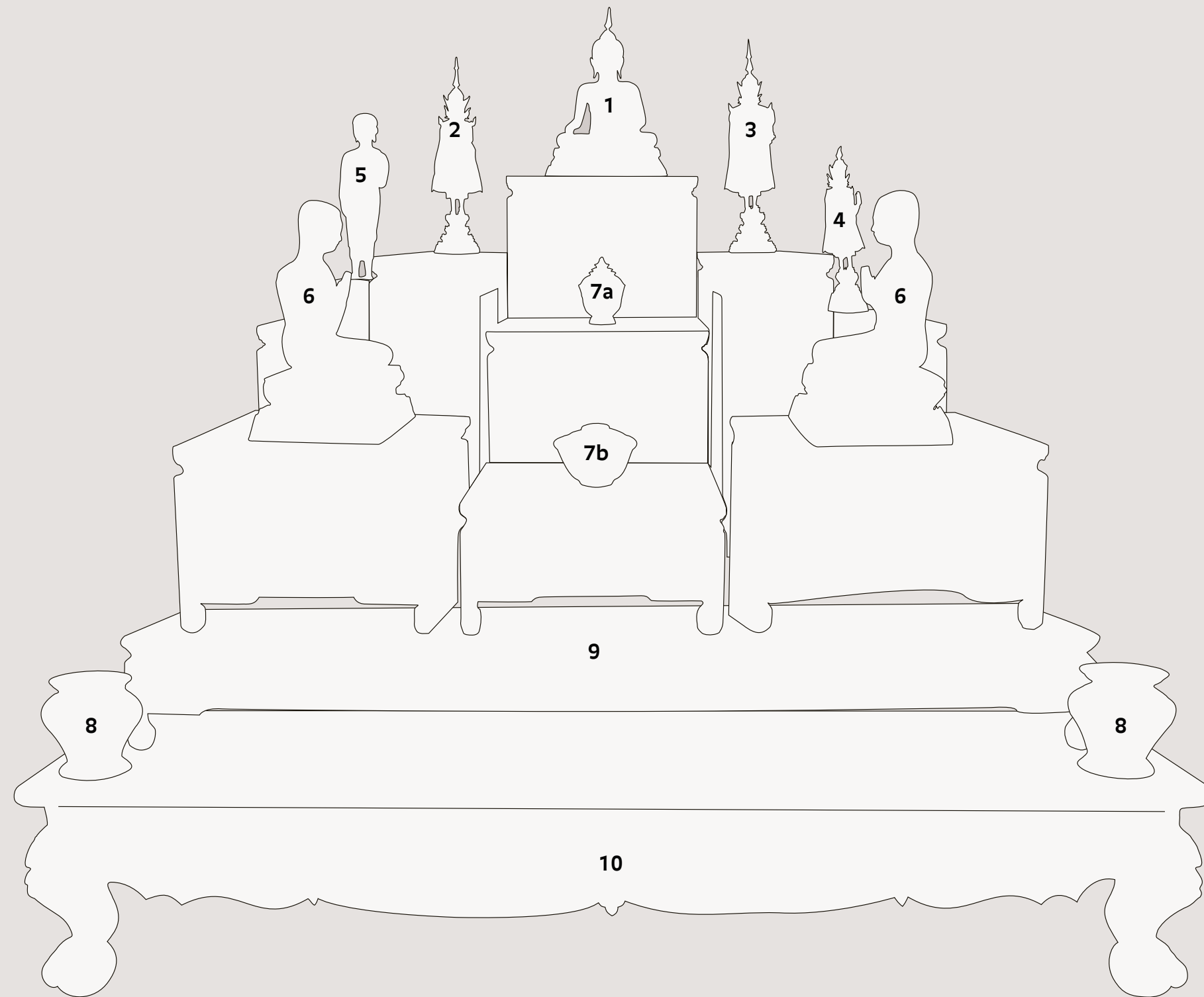




A THAI BUDDHIST ALTAR



IN THAILAND roughly ninety-five percent of the population is Theravada (meaning “the Teaching of the Elders”) Buddhist, one of the oldest surviving schools of Buddhism; many use home altars for worship twice a day, in the morning and again at night. The objects that comprise UMMA’s altar were not originally part of the same grouping but represent the types of objects that would have been found on a Thai altar dating to the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. The size and gilt decoration of the altar tables suggest that they were either used in a side altar at a temple (*wat*) or that they came from the home of a wealthy family.

Though there are no set requirements for Thai Buddhist altars, they usually contain numerous tables of different heights with at least one Buddha on the highest central table. Other tables support vases, pots, and candleholders, all of which are used for offerings such as flowers, food and drink, or incense. Offerings, presented in bowls (such as 7a and b) are given in groups of three to honor

the Triple Gem: the Buddha, his teachings (*Dhamma*), and the monastic community (*Sangha*). Within the Buddhist framework of the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*), offerings are thought to lead to progress towards release from the suffering that results from desire (or craving), which causes states such as anger, greed, jealousy, fear, distraction, and clinging to the body. Release from desire leads to a better birth or even the attainment of *nibbana* (or nirvana), which is a liberation from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

Because they nurture the qualities of generosity and virtue and give rise to contemplative gratitude and inspiration, offerings act as preparation for daily meditation and prayer. Regarding the image of the Buddha, lighting lamps, burning incense, offering flowers, and making prostrations also serve to engage the five senses, enhancing and accelerating the purification of the lay practitioner’s mind and deepening the commitment to the Buddha’s path.

