

# SEASONAL TRAVELS OF THE VALLEY GOD

IAN ALSOP



Fig. 1 Bunga Dya; Nepal; date uncertain; wood, metal (silver?), clay, pigments; height approx. 36 in. (92 cm); Ta Baha, Patan, and Rato Macchendranath Temple, Bungamati, Nepal; photograph by Bruce McCoy Owens, showing Bunga Dya newly reinstalled in temple sanctum of Ta Baha after repainting, May 11, 1983

## **BUNGA DYA (BUNGA LOKESHVARA, KARUNAMAYA, RATO MACCHENDRANATH)**

Nepal  
from the 7th century on

## SUMMARY

Art historian Ian Alsop examines the history and many identities of the ancient Nepalese rain deity, Buddhist bodhisattva, and divine Hindu yogi Bunga Dya. Every year this image is placed in a giant chariot and pulled through the streets of Patan city in a riotous Buddhist-Hindu festival. The sculpture owes its unusual appearance to this rough treatment and annual repainting and repairs.

Bunga Dya (the god of Bunga) is the quintessential god of the Newars of the largely Buddhist city of Patan in the Kathmandu Valley. His cult is clearly ancient, going back as far as the seventh century, and perhaps even before. His identity is threefold. He is thought to be an ancient rain god of the original inhabitants of the valley, who are most closely associated with the Jyapus, the farmers and agricultural workers of Newar society. He is also the great Buddhist bodhisattva Arya Avalokiteshvara, and through that association is often called Bunga Lokeshvara (a variant is the oldest historically recorded name for him) (fig 2.) or Karunamaya, “full of compassion,” an epithet of this bodhisattva.

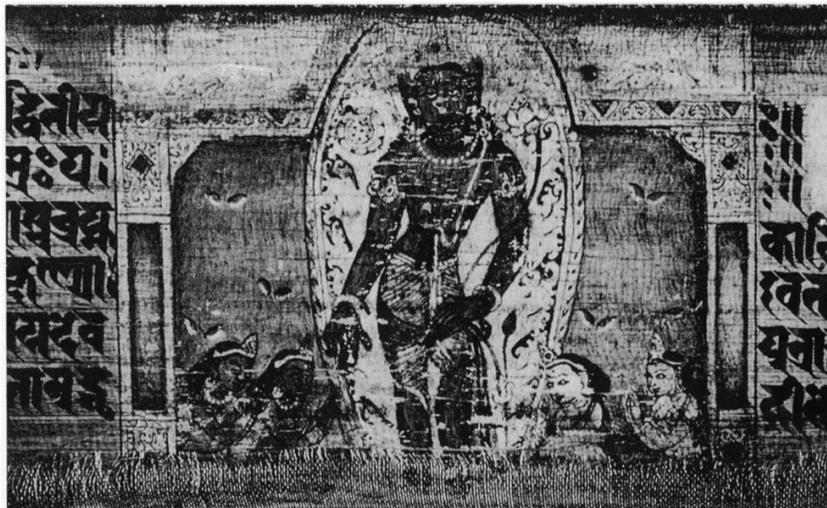


Fig. 2 Bunga Lokeshvara in [of] Nepal Depicted as a Conventional Avalokiteshvara; illumination from a manuscript from Hlam Vihara; Nepal; 1071; The Asiatic Society, Kolkata; MS A.15; image after Slusser 1982, pl. 594

Finally, in the seventeenth century he became associated with the Hindu Nath yogi Matsyendranath as Rato Macchendranath, or Red Macchendranath. This name, now popularly used by the non-Newar population of Nepal, is found in guidebooks and, thus, on the lips of guides and tourists. This last iteration of his identity brought the Hindu Nepalese into the fold of his devotees, and his yearly *jatra*, or festival, while run by Buddhist officiants, is celebrated by Buddhists and Hindus alike.

The Bunga of his Newar name is associated with his home village of Bungamati, where he resides for half the year. He is the only god in Nepal to have two home temples, his main temple in Bungamati, now under repair after being almost entirely destroyed in the 2015 earthquake, and another later temple in Ta Baha of Patan.

