

JOHN S. STRONG

The Legend and Cult of Upagupta

*Sanskrit Buddhism in North India and
Southeast Asia*



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SANSKRIT BUDDHISM IN NORTH INDIA
AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

John S. Strong

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*In Memory of
U Ko Ko
Eugène Denis
and Maung Maung Gyi
who are in the past
in Mandalay, Bangkok, and Lewiston, Maine*

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Preface

WHEN Louis Finot undertook a survey of the libraries of Laotian monasteries in 1917, he discovered that none of them possessed an entire set of the Pali canon. Of the three divisions of the Tipiṭaka, only the “basket of scholasticism”—the Abhidhamma—was complete, but that was because its seven books had important ritual uses at funerals and other ceremonies. The Vinaya—the monastic disciplinary code—was “mostly there,” but much of the Sutta piṭaka, purporting to record the words of the Buddha himself, was unknown, and many of its books existed only in the form of anthologies of paritta, texts to be recited for their magical potency.¹

The situation has not changed much since Finot’s time. The volumes of the Pali canon which neatly line the shelves of buddhologists in the West are generally not to be found in the bookcases of Buddhists in Southeast Asia. What *is* there is mostly “extracanonical”: jātakas (stories of previous lives of the Buddha), collections of legends from the commentaries, tales of the adventures of saints, accounts of other worlds, ānisaṃsas (stories extolling the advantages of merit making), ritual manuals, anthologies of sermons, secular tales, historical chronicles, grammars, and primers.² For most Buddhists, these are the sources that are read and repeated, the texts that best illustrate the Buddha’s Teaching. The canon is important for other reasons: for its protective power and magical efficacy, and as an object of refuge and devotion.

I first thought of writing something about the legend and cult of the elder Upagupta—a saint who does *not* appear in the Pali canon—over fifteen years ago, while a graduate student in history of religions at the University of Chicago. My initial impression was that here was a potentially interesting figure who would allow for the investigation in Buddhism of what subsequently has been called, in a different context, that “powerful body of tradition [which] emphasizes not codes but stories, not precepts but personalities, not lectures but lives.”³

This impression grew stronger and became better grounded during my work on the Sanskrit legends of King Aśoka, in some of which Upagupta is featured in a significant fashion. It was only gradually, however, that I began to understand the full scope of my undertaking, and only after I had embarked on fieldwork and textual study that I discovered the richness and complexity of the written, oral, and ritual traditions about Upagupta, some of which are still to be found in Southeast Asia.

In my view, Buddhism, as it is popularly practiced, consists primarily of deeds done and stories told, that is, of rituals that regulate life both inside and outside the monastery, and of legends, myths, and tales that are recalled by, for, and about the faithful. Encouragingly, in recent years, scholars in various

disciplines have become more interested in such “stories,”⁴ and concerned more specifically with the study of sacred biographies—the stories told about individual saints.⁵ These hagiographies and the lives they feature can be thought of in terms of what Roger Bastide, in a very different context, has called “belvedere phenomena”⁶—compilations of traditions that reveal a broader context, that enable one to see a whole surrounding countryside, in all of its various aspects (doctrinal, sociological, ritual, soteriological).

Many of the stories that will preoccupy us in this book will be Sanskrit Hīnayāna Buddhist tales of a popular bent.⁷ In general, buddhology in the West has tended to overlook such sources in favor of Mahāyāna or Pali Theravāda texts. In part, this is due to an understandable bias which inclines us to view the past in terms of the extant present; of all the many and diverse Hīnayāna sects that once thrived in South and Southeast Asia (Sarvāstivādins, Mahāsamghikas, etc.), only the Theravādins remain today. As a result, when we do look at Sarvāstivādin or other Sanskrit Hīnayāna works, we tend to view them not in their own light, but in that of other traditions, as complementary to the Theravāda or as precursory to the Mahāyāna. The Sanskrit sources that recount the legend of Upagupta, however, must be understood in their own context. As we shall see, they reflect a popular perspective on Buddhism that is at times significantly different from those of both the Theravāda and the Mahāyāna.

Readers will no doubt detect in the views depicted in this book influences of French buddhologists, inclinations towards anthropology, and imprints of my training in the history of religions. My approach may perhaps best be described, however, as the exegetical exploration of a world of meaning. In this, I have been inspired not only by my mentors at the University of Chicago, but also by the early works of Paul Mus, who, in my opinion, remains exemplary in his treatment of particular texts (or works of art) as focal points for reexamining the broad themes of a given tradition.⁸ “Upagupta” is my belvedere, in the way that “Barabuður” and the “Buddha paré” were Mus’s. The legends, myths, and rituals about him will form the world of our “text,” and the effort to understand them will lead us to view not only his “context,” but a number of other neglected landscapes in the study of Buddhism.

In what follows, I have tried to be fairly comprehensive, but I cannot pretend to have covered every single aspect of Upagupta’s cult and every textual reference to him. Although I was lucky enough to observe and inquire about a number of rites in Thailand and Burma, my time there was limited. Although I believe that I have looked at and dealt with most of the important Buddhist textual references to Upagupta, there are additional sources in Chinese and Tibetan that have not been examined here. And although I have, through translators, consulted both Thai and Burmese works on Upagupta, I know of the existence of manuscripts—in Laotian, Lanna Thai, and Shan (not to mention Sanskrit)—that have remained untouched.

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Lewiston, Maine
25 August 1990

Note and Abbreviations

IN CITING Sanskrit and Pali sources, I have sought to provide references to original-language editions as well as to English, French, or German translations when available. In dealing with Chinese texts, I have been guided by existing translations in Western languages, but, for the convenience of scholars, I have also included references to originals in the standard Taishō edition (*T.*) of the Chinese canon, even when those translations were based on originals found in other earlier editions. In all cases, editions are cited by abbreviated title (as given below) and translations by the name of the translator (see Bibliography of Works Cited) preceded by an indication of the language of the translation (Eng., Fr., or Ger.). In discussions of Chinese Buddhist texts, I have used reconstructed Sanskrit titles when these are more or less reliable. In this, I have generally followed the forms given in Lancaster (1979).

