



**HAL**  
open science

# Namo Buddhāya: A Scarified and Puzzling Buddha Image from Northeast Thailand

Nicolas Revire, Javier Schnake

► **To cite this version:**

Nicolas Revire, Javier Schnake. Namo Buddhāya: A Scarified and Puzzling Buddha Image from Northeast Thailand. *Journal of the Siam Society*, 2023, 111 (1), pp.57-74. hal-04145046

**HAL Id: hal-04145046**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04145046v1>**

Submitted on 28 Jun 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# *Namo Buddhāya: A Scarified and Puzzling Buddha Image from Northeast Thailand*

Nicolas Revire and Javier Schnake

The Art Institute of Chicago; École Pratique des Hautes Études

**ABSTRACT**—This article discusses an unusual modern bronze image of the Buddha in the posture of subduing Māra which originated from Nakhon Ratchasima, northeast Thailand, now in the custody of the National Museum of Bangkok. This statue is unique because it is scarified all over its body with Khmer mystical letters and syllables forming Pali formulae and geometric designs. This evidently recalls the popular practice of “*yantra* tattooing” witnessed in Tai–Khmer cultures.



Figure 1a. Buddha image named “Phra Chai Mueang Nakhon Ratchasima”, found in Khorat, late 19th century (?), bronze, height: 22.2 cm, width: 15.3 cm, National Museum of Bangkok, inv. no. A.Y. 25 (ฉ.ย. ๒๕); front view (Photo © Nicolas Revire)



Figure 1b. Three-quarter view (Photo © Nicolas Revire)



Figure 1c. Left-side view  
(Photo © Nicolas Revire)



Figure 1d. Right-side view  
(Photo © Nicolas Revire)



Figure 1e. Back view (Photo © Nicolas Revire)

## Description of the image

A peculiar bronze statue of the Buddha was until recently on public display at the National Museum of Bangkok (NMB; inv. no. A.Y. 25/อ.ย. ๒๕) (Figures 1a–e). It is sitting in meditation with its right leg bent and foot in a half-lotus position, folded over the left leg which is resting on a low plain base. The right hand rests on the right thigh with the fingers pointing downwards in the standard attitude of subduing *Māra*, while the left hand rests, palm upwards, in its lap.

The Buddha has a squarish face with bulging eyes wide open—perhaps a sign of sudden awakening—and slightly curved eyebrows. He displays an open, sly, smug or mischievous smile that gives him a rather mysterious and puzzling, if not frightening, expression.<sup>1</sup> The curls of his hair are framed by a thin two-tiered headband on the forehead. His large and flat cranial protuberance is surmounted by a round tall object made in the shape of a water pot (Skt.: *kumbha*), usually the attribute of great ascetics, and sometimes observed on other modern Buddha images from northeast Thailand and Laos. The austere appearance is further captured by the Buddha’s somewhat emaciated body, symbolically revealing a few rib-cage bones under his molded robe.

This Buddha image is locally known as Phra Chai Mueang Nakhon Ratchasima (พระชัยเมืองนครราชสีมา), that is, the “Victorious One for the City of Nakhon Ratchasima”,

claiming to be a palladium image. Situated in northeast Thailand, Nakhon Ratchasima—commonly known in its contracted form as Khorat—was once the royal boundary city between Lao and Siamese territory. The Buddha image is said to have been brought from there to Bangkok, the new Siamese capital, in 1889 by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (1862–1943) during an official visit. After the Ministry of Interior in Bangkok kept the statue for years, it reached the collection of the NMB where it was openly exhibited in the Ayutthaya gallery until recently. The Fine Arts Department gives it a date of the 17th–18th century CE (FAD 2564: 54–59) which, in view of its peculiar features, is probably too early. The “Khorat style” (a mixture of Khmer and Lao features)



Figure 2. Large replica of Phra Chai Mueang Nakhon Ratchasima, cast in 2015, currently kept near Khorat City Hall (Photo © www.museumthailand.com)

<sup>1</sup> Wrathful Buddhist deities displaying fierce facial expressions are a notable feature of Vajrayana iconography, especially observed in the Himalayas and Japan to this day. Their ferocious (Skt.: *krodha*) appearance symbolize protection and help devotees to overcome the passions that hinder salvation because of their power to destroy the obstacles to awakening. These types of fierce Buddhist deities first appeared in India, and became a central feature of Indian tantric Buddhism by the late 10th or the early 11th century (Linrothe 1999). Very popular in Tibetan art, they are unusual in the Buddhist art of Thailand, except during the Angkor period. Some wrathful Buddhist deities have been found at Prasat Hin Phimai, in Nakhon Ratchasima province, dating back to the 11th–12th century (e.g., Conti 2014: fig. 10).



Figure 3. Replicas of Phra Chai Mueang Nakhon Ratchasima, cast in different alloys in 2019 for sale (Photo © koratway.com)

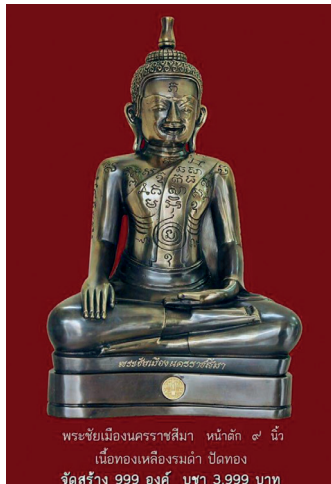


Figure 4. Replica of Phra Chai Mueang Nakhon Ratchasima, cast in 2019, height: 22.86 cm, gilded brass, 999 images made for sale at 3,999 Thai baht each (Photo © koratway.com)

