



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## The iconography of Avalokiteśvara in Java

Sundström, I.S.

### Citation

Sundström, I. S. (2020, March 5). *The iconography of Avalokiteśvara in Java*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/86069>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/86069>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/86069> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

**Author:** Sundström, I.S.

**Title:** The iconography of Avalokiteśvara in Java

**Issue Date:** 2020-03-05

## Chapter 5

### Avalokiteśvara's presence in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* and *Bhadracarī* reliefs on Borobudur

I know a gate of liberation, the embryo of knowledge  
Of clouds of compassion of all buddhas,  
Born of my own love and operating everywhere  
To protect and care for all beings...

Those who scatter a handful of flowers over me,  
Calling my name, go to my refuge of bliss;  
Those who give me offerings with a clear mind  
Will be worthy of receiving offerings in my Buddha-land.  
*Gaṇḍavyūha*, Sudhana's visit to Avalokiteśvara.  
(*Avataṃsakasūtra*, ed. Cleary 1993: 1277-1279)

#### 5.1 Introduction

Avalokiteśvara may be the most popular *bodhisattva* in the Mahāyāna pantheon, but this is not evidenced by the imagery on Borobudur, the largest Buddhist monument in the world. There the Bodhisattva does not appear in the form of a statue and he is only depicted in twelve of the 1460 narrative reliefs present. He is also not included in the hundreds of reliefs showing the Buddha and his attendants. Surprisingly, we encounter Avalokiteśvara only in a mere 0.8 percent of the reliefs. Considering this percentage, we need to question the epithet of the 'most popular *bodhisattva*' for Avalokiteśvara in this Central Javanese context.

The main walls and balustrade walls of Borobudur illustrate the Buddhist texts *Lalitavistara*, *Gaṇḍavyūha* and the *Bhadracarī*, as well as various *Jātaka* and *Avadāna* texts. We find the few reliefs showing Avalokiteśvara as part of the depictions of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* on the main wall of the second level and the *Bhadracarī* on the main wall of the fourth level. Yet, Avalokiteśvara is only included in one episode of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* and is not mentioned at all in the *Bhadracarī*. Thus, finding him in twelve reliefs is somewhat of a surprise as well. In this chapter, I will describe the images and suggest why Avalokiteśvara was depicted more often than he is mentioned in the texts.

The *Gaṇḍavyūha* tells the story of a spiritual pilgrimage and Sudhana's visits to 52 *kalyāṇamitras*, his spiritual teachers (Osto 2008: 2).<sup>88</sup> One of these visits takes Sudhana to Avalokiteśvara. The *Bhadracarī* describes the ten vows of the Bodhisattva

---

<sup>88</sup> The *Gaṇḍavyūha* and the *Bhadracarī* are both part of the *Avataṃsakasūtra*.

Samantabhadra.<sup>89</sup> The text describing Sudhana's visit to Avalokiteśvara can be divided into two sections: a prose component and a verse component, the contents of which are the same. They begin with Avalokiteśvara welcoming Sudhana and then explaining to Sudhana his knowledge and his role in guiding sentient beings.

Although the *Gaṇḍavyūha* text describes Sudhana as only visiting the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara once (*Avatamsakasūtra*, ed. Cleary 1993: 1275-1280), he is depicted on Borobudur as visiting the Bodhisattva twice. The reliefs indeed tell the story of Sudhana's pilgrimage twice. Besides the visit to Avalokiteśvara, all other visits of Sudhana to *kalyāṇamitras* seem to have been doubled as well.

Avalokiteśvara is depicted only once (Cat. no. 120) in the first round of depictions and as many as three times in the second (Cat. nos 121-123). Why the creators of Borobudur decided to illustrate the *Gaṇḍavyūha* in this manner is somewhat of an enigma. Jan Fontein describes these various attempts in *Entering the dharmadhātu* (2012: 6-7). Two elements have played a role. F.D.K. Bosch noticed that the *Gaṇḍavyūha* itself described Sudhana as visiting 110 towns and this number may have played a role in the design of Sudhana's visits on Borobudur (1938).

Fontein himself added that the traditional number of 53 visits to *kalyāṇamitras* may actually be seen as 55, as one visit included two *kalyāṇamitras* along with two separate visits to Mañjuśrī (2012: 6).<sup>90</sup> If these visits are then doubled, as he suggests, one arrives at the number of 110 exactly, the number of visits shown on the main wall of the second level of Borobudur.

A second round of visits is depicted following the first round. The visual narration of the 110 visits covers 128 relief panels on the second gallery (Fontein 2012: 5). A few of the additional panels show Sudhana travelling. The rest of the additional panels are devoted to visits that seem to have been deemed specifically significant. The various versions of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* that have survived do not give us any clue as to why this second round received three depictions of Avalokiteśvara.

The second series of reliefs depicting Avalokiteśvara is on the main wall of the fourth main wall. This series illustrates the *Bhadracarī*. Eight reliefs have been identified as including the Bodhisattva, although Avalokiteśvara is never mentioned in the various versions of the text. The exact textual version of the *Bhadracarī* used for Borobudur remains unknown, but from the available images we can see that the text focused on the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra, while offering repeated references to enlightened Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Many of the Bodhisattvas are generic *bodhisattvas*, but Avalokiteśvara can clearly be identified by the presence of the Buddha Amitābha in his *jaṭāmukuta*

---

<sup>89</sup> For further information on these two Mahāyāna texts, see Bosch 1938, Fontein 1967, 2000 and 2012, Osto 2008 and *Bhadracarī* ed. Osto 2010.

<sup>90</sup> Fontein cited 53 visits as this is the traditionally given number in both Japan and China (2012: 6). However, Osto cited 52 visits based on the number narrated in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* (2008: 2).

(Cat. nos 126, 129-131). In a few other reliefs Avalokiteśvara can be identified by his attributes, such as a lotus (Cat. nos 124-125 and 127). In these reliefs Avalokiteśvara has a triangular shape in his *jaṭāmukūṭa*, which could indicate that there was once a Buddha figure depicted there.

