Avalokiteśvara in Pala Art: An Iconographic study with special reference to Sādhanamālā

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Abstract
This paper attempts to trace the evolution of Avalokiteśvara from being an attendant deity to becoming one of the prominent deities of the Buddhist pantheon through the development of its imagery and its representation in various Buddhist textual sources. This paper particularly focuses on the iconographic and stylistic depiction of Avalokiteśvara images of the Pala period. During this period, the imagery of Avalokiteśvara became highly evolved and complex with the efflorescence of Vajrayāna Buddhism. Examples of its many forms have been highlighted to signify its various manifestations and its popularity as a Buddhist deity within the region of India as well as abroad in regions such as China, Nepal, Tibet and others.

Keywords: Buddha, Bodhisattva, Padmapani, Avalokitesvara, Sadaksari Lokesvara, Simhanada, Khasarpana, Lokanath, Dhyani Buddha, Amitābha, Sadhanamala, Mahāvastu, Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra

The present paper aims to discuss the iconographic representations of Avalokitesvara during the Pala period by correlating them to a Buddhist text, the Sādhanamālā, a significant text on Vajrayana Buddhism. The text is a collection of short works called sadhanas which are the injunctions on rituals to be performed for worshipping the deity (Sādhanamālā, vol.1, 1925, pp. vi-vii). “Thirty seven Sadhanas (6-43) are devoted to his various manifestations, namely, Sadaksari Lokesvara, Lokanatha, Halalaha, Vajradharma, Khasarpana, Simhanada, Padmanarttesvara, Harihararihavanoddbhava, Trailokyavasankara, Nilakanta, Mayajalakrama-Lokesvara Sugatisandarsana and Pretasantarpita” (Sādhanamālā, vol.1, 1925, p. vii). Of many forms of Avalokitesvara, a few popular forms of the deity are considered here as case studies. Some early Buddhist texts and artworks have also been discussed to trace the evolution of Avalokitesvara from an attendant figure to one of the most revered deities in the later Buddhist pantheon.

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In literature, the germination of the concept of Avalokitesvara can be seen in the Avalokita Sūtra, a supplement of an early Buddhist text, the Mahāvastu, in which a bodhisattva takes a resolution to emancipate all of mankind after his bowl is accepted by Gautama Buddha who declares that he would be the saviour of the world and the future Buddha (The Mahavastu, 1976, p. 353). Though the text does not name this bodhisattva, he can be identified as the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. “Avalokitesvara is famous in the Mahayana Pantheon as a Bodhisattva emanating from the Dhyani Buddha, Amitabha and his Sakti, Pandara. As Amitabha and Pandara are the presiding Dhyāni Buddha and Buddhasakti of the present Kalpa (cycle), namely, the Bhadrakalpa, Avalokitesvara is said to be the Bodhisattva who rules during the period between the disappearance of the Mortal Buddha, Sakyasimha, and the advent of the Future Buddha, Maitreya” (Bhattacharya, 1958, p. 124). He is considered the embodiment of compassion and mercy. He decided to postpone his own Buddhahood in order to help every sentient being on their path of salvation. His worship became widespread across the Buddhist world and images of his different forms are found in abundance. Initially depicted as an attendant deity, the bodhisattva later acquired the position of the most important deity in the Buddhist Pantheon. The Kāraṇḍavyūha sutra records “Avalokitesvara’s transformation into the principal figure of the Buddhist pantheon, greater than all other buddhas, let alone bodhisattvas. In this sutra, Avalokitesvara is a resident of Sukhavatī and acts as a messenger and gift bearer for Amitabha, even though he is also described as superior to all buddhas and therefore paradoxically has both a subservient and dominant status” (Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra, 2013, vii).

His role as the omnipotent savior who protects the devotee from all perils was well established by the 5th century CE and is attested by many sculptures in the caves of Ajanta, Ellora, Aurangabad and Kanheri as well as at other places. Some of these sculptures are discussed in great detail by Susan Huntington in her seminal work titled The Art of Ancient India.

