yakkha* Ālavaka (Figure 4), who looks very human here. In fact, Ālavaka's "species" is not identified in the commentaries: we only hear that he was "a very powerful, indomitable individual (*vyakti*)" (H 1:33:18).

If the supernormal content is not crucial to the story, it can be substituted for something more practical: in the discussion with Kasi Bhāradvāja, a miraculous transformation of matter (Sn 1.4) becomes a lesson on the Dhamma's pricelessness (G 117). Even when they are essential to a story (Sāriputta teaching the Dhamma to his mother, no. 86), the *deva*s are simply excluded from the picture (H 2:19:02, G 194–195). The English video commentary (which reflects the Pagoda's audiotour) makes no mention of them; other than a passing reference to "divine beings" (E 6:04), this commentary shows no explicit connection to traditional Buddhist cosmology.[29] The written commentary does contain allusions to "the

[29] These tensions are even stronger outside the gallery. Around the Mumbai dome, at each cardinal point, there are statues of *deva*s in worship, in an unmistakably Burmese style, with inscriptions presenting them as elemental deities paying respect to the relics. In these inscriptions, English translations tend to disappear (with an exception), and the

lower realms," the "heavenly realm," the "celestial realm" or "the nether worlds" (G viii, 31, 99, 173), though they also are graphically excluded from the images. Rather than "a tacit elimination of traditional cosmology" (Carini 2017: 13, n. 11), this is a complicit silence.

The Buddha's biography is also "rationalized." Goenka is sceptical even of the long-held belief that prince Siddhattha was unaware of old age, sickness, death and the outside world prior to his four encounters at age 29, judging it unrealistic and against the scriptures (G 19). In the scene of his birth (no. 4), the image is as miraculous as the iconographic tradition requires, but not so the spoken commentaries, which ignore the fact that the newborn is walking and about to speak (E 1:10, H 3:08). The written commentary does include the prediction of enlightenment, though the wording is unclear as to when this took place: it is claimed not that a baby spoke right after his birth, but that "the child" spoke "later on" (G 5).

This "naturalistic" Buddha (who does keep his saintly halo – "vibrations") comes across as both ethereal and tangible, sublime and humane, a relic and a vivid presence. He is surrounded by all kinds of people, but seems to have a preference for the unordained. Stories involving laypeople make up the majority of the paintings, and the identity of monastics is often known through their interactions with them (for the Buddha's lifetime, we have less than 15 all-monastic group scenes). This is hardly surprising in a thoroughly lay lineage, specialized on retreats open to all where Goenka often sat beside his wife. However, Goenka and his most committed meditators were celibate, and, while their meditative lifestyle does not lack historical and canonical precedent, it contrasts with the traditional roles of Theravādin laypeople. Rather than a "'monasticization' of the unordained" (see Houtman 1990a: 125), the lay focus and leadership of this movement involves a laicization of the knowledge and roles of the ordained. Goenka emphasized his own down-to-earthness and that of the Buddha, who "never wore any special dress assigned to professional ascetics" (Melnikova 2014b: 83) (in our paintings, non-Buddhist ascetics look similar to their Buddhist counterparts).

Pagoda's audio tour, in English and Hindi, conceptualizes the statues as representations of "the four elements recognised in the early scriptures."

Simple and warm-hearted as he was, the Buddha *was* an ascetic (*samaṇa*), and this is nowhere denied. An interesting selection is an episode (Sn 1.4) where the Buddha replies to the accusations of the farmer Kasi Bhāradvāja, who argues that he too "should plough and sow" to earn his food (no. 56). Although the Goenka tradition does not encourage monasticism, it remains deferential to the Saṅgha – unlike some modern strands of South Asian Buddhism (Kemper 1978) – and saw the need to reply to the householder who "becomes critical when he sees an able-bodied person begging alms," a typical reaction then and "today" (G 117).