Most scholars interested in Borobudur have studied the monument as a whole, focusing on its meaning. Or they studied the reliefs on the various galleries using texts.<sup>91</sup> Thus far, the only scholar to have focused solely on Avalokiteśvara on Borobudur is N. Tingley in her study of the *in situ* images of the Bodhisattva at Borobudur, Candi Mendut, the Plaosan complex in Central Java and Candi Jago in East Java (2006-07).

Among the Avalokiteśvara depictions on Borobudur seven images carry the Buddha Amitābha figure in the *jaṭāmukūṭa* (Cat. nos 120-123, 126, 129-131). Krom identified a further four reliefs as illustrating Avalokiteśvara (1927: 92, Cat. nos 125, 127-129) and, as noted in Chapter 4, Chutiwongs identified yet another Avalokiteśvara relief without the Buddha Amitābha in the *jaṭāmukūṭa*, although it may originally have been there (1994: 100, Cat. no. 124). These identifications are based on different factors, such as the attributes in the hands and the narrative context of the reliefs.

## 5.2 Avalokiteśvara in the Gaṇḍavyūha series on the second main wall: iconography and style

A visitor to Borobudur will first encounter an image of the Bodhisattva in the second gallery where the depiction of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* starts.<sup>92</sup> Avalokiteśvara is one of the many *kalyāṇamitras* or spiritual guides, to whom Sudhana travels to gain instruction.

### *Sudhana's first encounter with Avalokiteśvara (II 47, Cat. no. 120)*<sup>93</sup>

The first Avalokiteśvara image shows him inside a building seated in an informal way with the right leg placed in front of the left on a throne covered with fabric (Cat. no. 120). The Bodhisattva sits within a palace. He has a tall tower-shaped *jaṭāmukūṭa* with a jewel top and a visible Buddha Amitābha in the *jaṭāmukūṭa* niche. A solid oval halo encircles the Bodhisattva's head. He does not wear a tiara, but wears a necklace, armbands, bracelets and anklets. Avalokiteśvara has a sash *yajñōpavīta* crossing the body to just below the waist. His right hand is in *vitarka-mudrā*, his left hand rests on his left knee, apparently holding a stem that emerges from the base. It reaches up to an opening lotus bud by the Bodhisattva's head.

The *vitarka-mudrā* is not one of the conventional *mudrās* for the Javanese Avalokiteśvaras. His iconography has been adapted in this relief to suit the narrative. He is a *kalyāṇamitra*

---

<sup>91</sup> Krom 1927, Bosch 1930 and Fontein 2012.

<sup>92</sup> The first gallery illustrates the *Lalitavistara* and *Jātakas*.

<sup>93</sup> This numbering is based on the division of plates of the reliefs at Borobudur by Krom and van Erp (1920-31), in which the Roman number refers to the gallery and the serial number to the relief in that gallery.

sitting in a natural, non-conventional posture; his hand, like that of other *kalyāṇamitras*, is in *vitarka-mudrā* to indicate that he is teaching Sudhana.

According to the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, Sudhana arrives at Mount Potalaka and sees the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara seated on a diamond boulder, surrounded by enlightened beings, listening to the Bodhisattva teaching the doctrine of “light of the medium of great love and compassion” (*Avataṃsakasūtra*, ed. Cleary 1993: 1275). These enlightened beings surround the Bodhisattva in this relief and the following three reliefs of Avalokiteśvara (Cat. nos 121-123). However, we do not see the depiction of Mount Potalaka in this relief, instead we see him seated within a palace.

*Sudhana’s second encounter with Avalokiteśvara (II 100-102, Cat. nos 121-123)*

The first relief of the second encounter shows Avalokiteśvara with four arms sitting in *padmāsana* on a double lotus resting on a throne supported by lions and human-shaped figures riding on their backs (Cat. no. 121). A triangular cloth hangs down over the throne from below the lotus base. The Bodhisattva sits in a more natural setting than in the previous relief, as is evident from the rock-shaped elements above him, indicating that he sits in a mountain cave or on the side of a mountain. Additionally, various trees and animals surround him. This corresponds to the *Gaṇḍavyūha* text, which describes the Bodhisattva as seated on Mount Potalaka (*Avataṃsakasūtra*, ed. Cleary 1993: 1275).

Climbing the mountain, he looked around for Avalokiteshvara and saw him on a plateau on the west side of the mountain, which was adorned with springs, ponds, and streams, sitting wakefully on a diamond boulder in a clearing in a large woods, surrounded by a group of enlightening beings seated on various jewel rocks... (*Avataṃsakasūtra*, ed. Cleary 1993: 1275)

In the relief, Avalokiteśvara has a tall, bun-shaped *jaṭāmukuta* and the Buddha Amitābha can be seen at the front. Avalokiteśvara is wearing a three-pronged tiara. He also wears a pendant necklace, bracelets and armbands. The Bodhisattva wears a sash *yajñopavīta*, which does not appear to have a fold by the left shoulder, as seen in the previous relief.

In his top right hand, he holds a rosary and the bottom right hand rests in front of the right knee in *varada-mudrā*. His top left hand holds an elephant hook or *aṅkuśa*.<sup>94</sup> The lower left hand is damaged, but a blooming lotus flower can still be seen, and the stem must have been held in the lower left hand.

The next relief (II 101, Cat. no 122) also shows a four-armed Avalokiteśvara seated in *padmāsana* on a double lotus base. This base rests on a throne draped with fabric that hangs down in two flaps. Lions support the throne at the corners and in the centre. In the relief, there are two bands of clouds; one above the seated Bodhisattva, and a second set alongside

---

<sup>94</sup> The elephant hook can be seen in a few Avalokiteśvara forms (Liebert 1976: 18).

him. In Java, it is common that the tops of mountains are covered in clouds and perhaps the artists were trying to emphasise Avalokiteśvara high up on Mount Potalaka by including these clouds.