The imagery of Avalokitesvara became highly evolved and complex with the popularity of Vajrayāna (Tantric Buddhism) during the Pala period. Vajrayāna Buddhism appealed to the common people as it propounded that emancipation can be obtained in a short time without undergoing the severe austerities and bodily sufferings mandated by the Hinayana and Mahayana forms of Buddhism. (Guhyasamaja Tantra, 1931, p. xi)

Different forms of Avalokitesvara came into being such as Sadaksari Lokesvara, Simhanada, Khasarpaṇa, Lokanath etc. Various manifestations of Avalokitesvara became popular in other countries too. For example, in China during the Tang dynasty (late 6th century CE to early 10th century CE), Avalokitesvara was represented as Water-moon Kuan Yin, Guiding Kuan-Yin, eleven-faced Kuan-yin, thousand-armed Kuan-yin etc. From Nepal, we have representations of 108 forms of Avalokitesvara. The ability of Avalokitesvara to transform in numerous forms to extinguish all the suffering of the sentient being is recorded in chapter XXV of the Lotus Sutra, the translation of the Saddharma Pundarika. In this chapter, Buddha speaks of how the bodhisattva appears to all according to their needs and can take forms of Buddha, pratyekabuddha, Brahma, Sakra, Isvāra, Mahēśvara, devas, male, female, elder, youth, wife, citizen, official etc. to save them from all kinds of serious and immediate dangers (The Lotus Sutra, 2007, pp. 295-302). From his discourse, one may infer that Buddha was probably hinting that any person who extends help in the hour of need assumes the form of Avalokitesvara for the needy. In this context, the divinity lies within and not without. This concept was further elaborated in sādhanas (meditative practices) in the
Sādhanamālā in which the devotee is asked to perceive himself as Avalokiteśvara with all his paraphernalia while worshipping the deity.

Claudine Bautze-Picron points out that “since his compassion extends to all beings, his nature is universal: he becomes a "god" who encompasses the entire universe, and a "god" who creates” (Bautze-Picron, 2004, p. 225). In the Kāraṇḍavyuha Sūtra, dated to c. 5th century CE, one notices the transformation of Avalokiteśvara from an attendant deity to the principal deity in the Buddhist Pantheon. In this text, he supersedes all the Buddhas, including Sākyamuni, in merit and wisdom. The text asserts that from the pores of his body emanated everything that exists in the entire universe. In this context, Avalokiteśvara possesses qualities of Vishvarupa Viṣṇu although his iconography is derived from the iconography of Siva. The text further emphasises the significance of Avalokiteśvara by asserting the emergence of Viṣṇu and Siva, the most powerful deities in Hinduism, from Avalokiteśvara.

If one traces the development of the imagery of Avalokiteśvara, initially, during the Kushana period, the two-armed Avalokiteśvara can be seen in regal attire holding a lotus flower as Padmapāṇi, an attendant to Buddha. From the 5th century CE onwards, one notices representations of Padmapāṇi as an independent deity. The best example is from Ajanta cave-1 where the bodhisattva is shown emanating grace and compassion. From the Pala period, we see his representation as Avalokiteśvara Padmapāṇi, with the image of Amitābha in his jātāmukūta.
(matted locks) being the most distinctive feature. A standing image of Avalokitesvara Padmapani is in the collection of the British Museum (Figure 1). His right hand is in varada mudrā (boon-bestowing gesture) and with his left hand he holds the stalk of a lotus flower. He wears the effigy of Dhyani Buddha Amitābha in his jatāmukuta (matted locks). His short-pleated dhoti (lower garment) is fastened by a belt. He stands on a lotus pedestal. The body of the bodhisattva is framed by pillars supporting a lintel, above which springs an oval halo beautifully surrounding his face. The central plain section of the halo has an inscription. A double border of pearl garland and lotus petals enhances the aesthetics of an otherwise plain halo. Avalokitesvara is framed by goddesses Tara and Bhṛkūṭī.

A fine representation of two-armed Avalokitesvara Padmapani from the Pala period is from Vishnupur Gaya (Figure 2). In this sculpture, he is shown holding a lotus stalk in his left hand, and his right hand is in abhaya mudrā (protective gesture). He sits with royal ease on his cushion seat. His face is almost square. He has a pointed nose and clearly outlined lips. In the typical 10th-century Pala idiom, he is provided with half-closed eyes with heavy eyelids drooping in the middle. His bow-shaped eyebrows join the bridge of his nose. His torso is in the gomukha (cow face) shape. His shoulders are broad. He has a tall jatāmukuta (matted locks) that bears an effigy of Amitabhā identified by the dhyāna mudrā (meditative gesture). The Bodhisattva is heavily bejewelled.