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>A.</i>	<i>Anguttara Nikāya</i>
<i>AA.</i>	<i>Manorathapūraṇī</i> (Commentary on <i>A.</i>)
<i>AbhK.</i>	<i>Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam</i>
<i>Aśokāv.</i>	<i>Aśokāvadāna</i>
<i>Aṣṭa.</i>	<i>Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra</i>
<i>Avk.</i>	<i>Avadānakalpalatā</i>
<i>Avś.</i>	<i>Avadānaśataka</i>
<i>Brapaṃsukūla.</i>	<i>Brapaṃsukūlānisamṣaṃ</i>
<i>BuvA.</i>	<i>Madhuratthavilāsini</i> (Commentary on <i>Buddhavaṃsa</i>)
<i>Catuṣ.</i>	<i>Catuṣpariṣatsūtra</i>
<i>D.</i>	<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>
<i>DA.</i>	<i>Sumangalavilāsini</i> (Commentary on <i>D.</i>)
<i>Dāṭh.</i>	<i>Dāṭhāvaṃsa</i>
<i>DBK.</i>	<i>Dasabodhisattuppattikathā</i>
<i>DhA.</i>	<i>Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā</i> (Commentary on <i>Dhp.</i>)
<i>Dhp.</i>	<i>Dhammapada</i>
<i>Div.</i>	<i>Divyāvadāna</i>
<i>Dpv.</i>	<i>Dīpavaṃsa</i>
<i>ExtMhv.</i>	<i>Extended Mahāvaṃsa</i>
<i>GilgMss.</i>	<i>Gilgit Manuscripts</i>
<i>HmanNanY.</i>	<i>Hman-Nan-Yazawindawgyi</i>
<i>Itv.</i>	<i>Itivuttaka</i>

<i>J.</i>	<i>Jātaka</i>
<i>JM.</i>	<i>Jātakamālā</i>
<i>Konjaku</i>	<i>Konjaku monogatari shū</i>
<i>Kvu.</i>	<i>Kathāvatthu</i>
<i>KvuA.</i>	<i>Kathāvatthuppakaraṇa-aṭṭhakathā</i> (Commentary on <i>Kvu.</i>)
<i>Lakṣacait.</i>	<i>Lakṣacaityasamutpatti</i>
<i>Lal.</i>	<i>Lalitavistara</i>
<i>LP.</i>	<i>Lokapaññatti</i>
<i>M.</i>	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>
<i>Mhv.</i>	<i>Mahāvaṃsa</i>
<i>MhvṬ.</i>	<i>Vaṃsatthappakāsini</i> (Commentary on <i>Mhv.</i>)
<i>Mil.</i>	<i>Milindapañha</i>
<i>MJM.</i>	<i>Mahājātakamālā</i>
<i>Mkv.</i>	<i>Mahākarmavibhanga</i>
<i>MPS.</i>	<i>Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra</i>
<i>MSV.</i>	<i>Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya</i>
<i>Mtu.</i>	<i>Mahāvastu</i>
<i>Pañca.</i>	<i>Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā</i>
<i>PJāt.</i>	<i>Paññāsa-Jātaka</i>
<i>PSK.</i>	<i>Phra Paṭṭhamasambodhikathā</i>
<i>Ratnamālāv.</i>	<i>Ratnamālāvadāna</i>
<i>S.</i>	<i>Samyutta Nikāya</i>
<i>SA.</i>	<i>Sāratthappakāsini</i> (Commentary on <i>S.</i>)
<i>Sanghbhv.</i>	<i>Sanghabhedavastu</i>
<i>Sās.</i>	<i>Sāsanavaṃsa</i>
<i>Saund.</i>	<i>Saundarananda</i>
<i>Śāyanāsav.</i>	<i>Śāyanāsavastu</i>
<i>Sāmp.</i>	<i>Saddharmapuṇḍarīka sūtra</i>
<i>Sān.</i>	<i>Saddanīti</i>
<i>Sīhaḷav.</i>	<i>Sīhaḷavatthuppakaraṇa</i>
<i>Śīkṣ.</i>	<i>Śīkṣāsamuccaya</i>
<i>Sn.</i>	<i>Suttanipāta</i>
<i>SnA.</i>	<i>Paramatthajotikā II</i> (Commentary on <i>Sn.</i>)
<i>Sumāg.</i>	<i>Sumāgadhāvadāna</i>
<i>T.</i>	<i>Taishō shinshū daizōkyō.</i> Citations in notes refer to text number, volume, page number, and register (a, b, or c).
<i>T. 99</i>	<i>Samyuktāgama sūtra</i>
<i>T. 125</i>	<i>Ekottarāgama</i>
<i>T. 128</i>	<i>Sumāgadhāvadāna sūtra</i>
<i>T. 130</i>	<i>Sumāgadhāvadāna</i>
<i>T. 190</i>	<i>Abhiniṣkramaṇa sūtra</i>
<i>T. 200</i>	<i>Avadānaśataka</i>

T. 201	<i>Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā</i>
T. 202	<i>Damamūkanidāna sūtra</i>
T. 203	<i>Tsa pao tsang ching</i>
T. 206	<i>Chiu tsa p'i yü ching</i>
T. 208	<i>Chung ching hsüan tsa p'i yü ching</i>
T. 211	<i>Dharmapādāvadāna</i>
T. 213	<i>Dharmapāda</i>
T. 310	<i>Mahāratnakūṭa</i>
T. 453	<i>Mi le hsia sheng ching</i>
T. 456	<i>Mi le ta ch'eng fo ching</i>
T. 642	<i>Śūraṅgamasamādhi sūtra</i>
T. 643	<i>Buddhānumṣṭi samādhi sūtra</i>
T. 1262	<i>Kuei tzu mu ching</i>
T. 1421	<i>Mahīśāsakavinaya</i>
T. 1425	<i>Mahāsaṅghikavinaya</i>
T. 1428	<i>Dharmaguptakavinaya</i>
T. 1435	<i>Sarvāstivādavinaya</i>
T. 1442	[<i>Mūlasarvāstivāda</i>] <i>Vinayavibhanga</i>
T. 1448+1450	[<i>Mūlasarvāstivāda</i>] <i>Vinayavastu</i>
T. 1451	[<i>Mūlasarvāstivāda</i>] <i>Vinayaṣudravastu</i>
T. 1462	<i>Samantapāsādikā</i>
T. 1465	<i>Śāriputrapariṣcchā</i>
T. 1507	<i>Fen pieh kung te lun</i>
T. 1509	<i>Mahāprajñāpāramitā śāstra</i>
T. 1545	<i>Mahāvibhāṣā</i>
T. 1634	<i>Mahāyānavatāra</i>
T. 1644	<i>Lokaprajñapti</i>
T. 1689	<i>Ch'ing pin t'ou lu fa</i>
T. 1899	<i>Chung t'ien chu she wei kuo ch'i yüan ssu t'u ching</i>
T. 2027	<i>Chia she chieh ching</i>
T. 2030	<i>Nandimitrāvadāna</i>
T. 2042	<i>Aśokarājāvadāna</i>
T. 2043	<i>Aśokarājasūtra</i>
T. 2053	<i>Ta tz'u en ssu san ts'ang fa shih chuan</i> [of Hui-li]
T. 2058	<i>Fu fa tsang yin yüan chüan</i>
T. 2059	<i>Kao seng chuan</i> [of Hui-chiao]
T. 2085	<i>Kao seng fa hsien chuan</i> [of Fa-hsien]
T. 2087	<i>Ta t'ang hsi yü chi</i> [of Hsüan-tsang]
T. 2092	<i>Lo yang ch'ieh lan chi</i> [of Yang Hsüan-chih]
T. 2145	<i>Ch'u san tsang chi chi</i> [of Seng-yu]
ThagA.	<i>Paramatṭha-dīpani Therāgātha-Aṭṭhakathā</i>
Ujishūi	<i>Uji shūi monogatari shū</i>

xviii · Note and Abbreviations

<i>Upasam.</i>	<i>Upasampadāvidhi</i>
<i>Vin.</i>	<i>[Theravāda] Vinayapiṭakam</i>
<i>VinA.</i>	<i>Samantapāsādikā (Commentary on Vin.)</i>
<i>VinNid.</i>	<i>Vinaya Nidāna</i>
<i>Vsm.</i>	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>