The Bodhisattva's tower-shaped *jaṭāmukuta* does not have a jewel top this time. There is an oval, solid halo behind his head and he wears a three-pronged tiara. Avalokiteśvara wears a sash *yajñopavīta* that crosses the body to the waist and there appears to be a fold in the *yajñopavīta* by the left shoulder. He also wears a necklace and armbands, but due to the damage to the relief no bracelets can be seen.

In his upper right hand Avalokiteśvara appears to be holding a rosary and the lower right hand has suffered some damage. This hand likely displayed the *varada-mudrā*. In his upper left hand, he holds a book and the lower left hand is damaged. A lotus in full bloom by the Bodhisattva's head indicates that this was the attribute held in his lower left hand. This iconography is quite common for Avalokiteśvara statuettes from Java (Cat. nos 254-265). A similar set of attributes is seen for Avalokiteśvara on the rear wall of Candi Mendut, discussed in Chapter 7 (Cat. no. 182).

The final depiction of Avalokiteśvara, as part of the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, is unique among the representations of the Bodhisattva on Borobudur, as it is the only one with six arms (II 102, Cat. no. 123). The Bodhisattva sits, as in the two other reliefs, in *padmāsana* on a double lotus resting on a throne covered by fabric. Behind Avalokiteśvara's head there is a solid, oval halo. The Buddha Amitābha can be recognised at the front of the *jaṭāmukuta*, despite the damage to the upper part. The two sets of clouds seen in the previous relief are here reduced to one set above Avalokiteśvara, seen under the flying figures. These cloud depictions could be a way of illustrating the descent of Ananyagamin, the next *kalyāṇamitra* Sudhana will learn from (*Avataṃsakasūtra*, ed. Cleary 1993: 1279), who has been identified as standing to Avalokiteśvara's left (Tingley 2006-07: 68). It is possible that the clouds show Avalokiteśvara descending from the top of the mountain, or perhaps the artists wanted to show the Bodhisattva in different environments.

The design of the reliefs may also be an attempt to illustrate Sudhana's spiritual progress with Avalokiteśvara. The first relief shows a mountain setting and the second illustrates a palace in mid-air, with clouds on two levels. The final relief, with Avalokiteśvara in his six-armed form, shows a celestial palace, Sudhana is now depicted with a halo, standing to the Bodhisattva's right.

The Bodhisattva holds a rosary in his upper right hand and the lower right hand displays the *varada-mudrā*. The attribute of the middle right hand cannot be determined. The upper left hand is missing, and the lower left hand holds a bottle. The front left hand holds the stem of a lotus in full bloom, seen to the left of the Bodhisattva's face.

Avalokiteśvara wears bracelets and armbands. Due to relief damage, we cannot see a necklace, but we may assume that the Bodhisattva originally wore a necklace to accompany the jewellery that remains visible. His throne has a back piece composed of a horizontal

beam and is supported by two lions facing outwards. The throne and the Bodhisattva are contained within a structure symbolising a palace.

Tingley endeavours to name the four-armed and six-armed depictions of Avalokiteśvara in the second gallery (2006-07: 69). However, the only certain name we have for Avalokiteśvara in Java is Lokeśvara and possibly Kamalapāṇi/Padmapāṇi during the Central Javanese period, as these are the names found in inscriptions. Tingley identified a four-armed form of Avalokiteśvara as Mahākārūna Avalokiteśvara (2006-07: 69). This name is often associated with the sorrowful form of the Bodhisattva. Unfortunately, Tingley does not explain why she used this name for Avalokiteśvara's four-armed form. Previously, this name, Mahākārūna Avalokiteśvara, was associated with standing four-armed Avalokiteśvara images, based on the identification by Waddell (1894: 76). Tingley identified the six-armed form as Amoghapāśa, but noted that the absence of the noose is unusual (2006-07: 69). Without the presence of the noose, it is very difficult to identify this Avalokiteśvara as representing Amoghapāśa. As we shall see in Chapter 8, Amoghapāśa Lokeśvara was a known entity during the Central Javanese period, primarily depicted with eight arms at the time. Thus, Tingley's identification may have been slightly imprudent.

Even though there are only four depictions of the Bodhisattva in the second gallery, he is seen in two different types of seated positions (*padmāsana* and with his legs crossed in a conventional sitting pose) and with a variable number of arms (two, four and six). As was demonstrated in Chapters 3 and 4, the six-armed Avalokiteśvara is uncommon among bronze depictions (Cat. nos 45, 79, 112-115). It is interesting to see this form appear on Borobudur. Another interesting feature is that he sits in *padmāsana* in three of these reliefs, while this seated pose is rare among bronze statuettes of the Bodhisattva. Thus far, I have only found four depictions in bronze of the Bodhisattva seated in this manner (Cat. nos 279-282).

These four second-gallery reliefs, taken together, could be an attempt to show Sudhana's two visits to Avalokiteśvara in three different ways to illustrate the Bodhisattva's ability to take on various personas in order to teach effectively. According to the *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra*, Avalokiteśvara is able to take on the necessary form to teach the law (*Avataṃsakasūtra*, ed. Cleary 1993: 1276).

I also develop sentient beings by appearing in various forms. I gladden and develop them by purity of vision of inconceivable forms radiating auras of light, and I take them according to their mentalities, and by showing conduct according to their inclinations, and by magically producing various forms and teaching them doctrines commensurate with their various interests, and by inspiring them to begin to accumulate good qualities, by showing them projections according to their mentalities, by appearing to them as members of their own



various races and conditions, and by living together with them  
(*Avataṃsakasūtra*, ed. Cleary 1993: 1276).