The preference for laypeople and their stories is not unique to the iconography of this *vipassanā* tradition (Jordt 2007: 38); the portrayal of the Buddha as a down-to-earth, commonsensical teacher is also widespread. What is perhaps more distinctive is the emphasis on the Buddha's rationalism, his ability to match the highest intellectual standards of his and our time. He is presented as someone able to defeat a "conceited logician" at his own game (E 12:00, MN 36), even as a "Super Scientist of Spirituality," as inscriptions in the Global Vipassana Pagoda describe him (G v; on the conceptual problems of "super science," see King 1964: 135). The distaste for "superstition" leads to the addition of episodes where the Buddha explains that he should not be worshipped with flowers (G 197–199). This prescription is lacking in the discourse that narrates the last days of the Buddha, the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* (DN 16), unless it is an elaboration of Gotama's exhortation to monks not to worry about his material remains. Accordingly, the story of the plantation of the first *bodhi* tree sapling (Ja 479) turns into a lesson against mere worship: people pay "respect with folded hands" to an image, but under a tree one can do something better: one can practice *vipassanā* (E 24:40, H 2:05:29). Of the many hypotheses as to why early Buddhist art lacks figurative Buddha-life representations (Huntington 1990, Dehejia 1991, Karlsson 2006), Goenka's is, characteristically, the most practical: there was an explicit prescription to substitute iconic worship with a stupa, a *bodhi* tree or, most importantly, *vipassanā* practice (G 171). The meditator becomes the monument, his act of worship lies in his meditation. Following this philosophy, Goenka (2020: 259) once declared that "any meditator who has learned *vipaśyanā* from Sayagyi U Ba Khin by means of his proxy and Dharma-son (Respected Goenkaji) is a mobile monument to Sayagyi U Ba Khin."

It would seem that the Rationalistic Buddha has mastered, not only the Western-born theory that early Buddhist art is aniconic (Foucher 1911), but also the Western scientific *episteme* as a whole, which he is seen as predating. Naturalism, scepticism and science now have a place in the earliest Dhamma, along with social egalitarianism and female empowerment. A visual Ockham's razor cuts off the *deva*s, a reformed Buddha protests against icons. How could the West "discover" some of these things many centuries later? One explanation might be hinted at in the narrative itself: according to Goenka, one of the Asokan missionaries was sent to "Ancient Greece,"[30] so that the Dhamma was preached in the agora.

Indigenization

Reintroducing *vipassanā* in India is a difficult enterprise. An updated presentation of the Buddha and his Dhamma, a non-sectarian philosophy, an experiential focus are not enough to guarantee its success. There are new situations and places that need to be incorporated into this general history.

Several paintings portray an environment hostile to the Buddha and his followers. We find the well-known stories of Sundarī (no. 47), Ciñcā (no. 48), Aṅgulimāla (no. 51) or Devadatta (nos. 91–93), and scenes showing mistrust and violence towards monks (nos. 46, 65, 67–68). Encounters with adverse situations are explicitly mentioned in an introductory text as "the central theme of some of the stories."[31] The lesson, in the commentaries, seems to be the cultivation of equanimity against anger, but one wonders whether it is targeted to *vipassanā* meditators in a majority-Hindu environment like Western India, where this technique has been looked upon with suspicion (not without reason, due to its many Buddhist customs and beliefs, as well as its Burma-centred history of

[30] "Era of Emperor Asoka," accessed March 29, 2021, https://www.vridhamma.org/Era-of-Emperor-Asoka. More commonly interpreted as ancient *Bactria* (Central Asia); Goenka's book-length commentary states that the messenger was sent to both Bactria and Greece (G 238). According to the VRI website, others were sent "to as far away as present day Syria and Egypt" ("History and Spread of Vipassana," accessed March 29, 2021, https://www.vridhamma.org/History-and-Spread-of-Vipassana).

[31] "About the museum," accessed March 29, 2021, http://izi.travel/en/7148-the-origin-and-spread-of-vipassana/en.

Buddhism). Nevertheless, the nature of "adverse forces" in the Goenka/U Ba Khin cosmology encompasses more than merely human antagonism, and an earnest meditator can find herself besieged by "destructive" supernormal forces intent on preventing the cultivation and spread of Dhamma (Stuart 2020: 47). In our naturalistic account of the lives of the Buddha and his early followers, this cosmic battle of forces seems to take the form of social derision and opposition of the kind a Goenkan meditator might experience today in India.

Other episodes seem to be related to the specific activities of the Goenka movement. Stories praising the virtues of silence (no. 95) are consistent with a method learnt in silent retreats. Images showing the practice of meditation in prisons (nos. 74, 90) evoke one of the charitable projects of the movement, which has brought meditation to inmates in India and several other countries,[32] in the tradition of U Nu and, from their perspective, emperor Asoka.[33]