The Legend and Cult of Upagupta

Introduction

I SHALL NOT attempt, in this book, to separate fact from fiction in the legendary traditions that surround the Buddhist elder Upagupta. As with many great saints, the stories about him are so filled with the fancies and formulae of later hagiographers that the task of demythologizing these is probably an impossible one. If pressed, I could perhaps say, with a fair degree of accuracy, that historically Upagupta was a Buddhist monk who achieved some fame as a preacher and teacher in the region of Mathurā in Northern India, sometime between the reign of King Aśoka (third century B.C.E.) and the first century of the Christian era. By inclination, he was perhaps a follower of the Sarvāstivādin school. He was probably a forest monk, and he very likely attracted to himself a number of disciples interested in meditation, although this did not stop him from engaging in contact with laypersons.¹ He may have written one book, but this has not survived, and we know almost nothing about it.² After his death, his mountain monastery near Mathurā became a center of pilgrimage and remained so at least until the time of the Chinese traveller Hsüan-tsang (seventh century C.E.).³ Beyond this, however, I would probably not venture to say much, at least not with any confidence.

Fortunately, in this book, we shall not primarily be concerned with the historical Upagupta. Instead, we shall examine his legends as legends and his cult as cult, and both as reflective of the preoccupations and viewpoints of the Buddhist communities that engendered and preserved them throughout the ages. This in itself is a rather formidable enterprise, for the legend and cult of Upagupta have existed for about two thousand years. Not only are there Indian Buddhist stories about him (extant in Sanskrit and, in translation, in Chinese and Tibetan), but, at some point, these traditions were passed on to northern Southeast Asia, where his cult has continued right up to the present and where his tale is still told in Burmese, Thai, and Laotian.

A number of anthropologists have interested themselves in the cult and legend of Upagupta in Southeast Asia; by and large, however, their studies have failed to consider fully the Indian textual traditions about the saint.⁴ On the other hand, a number of buddhologists have examined these Indian texts, but they generally have not sought to relate them to the relevant Southeast Asian ethnographic materials.⁵ In this book, we shall assume that the overall significance of Upagupta can be understood only by studying both Indian and Southeast Asian sources. We shall also assume that a complete picture of his legend and cult will emerge only with the coordinated consideration of all types of traditions, whether these be textual, oral, ritual, or iconographic. The chapters that follow, therefore, will include translations and exegeses of texts

of both Indian and Southeast Asian provenance, descriptions and interpretations of rituals observed in Northern Thailand and Burma, the recounting and evaluation of pertinent oral traditions still being preserved today, and the consideration of images and other representations as these developed in different areas.

One of the most striking things about Upagupta, at least for buddhologists, is that there is no mention of him at all in the Pali canon. Even more remarkably, there are no references to him in the standard Pali commentaries on the canon, and his name appears to have been completely unknown in Sri Lanka.⁶ Yet ironically, today, his cult is perpetuated only in Burma, Thailand, and Laos, where the Buddhism that is practiced—at least officially—is that of the Sri Lankan Pali Theravāda school.

There are, of course, historical reasons for this. In Burma, Upagupta figured originally as part of the Buddhist Sanskritic tradition that was initially very influential in that country.⁷ When, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Burmese religious milieu was changed by the official establishment of Pali Buddhism from Sri Lanka, saints such as Upagupta suddenly found themselves questioned as no longer quite canonical. This does not mean that his cult was suppressed; instead, it seems to have gone underground and survived as an unofficial remnant of an older Indian Buddhist tradition, but within a new context.

In the process, some interesting transformations appear to have taken place. Today, for instance, the cult of Upagupta is almost the exclusive preserve of Buddhist laypersons. Upagupta himself is thought of as being a monk and is recognized as such both in his iconography and in the details of his cult; but, in parts of Thailand and Laos at least, monks are nonetheless expected *not* to participate in certain rituals involving him. These are carried out instead by leading lay elders.

At the same time, in Southeast Asia generally, Upagupta has become associated with the mythology of *nāgas* (snake divinities) and of various local guardian deities (although we shall see that these relationships are complex ones). He is thought to still be alive, residing in a brazen palace in the midst of the Southern Ocean. He is invoked primarily as a protective figure, a guardian against disorder. He is also thought to have great magical powers and to be able to intercede in favor of his devotees.

These kinds of transformations raise the issue of syncretism, not only between Buddhism and indigenous religious traditions, but between different types of Buddhism as well. Generally speaking, as Buddhism moved out into non-Buddhist areas, its ideological assimilation of local traditions was asserted by legends telling of the conversion of indigenous divinities to the new faith. These spirits (*nāgas*, *yakṣas*, *nats*, *phī*) were thus “buddhicized”; they were incorporated into a Buddhist “pantheon” and given roles as protectors of the religion or its followers. At first glance, in the case of Upagupta, it would

seem that something of the *reverse* process occurred. Upagupta, a perfectly legitimate and saintly figure in the *Sanskrit* Buddhist tradition, was suddenly found to be lacking a place in the *Pali* scheme of things. Too popular to be dismissed, he was kept on, but his cult was laicized, and he himself was indigenized and associated—though never fully—with local divinities who themselves had become Buddhists—though never completely. At the same time, freed from their Northwest Indian Sanskrit context, the traditions about him were able to expand and develop in all sorts of ways that might not otherwise have been possible. We shall examine the details of this rather complicated process in due course.

Enough has been said to indicate that, in this book, we shall be dealing with materials imbedded in two distinct yet related religiocultural milieux: Northwestern India, where the legend of Upagupta first developed around the beginning of the Christian era; and northern Southeast Asia—especially Burma, Northern and Northeastern Thailand, and Laos—where the traditions about him became established by the twelfth century C.E. (about the time, in fact, that they were dying out in India). In the remainder of this introduction, it may be useful to take an initial look at these two contexts and to survey some of the sources and problems that will occupy us in greater detail later on.

MATHURĀ AND THE SARVĀSTIVĀDIN TRADITION

The Indian legends about Upagupta have their origins in the Sanskrit Buddhist traditions of Northwestern India, specifically in the region of Mathurā. Historically, Buddhism seems to have spread to this area in a number of stages. Quite early, perhaps even during the lifetime of the Buddha himself, missionary monks began to wander up the valleys of the Ganges and its tributaries, preaching, converting, and establishing new communities of the faithful as they went. The city of Mathurā on the Yamunā River may well have received their attention from the start.