By depicting Avalokiteśvara in various iconographic forms the creators of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* reliefs may have tried to illustrate this ability to adapt. In this manner, Avalokiteśvara is seen with a varying number of arms, attributes and gestures. These reliefs also illustrate Sudhana's spiritual progression while Avalokiteśvara remains seated on the throne as described in the text, a diamond boulder. Three of these reliefs show him seated inside a building, whereas in relief II100 he is encircled by animals and other beings, following the description in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* (*Avataṃsakasūtra*, ed. Cleary 1993: 1275). The repeated depiction of Avalokiteśvara is important for our understanding of his role on Borobudur. The three depictions in the second visit are not required by the text. This may indicate that Avalokiteśvara was an important figure for the sculptors creating the reliefs and they took the opportunity in these reliefs to illustrate the variety of iconography known for the Bodhisattva in Java.

### *5.3 Avalokiteśvara in the Bhadracarī series of the fourth gallery (Series IV): iconography and style*

Avalokiteśvara has been identified in eight out of the 72 reliefs depicting the *Bhadracarī* on the fourth gallery of Borobudur. Bosch was the first to identify these reliefs as illustrating this text (1930, 1938).<sup>95</sup> In my discussion of these reliefs I have included two different translations from two versions of the *Bhadracarī*, as we do not know the version that was used to inspire the Borobudur reliefs (*Bhadracarī*, ed. Asmussen 1961, *Bhadracarī*, ed. Osto 2010). Asmussen translated a manuscript from Khotan (*Bhadracaryādeśanā*), which he describes as “a rather free rendering of the BSkrt. original, in some cases more a paraphrase than a translation” (*Bhadracarī*, ed. Asmussen 1961: 6). Osto translated the *Bhadracarī* that was a later part of a Sanskrit version of the *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra* found in Nepal as published by Vaidya (*Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra*, ed. Vaidya 1960a: ix, *Bhadracarī* ed. Osto 2010: 8).

#### *Avalokiteśvara in his sorrowful form (IV 2, Cat. no. 124)*

As was noted in Chapter 4, Chutiwongs was the first to identify this depiction as illustrating the sorrowful Avalokiteśvara (1994: Pl. 7, a form commonly depicted in bronze, as we have seen in the previous chapter). The Bodhisattva can be seen in the lower left-hand corner of the Borobudur relief beneath a line of six seated Buddhas that show four different hand gestures. In the lower section, there are a further three *bodhisattvas* sitting in *padmāsana*. In between sit minor figures in a natural, cross-legged position. They do not display any formal hand gestures indicating that they are functioning as attendants (Cat. no. 124).

---

<sup>95</sup> The *Bhadracarī* used by Bosch was from Watanabe 1912.

Tingley also identified the sorrowful figure seated in *mahārājalīlāsana* in relief IV 2 as representing Avalokiteśvara and she interpreted the *Bhadracarī* as directly mentioning Avalokiteśvara in the opening section of the text (2006-07: 68).

Although it is difficult to distinguish a Buddha in the bodhisattva's headdress, the fact he is mentioned in this portion of the text and holds a Padma seems to indicate that this identification may be correct (Tingley 2006-07: 68).

However, in the version of the *Bhadracarī* she examined there is no direct reference to Avalokiteśvara. Buddha-lands and their enlightened beings are mentioned, which Tingley may have interpreted as referring to Avalokiteśvara.

While both Chutiwongs and Tingley have identified this figure as illustrating Avalokiteśvara, it would seem unusual to have the sorrowful form of the Bodhisattva depicted in connection with the opening section of the *Bhadracarī*, a popular Mahāyāna text dealing with the vows of Samantabhadra. The emotion of sorrow does not seem to correspond with this point in the career of a Bodhisattva; the taking of vows is generally considered a joyful event.

Bosch identified this relief as illustrating the second verse of the *Bhadracarī* (1938: 292).<sup>96</sup> This verse was translated by Asmussen from a Khotanese text as:

I bow down to the Bodhisattva, this Samantabhadra,  
The Buddha-son, the destroyer of all miseries.  
Entirely good to look at, Samantabhadra.  
Perfect he is, with no bases (unbased), unmoved  
(*Bhadracarī*, ed. Asmussen 1961:7).

Osto translates the second verse in another version of the text as:

Through the strength of my vow for the Good Course,  
With a mind directed toward all Conquerors,<sup>97</sup>  
I prostrate with as many bodies as there are  
Atoms in the world to all Conquerors  
(*Bhadracarī*, ed. Osto 2010: 9).

Thus, this verse makes no reference to Avalokiteśvara or any other Bodhisattva apart from Samantabhadra. In Osto's translation, there is no reference to Samantabhadra or other *bodhisattvas*. As the sorrowful Avalokiteśvara is not mentioned in the verse the relief supposedly illustrates, we should question why this iconography was given at this point

---

<sup>96</sup> Bosch referred to Watanabe's 1912 and as this text is not in English, I have chosen to work with the two different versions of the text by Asmussen (*Bhadracarī* 1961) and Osto (*Bhadracarī* 2010).

<sup>97</sup> Conquerors refers to Jina Buddhas (*Bhadracarī* ed. Osto 2010: 9 n. 36).

among the reliefs. Looking at Asmussen’s translation, Samantabhadra is described as “the destroyer of miseries” (*Bhadracarī*, ed. Asmussen 1961: 7), which may be why Avalokiteśvara is depicted in his sorrowful form in the relief. Possibly, the iconography of leaning the head in one’s hand also fitted Bodhisattva imagery in the mind-set of the artists and thence was included in this relief, along with other iconographies for *bodhisattvas*, to create the idea of multiple *bodhisattvas*. Fontein noted that the presence of several Buddhas in the upper level was an appropriate method for illustrating “all Conquerors” (*Bhadracarī*, ed. Osto 2010: 9, Fontein 2012: 173).