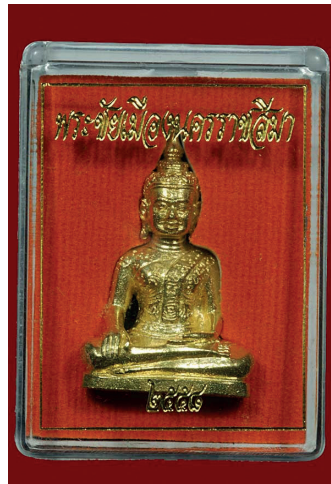


Figure 5. Miniature gilt amulet of Phra Chai Mueang Nakhon Ratchasima, cast on 27 June 2015, at 13.29 hrs, for sale (Photo © www.klungpra.99wat.com)

of this “Phra Chai” Buddha image bears indeed a strong resemblance to some Buddha images produced in the early 20th century in Cambodia.<sup>2</sup> In 2015 a larger model of this Phra Chai was created and installed in its own shrine outside the City Hall of Nakhon Ratchasima as part of a new and sudden local cult phenomenon (Figure 2).<sup>3</sup>

Thousands of recent duplicates, made of different alloys, were cast locally in June 2019 and inaugurated with great fanfare in September of that year during an auspicious

<sup>2</sup> Some similar dated images from the 1930s are displayed in the National Museum of Cambodia in Phnom Penh and remain unpublished to our knowledge.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.museumthailand.com/th/1463/storytelling/Buddhapatimarachasim>. For a video recording of the consecration ceremony held on 15 August 2015, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=emfHJ3wpDWs>. A Thai traditional song was even composed for the occasion: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2tCtx-t9y0> (accessed 15 October 2022).

ceremony to mark the 345th anniversary of the founding of Khorat in the year 1674 (Figures 3–4).<sup>4</sup> Miniature amulets and votive medals of this Phra Chai have also circulated widely in the art market since 2015 (Figure 5).<sup>5</sup>

Such Buddha images of “Victory” are vaguely mentioned in the royal chronicles of Ayutthaya from the reign of King Naresuan (1590–1605) where they are said to be used to summon the army when fighting for victory. According to other traditional accounts, such images were also collected to serve in royal ceremonies for warding off evil and obstacles and facilitating the success of rituals and processions (FAD 2564: 54–59). It is uncertain whether this Phra Chai Buddha image from Khorat was effectively connected to such rituals. In any event, the presence of Pali characters engraved in a Khmer script on its body makes this Buddha image most unique and appealing in the local and regional iconography.

### Reading the inscriptions

Different Pali sacred letters or syllables (P.: *akkharas*) are inscribed in Mul or “round” script<sup>6</sup> on the Buddha’s body.<sup>7</sup> Called “heart formulae” in Thai (หัวใจ, *hua chai*),<sup>8</sup> these syllables condense or encapsulate specific verses or concepts used in Buddhist scholasticism and can be manipulated in multiple ways for worldly or soteriological ends.<sup>9</sup> These letters, when connected together in short strings, form *gāthās* (คาถา, *khatha*) or *mantras* (มนต์, *mon*),<sup>10</sup> namely incantations or magic formulae. They play a major role as visual elements in *yantras* (ยันต์, *yan*), or magic diagrams, particularly prevalent in Tai–Khmer cultures. On the Phra Chai Buddha image, these *akkharas* can generally

<sup>4</sup> See <http://koratway.com/archives/4227>. A video recording of the casting ceremony held on 17 June 2019 can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owtPV39vIPY>; for the consecration ceremony held on 9 September 2019, see <https://youtu.be/k5FPJFq5-pI> (accessed on October 15, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> See for example <http://www.klungpra.99wat.com/product/87313/พระชัยเมืองนครราชสีมา> (accessed 15 October 2022).

<sup>6</sup> *Akson mul* (អក្សរមូល) is generally limited to Cambodia and gave early rise to *akson khom* (อักษรขอม) in Siam since the Sukhothai period, which in turn was reintroduced back in Cambodia later due to the Siamese influence in the area. In modern times, Khom and Mul scripts are traditionally used for the ancient Khmer lettering employed in the region to inscribe sacred *mantras* in Pali, and often structured in various forms of *yantras*, especially associated with the ritual and occult art of tattooing (see Bizot 1981; Becchetti 1991; Bernon 1998). These two writing systems are very close to each other and can only be distinguished by small graphical variations (Antelme 2007: 6f). The letter KA (ក), for instance, inscribed several times on this Phra Chai Buddha image is of the Mul variant used in Cambodia proper until the early 20th century, not the regional Siamese Khom (ក). We therefore propose that the engraver may have been of Cambodian origin.

<sup>7</sup> This may be reminiscent of the medieval Hindu and Buddhist tantric practice of imposing *mantras* on the body (Skt.: *nyāsa*) in order to transform the ordinary body of the practitioner into a subtle body of ultimate reality. On this ritual practice, see Padoux 1980.

<sup>8</sup> The term is difficult to translate literally. It has been spoken of as “core of the heart” (Anuman 1988: 307), “heart” or “heart letters” (Penth 1997: 496), “formulae, heart formulae, heart syllables, etc.” (Skilling 2012: 4; Baker and Pasuk 2013: 224). It is literally equivalent to the *hr̥daya* mystical letters of the Sanskrit tradition (P.: *hadaya*).

<sup>9</sup> Concerning this topic, see Penth 1997: 496f; Skilling 2012: 4–7; also Schnake 2018: 159–180.

<sup>10</sup> Thai society has widely assimilated Sanskrit technical terms, such as *āgama*, *gāthā*, *mantra*, and *veda*, to refer to various uses of the language (Anuman 1988: 305f).

be read from left to right (viewer’s perspective) and top to bottom, as indicated in the following description.