According to a text that is certainly apocryphal, the Buddha himself is reputed to have visited Mathurā. He arrived there on the day of a festival. The goddess of the city, worried that the Buddha's presence would detract from the celebrations in her honor, sought either to seduce him or to scare him away by appearing before him as a naked woman. He, however, merely declared that clothed females were unattractive; how much more so naked ones! Embarrassed, she went away, and the Buddha then commented to his disciples that Mathurā was a dusty place, plagued by fierce dogs and demons, where there were too many women, the ground was uneven, alms were difficult to obtain, and people (monks?) ate when it was still night.⁸ It is clear that, at this point, Mathurā was, in the view of some Buddhists at least, a rather tough mission field and hardly the beacon of the faith that it eventually became.

Nevertheless, there are some stories of successful conversions that are sup-

posed to have taken place even in this early period. A Pali sutta recounts the conversion of a king of Mathurā named Avantiputta by the Buddha's own disciple Mahākaccāna,⁹ while a Sanskrit text recalls the story of the honest Brahmin Nīlabhūti, who, all set to condemn the Buddha for his views on caste, quickly found himself overcome by the Blessed One's charisma and willy-nilly breaking out in praise of him instead.¹⁰ Finally, in a sequel to the tale of the Buddha's visit to Mathurā recounted above, the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* relates how some devout Mathuran Brahmins subsequently came to the Blessed One to ask him to subdue the yakṣas Gardabha, Śara, and Vana and the yakṣiṇīs Ālikavendā and Timisikā, who had been plaguing the people of the city. The Buddha does so by converting these demonic figures to Buddhism and having the citizens of Mathurā build Buddhist vihāras in their honor.¹¹ This, as we shall see, is a typical pattern for the implantation of Buddhism in a region.

In any case, by the time of the Council of Vaiśālī, which according to tradition took place one hundred years after the death of the Buddha, Mathurā seems to have become, along with Sāmkāśya and Kaṇyākubja, one of the centers of Buddhism in the west. As such, it was distinct in a variety of ways from the Buddhist communities of Magadha in the east, where the Buddha had lived and preached.¹² With the reign of King Aśoka in the third century B.C.E., however, Buddhism must have moved into Northwest India as a whole, and in full force. Not only in Mathurā, but beyond it in Gandhāra and Kashmir, new centers of the faith developed where large communities of monks flourished and different schools of thought emerged. Among the sects that firmly established themselves in the region at this time were the Sarvāstivādins, and it is probably to them that we owe our first accounts of the legend of Upagupta.

Indeed, Upagupta himself may have been a Sarvāstivādin; he figures prominently in that school's listing of Dharma masters, and a number of Chinese sources were even willing to credit him with the compilation of the Sarvāstivādin Vinaya.¹³ Moreover, the only written work attributed to him, the *Netrīpada śāstra*, would appear to have been a treatise presenting Sarvāstivādin viewpoints.¹⁴

This is not to say that there were not other sectarian forces operating in Mathurā. Epigraphical evidence shows that, by the second century C.E., at least two other Hīnayānist sects besides the Sarvāstivādins counted adherents there: the Mahāsāṅghikas (forerunners of the Mahāyāna) and the Sammatīyas (another important early group).¹⁵ In addition, early Pure Land notions were developing in the region.¹⁶ By the time the Chinese pilgrim Fa-hsien visited Mathurā about 400 C.E., the city and its environs were clearly religiously pluralistic places.¹⁷ Indeed, as we shall see in chapter 7, not only did various types of Hīnayānists and Mahāyānists flourish there, but there were special-

ized subgroups within these sects, each devoted to the cult of its own particular patron saint. Moreover, we should not forget that Mathurā was also an important center for Jains and that it was and has remained sacred to Vaishnavites, who see it as the homeland of Kṛṣṇa.

In the midst of all this, however, the Sarvāstivādins, at least in Upagupta's time, still occupied an important position, and we shall, in what follows, focus especially on them. Unlike their Theravādin cousins, who put down their roots in Sri Lanka and recorded their canon in Pali, the Sarvāstivādins preserved their scriptures in Sanskrit. They had their own Vinaya and Sūtra piṭakas, and an Abhidharma that was quite different from that of the Theravādins.¹⁸ In addition, individual Sarvāstivādin scholars soon produced a whole series of commentaries and treatises that established the major scholastic themes for generations of Buddhists in Northern India, Central Asia, China, and Tibet.¹⁹ There is no denying the overwhelming importance of the Sarvāstivādins in the development of Buddhism. Accidents of history have made the Theravādins and their Pali canon better known in modern times, but for centuries Sarvāstivādin monks and their Sanskrit scriptures set many of the standards for thought and practice in large parts of the Buddhist world.

André Bareau has listed 140 theses maintained by the Sarvāstivādins.²⁰ The first of these is that for which they were best known and to which, in fact, they owed their name: the doctrine that "everything exists" (sarvam asti), that all dharmas (elements of reality) have existence, whether in the past, present, or future.

This assertion must first be understood in the context of the abhidharmic positions of other schools. Early on, some Buddhists painted themselves into a scholastic corner by maintaining the momentariness and fundamental separateness of all dharmas from each other. According to this view, dharmas exist only in the present moment, arising and becoming extinct in an instant. Given this metaphysic, the Sarvāstivādins were worried about the connections and continuities among these theoretically distinct dharmas. Especially, they were concerned about the possibility of perceiving (remembering) things past and perceiving (predicting) things future. Similarly, they wanted to be able to assert, in the context of the doctrine of karma, the reality of past causes and the reality of future fruits.²¹

Given the absence of any ongoing substratum, and given the claim that only existing things could be perceived, once a thing (dharma) was past, how could it be recalled (for instance, by the Buddha in "remembering" someone's previous life) if it did not in some sense still exist? Similarly, if a future thing (for example, the eventual enlightenment of a disciple) did not exist, how could it accurately be foretold? The Sarvāstivādin solution to these problems was simply to affirm the existence not only of present, but also of past and future dharmas. According to them, the past and the future are, like the present,

cognizable (jñeya); they “have knowability” (jñeyadharmatā), and it is this knowability that results in their being said to exist, in their having their own real characteristics (svabhāvalakṣaṇa).²²

This is not to argue that past and future dharmas are in all respects the same as present ones. The manner in which they differ, in fact, became a topic of some debate among various Sarvāstivādin masters.²³ One solution to the problem was to state that they differed in their “activity” or “function” (kāritra). While both a past dharma and a present dharma may be said to exist (since they are cognizable), the latter differs from the former in that, in addition to its cognizability, it is characterized by activity. Similarly, a future dharma lacks activity, though it exists.²⁴