*Avalokiteśvara depicted in a group of Buddhas and bodhisattvas (IV 3, Cat. no. 125)*

The next *Bhadracarī* relief in which Avalokiteśvara has been identified depicts a group of eight *bodhisattvas* (IV3, Cat. no. 125) known as the Aṣṭamahābodhisattva. This specific group of *bodhisattvas* is not mentioned in the text, and neither is Avalokiteśvara. The relief with two rows of seated figures shows two Buddhas surrounded by four *bodhisattvas* in the top tier. Avalokiteśvara is identified in the upper tier based on his lotus attribute as well as the niche in the *jaṭāmukuta*, even though a Buddha Amitābha figure cannot be ascertained. The presence of the niche alone indicates that the *bodhisattva* is either Maitreya or Avalokiteśvara (Krom 1927: 273). As another *bodhisattva* figure holds a *nāgapuṣpa*, an attribute of Maitreya, the *bodhisattva* with a niche in his *jaṭāmukuta* can be identified as Avalokiteśvara (Krom 1927: 273). This identification relies on the assumption that Avalokiteśvara or Maitreya would not be depicted twice in the same relief.

The relief has suffered some wear, but the Bodhisattva is clearly seated in *padmāsana* on a lotus base. His body is flexed slightly towards the Buddha figure beside him. He wears a tiara with two clear prongs above each ear. He has a necklace and armbands, but no bracelets are visible due to the wear of the stone. Behind the Bodhisattva's head is an oval halo. Avalokiteśvara holds his right hand in front of the chest, which would commonly indicate that he is holding the *cintāmaṇi*, this remains unclear from the image. The left hand extends outwards from the body and probably holds the stem of the lotus flower rising upwards from the seat. The flower is depicted as a bud by the Bodhisattva's shoulder. Krom further identified Vajrapāṇi and Mañjuśrī, based on their attributes, in the lower row (1927: 272). He also discussed the identities of the other four *bodhisattvas* in the relief, but did not make a firm identification (1927: 273).

Bosch classified this relief as illustrating the third verse of the *Bhadracarī*:

All the Buddhas together with the Bodhisattvas,  
 May they in fact all now take me under their protection,  
 So that I may succeed in hearing the pure Bhadra-caryā,  
 Whereby all deeds may become without obstruction  
 (*Bhadracarī*, ed. Asmussen 1961: 8).

In a single atom Buddhas equal in the number of atoms  
Are seated in the middle of the Sons of the Buddhas<sup>98</sup>.  
In this way, I am entirely intent upon  
The whole Dharma Realm filled with Conquerors  
(*Bhadracarī*, ed. Osto 2010: 10).

Unlike the verses for the previous relief, this verse does mention generic *bodhisattvas* or sons of the Buddhas, in both translations. If, during the time of the construction of Borobudur, the sculptors chose to depict various known *bodhisattvas*, rather than generic *bodhisattvas*, it could explain the presence of Avalokiteśvara in this relief.

Bosch was not as certain about the identification of Avalokiteśvara in this relief as Krom was, for he added a question mark to his description (1938: 257). He identified the figures in the top tier as Sarvanivaraṇaviṣkambhin with a stem with several flowers, Buddha in *vitarka-mudrā*, Avalokiteśvara (?), Buddha in *dharmacakra-mudrā* and Maitreya (?) (1938: 257).<sup>99</sup> However, Bosch did not attempt to identify the four *bodhisattvas* seated in the lower tier together with Sudhana (1938: 257).

Both Long's and Bautze-Picron's identifications agree with those of Krom in terms of the position of Avalokiteśvara (Krom 1927: 102). Bautze-Picron identified the *bodhisattvas* in the top tier as Sarvanivāraṇaviṣkambhin – Samantabhadra – Buddha (*vitarka-mudrā*) – Avalokiteśvara – Buddha (*dharmacakra-mudrā*) – Maitreya (1997: 54). In the lower tier are, from the left, Sudhana, Kṣitigarbha, Ākāśagarbha, Mañjuśrī and Vajrapāṇi (Bautze-Picron 1997: 54).

Long revised this identification, as Samantabhadra has consistently been depicted in the lower tier in the Borobudur *Bhadracarī* reliefs (2009: 167). His new identification of the top tier is then Ākāśagarbha or Sarvanivāraṇaviṣkambhin – Kṣitigarbha – Buddha (*vitarka-mudrā*) – Padmapāṇi – Buddha (*dharmacakra-mudrā*) – Maitreya (Long 2009: 166-167). Considering that Samantabhadra has been depicted in the centre of the lower tier in other reliefs, I agree with Long's identification.

The iconography of the Aṣṭamahābodhisattva appears to have developed in Maharashtra, where we find the earliest depiction of this group in Cave 26 at Ajanta (Bautze-Picron 1997: 1). Unlike the ascetic Avalokiteśvara, who does not appear to have travelled in India beyond the Buddhist cave complexes, this group of eight *bodhisattvas* was also adopted in Bihar and Odisha (Chapter 2, Bautze-Picron 1997: 1, Bautze-Picron 2015: Pls 90-97). Like the ascetic Avalokiteśvara, the group of eight *bodhisattvas* also travelled to Southeast Asia, in particular to Java around 800 CE. It also found its way to the Thai-Malay Peninsula, where the Aṣṭamahābodhisattva can be seen on clay tablets thought to date from

---

<sup>98</sup> The term 'Sons of the Buddhas' refers to *bodhisattvas* (*Bhadracarī*, ed. Osto 2010:10).

<sup>99</sup> Bosch made no mention of the *bodhisattva* figure furthest to the left in the upper tier of this relief (1938: 257).

the seventh century CE (Skilling 2011: 377, Pl. 6D). Therefore, we can trace both the ascetic Avalokiteśvara and the Aṣṭamahābodhisattva to the Buddhist caves in Maharashtra, although their manner of transmission to Southeast Asia were likely different.