The Indian State chosen for the headquarters of the Goenka organization, and the one with the highest density of *vipassanā* centres, is Maharashtra. Incidentally, the majority of Indian Buddhists (77% as of 2011) live in this State (Moudgil 2017), due to the mass conversions organized by Ambedkar's Neo-Buddhist movement since the 1950s (Pániker 2014: 537–546). However, Goenka seldom mentions Ambedkar in his accounts of India or Buddhism, even though he has borrowed verbatim expressions from him, as shown above, and commemorated his legacy on occasion.[34] By keeping his distance, Goenka avoids being seen as a threat to Hinduism and its mores, of which Ambedkarites are extremely critical. As many Indian *vipassanā* meditators belong to the higher castes, "classical" Hindu heritage (as contemporarily defined) is absorbed rather than rejected. Goenka's written commentary does not criticize Brahmins as a group, but remains sympathetic to those "broadminded brahmin[s]" who revered the Buddha during his lifetime (G 7, 173). As a young man,

[32] "Vipassana Meditation for Correctional Facilities," accessed March 29, 2021, https://www.prison.dhamma.org.

[33] "History and Spread of Vipassana," accessed March 29, 2021, https://www.vridhamma.org/History-and-Spread-of-Vipassana.

[34] SAMBODHI, "Babasaheb Ambedkar 50 years by SN Goenka," YouTube video (Hindi), 1:03:09, October 15, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YfFrzQaw4uk.

Goenka was a devout Hindu himself, and evidently retained much of that learning. The *Bhagavadgītā* is frequently quoted to illustrate Buddhist points (G 43, 57, 63…), as are some Indian proverbs and the mystic Kabir (G 139). Familiarity is, again, the preferred strategy: even "many aeons ago" there is a certain play on words that still works in Hindi or Punjabi (and not in Pāli or Sanskrit) (G 165).

Goenka's social stance is one of neutrality – or perhaps, equanimity (*upekkhā*). Upper-caste individuals are absolved, and even welcome, and are crucial to the movement as supporters and sponsors. Brahmins cook in the meditation centres, which serve only vegetarian food: this is certainly not the usual Neo-Buddhist (largely Mahar) fare (Shastree 1996: 56–57), and the caste-based choice might be interpreted as an accommodation to the principles of Hindu society.[35] Goenka had to tread the fine line between Hindu standards of respectability and "communion" with his Buddhist brethren. On the one hand, he has been accused of de-politicizing and de-communalizing Neo-Buddhism, and of attempting to bring it back into the Hindu fold, erasing its distinctiveness with a rhetoric of non-sectarianism (Demers 2010: 169–170, 279–281). On the other hand, his modernistic presentation of early Buddhism, and sometimes his rhetoric, are in tune with Ambedkar's (1957), and Neo-Buddhists are described as a distinct group among Goenka meditators (Melnikova 2014b: 66). More ethnography is needed to better understand the relationship between *vipassanā* and this movement, as has been done with regard to other Indian communities (Stuart 2017; 2020: 92–98).

Goenka has a subtler way to create a dhammic connection to the State of Maharashtra and its people. The commentary to the images introduces Puṇṇa, a *bhikkhu* from Sunāparanta, who is willing to bring the Dhamma to his homeland (MN 145, SN 35.88). The inhabitants of Sunāparanta are

[35] Goenka's own vegetarianism is rooted in his upper-caste Marwari upbringing, not in Burmese Buddhism, where such a diet is primarily associated with *samatha* meditators, peripheral *gaing*s and ascetic monks (Rozenberg 2005: 70–82, Hayami 2011). None of his known predecessors in the *vipassanā* lineage was a strict vegetarian, though some avoided certain kinds of flesh. In India, Goenka would develop a vipassanic defence of vegetarianism, going so far as to advance that meditators "slowly […] will come out of eating meat, like thousands of Vipassana students have" ("Q&A – A Store-House of Answers by S. N. Goenkaji: Food," accessed March 29, 2021, https://mutta.dhamma.org/dhamma-discourses/qa).



Figure 5: Puṇṇa, the Dhamma-messenger of Sunāparanta (SN 35.88). https://www.dhammatalks.net/images/vimuttisukha/a80.jpg

"stern and ferocious," and would assault a Buddhist missionary monk as soon as they saw him, but Puṇṇa is determined to teach the Dhamma to his people, even at the risk of his life (Figure 5). The Buddha gave his blessing and Puṇṇa, though not yet an *arahant*, "happily proceeded to Sunaparanta" (G 141).