This “solution,” obviously, is not without its own obscurities and philosophical difficulties, and the Sarvāstivādin theory as a whole was hotly disputed by other Buddhist schools, which tackled these fundamental problems in their own ways. The Theravādins in particular lambasted and ridiculed the Sarvāstivādins, accusing them of propounding heresy.²⁵

The Sarvāstivādins themselves, moreover, were by no means free from other kinds of factionalism. By the second century C.E., the “orthodox” Vaibhāṣikas, who claimed that they were the correct interpreters of the Abhidharma along the lines of the *Mahāvibhāṣā* commentary, had become clearly distinguished from the Sautrāntikas, who maintained the sole authority of the sūtras.²⁶ Later sources also speak of the Mūlasarvāstivādins (Original Sarvāstivādins), who had a separate Vinaya of their own and who thus would appear to have been a distinct sect. Their relative antiquity and relationship to the other Sarvāstivādins are matters of considerable dispute,²⁷ but their general doctrinal stances do not appear to have been fundamentally different.²⁸ In what follows, therefore, I shall often lump together sources from these two schools.

Scholars studying the Sarvāstivādins and Mūlasarvāstivādins have generally tended to focus on the abhidharmic and Vinaya issues that distinguished them from their Hīnayānist cousins and from their Mahāyānist successors. But it should not be forgotten that the Sarvāstivādins were by no means just a sect of monks following a certain Vinaya, or a school of scholastic debaters renowned for their Abhidharma. They, and even more so the Mūlasarvāstivādins, were also famous for their collections of popular Buddhist legends (avadānas), which they both incorporated into their canonical texts and preserved as separate anthologies.²⁹

Avadānas are stories about the karmic fortunes of individual Buddhists. They tend to emphasize the beneficial effects, in this or a future lifetime, of past or present good deeds and of devout attitudes such as merit making, vow taking, faith, and devotion. Such stories, as well as the jātakas (accounts of the Buddha’s previous lives), have always played an important role in Buddhism, especially in the sermons directed towards the laity. But under the

Sarvāstivādins, they seem to have taken on additional importance; they were systematically collected, and, as a genre, they came to be recognized as an official part of the Buddha's Teaching itself.³⁰

INDIAN SOURCES

The principal sources for our study of the Upagupta legend in India are, in fact, Sarvāstivādin and Mūlasarvāstivādin texts of the *avadāna* type. These include:

The *Divyāvadāna*, an important anthology of Buddhist legends, which contains in its twenty-sixth and twenty-seventh chapters the fullest extant Sanskrit version of the Upagupta story.³¹

The *Avadānaśataka*, a collection of one hundred *avadānas*, the last of which mentions Upagupta. It does not actually present much information about him but is important for being perhaps the earliest known reference to him.³²

Three Chinese versions of the *avadāna* of King Aśoka: the *Aśokarājāvadāna* (*A-yü wang chuan*),³³ the *Aśokarājasūtra* (*A-yü wang ching*),³⁴ and several chapters from the *Samyuktāgama sūtra* (*Tsa a han ching*).³⁵ These have preserved the basic legend of Upagupta more or less as it is found in the *Divyāvadāna* with, in addition, many extra anecdotes about his relationship to his teacher and to his disciples.

The *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*, an enormous work that has preserved within it many *avadānas*, including a number of stories about Upagupta. Some of these are available in the original Sanskrit as well as in Chinese and Tibetan translations.³⁶

In addition, mention might be made here of a number of other sources that do not necessarily belong to the Sarvāstivādin or Mūlasarvāstivādin schools but whose accounts of Upagupta appear to be based on related sources. These include:

Story no. 54 of the *Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā* (alias *Sūtrālaṃkāra*), an anthology of tales variously attributed to Aśvaghōṣa or Kumāralāta.³⁷ This story gives an account of Upagupta's conversion of Māra that closely parallels that of the *Divyāvadāna*.³⁸

Section 67 of the *Damamūkanidāna sūtra*, an anthology of tales better known by its Chinese title (*Hsien yü ching*) or its Tibetan one (*hDsangs blun*), and even more commonly referred to as the "Sūtra of the Wise Man and the Fool."³⁹ It was compiled by the Chinese monk Hui-chio and his seven companions on the basis of sermons they heard preached in Khotan in 445 C.E.⁴⁰

The memoirs of the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Hsüan-tsang, who visited India in the late seventh century. He not only recounts in part the legend of Upagupta as he knew it, but also describes sites he visited in Northern India that were associated with him.⁴¹

The "Upaguptāvadāna," chapter 72 of the *Avadānakalpalatā*, a late collection of

Buddhist legends rewritten and put into verse by the eleventh-century Kashmiri poet Kṣemendra.⁴²

The Tibetan histories of Buddhism in India, including most prominently Tāranātha's sixteenth-century *Chos ḥbyung*, which presents the story of Upagupta in its account of the transmission of the Dharma after the death of the Buddha.⁴³

A number of late Sanskrit collections of avadānas known as the avadānamālās ("garlands of avadānas"). They present Upagupta as the narrator of the stories, which he tells to King Aśoka and which occasionally add a few details about Upagupta.⁴⁴

A miscellany of other sources preserved mostly in the Chinese Tripiṭaka and containing either variants of basic Upagupta legends or small stories about him not found in other sources.⁴⁵

This list of sources does not pretend to be complete, but it does contain most of the texts to which we shall be referring.

THE MATHURAN AND AŚOKAN CYCLES OF UPAGUPTA LEGENDS

Even the most cursory examination of these sources will reveal in them two distinct cycles of stories in which Upagupta appears. In the first cycle, he figures as the hero of his own avadāna. In its fullest form, this avadāna recounts the prediction made about him by the Buddha (which we shall analyze in chapter 1), his past life as a monkey on Mount Urumuṇḍa near Mathurā (see chapter 2), his subsequent birth as the son of a perfume merchant in that city (chapter 3), his encounter with the courtesan Vāsavadattā, his ordination by the elder Śāṅakavāsin, and his fame as a teacher residing at the Naṭabhaṭṭika monastery (chapter 4). Then it features his victory over Māra (the Buddhist embodiment of evil), an achievement much emphasized in the subsequent tradition (chapter 5), before ending with his death and cremation and with stories of his disciples (chapter 6).

All of these events are presented as taking place in and around the city of Mathurā and so may be said to constitute the Mathuran cycle of stories about the saint. It is because of these stories that it is often thought that Upagupta himself must have been a famous monk of Mathurā, the abbot of the local Buddhist community renowned for his teaching abilities.

The second cycle of stories about Upagupta in these texts is one which associates him with King Aśoka. In these tales (see chapter 7), Upagupta often appears as a sort of spiritual advisor and companion to the great Mauryan monarch. We are told of their meeting in the capital city of Pāṭaliputra and of their joint pilgrimage to all the holy sites of Buddhism in North India.