*Avalokiteśvara as part of a triad (IV 8, Cat. no. 126)*

In the next relief, believed to show Avalokiteśvara, the Bodhisattva is recognised as the figure in the central triad to the right side of the Buddha (IV 8, Cat. no. 126). In this case, we see the remnants of a Buddha figure in the *jaṭāmukūṭa*.<sup>100</sup> The identification is based on the attributes carried, which match the iconography common for Avalokiteśvara in Java. It is also possible to identify this Bodhisattva as Avalokiteśvara due to his placement within a triad. The second *bodhisattva* holds a blue lily, with what appears to be a *vajra* on top, identifying him as Vajrapāṇi. Neither Vajrapāṇi nor Avalokiteśvara are mentioned in the text, and one wonders once again, why there is a triad and why it included Avalokiteśvara.<sup>101</sup>

The relevant verse is given by Asmussen as:

As many as there are grains of sands in the fields,  
With so many of those in number thus I go with reverence to  
all,  
Having faith in having a heart (devoted) to all the Buddhas,  
Manifestly doing honour with the mouth [and] with the mind  
(*Bhadracarī*, ed. Asmussen 1961: 9).

Whereas Osto gives this verse as:

I worship those Conquerors with  
The finest flowers, garlands, musical instruments,  
Unguents, parasols, lamps and incense  
(*Bhadracarī*, ed. Osto 2010: 10).

These verses described Buddhas or Conquerors, but no *bodhisattvas*, yet once again the sculptors of Borobudur chose to represent the Buddha as the centre of a triad, flanked by two *bodhisattvas*, including Avalokiteśvara.

---

<sup>100</sup> I am grateful for the images taken by Marijke Klokke at Borobudur that evidenced the presence of the Buddha Amitābha.

<sup>101</sup> Bosch included this relief among the three that he designated as illustrating verse 5b of the *Bhadracarī* (1938: 258).

*Standing Avalokiteśvara in a triad (IV 12, Cat. no. 127)*

Avalokiteśvara stands next to the centrally seated Buddha figure in relief IV 12 (Cat. no. 127). The wear of the stone makes it impossible to determine whether once a Buddha Amitābha figure was shown in the Bodhisattva's *jaṭāmukuṭa*. This is the only relief showing Avalokiteśvara as standing. His right hand may display the *vitarka-mudrā* (or a similar gesture) and his left holds a lotus. Bosch expressed the opinion that this relief, along with relief IV 11, depicts the same verse (1938: 260):

As upon the point of one atom [there are] endless Buddhas,  
Buddha-sons surrounding, the teacher in the middle,  
These altogether [and] the dharma-world without end,  
All of it in fact filled with Buddhas I am devoted to  
(*Bhadracarī*, ed. Asmussen 1961: 9).

I worship these Conquerors with the best garments and  
fragrances,  
With vessels of powder as voluminous as Mount Meru  
And with the best of all excellent arrays  
(*Bhadracarī*, ed. Osto 2010: 10).

In Asmussen's translation, a central Buddha figure is described being surrounded by *bodhisattvas*. This could refer to a triad, or a larger group of *bodhisattvas*, but a similar description is not found in Osto's translation.

Avalokiteśvara may be copying the Buddha's hand gesture with the *vitarka-mudrā*, which we saw in the first Avalokiteśvara relief in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* depiction. While an unusual hand gesture for Avalokiteśvara in Java, the gesture corresponds to the text describing the *bodhisattvas* that surround "the teacher in the middle", since the *vitarka-mudrā* represents teaching (*Bhadracarī*, ed. Asmussen 1961: 9). The use of the same hand gesture as the Buddha is also rare. Another possibility is that Avalokiteśvara displays the *abhaya-mudrā*, which is a common hand gesture for the Bodhisattva, as evidenced by the imagery in the Buddhist cave complexes in western India, for example (See Section 2.4). The second *bodhisattva* appears to be Vajrapāṇi, judging from the *vajra* he holds in his right hand. The combination of Avalokiteśvara and Vajrapāṇi occurred earlier in Buddhist cave complexes such as that of Aurangabad, as well as possibly inside Candi Mendut (Chapter 7, Malandra 1993: 99).

*Avalokiteśvara in a group of bodhisattvas (IV 16, Cat. no. 128)*

Krom identified Avalokiteśvara in relief IV 16 (Cat. no. 128) as part of a group of *bodhisattvas* (1927 II: 105). The Bodhisattva can be seen as the second figure from the left in the top row in the relief. The Bodhisattva sits in *padmāsana* on a lotus seat. He displays the *varada-mudrā* with his right hand and holds a flower in his left. It does not appear to

be generic lotus type seen in other reliefs, but another type of lotus. Due to the absence of a clear Buddha in the *jaṭāmukūṭa*, as well as the uncertainty about the attribute he carries, we need to consider that this identification of Avalokiteśvara might be incorrect. Nevertheless, a close inspection of the *jaṭāmukūṭa* shows that there may have been a niche within the hairdo, supporting Krom's identification of the figure as Avalokiteśvara.

The verse that Bosch associated with relief IV 16 (1938: 248) has been translated by J.P. Asmussen as:

The oceans consisting of virtues, imperishable, sounds,  
tones such as [coming from] the shores of the ocean,  
innumerable virtues of these Buddhas, all  
of them I praise, to them I bow down in homage  
(*Bhadracarī*, ed. Asmussen 1961: 9).

And by Osto as:

Whatever are supreme, noble offerings,  
I devote them to all the Conquerors.  
Through the strength of my resolution for the Good Course,  
I honor and worship all the Conquerors  
(*Bhadracarī*, ed. Osto 2010: 10-11).

Bosch also gave a translation of the verse in Dutch which states that the speaker places all confidence in the Buddha, the sons of the Jina Buddhas and the Dharma (1938: 257). In the relief, we can identify Samantabhadra in his usual position in the lower part of the relief as well as Maitreya to the far right due to the presence of the *stūpa* in the *jaṭāmukūṭa*.