Front view

On the Buddha’s forehead, we have **𑖀** (**BHA**) (Figure 6a). Under the throat, at the level of the sternal notch, we read **𑖀** (**KA**) (Figure 6b). On the Buddha’s right shoulder, we can see the letter **𑖀** (**SA**), and on the left shoulder, we have **𑖀** (**CA**) (Figure 6c). These four *akkharas* observed on the head, neck and shoulders respectively are meaningless when read individually but constitute a *gāthā* that should be properly deciphered together in reverse order (P.: *paṭiloma*) as **𑖀 𑖀 𑖀 𑖀** (**CA BHA KA SA**). This formula is well known in the literature and is also found on this Buddha’s right arm (see *infra*, Figure 7b). Near to the left shoulder, we also can see the beginning of a longer sacred verse starting with **𑖀** (**NA**) (Figure 6b). The rest of the inscription runs down the back (see discussion *infra*, Figure 8).



Figure 6a. Phra Chai Mueang Nakhon Ratchasima, face detail with inscription BHA on the forehead (Photo © Nicolas Revire)



Figure 6b. Phra Chai Mueang Nakhon Ratchasima, top left chest detail with inscriptions KA and NA (Photo © Nicolas Revire)



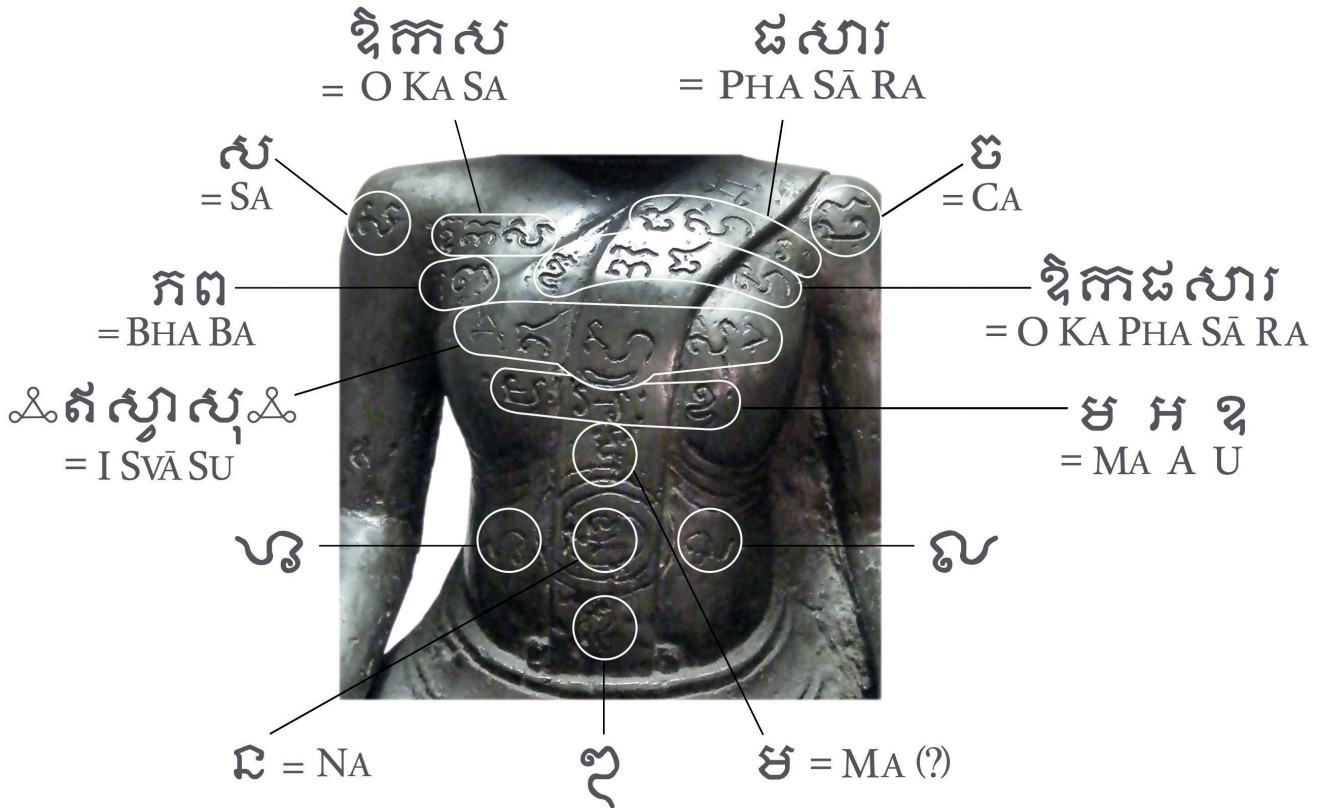



Figure 6c. Phra Chai Mueang Nakhon Ratchasima, front chest detail with various inscriptions (Photo and assemblage © Nicolas & Naphatsnan Revire)

Then we have, on top of the chest, at the level of the armpits, towards the left as we face it, ឌីកកស (O KA SA) which could refer to Pali *okāsa* (with long *a*), literally meaning “space”, “open room”, or “atmosphere” (PED, sv. *okāsa*); but, when used in a formulaic manner, it can also denote a “permission” or “request” used in paying homage to the Buddha(s) before the undertaking of the Five Precepts, or used as a way of addressing a senior monk in lower ordination rituals (P.: *pabbajjā*) of the Thai non-reformed liturgy belonging to the Mahānikāya (มหานิกาย, Mahanikai).<sup>11</sup> The next few *akkharas* are not entirely clear (Figure 6c). On the right of the chest, at the same level with O KA SA, we tentatively read ផសារ (PHA SĀ RA). On the line directly under, we hesitantly read ភិត (BHA BA), to the left, and ឌីកកផសារ (O KA PHA SĀ RA) to the right (viewer’s perspective). Unfortunately, this string of syllables (BHA BA O KA [SA?] PHA SĀ RA) bears no immediate meaning.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See Bizot (1988: 26, 28, 48, 103, 105f, photos 1, 4) who claims that the *okāsa* formula may be of Mon (southern Burmese) origin from the 11th century. The term is virtually unknown in the Pali Canon and it is also not used in the more recent liturgy of the Dhammayuttikanikāya (ธรรมยุติกนิกาย, Thammayutikanikai) founded in 19th-century Siam.