Jean Przyluski has argued that these stories should also be thought of as part of a Mathuran cycle—that they were made up by Mathuran monks who, eager to enhance the prestige of their hometown abbot, invented the tale of his meet-

ing with the great Mauryan monarch and interpolated it somewhat clumsily into an existing Aśoka legend.⁴⁶ Przyłuski's argument is an ingenious one, and it has been widely accepted. Nevertheless, the stories connecting Upagupta with Aśoka are distinct from those associating him with Mathurā, a fact that cannot readily be dismissed. For example, in the last chapter of the *Avadānaśataka* (which Przyłuski, in his *Légende de l'empereur Açoka*, conveniently ignores), Upagupta is already associated with the Mauryan king, but no mention is made at all of his connections with Mathurā or with Mount Urumuṇḍa. Instead, he is portrayed as residing at the Kukkuṭārāma monastery in Pāṭaliputra, where Aśoka goes to question him.⁴⁷ Conversely, in other sources, such as the *Damamūkanidāna sūtra*, Mathurā is very much featured, but no mention at all is made of King Aśoka.⁴⁸

The two cycles of legends, therefore, often appear to have existed independently, side by side, and though various attempts may have been made to join them,⁴⁹ each seems to have undergone a separate evolution on its own. Thus, from the Mathuran tradition about Upagupta's cremation at the Naṭabhaṭika hermitage, there arose a whole series of stories about Upagupta's disciples that have nothing to do with Aśoka.⁵⁰ Similarly devoid of reference to the Mauryan king was the Mathuran presentation of Upagupta as the fourth (or fifth, depending on the source) Master of the Dharma (dharmācārya)⁵¹ in the Buddhist Sanskrit theory of patriarchal succession. According to this tradition, which is quite different from that of the Pali canon, the Buddha, at the time of his death, committed the Dharma to the keeping of the elder Mahākāśyapa, who, in turn, passed it on to Ānanda; Ānanda then transmitted it both to Śāṅkavāsin and to Madhyāntika, the latter going off to convert Kashmir and the former becoming, in Mathurā, the preceptor of Upagupta.⁵²

The Aśokan cycle of Upagupta stories, on the other hand, also gave rise to a number of distinct traditions, including the already-mentioned pattern of his dialogues with the king featured in many late collections of avadānamālās. In these there is no mention of Mathurā. In addition, it was in its descriptions of his relationship with Aśoka that Upagupta's legend was to overlap most significantly with the stories of other great arhats who were reputed to have been associated with the Mauryan monarch. Thus, it is insofar as he encounters Aśoka that Upagupta has been confused with Yaśas, the abbot of the Kukkuṭārāma; with Piṇḍola, a disciple of the Buddha; with Indagutta, another enlightened arhat; and most especially with Moggaliputta Tissa, the president of the Third Buddhist Council in the Pali Theravāda tradition.⁵³

SOUTHEAST ASIA : TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

If the Indian materials about Upagupta are varied and bristling with difficulties, the Southeast Asian sources are no less so. It is not altogether clear when and how the Upagupta tradition was first transmitted to Southeast Asia, but the

first two Burmese references to him can safely be dated to the early and mid-twelfth century.

The oldest of these is an inscription found in the Kubyauk-gyi, a temple built around 1113 C.E. at Myinkaba in the ancient Burmese capital of Pagan. The builder of the temple was Rājakumār, son of Kyanzittha, the great king of Pagan, and famed for his unselfish relinquishment of his claim to the throne in an act of filial respect. Gordon Luce has argued that Rājakumār was not only a loyal son to his father, but a remarkable Buddhist scholar as well. Luce claims that the frescoes that covered the walls of his temple at Myinkaba and their accompanying inscriptions testify to the breadth of his familiarity with Buddhist scriptures.⁵⁴

Be this as it may, one of these inscriptions is of particular interest to us here. It states simply: “Tisapagut [Tissa-Upagupta] and King Dhammāsok [Aśoka] discuss the broadcasting of the Religion.”⁵⁵ We will deal later with the apparent confusion here between Moggaliputta Tissa and Upagupta; suffice it to observe now that, at this point in Burmese history, at least one tradition about Upagupta—that of his association with King Aśoka—must have been known.

The other early reference to Upagupta is a bit different in nature. It is found in the *Saddanīti*, a Pali grammar written in Pagan by the monk Aggavaṃsa in 1154 C.E. As one of the paradigms for the use of the instrumental case, Aggavaṃsa gives the following sentence: “Upaguttēna badho Māro” (by Upagutta Māra was bound).⁵⁶ This example was not original with him; it appears already in the oldest extant Pali grammar—that of Kaccāyana (fifth and sixth centuries C.E.)⁵⁷—but its inclusion in the *Saddanīti* is significant, for it shows that the tale of Upagupta and Māra, which is part of the Mathuran cycle, must also have been known in twelfth-century Burma. Moreover, it was known in a noteworthy context, for the *Saddanīti* subsequently became one of the most popular of Pali grammars, and one can easily imagine generations of young monks memorizing the Pali paradigm “Upaguttēna badho Māro” even if they knew nothing else about the Mathuran saint. Thus, it appears that in Burma, from the time of our earliest datable sources of information (1113 and 1154), both the Aśokan and the Mathuran cycles of stories about Upagupta were known, at least to some extent.

It comes as no surprise, then, to find both of these cycles in the *Lokapaññatti*, a text that was composed or compiled in Burma around the eleventh or twelfth century and that constitutes our most important Southeast Asian source on the legend of Upagupta (see chapter 9).⁵⁸ The *Lokapaññatti*, as a whole, is a treatise on cosmology and is usually attributed to one Saddhamaghosa of Thaton in Lower Burma. It is written in Pali but may well have been a reworking of a Sanskrit original, the *Lokaprajñapti*—a version of which is extant in the Chinese Tripiṭaka and bears remarkable affinities to the *Lokapaññatti*, except that it does *not* include the story of Upagupta.⁵⁹ Presum-

ably this story was added to the text by Saddhammaghosa on the strength of other Sanskrit traditions.

For all its parallels with the legend of Upagupta as it is found in extant Indian sources, the *Lokapaññatti* version does present a number of interesting divergences. First, the two traditions about Upagupta which we have detected in the Indian sources—the Mathuran and Aśokan cycles—are thoroughly fused for the first time in the *Lokapaññatti*. In the *Dīvyāvadāna*, the story of Upagupta subduing Māra makes no reference at all to King Aśoka; it belongs exclusively to the Mathuran cycle. In the *Lokapaññatti*, however, the two Indian cycles have been brought together in such a way that they are no longer readily separable: Upagupta subdues Māra at Aśoka's request when the latter is worried that Māra will interfere with his celebration of a festival in honor of the Buddha's relics at Pāṭaliputra.⁶⁰

Second, some new information about Upagupta also appears in the *Lokapaññatti*. Most importantly, he is now said not to have died, but to be dwelling in a brazen palace at the bottom of the ocean. From there he can come to the aid of those devotees who worship him. Here, then, we have an instance of a new kind of tradition developing, syncretistically, in a new situation. In this guise, moreover, Upagutta is also called Kisanāga Upagutta.⁶¹ This, understandably, has led scholars to associate him with the worship of nāgas, or snake spirits, in Southeast Asia, a topic which we shall examine in due time.