Figure 3: Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, 5th Century CE, Stone, Sarnath, Accession No 49-113, National Museum, Delhi. Image courtesy: Museums of India

Figure 4: Lokanath, 7th century A.D., Nalanda, Accession No 6, Nalanda Museum, Bihar. (Photo by author)
In visual art, the representations of Avalokitesvara as Lokanath are known from the Gupta period and in Buddhist literature, detailed iconographic prescription is available in Sādhanamālā (Bhattacharya, 1958, p. 130). The best example is from Sarnath, where Avalokitesvara is shown as an ascetic with Dhyani Buddha Amitābha in his ākṣobhyā (matted locks) instead of Amitābha, who is shown above the ākṣamaṇa (cranial protrusion) in dhīnā mudrā (meditative gesture). On either side of his ākṣamaṇa (cranial protrusion) are images of Akṣobhya in bhūmisparsā mudrā (earth touching gesture). The bodhisattva’s right hand is in varada mudrā (boon-giving gesture), while in his upraised left hand, he holds a full-blown lotus stalk. He is flanked by Tārā with a lotus on his right and Bhṛkuṭī with a rosary on his left. These two deities are from the pantheon of Khasarpana Avalokitesvara. According to Sādhanamālā, Lokanath should be flanked by Tārā and Hayagrīva and not Bhṛkuṭī as is the case with this image. However, there are several images where Lokanath is shown accompanied by Tārā and Bhṛkuṭī. This suggests that the canonical injunctions were adapted to cater to the needs of the patrons.

Of the four sādhanaś dedicated to Lokanath, three sādhanas describe him as a solitary figure without accompanying deities. Both seated and standing sculptures of this form of Lokanath were common. When seated, he may be represented in lalita (one leg bent and one leg pendant),)paryarika (seated pose with legs locked over seat) or vajraparyarika (cross-legged pose with feet crossed at the ankles and resting on the thigh of the opposite leg with soles facing upward, also called padmāsana) attitude.

The striking similarities between the two seated metal sculptures of Lokanath from the National Museum (Figure 5) and Bihar Museum (Figure 6) suggest a date of 12th century CE for both sculptures. Although the National Museum sculpture dates back to the 8th century CE, it may be from the same time period as that of the Kurkihar sculpture due to the stylized treatment of form. In both sculptures, Lokanath is shown seated in lalitāsana with the right leg pendant and resting on a lotus. In the first case, the lotus is attached to the pedestal, but in the latter, the footrest issues from under the lotus pedestal. In both sculptures, the upper body is inclined towards the left, but the head is slightly tilted to the right. In their left hands, the deities hold lotus stalks that rise above their shoulder levels and, thus, balance the flowers beside their heads. The stretched-out, fleshy and round right hand, in both images, rests on the knee. A cup-shaped face, broad forehead, rounded chin, narrow slit-like eyes set horizontally with the bridge of the nose and slanting towards the temples, tight lips rising upwards in a mannered smile, and third eye are the common denominators of both the sculptures. The body is tall and well-built, with broad shoulders and a narrow waist. The ornamentation and jewellery of the Bihar Museum sculpture is
profuse and intricate compared to that of the National Museum image. In the Bihar Museum image, one can also see the delineation of the sash with spots to represent a deer skin. Originally, the sculpture had an inlay of precious stones. The \textit{jaṭāmukūta} (matted locks) of this image is schematically arranged and refined compared to the other image where the hair is shown loosely interlocked to form the \textit{jaṭāmukūta} (matted locks). The lower garment is rendered with sharp and precise lines.