<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that the reading of these Mul characters is slightly different on Phra Chai Buddha replicas cast recently in 2019 (e.g., Figure 4), which probably signify that these inscriptions have lost their original meaning.

Just below, in the centre of the Buddha’s chest, three distinct letters are engraved **ส สุว สุ (I Svā Su)** (Figure 6c). The formula is referenced in the specialist Thai literature on the subject as *hua chai kao 3 prakan* (หัวใจแก้ว ๓ ประการ),<sup>13</sup> and is framed here by two small triangular diagrams . This well-known sequence, present in many *gāthās* and *yantras*, is an acrostic for praising the various qualities of the Triple Gem, namely the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. It is found in many places in the Pali Canon and is subject to various recitations or recollections (P.: *anussati*). Accordingly, I Svā Su is to be understood as follows:

**I:** *iti pi so bhagavā arahaṃ sammāsambuddho vijjācaraṇasampanno sugato lokavidū anuttaro purisadammasārathi satthā devamanussānaṃ buddho bhagavā ti* (D II 93, 27–32; M I 37, 16–19; etc.).

That Blessed One is accomplished, fully enlightened, perfect in true knowledge and conduct, sublime, knower of worlds, incomparable leader of persons to be tamed, teacher of gods and humans, enlightened, blessed (trans. Ñāṇamoli 1995: 118, l. 32, 119, l. 3).

**Svā:** *svākkhāto bhagavatā dhammo sandiṭṭhiko akāliko ehipassiko opanayiko paccattaṃ veditabbo viññūhī ti* (D II 93, 31–33; M I 37, 20–21; etc.).

The Dhamma is well proclaimed by the Blessed One, visible here and now, immediately effective, inviting inspection, onward leading, to be experienced by the wise for themselves (trans. Ñāṇamoli 1995: 119, l. 4–7).

**Su:** *supaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakaśaṅho ujupaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakaśaṅho, ñāyapaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakaśaṅho sāmīcipaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakaśaṅho, yadidaṃ cattāri purisayugāni aṭṭha purisapuggalā, esa bhagavato sāvakaśaṅho āhuneyyo pāhuneyyo dakkhiṇeyyo añjalikaraṇīyo, anuttaraṃ puññakkhettaṃ lokassā ti* (D II 93f, 34ff; M I 37, 22–28; etc.).

The Sangha of the Blessed One’s disciples is practicing the good way, practicing the straight way, practicing the true way, practicing the proper way, that is, the four pairs of persons, the eight types of individuals; this Sangha of the Blessed One’s disciples is worthy of gifts, worthy of hospitality, worthy of offerings, worthy of reverential salutation, the unsurpassed field of merit for the world (trans. Ñāṇamoli 1995: 119, l. 8–15).

Immediately below this formula, three letters can be clearly read as **ဗ ဣ ဣ (MA A U)** (Figure 6c). This is the *hua chai phra traipidok* (หัวใจพระไตรปิฎก), also prevalent in magic formulae and diagrams.<sup>14</sup> Its meaning has been explored by many scholars and

<sup>13</sup> See Thep 2515: 123–127; also Bizot and von Hinüber 1994: 17, 22–24, with further references.

<sup>14</sup> See for example Thep 2515: 113–122.

is said to derive from Vedic AUM, constituting the three phonetic components which in another order constitute the primordial sound and Sanskrit *akṣara* OM. One other local interpretation gathered by Thep Sarikabut (2515: 114) is that it is again an acrostic for the Triple Gem of Buddhism, the three syllables MA A and U being extracted from the aforementioned Pali canonical texts as follows:

MA: [... *deva-*] *manussānaṃ buddho bhagavā ti* = the Buddha.

A: [...] *akāliko ehipassiko* [...] = the Dhamma.

U: [...] *ujupatipanno bhagavato sāvakasaṅgho* [...] = the Sangha.<sup>15</sup>

The *mantra* also has a significant role during the gestation and the development of the primordial being in the *kammaṭṭhāna* meditation technique, connected with various elements such as the Tipiṭaka (MA = Vinaya; A = Abhidhamma; U = Suttanta), the process of exhalation (A), inspiration (U), and retention (MA), as well as the three properties of existence (A = *dukkha*/suffering; MA = *anicca*/impermanence; U = *anattā*/no-self).<sup>16</sup> Many other explanations have also been offered.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, located on the Buddha's navel, we see the letter  $\text{𑄖}$  (NA) in the centre of a continuous spiralling line—similar to an umbilical cord—which constitutes a round-*yantra*.<sup>18</sup> The *akkhara* NA carries the sense of essence and its origin is symbolically linked to the development of the embryo in the womb.<sup>19</sup> It is surrounded by, perhaps, the letter  $\text{𑄖}$  (MA) found at the top of the spire, and three *unalom*-like (อุณาโลม) symbols  $\text{𑄖}$ , similar to the punctuation mark known in Cambodia and Thailand as *ko mut*  $\text{𑄖}$  (Kh.:  $\text{𑄖}$ ; Th.:  $\text{𑄖}$ ; “cow's urine”; Skt.: *gomūtra*), traditionally indicating the end of a passage, a book or a treatise. These symbols are emanating outwards in three different cardinal directions (Figure 6d). In summary, while the letter NA is possibly marking a new

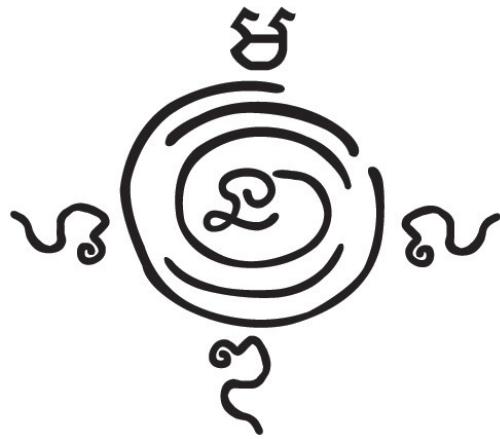


Figure 6d. Phra Chai Mueang Nakhon Ratchasima, detail of the round-*yantra* NA spiraling out from the navel (diagram © Naphatsnan Revire)

<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Lance Cousins (1997: 199, n. 50) cites this verse attributed to King Mongkut (Rama IV, r. 1851–1868): *Arahaṃ sammāsambuddho, Utamadhammamajjhagū, Mahāsaṅghaṃ pabodheti, icc eva ratanattayaṃ.*

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Cousins 1997: 199.