*Avalokiteśvara in triads (IV 20, IV 47 and IV 50, Cat. nos 129-131)*

The three final reliefs that include Avalokiteśvara depict him as part of a triad. In relief IV 20, Avalokiteśvara sits to the left of the central Buddha seated in *padmāsana* and the two *bodhisattvas* sit with their legs naturally crossed. In this case, the identification of Avalokiteśvara is definite, as we can see the remains of a Buddha Amitābha figure in his *jaṭāmukūṭa* (Cat. no. 129). The second *bodhisattva* cannot be identified definitely, even though he carries a blue lily, as this is a common attribute for Mañjuśrī and Vajrapāṇi. This triad is seen to the right of the relief's central figure. Bosch identified the relief IV 20 as illustrating the twelfth verse of the *Bhadracarī* (1938: 292), translated below:

What evil deeds also have been done by me  
Throughout all births under the influence of passion, anger  
[and] stupidity,  
With an imperfect body, tongue, [and] mind,

Thus in fact I confess every sin and acknowledge [it]  
(*Bhadracarī*, ed. Asmussen 1961: 12).

Whatever good I have collected through  
Honoring, worshipping, confession, delighting in,  
Requesting and asking [the Buddhas to teach],  
All of it I direct toward enlightenment  
(*Bhadracarī*, ed. Osto 2010: 11).

Due to the damage to the relief, it is difficult to determine the hand gesture of Avalokiteśvara. As both hands appear to be used in combination, he likely displays the *añjali-mudrā*, a highly unusual gesture for Avalokiteśvara in Javanese art. In this case, it could be explained by the text, which mentions the honouring and worship of the Buddha.

The second relief shows Avalokiteśvara once again in a triad, seated in *sattvaparyāṅkāśana* to the right side of the Buddha (Cat. no. 130). The three figures in the triad sit within their own niches ostentatiously decorated. With his right hand Avalokiteśvara displays the *vitarka-mudrā* in the same fashion as we saw in relief II 47 (Cat. no. 120). He displays the *varada-mudrā* with his left hand. The second *bodhisattva* holds an *utpala*, just as the second *bodhisattva* did in the triad in IV 8 (Cat. no. 126), but he cannot be identified without any other visible attributes. Bosch noted that the second *bodhisattva* may have been Vajrapāṇi, but was not definite in his identification (1938: 274). Asmussen and Osto translate the verse associated with relief IV 8 as follows:

Being in accordance with the teaching of all the Buddhas,  
In fulfilment of the Good Course (of Life) with self-control  
according to the Law,  
May I, undamaged, without pollution, perpetually faultless,  
Be able to restrain myself with (to practice) a supreme, pure  
restrain (*Bhadracarī*, ed. Asmussen 1961: 17).

Conforming to the way of beings,  
Perfecting the course to enlightenment,  
Nurturing the Good Course,  
May I traverse all future eons  
(*Bhadracarī*, ed. Osto 2010: 13).

The final relief of Avalokiteśvara on Borobudur shows Avalokiteśvara sitting to the right side of the central Buddha figure (Cat. no. 131). The second *bodhisattva*'s attributes cannot be determined, making him difficult to identify. The Bodhisattva sits in *sattvaparyāṅkāśana* on a double lotus, as in the previous relief. Behind the Bodhisattva are a throne back rest and an oval halo. The background of the relief is decorated with garlands and flowers. The Bodhisattva has a high *jaṭāmukuta* and the Buddha Amitābha is quite distinct at the front. Hair tresses also fall onto the shoulders.



In this relief Avalokiteśvara does not carry a tiara, but wears a necklace, two armbands on each arm and one set of bracelets. The body in the relief has suffered a bit of damage, but the Bodhisattva clearly has a sash *yajñōpavīta* crossing the body to the waist. His right hand rests in front on the right knee in *varada-mudrā*. The left hand is missing, but a large lotus bud faces the Bodhisattva's face, indicating that the left hand held the stem of this flower.

Bosch connects this relief to verse 25 (1938: 276) which is translated by Asmussen as:

From the klésas, the karmas on Māra's path  
Delivered may I wander in [my] way of life in the world,  
[just as] the pure lotuses in the water that are not at all polluted,  
Or like the sun [and] the moon that are undefiled in the sky  
(*Bhadracarī*, ed. Asmussen 1961: 18).

May I see face to face the Conquerors,  
Those Lords surrounded by the Sons of the Buddhas.  
And may I perform great reverence to them,  
Unwearied for all future eons  
(*Bhadracarī*, ed. Osto 2010: 13).

Osto's translation refers to the Buddhas being surrounded by *bodhisattvas*, and this relief has been rendered by the sculptors of Borobudur as one Buddha accompanied by two *bodhisattvas* in a triad. This is like another triad with Avalokiteśvara (Cat. no. 127), in which Asmussen's translation included a terminology similar to the stanza above, to wit "Buddha-sons surrounding" (*Bhadracarī*, ed. Asmussen 1961: 9).

As may have become clear from the above endeavours to connect the *Bhadracarī* to the Borobudur reliefs, this text is extremely difficult to translate into a visual form. It does not contain information that is specific enough for visual story telling. While we do not know the exact version of the *Bhadracarī* used for the Borobudur reliefs, there still appears to be some correlation between the existing text and the individual reliefs as identified by Bosch (1938).

What does become clear, is that the focus of the *Bhadracarī* reliefs is on the honouring of the Jina Buddhas and the *bodhisattvas* who surround them, even though they are not mentioned by name in the text. In the *Bhadracarī*, they are represented as a generic type of *bodhisattva*. In the reliefs, however, the sculptors tried to personalise these *bodhisattvas* whenever they had the opportunity. Possibly these artists integrated the textual information with their own iconographic traditions. This would support the idea that Avalokiteśvara was one of the best-known *bodhisattvas* and that the sculptors knew him in his various iconographic forms.