Puṇṇa's birthplace becomes more precise the more we approach an Indian audience: the English audio commentary proposes the State of Maharashtra (E 24:00), the Hindi audio specifies "today's Nala Sopara," in the Mumbai region (H 1:43:35), and the written commentary includes Gorai, the village close to Nala Sopara where the Global Pagoda is located (G 141). Some external sources agree that Suppāraka, the port of Sunāparanta, was in the area of Bombay (Anālayo 2018: 2, Malalasekera 1937: s.v. "Suppāra"), but it could also be somewhere in "the territory of Northern Gujarāt, Kāthiāwar, Kachch and Sindh" (s.vv. "Aparantaka," "Sunāparanta"), which Goenka calls *Northern* Aparantaka (G 211).[36]

[36] "Uttara Aparantaka." Goenka mentions the four place names in the same order, which suggests that he consulted Malalasekera's dictionary for his reconstruction.

The character and the story are canonical, but the focus on one place name (Sunāparanta = Maharashtra) changes the import of the entire narrative: now the State of the Global Pagoda and the Goenka headquarters has a legendary Dhamma messenger, native of Mumbai.

Puṇṇa did not live long after returning to Sunāparanta (G 141), but the seed of Dhamma was already planted there. He is the first known messenger of *vipassanā*, centuries before Asoka, who would have to travel westwards to learn the technique: the best teachers of the time lived in Rajasthan, the land of Goenka's ancestors. There, in Bairat (Viratnagar), Asoka learned the technique from the great monk Upagupta and became a stream-enterer (G 211). Bairat is today a town in Rajasthan with Asokan archaeological remains. Upagupta appears in association with the emperor in Sanskrit Buddhism, though canonical Pāli sources are silent. His enduring popularity in Southeast Asia makes him perhaps a better candidate than his Pāli counterpart, Moggaliputtatissa, and his non-orthodoxy (and biographical versatility) makes him easier to place in the West: in fact, one of the many locations associated with the Asokan Upagupta is Sindh (Strong 1992: 145).

The last Western Indian depicted in our paintings is the ascetic Bāhiya Dārucīriya, another student of the Buddha who came directly from Nala Sopara, "about fifty miles from the metropolitan city of Mumbai" (G 159). The canonical narrative places him in Sunāparanta's port (Ud 1.10), wherever that was, and his birthplace has been linked with today's Kathiawar, Gujarat (Malalasekera 1937: s.vv. "Bāhiya Dārucīriya," "Bharukaccha"). Notice that Bāhiya Dārucīriya died shortly – according to Goenka, immediately (H 1:57:46) – after his instruction, and, as a consequence, could not bring the Dhamma back to his native port.

Conclusion

Vipassanā meditation is often depicted as a demythologized version of Buddhism. Its austere, practical presentation does evince a drastic "change from a neotraditionalist Theravada of merit-making and scholarship to a reformist Theravada of meditation and experience" (Bond 1988: 172). In a survey among Buddhist collectives in the United States, "members of Vipassana groups tended to be the most skeptical about both karma and rebirth" (Coleman 2001: 122). Goenka's *vipassanā*, in particular,

embraces skilful agnosticism and is proudly non-sectarian (Hindi: *sāmpradāyiktā vihīn*), which is surely one of its main attractions in the eyes of a Hindu-born Marathi or an atheist-born Western European. Its conception of *vipassanā* as an *Art of Living*, leading to "productive, useful, happy lives" (Hart 1987: 140), is bound to win more non-Buddhist converts than more orthodox presentations (on life, see Sumana 1998: 116–117, Mahāsī 1979: 7).

However, the Goenka movement does engage with Theravāda Buddhism in various open ways: the routine in their meditation centres includes meditating in stupas, listening to Dhamma talks with Buddhist references, and daily Pāli chants dedicated to "those lacking faith in the Lord's revered teaching" (VRI n.d.: 1). None of these practices, however, is presented as a ritual – as anything Buddhist, indeed. When a 1983 Goenka retreat culminated in a donation to ninety-five Theravādin monks and nuns, Western participants were reportedly amazed by the ceremony (LeVine and Gellner 2005: 217): they apparently could not understand the link between institutional Buddhism and a *reframed* Buddhism.