### **BUNGA DYA'S ANNUAL CHARIOT FESTIVAL**

Bunga Dya's chariot festival is undoubtedly the most elaborate festival in Nepal, spanning a period of about two months in the spring and early summer, with the end of the chariot's journey often coinciding, as expected, with the beginning of the monsoon rains. The timing of the festival and the enthusiastic participation of the farmer populations of the valley give testimony to the origins of Bunga Dya as above all a god of rain, and, thus, abundance.<sup>1</sup> The chariot procession travels through the old city of Patan, but every twelfth year it begins and ends in Bungamati itself, some four and a half miles south of Patan (fig. 3).

The usual yearly festival begins with the god being taken from his Patan temple and ritually bathed; he then returns to the temple precincts to be cleaned, repaired, and repainted (fig. 4). The god is ritually invited to reside in a silver jar while the image is attended to. While these rituals are being performed a towering chariot is constructed at the entrance to the city of Patan (fig. 5).



Fig. 3 Overhead drone footage of Bunga Dya's chariot festival in Patan. Simosh Maharjan, "Machindranath Jatra 2079 || Drone Shots ||," YouTube, May 6, 2022, 1:14, <https://youtube.com/fXIZfMJ9ZFM>.



Fig. 4 Bunga Dya being repaired and repainted; Ta Baha, Patan, Nepal; May 5, 1983; photograph by Bruce McCoy Owens



Fig. 5 Bunga Dya chariot under construction; Pulchowk, Patan, Nepal; May 13, 2019, 10:30 PM; photograph by Sameer Tuladhar

The *rath jatra*—the pulling of the chariot by a crowd of one hundred or more excited young devotees—is an exciting and somewhat riotous affair (fig. 6 and 7). The huge and unwieldy chariot is pulled through the narrow streets of Patan and makes stops, lasting from a day to several weeks, at several important places as it slowly wends its way to the field of Jawalakhel. Here, the festival culminates in the ritual showing of a shirt associated with the god, with the highest officials of the government—in former times, including the king of Nepal—in attendance.

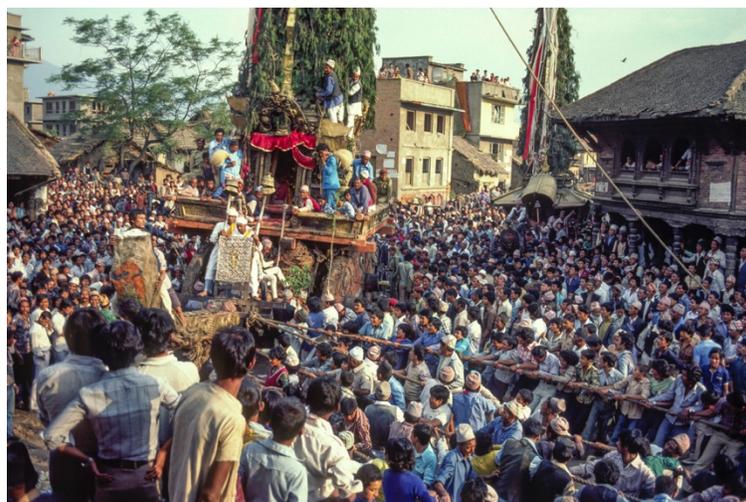


Fig. 6 Bunga Dya chariot procession; Pode tol, Patan, Nepal; May 27, 1982; photograph by Bruce McCoy Owens



Fig. 7 Procession of Bunga Dya's chariot through Patan. Rohit Maharjan, "Rato Machindranath Jatra | MangalBazar to Sundhara | Patan, Lalitpur | 2079," YouTube, May 8, 2022, 15:02, <https://youtube.com/p2LhXrlpGgQ>.