<sup>17</sup> See for instance Bizot 1976: 101f, 128, 132, 139; Bizot 1980: 225f, 250, 255; also Bizot forthcoming.

<sup>18</sup> A similar *yantra* NA the *Na mahapri chang ngan* (นพมหาปริจจังง), is found in Thep 2538: 124. See also Bizot 1981: 173f.

<sup>19</sup> The theme of embryonic life is frequently found in the *kammaṭṭhāna* material of mainland Southeast Asia, on which see particularly Bizot 1976, Bizot 1980 and Bizot forthcoming.

beginning or “rebirth”, the symbols 𑖅 may indicate the absolute end or “death”. It perhaps forms a symbolic pair just like the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, *alpha* (Α) and *omega* (Ω).



𑖅  
𑖇  
𑖆  
𑖅  
= NA  
MA  
BA  
DA

Figure 7a. Phra Chai Mueang Nakhon Ratchasima, detail of the left upper arm with inscription NA MA BA DA (Photo © Nicolas Revire)

Figure 7b. Phra Chai Mueang Nakhon Ratchasima, detail of the right upper arm with inscription CA TA SA KA (Photo © Nicolas Revire)

CA  
TA  
SA  
KA

𑖅  
𑖇  
𑖆  
𑖅  
=



### The arms

The Buddha’s left upper arm has 𑖅 𑖇 𑖆 𑖅 (NA MA BA DA) (Figure 7a), and the other right upper arm has 𑖅 𑖇 𑖆 𑖅 (CA TA<sup>20</sup> SA KA) (Figure 7b), which should be correctly reconstructed as 𑖅 𑖇 𑖆 𑖅 (CA BHA KA SA), a formula already encountered on the top front (see *supra*, Figures 6a–c). Each *gāthā* is framed by two identical four-sided *yantras* 𑖅 known as *paṭhamam bindukam* (Bizot and von Hinüber 1994: 17–18), symbolically representing the four limbs of the body, the four great elements (wind, water, earth, fire), and equivalent to the formula *namo buddhāya*.

<sup>20</sup> Although it is clearly written TA, the context requires BHA. The engraver seems to have had difficulty with the loop of the character’s left foot, positioning it inward, when it should have been facing outward.

The *hua chai that thang 4* (หัวใจธาตุทั้ง ๔) NA MA BA DA is loosely associated with NA MO BU DDHĀ [YA], of which it may be the abbreviated form.<sup>21</sup> As a well-known element participating in the construction of many *gāthās* and *yantras*, the formula is also a constitutive part of the traditional meditation system (P.: *kammaṭṭhāna*; Th.: กรรมฐาน) in mainland Southeast Asia, associated with different concepts such as the Tipiṭaka (NA = Abhidhamma; MA = Vinaya; BA = Sutta; DA = Dhammasit);<sup>22</sup> the four *dhātus* or primordial elements (NA = wind; MA = water; BA = earth; DA = fire); and different parts of the body (NA = consciousness; MA = blood, fat, brain, color, bile; BA = flesh, bones, veins, large intestine, small intestine, liver, lungs, heart; DA = skin, hair, bristle).<sup>23</sup>

As for CA BHA KA SA, it is known in Thailand as the *hua chai korani* (หัวใจกรณี), a famous and widespread formula also present in a large number of magic diagrams. The oldest extant literary evidence for this is located in the Pali literature from Lanna (present-day northern Thailand). It is found for instance in the *Saddabinduvinicchaya* (Sadd-v), a late 15th-century commentary on the *Saddabindu*, a Burmese grammar treatise. It is also found in a more elaborated version in the *Vajirasāratthasaṅgaha* (Vss), a multi-purpose text composed by the Thera Ratanapaññā (dated 1534 CE). Both sources link CA BHA KA SA with the following stanza:

*caja dujjanasamsaggaṃ bhaja sādhusamāgamaṃ  
kara puññaṃ ahorattiṃ sara niccaṃ aniccatam* (Sadd-v 91; Vss 39).

Give up contacts with bad persons,  
Take the company of good ones,  
Accomplish meritorious acts day and night,  
Always keep in mind the fact of impermanence (trans. Schnake 2018: 170).<sup>24</sup>

Vss adds other readings of the formula:

*cajeyya dummittaṃ bālaṃ āsīvisaṃ va māṇavo  
bhañjeyya pāpakaṃ kammaṃ naḷāgāraṃ va kuñjaro* (Vss 41; cf. Ndd 256).

Man should give up the bad ignorant friend who is like a snake,  
He should break the wrong action as the elephant [breaks] a house made of reeds  
(trans. Schnake 2018: 170).

*kareyya kusalaṃ sabbaṃ sivaṃ nibbānam āvahaṃ  
sareyya aniccaṃ niccaṃ nibbidāñāṅagocaraṃ* (Vss 42; cf. Ndd 257).

<sup>21</sup> According to the local Siamese tradition collected in Thep 2515: 58ff.

<sup>22</sup> *Dhammasit* (ธรรมสัทธี) is a unifying principle of the *dhammas* constitutive of beings (Bizot 1980: 241, n. 3).

<sup>23</sup> See for instance Bizot 1976: 141; also Bizot 1980: 241f.

<sup>24</sup> The strophe is also found in different texts of the *nīti* literary genre of ancient Burma, for example in the *Dhammanīti* (Dhn 411), the *Lokañīti* (Ln 42), and the *Kavidappaṇaṇīti* (Kvd 178). See Skilling 2012, for the Sanskrit version, with many further references; also Thep 2515: 75ff.