![Figure 5: Avalokiteshvara, Bronze, 8th Century CE, Pala, Accession No. 74-80, National Museum, Delhi. Image courtesy: Museums of India.](image1)

![Figure 6: Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, Gilt-bronze, 12th century, Pala dynasty, Kurkihar, Bihar, Bihar Museum. Image courtesy: Ellen Kaufman.](image2)

In the standing sculpture (Figure 7) dated to the 11th century CE from Kurkihar in the collection of the Bihar Museum, Lokanath is shown framed by an elliptical \textit{prabhamandala} (halo) bordered by conventional flame designs and a crowning \textit{chhatra} (umbrella). The Bodhisattva stands on a lotus pedestal. The tall and slender figure is graceful with fine proportions. The face has a youthful appearance. He holds the stalk of a lotus with his left hand and his right hand is in \textit{varada mudrā}. On the pedestal is carved a seated figure of a devotee in \textit{aṅjali mudrā} (folded hands).
Yet another very significant form of Avalokiteśvara is Shaḍaksharī Lokesvara that finds frequent manifestation in visual art during the Pala period and became popular in other countries as well. He is the presiding deity of the most sacred mantra in Tibetan Buddhism: *Om Mani Padme Hum*, which consists of six syllables. The mantra is given in *Kāraṇḍavyūha*. According to this text the mantra was known only to Avalokiteśvara (*Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra*, 2013, xx). The Buddhas of the past also failed to find this great *mantra* and it was only after Amitābha asked Avalokiteśvara to give the *mahāvidyā* (great knowledge) to the Buddha Padmottama that he revealed it to Padmottama and also taught him, “how to make the *maṇḍala* (ritual diagram) of the *mahāvidyā* (great knowledge) so that he may in the future give the *mahāvidyā* to others (*Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra*, 2013, xx).”

He could be unaccompanied or in a group with companions Maṇidhārā and Shaḍaksharī. He is usually depicted with four hands. His main hands are in *aṅjali mudra* (folded hands) and in the other two he holds a rosary and lotus.

A fine image (Figure 8) is in the collection of the Bihar Museum in which Shaḍaksharī Lokesvara is shown seated in *vajraparyārākāsana* on a lotus pedestal. The main pair of hands of the four-armed deity was originally in *aṅjali mudrā* (folded hands). In his upper right hand, he probably held an *aṅsha sūtra* (rosary) and an *utpala* (blue lotus) in his upper left, as per the iconography. At present none of the attributes are there. He has a third eye and is adorned with
an elaborate crown in which the image of Dhyani Buddha no more exists. He wears an elaborate necklace, arm bands and other ornaments. He is flanked by Shaḍakshari Maṇidhārā and Shaḍakshari Mahāvidyā both of whom are four-armed and seated on lotus pedestals. Their main hands are in āṅjali mudrā (folded hands), and in their other hands, they hold Raksha sūtras (rosaries) and utpalas (blue lotuses). The three figures are backed by an elaborate stele carved intricately with floriated patterns, vyāla (mythical creature) motifs, flying celestials and carved pillars. The head of the deity is framed by a horseshoe-shaped halo, which is plain at the center and, thus, highlights the elegant face against the overtly ornate background. The upper part of the stele is occupied by the five Dhyani Buddhas. In the typical 12th century CE idiom, the sculpture shows firm, sharp and precise outlines and excessive ornamentation.

A distinct image of Shaḍakshari maṇḍala (Figure 9), now in the collection of the Sarnath museum, depicts Lokeśvara with companion deities almost on the same plane unlike the previous sculpture where Shaḍakshari Lokesvara’s importance is highlighted by projecting him forward from the stele. Here, Shaḍakshari Lokesvara is in the middle. On his right is Maṇidhārā and on his left is Shaḍakshari Mahāvidyā. All three deities sit on their separate lotus seats, interconnected through entwined lotus stalks. Under their lotus seats are shown four diminutive figures. These are the four guardians of the shaḍakshari maṇḍala. In this sculpture, the ascetic idiom dominates the representation. All the three figures have four hands. The main hands are in āṅjali mudrā (folded hands) and in the other two they hold rosaries and lotus flowers. They wear simple ornaments and their tall jatāmukūtas (matted locks) have schematically arranged locks of hair.