Although the *Lokapaññatti* is a key text for the study of the development of the cult of Upagupta, its overall importance in Southeast Asia should not be exaggerated. As a cosmological treatise, it is rather awkwardly organized, and it was soon eclipsed, at least in Thailand, by the better-known *Traibhūmikathā*.⁶² But its version of the Upagutta tale (not found in the *Traibhūmikathā*) remained the fountainhead for all subsequent Southeast Asian Upagupta traditions. For example, one of the most popular of the Burmese chronicles, the *Mahāyāzawin-gyi* (the Great Chronicle of the Kings of Burma), compiled by U Kala in 1714, reproduces the whole of the *Lokapaññatti*'s Upagutta story, though it organizes it differently.⁶³ Likewise, the *Hman-Nan-Yazawindawgyi* (the Glass Palace Chronicle),⁶⁴ written in 1829, repeats the tale, although, as we shall see, the committee of scholars that compiled this text saw fit to point out that there was no Pali canonical basis to the story and that the *Lokapaññatti*, as a work, had never been sanctioned by any Buddhist Council.⁶⁵

Despite such official denigration, Upagupta continued to be popular in Southeast Asia, and his story continued to be told. In Burma, it was included in the mid-nineteenth century in the *Maha-win wutthu*, U Kin's retelling of the *Mahāvamsa*,⁶⁶ even though Upagupta does not appear at all in the Sri Lankan original of that work. It was also incorporated into the *Jinathapakāsani*, a popular version of the life of the Buddha and history of the early Sangha;⁶⁷ and

books more or less repeating the Upagupta legend have continued to appear right up to the present time.⁶⁸ In Thailand, his story was included in one of the last chapters of the *Phra Paṭhamasambodhikathā*, a widely read life of the Buddha of which there are both Thai and Pali versions.⁶⁹ In addition, it has been preserved separately in a number of Northern Thai manuscripts.⁷⁰

The Southeast Asian traditions about Upagupta, however, were not preserved solely or even primarily in written texts, but were kept alive in the practices and beliefs of Buddhist believers (see chapter 10). Today—in Burma, in Northern and Northeastern Thailand, and in Laos—Shin Upago (Burmese) or Phra Uppakhut (Thai, Laotian) is still thought to be alive and living in the ocean, or, alternatively, at the bottom of a nearby river or swamp. In this way, he fits into the cult of those arhats who, somewhat like bodhisattvas, are thought to delay their attainment of parinirvāṇa for the good of the religion until the time of the future Buddha Maitreya (see chapter 11). Just as Aśoka long ago invited Upagupta to come to stop Māra from interfering with his festival in honor of the Buddha's relics, so villagers today invite him to come to their celebrations from a nearby river or swamp to make sure that modern-day Māras do not spoil the festivities by making it rain or by causing drunks to be boisterous or thieves to be active (see chapter 12).

But the Southeast Asian ritual traditions about Upagupta are even more diverse than this. In Burma, where statues of Shin Upago are quite common, he is often depicted as sitting on a raft, floating in the middle of a tank of water (see fig. 1). He has one hand in a begging bowl on his lap, and his head is tilted upwards towards the sky. Two interpretations of this curious posture are commonly given. Some claim that Upagupta is a very strict monk and does not want to violate the Buddhist monastic rules by eating after noon; hence he is looking up to see if the sun has passed the zenith. Others maintain that it is actually already afternoon and that Upagupta is looking skywards because he is using his magical powers to stay the sun in its course so that he can keep on eating.

Whatever the interpretation, such images can be purchased today in almost any pagoda shop, at least in Rangoon, and many people have one at home on their family altar, alongside but subordinate to a statue of the Buddha. Larger images may also be found in special Shin Upago shrines, where people come to make offerings to him. Worship of him is thought to bring to the devotee good luck, protection, and prosperity in this life.

From time to time, especially in Lower Burma, someone decides to float a Shin Upago image on a river down to the ocean. This is meant symbolically to return the saint to his home. It is an occasion for special festivities, at the end of which the statue is installed on a specially constructed raft and towed out to midriver, where it is released. Often, villagers downstream, upon seeing a Shin Upago raft, will intercept it and take it back to their own village, where a whole new cycle of ceremonies in honor of the saint will commence. Then they, too, will put him in the water and send him on his way.



Fig. 1. Upagupta Image from Sagaing, Burma

In Thailand and Laos, on the other hand, statues or other anthropomorphic representations of Upagupta are much less common. There is, to be sure, a large image of him at Wat Uppakhut in downtown Chiang Mai, but this is an iconographic anomaly and totally unlike anything found in Burma. More commonly, the saint is represented in the form of a stone or stones taken from a river bottom or swamp bed (see chapter 12). It is also possible to find in amulet shops small metallic representations of seashells or other marine creatures out of which peers a crudely molded face or in which sits a small figure holding a lotus. These, too, are said to be Phra Uppakhut, and it is thought that, if the shell is immersed in water, it will bring good fortune to the home (see chapter 13).

The obvious connection of Upagupta with water in many of these examples and the Southeast Asian belief that he resides at the bottom of the ocean have spawned a number of popular stories about his origin. In some areas, he is said to be the son of Macchadevi, the foul-smelling fish princess who was born in the stomach of a great fish and later impregnated by a Brahmanical ascetic. Elsewhere, he is known as the offspring of a fish or a nāgī—a female snake divinity—who happened to swallow the Buddha's semen when he ejaculated into a stream!⁷¹

In light of all this, it is not surprising that a number of scholars have concluded that Upagupta, at least in Southeast Asia, should primarily be understood as a spirit connected with water, rain, and fertility. Jean Przyluski, for example, has argued that Shin Upago in Burma was an indigenous demigod, a “king of the waters” of the delta region who was both a nāga and a sort of divinity.⁷² As such, Przyluski asserts, he had little real connection with the Upagupta of the Indian legends. Instead, he was a product of the “maritime civilization of the Southeast,” a matriarchal “Austroasiatic” culture which, in its myths and rituals, located the source of all magico-religious power in water.⁷³ Only with the advent of Buddhism to Burma was this indigenous divinity identified with the Indian Buddhist patriarch Upagupta and absorbed into the new religion, “just as in Europe saints were often local heroes predating Christianity but then adopted by the Church.”⁷⁴