One should do always what is good, which brings the auspicious *nibbāna*.  
One should always keep in mind the fact of impermanence, which implies  
aversion and knowledge (trans. Schnake 2018: 171).

This formula (CA BHA KA SA) also adds another degree of complexity in placing the  
four syllables in four different strophes as shown in this table:

<p><i>cattapāpo jino jantū</i> <i>caturāpāyatārako</i> <i>cattadānavaro buddho</i> <i>catusaccāvabodhako</i> (Vss 44).</p>	<p>The one who has given up bad actions is the Conqueror, The one who helps beings cross the four lower worlds, The best of those who have given away gifts, he is the Buddha Who makes the Four Truths understood (trans. Schnake 2018: 171).</p>
<p><i>bhaggarāgo bhaggadoso</i> <i>bhaggamoho anāsavo</i> <i>bhagg'assa pāpakā dhammā</i> <i>bhagavā tena vuccati</i> (Vss 45; cf. Vism 211, 10–11; Sp I 123, 31–32; etc.).</p>	<p>The one who has broken passion, who has broken hatred, Who has broken delusion, free from the mental defilements, Because bad things have been broken by him, He is called the Blessed One (trans. Schnake 2018: 171).</p>
<p><i>karoti bhagavā nātham</i> <i>katapuññassa jantuno</i> <i>katheti pubbikaṃ kathaṃ karoti</i> <i>saggamocanaṃ</i> (Vss 46).</p>	<p>The Blessed One is the protector Of the one who had done good actions, He tells the story of the past, He liberates living beings (trans. Schnake 2018: 172).</p>
<p><i>sammā sāmañ ca sambuddho</i> <i>sambodheti pare jino</i> <i>saddhammaraṃsiyā loke sabbaṃ</i> <i>tamaṃ vinodayi</i> (Vss 47).</p>	<p>The Awakened one teaches correctly and nicely, The Conqueror awakens others. With the rays of the good Law, He has dispelled all the darkness in this world (trans. Schnake 2018: 172).</p>

In addition, the specialist literature reported in Thep Sarikabut (2515: 75) also  
associates CA BHA KA SA with other elements, such as the four Buddhas of the past,  
viz., CA for Kakusandha, BHA for Koṇāgamana, KA for Kassapa, and SA for Gotama, or,  
according to the combinations of syllables, to the different elements of the formal world.

## Back view

On the back of the Buddha, we finally see the ending of the sacred *mantra* that began with 𑄖 (NA) on the front left shoulder (see *supra*, Figure 6b) which is preceded and followed by the same four-sided *yantra* 𑄖. The full reading of the inscription is thus [𑄖] 𑄖 𑄖 𑄖 𑄖 ([NA] **MO BU DDHĀ YA**) (Figure 8). This is a standard and ubiquitous formula in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, literally meaning “Homage to the Buddha(s)”. It is referenced in the Thai literature as *hua chai phra phuttha chao 5 phra ong* (หัวใจพระพุทธรเจ้า ๕ พระองค์). These five primordial syllables are especially used by ritual specialists. They are present in various *gāthās* and *yantras*, but also constitute important elements in many *kammaṭṭhāna* texts and practices where they play a fundamental role in the myth of creation in which the *yogāvacara* (i.e., one who performs spiritual exercise) is involved.<sup>25</sup> They embody various conceptual sets such as the Five Buddhas (NA = Kakusandha, MO = Koṇāgamana, BU = Kassapa, DDHĀ = Gotama, YA = Metteyya);<sup>26</sup> the Five Elements (NA = *āpo*/water, MO = *pathavī*/earth, BU = *tejo*/fire, DDHĀ = *vāyo*/wind, YA = *ākāsa*/space); the Five Aggregates (NA = *rūpa*/form, MO = *vedanā*/feeling, BU = *saññā*/perception, DDHĀ = *saṅkhārās*/volitional formations, and YA = *viññāna*/consciousness); and so on.<sup>27</sup>

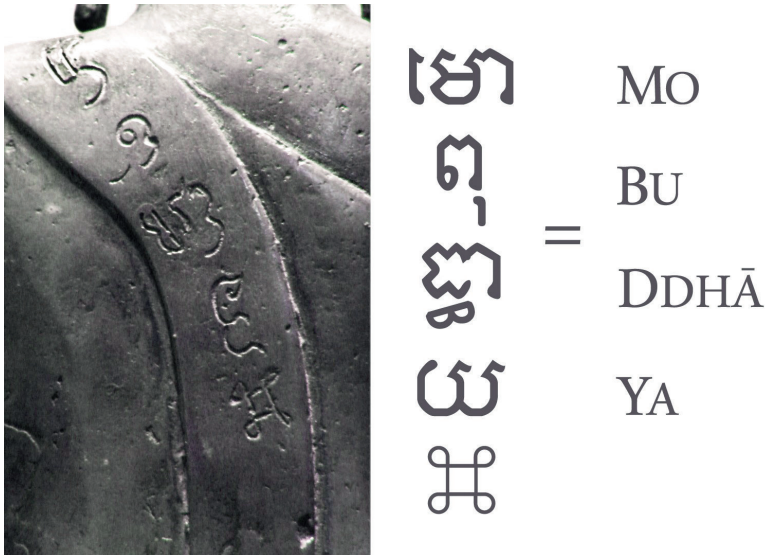


Figure 8. Phra Chai Mueang Nakhon Ratchasima, back view with inscription [NA] Mo BU DDHĀ YA (Photo © Nicolas Revire)

<sup>25</sup> See *inter alia* Bizot 1976: 74, 87, 91, etc.; Bizot 1980: 224–227, 240, etc.; Bizot 1981; Bizot and von Hinüber 1994: 40, 43, 46, 53; Bizot and Lagirarde 1996: 39, 40, 43, 46, 60, etc. The formula is also the basis of the Pali *Namo Buddhāya Siddham* (Bizot and von Hinüber 1994: 189–207), an acrostic poem where each stanza begins with one of its syllables.