![Figure 9: Sadakshari Mandala, 11th-12th Century C.E., Sarnath Museum. (Photo by author)](image)

A single sculpture of Shaḍakshari Lokesvara (Figure 10), now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art from the Pala Period dated to the 12th century CE, is shown seated on a double lotus pedestal with a beaded rim in vajraparyankasana, highly bejeweled and
adhering to the iconography: अन्जळी मुद्रा (folded hands), rosary and lotus. Numerous images of this form of Avalokiteśvara are also known from Nepal and Tibet. Such an example can be seen in a sculpture (Figure 11) from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

The popularity of yet another form of Avalokiteśvara known as Khasarpaṇa is attested by many highly evolved images of the deity known from the Pala period. To this form are dedicated several साधनास in the साधनमाला. A typical feature of Khasarpaṇa Lokesvara is that in this form, Avalokiteśvara is accompanied by the four attendant figures of Tārā, Sudhanakumara, Bhrkuṭī and Hayagrīva. Two stylistically similar, seated sculptures are taken up to elaborate on this iconography: one from the collection of the Asia Society, New York (Figure 12) and the other from the National Museum, New Delhi (Figure 13).
In both the images, the deity is shown seated in *lalitāsana* on a double lotus pedestal. The youthful face with a gentle smile adheres to the iconography given in the *Śādhanamālā*, which states that “he is aged about twice eight years” (Bhattacharyya, 1958, p. 129). Like Lokanath, Khasarpāṇa is also shown with his right hand in *varada mudrā* and his left hand holding the stalk of a lotus flower. Both sculptures have *jatāmukutas* with the image of Amitabha and are decked with fine ornaments. The pantheon of Khasarpāṇa is more elaborately shown in the Asia Society image. He is flanked by the goddess Tārā on his right and Bhṛkuṭī on his left. Tārā holds the stem of a lotus flower with her left hand and her right hand is in *abhaya mudrā*. The four-armed Bhṛkuṭī has her main hands joined in *aṅjali mudrā*. She has a rosary in her raised left hand and a *kamanḍalu* (water pot) in her right hand. She wears a *jatāmukuta*. Both stand on lotus flowers with long stalks that connect to the stalk of the lotus pedestal of Khasarpāṇa Lokesvara. Below the pedestal, on the right side of his pendent leg are shown Sudhanakumar and Suchimukh while two devotees in *aṅjali mudrā* along with the potbellied Hayagrīva are seen on the left. Sudhanakumar is shown with his hands joined in *aṅjali mudrā* holding a manuscript in the crook of his left arm. Suchimukha can be identified by his needle-nose and upturned face in the gesture of receiving the nectar of
grace from the god of compassion. Each of them is provided with a lotus seat; the two devotees share a single seat. The pointed stele of the National Museum image is more elaborate than that of the Asia Society image. It is provided with images of five Dhyani Buddhas compared to the four in the latter. Highly evolved standing images of Khasarpaṇa Lokesvara with four companion deities were also very popular.

Yet another popular form of Avalokitesvara is his four-armed form known as Jaṭāmukuta Lokesvara or Mahākaruna (Donaldson, 2001, pp. 193–199). It doesn’t find mention in Saddhanamālā but many images are known from throughout the Pala period. In a stone sculpture (Figure 14) from the National Museum collection, the four-armed bejeweled Avalokitesvara stands in samabhāṅga (standing erect) on a lotus pedestal against an oval stele with decorated border. His principal right hand is in varada mudrā, and with his left hand, he holds a kamaṇḍalu. The kamaṇḍalu is beautifully decorated with lotus petal designs and has a spout. He holds an akṣhamālā in his raised right hand and in the corresponding left-hand stalk of a full-blown lotus. His jaṭāmukuta has an effigy of Amitābha. The treatment of face and body appears somewhat hard and stiff. The ankle-length dhoti with a central pleat is fastened by a girdle and is patterned with parabolic lines in relief. He is flanked by Tārā and Bhṛkuṭī. Two-armed Tārā is shown standing in tribhrāṅga (standing posture with three bends in the body) with her right hand in abhaya and left holding stalk of the lotus flower that in turn supports the hand of Jaṭāmukuta Lokesvara. Bhṛkuṭī is also standing in tribhanga and is four-armed. She carries staff and kamaṇḍalu in her two left hands. Her right lower hand is in varada mudrā and in her upper right hand she possibly holds a lotus. In her right and left hand, she carries a rosary and water pot respectively. The lower
garments of Tārā and Bhṛkuṭī are similar to that of Lokesvāra. The attendant deities are consistent with Khasarpaṇa Lokesvara images.