#### 5.4 Avalokiteśvara on Borobudur and a comparison with bronze images from Java

None of the known, Javanese Avalokiteśvara statuettes in bronze can be identified as being an exact copy of one of the Avalokiteśvara reliefs of Borobudur, or vice versa. Nevertheless, there may still have been some cross-stimulus between the two media. There are several statuettes that share iconographic features, such as gestures (*varada-mudrā*) or attributes (lotus) with the stone reliefs of Avalokiteśvara. On Borobudur, we see Avalokiteśvara in iconographic forms that are seldom or never seen in metal. One example is the use of the *vitarka-mudrā* in the first Avalokiteśvara relief for the *Gaṇḍavyūha* narrative scenes (Cat. no. 120). The only possible example of Avalokiteśvara displaying this gesture in bronze that has survived from Java (Cat. no. 234), shows the Bodhisattva displaying the *vitarka-mudrā* with both hands. If we consider the scene the sculptors are trying to depict on Borobudur, the use of the teaching sign makes sense. Thus, the narrative context of this relief asks for this gesture, even if it is an uncommon gesture in Avalokiteśvara iconography.

A second example is when Avalokiteśvara brings his two hands together in a gesture (Cat. no. 129), possibly the *añjali-mudrā*. The Bodhisattva is not depicted with this gesture in bronze in Java, although he is portrayed in triads with a Buddha and a second *bodhisattva*, recreating the context of the Borobudur relief. A third example is that the placement of the lotus is interchangeable between the left and right hand on Borobudur (Cat. nos 126, 128 and 130). Among the bronze images of the Bodhisattva it is clear that the lotus is primarily held in the left hand.

A final example of the differences between bronze and stone Avalokiteśvara imagery is the use of the sitting pose *padmāsana*. We see *padmāsana* used in seven of the twelve depictions of Avalokiteśvara on Borobudur (Cat. nos 121-123, 125-126, 128), but it is a rare sitting pose for the Bodhisattva when he is depicted in bronze (Cat. nos 279-282). In Java, it is usually reserved for the Buddha.<sup>102</sup> In the case of Borobudur, the use of this pose cannot simply be explained by the textual narrative, even though the *Gaṇḍavyūha* describes Avalokiteśvara as seated. The disparity between the percentage of images on Borobudur that used the *padmāsana* pose and that of the bronze Avalokiteśvara Javanese statuettes, or oppositely a standing pose, suggests different types of iconographic traditions that a metal caster and a sculptor would follow for Avalokiteśvara, depending on the material used. Thus, the stone sculptors were not affected by the available bronze images of Avalokiteśvara in their depictions of the Bodhisattva on Borobudur.

#### 5.5 Conclusion

Borobudur stands as the largest Buddhist monument in the world, attracting approximately 2.5 million visitors each year. It remains a testament to the ingenuity and artistic skills of stone workers and architects of the Central Javanese period. This chapter has focused on the few reliefs with Avalokiteśvara found on Borobudur, which only make up a mere 0.8

---

<sup>102</sup> These four bronzes can be dated from 750-1000 CE, based on different stylistic features.

percent of the total 1460 of reliefs, making the Bodhisattva a rare sight on the monument. These twelve reliefs depict various manifestations of Avalokiteśvara, illustrating his capability of assuming various forms in order to teach the *dharma* in the most effective manner (Cat. nos 120-131).

A large number of Javanese bronzes depict the Buddha, but we find relatively few of Mañjuśrī or Maitreya, and I am not aware of any bronze depictions of Samantabhadra. However, the creators of Borobudur chose to depict Mahāyāna texts that highlighted Buddhist figures such as the Buddha, Mañjuśrī, Maitreya and Samantabhadra. The differences in the depicted figures in stone on Borobudur and the surviving bronze statuettes in Java may be due to a different focus among those who ordered the images.

Despite the small number of reliefs illustrating the Bodhisattva, the sculptors managed to show him with a variety of iconographic features. These include Avalokiteśvara in his two-armed, four-armed and six-armed form, with the lotus attribute, as well as the sitting poses *padmāsana*, *mahārājalīlāsana*, *sattvaparyāṅkāśana* and as standing with one hip jutting out to the side. There must have been a clear decision to depict Avalokiteśvara with a variety of iconography, despite there being only a few reliefs that include the Bodhisattva. Such a decision, whether conscious or unconscious, reveals the broad knowledge of Avalokiteśvara's iconography among the creators.

We see Avalokiteśvara in eight separate reliefs illustrating the *Bhadracarī* as part of a larger group, such as a triad or the group of eight *bodhisattvas*. However, in bronze he is only occasionally shown as part of a triad to the Buddha's right or in a dyad; he is usually depicted on his own.<sup>103</sup> The four depictions from the *Gaṇḍavyūha* show him with two, four and six arms, whereas in bronze images, six-armed depictions are rare, just as the use of the *padmāsana* pose is rare.

Comparing the stone imagery of Borobudur with the available bronze images, there appears to be a disparity between the two. The differences in sources of influence, such as the Buddhist texts depicted on Borobudur, indicate that the stone workers and bronze casters were not the same people. A stone worker would not work in bronze, and vice versa. This is supported by the differences in iconographic choices when depicting Avalokiteśvara.

Even though Avalokiteśvara did not play an important role on Borobudur, he appears to have been added wherever possible, even when he is not mentioned specifically in the illustrated texts. This could indicate Avalokiteśvara's popularity among a specific part of Javanese society, such as the architects and sculptors of Borobudur. This is opposed to the royalty and monks who likely chose the texts to be depicted in this particular context of a *stūpa*, the construction of which was most probably initiated by Śailendra royalty.

---

<sup>103</sup> The known examples can be seen in Cat. nos 20, 47, 67, 83, 139, 144-145, 151, 168, 173, 228, 245, 261 and 278 (A few of these were found in Sumatra).



Plate 7. A two-armed Avalokiteśvara in bronze seated in *sattvaparyāṅkāśana* from the Nelson Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City (Cat. no. 132).