<sup>26</sup> See Skilling and Evans 1999: 3, 12; also Revire 2022: 245–247, Table 7.4. This equation with the group of Five Buddhas (P.: *pañcabuddhas*) of this con (P.: *kappa*) is also attested in various forms of Southeast Asian Pali chanting.

<sup>27</sup> See Thep 2515: 33–57; Bizot and von Hinüber 1994: 40; Bizot and Lagirarde 1996: 43; also Bizot forthcoming.

## Usage of *yantras* and *mantras*

This Phra Chai Buddha image from Khorat studied above is unique in many ways. Engraved with *yantras* and several powerful Buddhist *mantras* using Pali letters in encrypted formulae, it may simply perform the role of protecting Buddhists from evil. This is confirmed by the posture commonly called in Thailand the “Victory over Māra” (मारวิชัย, *man wichai*; Skt.: *māravijaya*), also known as *chana man* (ชนะมาร) or *sadung man* (สะดุ้งมาร), “striking fear into Māra”. However, the image also highlights the role of the ritual and occult art of tattooing in modern Thai society. The popularity of *mantras* and *yantras* involving sacred tattoos has indeed continued in ancient Tai–Khmer Buddhist communities to this day.

The formulae inscribed on the body of this Buddha statue are among the most widespread today. They are appreciated by specialists in the field of occult practices as a source of protection, in particular in the context of ritual tattooing. They also occur frequently in texts and rituals related to meditation or spiritual exercises known as *kammaṭṭhāna*, where they have essential roles in the process of symbolic rebirth and deliverance, giving to the Pali letters a soteriological value. Almost all of the formulae examined above have been known locally for centuries—at least since the late Sukhothai or early Ayutthaya periods—thus attesting to their deep and enduring value. For instance, a square gold foundation plate found in Sukhothai province, also kept at the NMB, is inscribed on one side with several formulae including CA BHA KA SA and MA A U.<sup>28</sup> It is undated, but the so-called Khom Sukhothai script used suggests a date in approximately the 15th century CE (FAD 2529: 47–49). Another example containing NA MA BHA (*sic*) DA, CA BHA KA SA, MA A U, I Svā SU, and NA MO BU DDHĀ YA comes from an inscription found on a footprint (P.: *buddhapāda*) discovered at Wat Tham Phra Bat (วัดถ้ำพระบาท), also in Sukhothai province (Lorrillard 2000: 50f). Finally, MA A U is engraved on a stone inscription dated 2057 BE (1514 CE) discovered at Wat Chetuphon (วัดเชตุพน) in Sukhothai (FAD 2548: 468–471).

This scarified Buddha image from Nakhon Ratchasima thus belongs to a deep regional Tai–Khmer tradition and lore, often dubbed as *kammaṭṭhāna* or *yogāvacara*, which was once pervasive throughout mainland Southeast Asia. This tradition is said to embrace a spiritual “right-hand path” known as *buddhamantra* focusing on attaining *nibbāna*, and a more practical “left-hand path”, the *vedamantra*, engaged on getting apotropaic and worldly goals (Bizot and von Hinüber 1994: 17, 42–44), especially through the popular and occult practices of “*yantra* tattooing” (สักยันต์, *sak yant*). This artificial dichotomy clearly shows the thin line that exists between spirituality and superstition in traditional Siam and modern-day Thailand.

<sup>28</sup> The full inscription is the *katha hua chai phra sut* (คาถาหัวใจพระสูตร) containing different cryptic formulae (Suphaphan 2529: 47).



### Acknowledgements

The lead author is grateful to Disapong Netlomwong, then curator at the NMB, for authorising the photographing of the Phra Chai Buddha image in 2010. We also thank Olivier de Bernon, Gregory Kourilsky, and Alexander Wynne for their comments, Michel Antelme for his help with the Mul font, Naphatsnan Revire for her invaluable assistance with the illustrations, and Leedom Lefferts for his editing of the language.

### Abbreviations

PED = *Pali-English Dictionary* (Rhys Davids and Stede 1921–1925).

References and abbreviations to canonical Pali texts follow the system adopted by the *Critical Pali Dictionary*. Volume and page references are to Pali Text Society editions.

#### Pali post-canonical texts

Dhn = [*Dhammanīti*] Bechert, Heinz and Braun, Heinz (1981). *Pāli Nīti Texts from Burma*. London: The Pali Text Society, pp. 3–71.

Kvd = *Kavidappanānīti* (Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana version, available in pdf form at [www.tipitaka.org](http://www.tipitaka.org)).

Ln = [*Lokanīti*] Bechert, Heinz and Braun, Heinz (1981). *Pāli Nīti Texts from Burma*. London: The Pali Text Society, pp. 72–98.

Ndd = *Naradakkhadīpanī* (Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana version, available in pdf form at [www.tipitaka.org](http://www.tipitaka.org)).

Sadd-v = Lottermoser, Friedgard (1987). Minor Pāli Grammar Texts: The *Saddabindu* and Its “New” Subcommentary. *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 11: 79–109.

Vism = Rhys Davids, C.A.F. (1920–1921, ed. 1975). *Visuddhimagga*. London: The Pali Text Society.

Vss = Schnake, Javier (2021). *Ratanapañña’s Vajirasāratthasaṅgaha and Its Ṭikā*. Bristol: The Pali Text Society.

## References

Antelme, Michel (2007). *Inventaire provisoire des caractères et divers signes des écritures khmères pré-modernes et modernes employés pour la notation du khmer, du siamois, des dialectes thaïs méridionaux, du sanskrit et du pāli*. Projet “Corpus des inscriptions khmères”—CIK (unpublished).