## BUNGA DYA'S IMAGE

Bunga Dya's physical form is unusual. Since his image is almost always draped with clothing and elaborate jewelry, few are able to see the figure uncovered. Bruce Owens, who had the chance to observe the image, describes it as "slightly over three feet high, with silver arms and feet protruding from a relatively formless standing body. The outermost layers of the torso and head clearly consist of caked paint and clay."<sup>2</sup>

This is a very strange depiction of the great bodhisattva in a culture abounding with skilled artists and artisans. Certainly, when compared with images from the same period, such as a wonderful sculpture of a white Avalokiteshvara in wood from the Pritzker Collection (fig. 8), the image of Bunga Dya lacks the elegance and fine workmanship we associate with Newar sculpture. The explanation surely lies in the rough treatment the idol must endure. One can imagine that if the god originally resembled the graceful figure of the white Lokeshvara, after not too many years of the tumultuous chariot *jatra*, it would be entirely destroyed. Each year the present sculpture

must be repaired and repainted by specialists, and a photograph of that operation in progress shows that even after a single year there is much to be done (fig. 4).



Fig. 8 Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara; Nepal; 6th–7th century; wood, white gesso, polychrome paint; height 29 1/2 in. (75 cm); Pritzker Collection

The legend of the arrival of Bunga Lokeshvara in the valley describes the efforts of a great king, Narendradeva, to end a disastrous multiyear drought by bringing the great god from afar—either Kamarup or Mount Potalaka<sup>3</sup>—to the valley to remove the causes of the drought. In this quest he calls on the aid of a great teacher (*acharya*), Bandhudatta, and a Jyapu farmer, Lalita. After numerous tribulations and adventures, this team succeeds in finding the god, capturing him in a silver vessel, and bringing him back to the valley, where he is installed in his temple in Bungamati.<sup>4</sup>

## HISTORY AND TRADITIONAL NARRATIVES OF THE CULT OF BUNGA LOKESHVARA

The antiquity of the cult of Bunga Lokeshvara is attested by several historical sources. A Buddhist manuscript dated 1071 CE in the collection of the Asiatic Society, Kolkata, has a note describing a miniature illustration as “Bugama Lokeshvara in (of) Nepal.”<sup>5</sup> Dharmasvamin, the thirteenth-century Tibetan translator and pilgrim who spent eight years in Nepal (1226–1234), left a detailed account of the cult of “Arya Bu-kham.”<sup>6</sup> The *Gopalarajavamsavali*, an authoritative fourteenth-century Nepalese chronicle, mentions the god and his cult many times. The first citation records that King Narendradeva, with the help of the *acharya* Bandhudatta, initiated the festival of Lord Shri Bugma Lokeshvara, confirming the main protagonists in the story that has been handed down to the present.<sup>7</sup> This was almost certainly the seventh-century Licchavi king Narendradeva (r. 643–679).

In a popular fourteenth-century Tibetan religious and royal history, Bunga Dya is connected with another king, the great Tibetan emperor Songtsen Gampo (r. 618–649), and in this history we see glimmerings of a possibly close connection between the origins of the cult of Avalokiteshvara in Nepal and Tibet, the paramount bodhisattva of both countries.

The Tibetan chronicle recounts how Songtsen Gampo, meditating on how to bring Buddhism to his kingdom, determined that an emanated form lay hidden inside a tree of white sandalwood in the southern part of Nepal. He sent a magically emanated mendicant to fetch these “supports of the dharma.” When the mendicant found the tree and cut into it, four emanations spoke, announcing where they were destined to go, and then appeared, all four in the form of the two-armed Avalokiteshvara.

The first and third can be identified respectively as the “noble Wati,” who would become famous as the Kyirong Jowo in southern Tibet;<sup>8</sup> and the “noble Jamali,” known

to the Newars as Janbahadya, the white Avalokiteshvara of Kathmandu (also known as Seto Macchendranath) (fig. 9), who has his own chariot festival.



Fig. 9 Janbahadya, the White Avalokiteshvara of Jana Bahal, also known as Seto Macchendranath; Kathmandu, Nepal; date uncertain; wood, paint; height approx. 36 in. (92 cm); photograph by Mary Slusser after Slusser 1982, pl. 600



Fig. 10 Pakpa Lokeshvara; Nepal; 7th century; wood, gold paint; height 32¼ in. (82 cm); Phagpa Lhakhang, Potala Palace, Lhasa; photograph by Ian Alsop

The second announced that he would go to the city of Yambu Yagel, or Kathmandu/Patan, and the noble “Bu kam” appeared, our Bunga Dya or Bunga Lokeshvara.<sup>9</sup>