Reframing is the keyword here, rather than demythologization or secularisation. Indeed, the historical narrative of the Goenka movement, as we have examined it, shows the fallibility of these two concepts. Our painting gallery contains both a naturalistic, rationalistic description of the early days of Buddhism, and the creative tracing of links with present places, lineages and contexts. The first side would seem to be a *de*-mythologization; the second, a *re*-mythologization of India in Buddhist terms. I would suggest that we are facing an *alter*-mythologization: one of a different kind to those we previously knew, though deeply indebted to them. An approach both modern and Buddhist, where humanism and non-self, objective fact and spiritual insight, self-experimentation and the intercession of the gurus, direct intuition and commentarial mediation, universality and pure Burmese-ness are inextricably blended. A worldview where *deva*s and electrons, atoms and karma, notions from the Nuclear Age and notions from the Iron Age dance through vast extensions of time and space.[37] These are just some of the extremes of a largely coherent (and largely understudied) continuum. There are some missteps from time to time: Goenka's narrations do occasionally show a tension between his naturalistic interpretations

[37] Most transparently in the discourse of U Ba Khin (1954a, Chit Tin 1982: 6).

and traditional miraculous interpretations, which he never discards completely (e.g., Melnikova 2014b: 68). As we saw, the *deva*s both are there (in the text) and are not (in the images). Nevertheless, the result has been convincing enough to stimulate thousands of dedicated meditators.

Transplanting a branch of Burmese Buddhism into India is a delicate operation. It therefore needs all the resources available: modernist tropes about the Buddha as a rationalistic, egalitarian, universal "son of India," a Superscientist of the non-Soul; but also, and as a source of the project's own legitimacy, a proud history of Burma as an ancient Dhammic land. And, of course, a proud history *of India* as an ancient Dhammic land, as the Asokan wheel never ceases to remind us.

On the one hand, a smiling, humane Buddha teaching his rational, practical philosophy in a setting both familiar and utterly alien, where Buddhist nuns look rather like their modern Jain counterparts and the Sāñcī gateway is everywhere. On the other hand, the sacred power of relics and pure lineages of nameless *arahant*s bridging the gap between that reimagined time and the present that it inevitably reflects.

That is the tree. The soil are the plains and hills of Maharashtra, Western India. Connections to the State it now calls its home are found in the least confrontational way, by unearthing Maharashtrian Buddhist teachers from the early times. As for India as a whole, a painting, already commented (no. 18), shows the goal: the lying Buddha covering the Indian subcontinent, as he once did, and as he will do again thanks to the spread of *vipassanā*, the direct path to liberation, the only component of (presumed) Indian culture that is, to its proponents, a-cultural, timeless, universal. And after India, the world.

All the ingredients are now in place. With the legitimacy conferred by the "chain of teachers," and with the landscape of over a hundred paintings, a new tradition, that of Burmese *vipassanā* taking root in India, has found its founding narrative. If the pure lineage of meditators dating back to the Buddha is difficult to confirm, one can identify here a different kind of lineage, and one that surely goes back to the time of the Buddha: the lineage of those men and women who shaped the memory of the Dhamma according to their immediate social and geographic concerns, squeezing the inherited tradition in order to season philosophy and meditation with something that is perhaps even more important – a meaningful background story.

Abbreviations

Canonical Pāli texts are numbered as in *SuttaCentral* (https://suttacentral.net/); their commentaries reference the Pali Text Society editions. Translations are my own.

AN *Aṅguttaranikāya*
Bv *Buddhavaṃsa*
Dhp-a *Dhammapadāṭṭhakathā*
DN *Dīghanikāya*
DT Dhammatalks. N.d. "Life of the Buddha in Pictures" I & II. Accessed January 29, 2019. https://www.dhammatalks.net/Articles/Life_of_the_Buddha_ in_Pictures.htm, https://www.dhammatalks.net/Articles/Life_of_the_Buddha_ in_Pictures2.htm.
E Vipassana Meditation. 2016. "Glimpses of Buddha's Life Story by S. N. Gonkaji [*sic*], The Origin and Spread of Vipassana – English." YouTube video, 36:39. November 27, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wshmaTHp0jk.
G Goenka, S. N. 2011. *The Great Buddha's Noble Teachings*: *The Origin & Spread of Vipassana*. Dhamma Giri, Igatpuri: Vipassana Research Institute.
H Vipassana Meditation. 2020. "Glimpses of Buddha's Life Story by S. N. Gonkaji [*sic*], The Origin and Spread of Vipassana – Hindi." YouTube video, 2:38:42. August 8, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m90RXP7o4oM.
Ja *Jātaka*
MN *Majjhimanikāya*
SN *Saṃyuttanikāya*
Sn *Suttanipāta*
Th-a *Theragāthāṭṭhakathā*
Thī *Therīgāthā*
Ud *Udāna*
Vin (Theravāda) *Vinaya*
VRI Vipassana Research Institute

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Appendix: List of images

The paintings are numbered according to their order at DT. The site does not hold the rights to its materials.

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