Anuman Rajadhon, Phya (1988). Thai Charms and Amulets. In Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development, ed., *Essays on Thai Folklore*. Bangkok: Sathirakoses Nagapradipa Foundation, pp. 300–330 (3rd Edition; 1st Edition 1968).

Baker, Chris and Pasuk Phongpaichit (2013). Protection and Power in Siam: From *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* to the Buddha Amulet. *Southeast Asian Studies* 2(2): 215–242.

Becchetti, Catherine (1991). *Le mystère dans les lettres/ปริศนาธรรมในอักษร: étude sur les yantra bouddhiques du Cambodge et de la Thaïlande*. Bangkok: Édition des cahiers de France.

Bernon, Olivier de (1998). *Yantra et Mantra*. Phnom Penh: Centre culturel français.

Bizot, François (1976). *Le figuier à cinq branches. Recherche sur le bouddhisme khmer*. Paris: École française d’Extrême-Orient.

— (1980). La grotte de la naissance. Recherches sur le bouddhisme khmer, II. *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient* 67: 221–274.

- (1981). Notes sur les yantra bouddhiques d’Indochine. In M. Strickmann, ed., *Tantric and Taoist Studies in Honour of R.A. Stein*. Bruxelles: Institut belge des hautes études chinoises, vol. 1, pp. 155–191.
- (1988). *Les traditions de la pabbajjā en Asie du Sud-Est*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- (forthcoming). La spéciation des trois-robets et l’ADN du Buddha. Recherches sur le bouddhisme khmer, VI. *Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques*.
- Bizot, François and von Hinüber, Oskar (1994). *La guirlande de bijoux, สถิติยโษภภคณภภ*. Paris/Chiang Mai: École française d’Extrême-Orient.
- Bizot, François and Lagirarde, François (1996). *La pureté par les mots, Saddavimāla*. Paris/Phnom Penh/Chiang Mai/Vientiane: École française d’Extrême-Orient.
- Conti, Pia (2014). Tantric Buddhism at Prasat Hin Phimai: A New Reading of Its Iconographic Message. In N. Revire & S.A. Murphy, eds., *Before Siam: Essays in Art and Archaeology*. Bangkok: River Books and The Siam Society, pp. 374–395.
- Cousins, Lance S. (1997). Aspects of Southern Esoteric Buddhism. In P. Connolly and S. Hamilton, eds., *Indian Insights: Buddhism, Brahmanism and Bhakti. Papers from the Annual Spalding Symposium on Indian Religions*. London: Luzac Oriental, pp. 185–207.
- Fine Arts Department [FAD = กรมศิลปากร] (2529 BE/1986 CE). จารึกในประเทศไทย เล่ม ๕ [*Inscriptions of Thailand, Volume 5*]. Bangkok: Fine Arts Department.
- (2548 BE/2005 CE). ประชุมจารึก ภาคที่ ๘ จารึกสุโขทัย [*Collection of Inscriptions, Volume 8: Inscriptions of Sukhothai*]. Bangkok: Fine Arts Department.
- (2564 BE/2021 CE). นบพระนำพร บวรสถานพุทธปฏิมามงคล (*Auspicious Buddha Images of the Front Palace*). Bangkok: Fine Arts Department.
- Linrothe, Robert N. (1999). *Ruthless Compassion: Wrathful Deities in Early Indo-Tibetan Esoteric Buddhist Art*. London: Serindia.
- Lorrillard, Michel (2000). Aux origines du bouddhisme siamois. *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient* 87(1): 23–55.
- Ñāṇamoli, Bhikkhu, trans. (1995). *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha. A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society.
- Padoux, André (1980). Contributions à l’étude du Mantrasāstra. II. nyāsa : l’imposition rituelle des mantra. *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient* 67: 59–102.
- Penth, Hans (1997). An Inscribed Buddha Image in Wat Ket Sī. In P. Kieffer-Pülz and J.U. Hartmann, eds., *Buddhavidyāsudhākarah: Studies in Honour of Heinz Bechert on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*. Indica et Tibetica Verlag: Swisttal-Odendorf, pp. 495–514.
- Revire, Nicolas (2022). Back to the Future: The Emergence of Past and Future Buddhas in Khmer Buddhism. In A. Thompson, ed., *Early Theravadin Cambodia: Perspectives from Art and Archaeology*. Singapore: SOAS–NUS Press, pp. 231–268.
- Schnake, Javier (2018). Letters and Numbers: Protective Aspects in the *Vajirasāratthasaṅgaha*. In C. Cicuzza, ed., *Protective Literature from South and Southeast Asia*. Bangkok and Lumbini: Fragile Palm-leaves Foundation, pp. 157–196.
- Skilling, Peter (2012). At the Heart of Letters: *Akṣara* and *Akkhara* in Thai Tradition. In Weerawan Ngamsantikul, ed., ๘๐ ทศ พลตรี หม่อมราชวงศ์ [*Felicitations Volume for Maj. Gen. MR Suphawut Kasemsri on His 80th Birthday*]. Bangkok: Duean Tula Publishing, pp. 441–433.
- Skilling, Peter and Evans, Bruce (1999). Five Bodhisattas (Part 2). *Fragile Palm Leaves Newsletter* 5: 3, 8–12.
- Suphaphan na Bangchang [สุภาพรรณ ณ บางช้าง] (2529 BE/1986 CE). วิวัฒนาการงานเขียนภาษาบาลีในประเทศไทย [*The Evolution of Pali Writing in Thailand*]. Bangkok: Mahamakut University Foundation.

Thep Sarikabut [เทพย์ สาริกบุตร] (2515 BE/1972 CE). คัมภีร์หัวใจ ๑๐๘ [*Manual of 108 Heart-letters*]. Bangkok: Soemwit Bannakhan Publishing.

— (2538 BE/1995 CE). คัมภีร์นะ ๑๐๘ (*Manual of 108 Na-Yantras*). Bangkok: Charoenkit Publishing.