The fourth announced that he would go to the snowy kingdom of Tibet as King Songtsen Gampo’s tutelary deity. That is the Pakpa Lokeshvara of the Potala Palace, who presides there to this day, in a distinctive form as an elegant bodhisattva, with an unusual high, three-peaked crown, the central peak adorned with a standing buddha, two buns of hair cascading on either side, and distinctive bell-shaped earrings (fig. 10).<sup>10</sup>

## CONNECTIONS TO TIBET

The two kings who play leading roles in these stories, the Nepalese Narendradeva and the Tibetan Songtsen Gampo, are connected in many ways. Narendradeva's father was the victim of a usurpation, and Narendradeva, forced to flee the Kathmandu Valley, went to Tibet, where he took refuge in Lhasa. He spent many years in Tibet, perhaps from 624 until his return to the throne in Nepal in 641. Twelve years of Narendradeva's stay in Lhasa coincided with Songtsen Gampo on the throne, and, it may have been Songtsen Gampo who aided his return and the ousting of the usurpers.<sup>11</sup>

It was during the time of Narendradeva's sojourn in Tibet that the Newar contribution to the art there blossomed; the decoration of Jokhang temple, built during this period, clearly shows the hand of Newar sculptors.<sup>12</sup> The sculpture of Pakpa Lokeshvara, the tutelary deity of Songtsen Gampo, displays the Newar aesthetic even when covered with layers of gold offered by the devout (fig. 10).

The elegant figure of the Potala Pakpa Lokeshvara and the rustic *jatra*-worn idol of Bunga Dya share one other distinctive trait. They are both images of such renown and sanctity that the sculptures themselves have become sacred images, and have been reproduced for the faithful over the centuries, as sculptures (figs. 11 and 12) and in paintings (fig. 13).

In spite of the mystery that shrouds these figures, the legend and history surrounding Bunga Dya and Pakpa Lokeshvara and the available stylistic evidence suggest that both are indeed precious relics of the early years of Mahayana Buddhism in the Himalayas. These two share characteristics unique to their cults: stories of royal introduction, peculiarities of iconography and style, and the very rare custom of manufacturing copies not of an iconographic type but rather of a specific sacred image.



Fig. 11 Pakpa Lokeshvara (copy of the original in the Potala Palace, Lhasa); central Tibet; 13th–14th century; wood with gold and paint; 13 × 4 × 2 1/4 in. (33 × 10.16 × 5.71 cm); Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Museum Associates Purchase; M.75.67; photograph © Museum Associates/LACMA, www.lacma.org

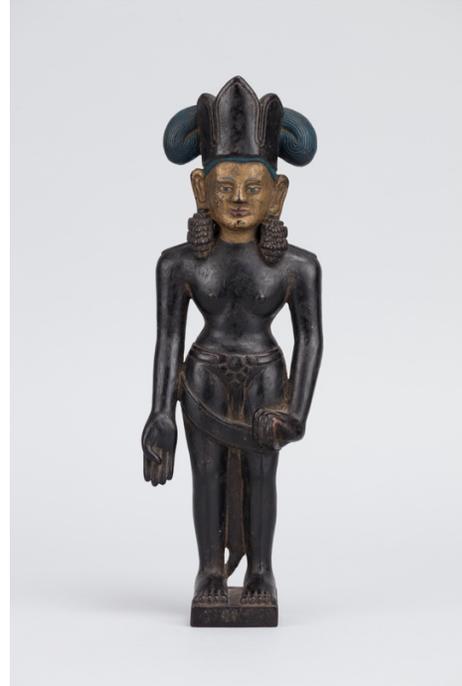


Fig. 12 Phakpa of Lokeshvara of Lhasa; Tibet or Nepal; date uncertain; wood with gold paint and colors; 11 5/8 × 3 7/8 × 2 1/8 in.; Rubin Museum of Art; gift of Shelley and Donald Rubin; C2006.66.61 (HAR 700080)



Fig. 13 Red Avalokiteshvara or Bunga; Nepal; dated by inscription, 1818; pigments on cloth; 34 1/8 × 27 1/8 in. (estimated); Rubin Museum of Art; gift of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation; F1998.3.13 (HAR 100038)

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Gautama V. Vajracharya, *Nepalese Seasons: Rain and Ritual*, Exhibition catalog (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2016), [https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/nepalase\\_seasons\\_-\\_combo-\\_96\\_ppi](https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/nepalase_seasons_-_combo-_96_ppi) elucidates the importance of the seasons to the religions of the Kathmandu Valley; see esp. 62.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce McCoy Owens, “The Politics of Divinity in the Kathmandu Valley: The Festival of Bungadya/Rato Matsyendranath” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1989), 155.