In his form of Simhanada Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva is believed to be the curer of all diseases (Bhattacharyya, 1958, p. 127). In a sculpture (Figure 15) from the Bihar Museum, Simhanada Avalokiteśvara is shown in maharajalīlasana (posture of royal ease) on a lotus seat mounted over a couchant lion. Beneath the vahana (mount) is also a lotus seat. He wears a tall jatamukuta with Amitābha in it. Four other Dhyani Buddhas are also depicted. He has a third eye on the forehead and wears a dear skin sash. His right hand, which was placed on his knee, is now broken. His left hand is firmly planted on the pedestal. As prescribed in the Sādhana Mālā, he is provided with a trisūla (trident) entwined by a snake in his right and a sword on a lotus in his left hand. Though the text prescribes no ornamentation for this form, here, the bodhisattva is shown with some ornaments, such as a bejewelled yajnopavīta (sacred thread) and an ornate girdle. This was yet another popular form and its representations are known in India, Nepal, Tibet and China.

With the insertion of Tantric elements in Buddhism, Avalokiteśvara began to be depicted in supernatural forms with multiple arms and heads; one such form is of Amoghapāśa. This form is elaborated in Amoghapāśakalparajā, Mahayanistic tantra literature containing twenty-six chapters. In this form, the bodhisattva protects all sentient beings with his rope of compassion. The sūtras (scriptures) relating to Amoghapāśa have been translated by several Chinese monks between the 6th and 7th centuries CE including Hsüan Tsang (Barua & Basilio, 2009, pp. 4–5). “Recitation of his mantras results in twenty blessings in this world and eight for those near death (Barua & Basilio, 2009, p. 5).”

![Figure 16: Lokeshvara, 9th Century CE, Grey Stone, Kurkihar, Gaya, Accession No. BM 2017.007.50, Bihar Museum. (Photo by author).](image-url)

A six-armed Amoghapāśa Lokesvara from Kurkihar, Bihar (9th century CE) is in the collection of the Bihar Museum (Figure 16). In this image, the deity is shown seated in lalitāsana
on a pedestal with lions and a double inverted lotus cushion placed over it. He has three eyes and wears a deer skin. In his upper right hand, he holds a rosary, the other two right hands display varada and abhaya mudrās. He holds a pasā (lasso), book and lotus in his three left hands. The pasā is the most distinguishing feature of this deity. His jatāmukuta is provided with the image of Amitābha. He is decked in ornaments, wears the sacred thread and has a crown of matted hair. The attendant deities are squeezed into the pedestal to adhere to iconographic injunctions.

Though Amoghapāśa is missing in the Sādhanamālā, many sculptural representations are available from the Pala period. Images of this form of the bodhisattva are also known from China, Tibet, Nepal, Japan, and countries in Southeast Asia, emphasizing the significance of the deity. This was because as pointed by Susan Huntington, “During this period, Buddhist monks and pilgrims from near and distant part of Asia, including China, Southeast Asia, Nepal, and Tibet, came to Bihar and Bengal to study Buddhism and ultimately to transmit to their homelands much of the religious, cultural, and artistic heritage of this region. Indeed, the art of the so-called Pala-Sena period is as notable for its influence abroad as it is for its role as a major art school in the Indic sphere” (Huntington, 1999, p. 387).

To sum up, the Pala period saw the emergence of many forms of Avalokitesvara with varied iconographies. The concepts which were in nascent stages during the Mahayana period evolved into complex iconographic programmes. The Sādhanamālā was a very important text of the period; other texts were also available to provide guidance in icon making. Despite constant warfare and the ever-expanding and shrinking boundaries of the Pala empire, artistic production continued unhampered, as did artistic exchanges with Far East and Southeast Asia countries.

Notes
i. "(396) May I set free beings who are in great misery. May I be an eye to the blind in all the world. Having won the light may I dispel the gloom and darkness. May I lead across the beings who have not crossed."

"May I in my emancipated state set free the unfree. Having attained the calm, the noble supreme enlightenment, may I fare without a tremor through the whole world. Having awakened to the knowledge may I release those in misery."

(397) “Aware of this vow, for what was in his heart was known to him, the Conqueror smiled, and proclaimed “Thou wilt become a Buddha, a saviour of the world.”

References


*Image References*


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