As we shall see, there are some real difficulties with Przyluski's view. More recent interpretations may be found, however, in the works of Stanley Tambiah and of Richard Davis, who both address the question of Upagupta's identity primarily on the basis of the ethnographic data they collected in the field. For Davis, working in Nan province in Northern Thailand, Upagupta is “a complex and paradoxical figure . . . a ‘multivocal’ or ‘polysemous’ symbol, standing for several referents and eliciting a variety of associations depending upon the context.”⁷⁵ More specifically, he represents a “conjunction of asceticism and piety with virility, sexuality, and natural fecundity.”⁷⁶

For Tambiah, working in a northeastern Thai village not too far from the Laotian frontier, Upagupta is also a paradoxical figure, but Tambiah tends

more to resolve the various structural oppositions with which he is concerned. Thus, he interprets the story of Upagupta's birth from the union of the Buddha's sperm and the *nāgī* as reflecting an opposition between nature (the water-dwelling mother) and spiritually endowed humanity (the enlightened father)—an opposition which is bridged by Upagupta, who is somewhat of a hybrid creature.⁷⁷ He is a Buddhist monk (that is, a son of the Buddha) and, as such, has subdued his lower nature; but the villagers still identify him with the *nāgas*, and so with water and rain. The rite of inviting him (“ritually compelling him”) to come from the swamp (or river) to protect a Buddhist festival from the incursions of *Māra* thus represents the taming and conversion of a water spirit to Buddhism. In Tambiah's words, the rite is “an attempt to bring nature under man's metaphysical control,” even though “its comprehensiveness must remain partial for man's control over nature is always incomplete.”⁷⁸

At the same time, according to Tambiah, this ritual reflects another structural opposition: between society (“human beings in their solidarity”) and chaos (“the forces of passion, death and malevolence” represented by *Māra*). Upagupta resolves this polarity, at least for the duration of the festival, by allying himself with the humans in order to protect them from the Evil One.⁷⁹ Finally, in the story of Upagupta's encounter with King Aśoka's elephant (which we shall consider in chapter 9), Tambiah finds a third opposition between spiritual power (Upagupta) and royal power (the elephant) that is resolved in favor of the former when Upagupta easily stops the elephant's charge.⁸⁰

Tambiah's insights here are quite seminal, and we shall try to do greater justice to them later on. Unfortunately, his own ethnographic data did not enable him to explore these structural oppositions fully. He therefore ends his discussion with a limited conclusion that Upagupta is, in the final analysis, a rain spirit which a Buddhist society invites and tries to control in order to ensure the plenitude of the monsoon.⁸¹

For the village studied by Tambiah, this conclusion may well have been true. There, the invitation of Upagupta occurred only in conjunction with the celebration of *Bun Phra Wes*, the festival of the recitation of the *Vessantara Jātaka*, which, in that region, takes place just prior to the advent of the rainy season. It would appear, therefore, that this invitation is timed to help bring on the monsoon. However, when data from a broader region is considered, it is clear that Upagupta can be and is invited at almost any time of the year, and for a host of different celebrations: New Year's, entering the rains retreat, ending the rains retreat, rocket festivals, the festival of lights, dedications of new monasteries or monastic buildings or Buddha images, ordinations of new monks, or, in Burma, boys' initiation ceremonies. As one senior monk in Chiang Mai put it, Upagupta is not necessarily connected with the *Vessantara* tradition; he can be invited anytime for any festival at all.⁸²

Moreover, when laypersons and monks, either in Burma or in Thailand, are asked why Upagupta should be invited to these rituals, usually one of the first answers they give is that he will make sure it does *not* rain, showers being one of the ways in which Māra is thought to spoil a celebration. This seems especially true in Burma, where the mere presence of Upagupta is thought to halt rainfall even in the midst of the monsoon season. As one informant in Rangoon told me, whenever she forgets her umbrella on a cloudy day, she says a little prayer to Upagupta, asking him to see to it that it does not rain on her.⁸³

Upagupta, however, is more than just a saint who will protect Buddhist festivals from mishap and who can be called upon to bring good weather for the duration of a celebration. In both Northern Thailand and in Burma, he is also thought to be able to manifest himself in person, suddenly and quite mysteriously appearing in the form of a rather ugly and strange-looking monk on his begging round. In Northern Thailand, he is particularly said to come in this way very early in the morning (at 1:00, 2:00, or 3:00 A.M.) on those few days each year when the full moon falls on a Wednesday.⁸⁴ On such days, laypersons should get up before daybreak and offer food to any monks who have gone out on their begging rounds extra early for the occasion. Those who are lucky may actually encounter Upagupta at such times; this is a stroke of good fortune, since food offerings made to him in person are thought to be especially meritorious and to result in great wealth, not just in future rebirths, but in this very lifetime. In fact, stories abound of individuals who struck it rich after encountering Upagupta.⁸⁵

These few remarks will suffice to indicate that the traditions about Upagupta, in Southeast Asia as well as in India, are much more diverse and complex than has generally been realized. It should be pointed out, however, that this book is more than a book about the fame and fortune of a single Buddhist saint, for our investigation of these traditions—our discussion of Upagupta's legend and cult—will lead us to reexamine some fundamental aspects of Buddhism itself in both its Indian and Southeast Asian contexts. Indeed, as we trace Upagupta's hagiography and the rituals attached to it, we shall branch out to explore the legends and practices with which these intersect. In so doing, chapter by chapter, we will be able to reinvestigate a number of basic issues: the liminal situation Buddhists find themselves in in the post-parinirvāṇa period, being contemporaries neither of the now-past Buddha Gautama nor of the still-future Buddha Maitreya (chapters 1 and 2); the role of the lineage of the Masters of the Law (the Sanskrit Buddhist patriarchate) (chapter 3); the nature of the Buddhist Path to arhatship and the places in it of asceticism and ordination (chapter 4); the dynamic structure of image worship and the nature of Buddhist devotionism (chapter 5); the didactic techniques of Buddhist teachers and the variety of modes of master-disciple relationship (chapter 6); the role of kings and charismatic saints in Sangha-state interactions (chapter 7); the relationship of orthodox and heterodox Buddhist prac-

tices within a Theravāda context (chapter 8); the multiple meanings of the word *nāga* (chapter 9); the development of the Buddhist cult of arhats as protectors of the Dharma (chapters 10 and 11); and, finally, the roles of Buddhist saints as facilitators of festivals (chapter 12) and providers of moral and material benefits (chapter 13).

In addressing these questions, our perspective will generally be governed by the popularly oriented Sanskrit sources that we shall be interpreting. In some cases, these will allow us to shed new light on old problems in the study of Buddhism, problems which, for the most part, have been viewed either through the lens of the Pali canon or within the retrospective systems of Mahāyānist philosophers. Hopefully, the largely Sarvāstivādin stories which we shall introduce and analyze in the chapters that follow will help illuminate not only the overall Indian Buddhist milieu in which the traditions about Upagupta originated, but also the contemporary practices of Theravādins in which these traditions have been preserved.

PART ONE

Upagupta in India