<sup>3</sup> For Kamarup, Mount Kapotala, see Bruce McCoy Owens, “The Politics of Divinity in the Kathmandu Valley: The Festival of Bungadya/Rato Matsyendranath” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1989), 149n15; for Mount Potalaka, see John K. Locke, *Karunamaya: The Cult of Avalokitesvara-Matsyendranath in the Valley of Nepal* (Kathmandu: Sahayogi Prakashan, 1980), 281.

<sup>4</sup> For the various accounts, see John K. Locke, *Rato Matsyendranath of Patan and Bungamati* (Kirtipur: Tribhuvan University Press, 1973), 39ff, and 1980, 281ff; Bruce McCoy Owens, “The Politics of Divinity in the Kathmandu Valley: The Festival of Bungadya/Rato Matsyendranath” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1989), 148ff.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Shepherd Slusser, *Nepal Mandala: A Cultural Study of the Kathmandu Valley*, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 371, pl. 594; John K. Locke, *Karunamaya: The Cult of Avalokitesvara-Matsyendranath in the Valley of Nepal* (Kathmandu: Sahayogi Prakashan, 1980), 327.

<sup>6</sup> George N. Roerich, trans., “Biography of Dharmasvamin (Chag lo tsa-ba Chos-rje-dpal). A Tibetan Monk Pilgrim,” Historical Research Series 2 (Patna: K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute, 1959), 54–55.

<sup>7</sup> Dhanavajra Vajrācārya and Kamal P. Malla, *The Gopālarājavaṃśāvalī*, Nepal Research Centre Publication 9 (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, n.d.), 31, 126, also 129–30, 145.

<sup>8</sup> Per K. Sørensen, “Tibetan Buddhist Historiography: The Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies: An Annotated Translation of the XIVth Century Tibetan Chronicle rGyal-rabs gsal-ba’i melong,” *Asiatische Forschungen* 128 (1994), 194 and n.551.

<sup>9</sup> Per K. Sørensen, “Tibetan Buddhist Historiography: The Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies: An Annotated Translation of the XIVth Century Tibetan Chronicle rGyal-rabs gsal-ba’i melong,” *Asiatische Forschungen* 128 (1994), 194, and see 194n552 for all the versions of the name of the god in the Tibetan texts.

<sup>10</sup> Ian Alsop, “Phagpa Lokeśvara of the Potala,” *Orientalia* 21, no. 4 (April) (1990): 51–61, 58–59. See also Per K. Sørensen, “Tibetan Buddhist Historiography: The Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies: An Annotated Translation of the XIVth Century Tibetan Chronicle rGyal-rabs gsal-ba’i melong,” *Asiatische Forschungen* 128 (1994), 193–95.

<sup>11</sup> Roberto Vitali, *Early Temples of Central Tibet* (London: Serindia, 1990), 71nn27, 28.

<sup>12</sup> Roberto Vitali, *Early Temples of Central Tibet* (London: Serindia, 1990), 71–72.

## **FURTHER READING**

Locke, John K. 1980. *Karunamaya: The Cult of Avalokitesvara-Matsyendranath in the Valley of Nepal*. Kathmandu: Sahayogi Prakashan.

Slusser, Mary Shepherd. 1982. *Nepal Mandala: A Cultural Study of the Kathmandu Valley*, esp. 367–80. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Vajracharya, Gautama V. 2016. *Nepalese Seasons: Rain and Ritual*, esp. 60–65, pls. 14, 15. Exhibition catalog. New York: Rubin Museum of Art.

## CITATION

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