1. Seated Buddha

Thailand, Bangkok period, 1782–present
19th century
Gilt bronze with glass inlay
2005/1.454

3. Standing Buddha

Thailand, Bangkok period, 1782–present
19th–20th century
Gilt bronze with glass inlay
2005/1.450

5. Phra Malai

Thailand, Bangkok period, 1782–present
19th–early 20th century
Gilt bronze
2005/2.453

7a and b. Bencharong ware jars (*tho*)

China
19th century
Porcelain with overglaze enamel and gold painting
2005/1.465A&B, 1.467A&B

9. Ten-piece set of altar tables

Thailand, Bangkok period, 1782–present
19th century
Gilt and lacquered wood with mirrors
2005/1.466.1–10

2. Standing Buddha

Thailand, Bangkok period, 1782–present
Early 20th century
Gilt bronze with glass inlay
2005/1.475

4. Standing Buddha

Thailand, Bangkok period, 1782–present
19th century
Gilded brass (or gilded copper alloy)
Anonymous gift, 1975/1.66

6. Pair of kneeling monk devotees

Thailand, Bangkok period, 1782–present
19th–early 20th century
Lacquered and gilded copper alloy
2005/1.455.1–2

8. Vases

China
19th century
Cloisonné (metalwork with enamel décor)
2005/1.470.1–2

10. Platform for altar tables

Thailand, Bangkok period, 1782–present
First half of the 20th century
Gilt and lacquered wood
2005/1.466.11

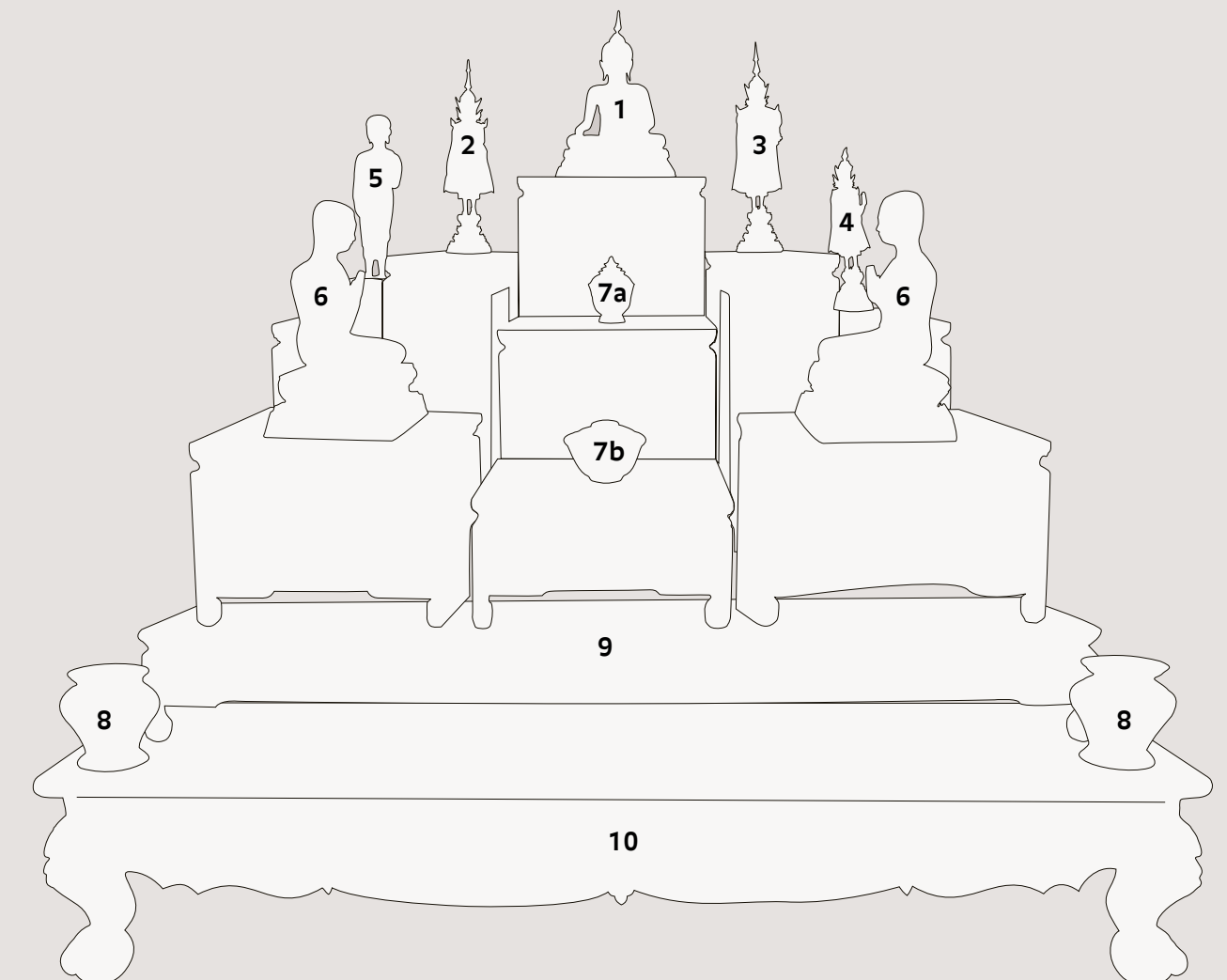


ELEMENTS OF A THAI BUDDHIST ALTAR

IT IS COMMON for Thai altars to have many images of the Buddha as well as images of devotees and attendants. Here, the central image of a seated Buddha (1) represents the type most commonly seen as the main subject of worship in Thai temples. He makes the gesture of calling the earth to witness his victory over Mara, the god of death and desire, the moment before he becomes enlightened. The three standing Buddhas that flank him gesture either with both hands raised (2 and 4), called “calming the ocean” by Thais, or with one hand raised, palm facing outwards (3), which means “fear not.” The kneeling devotees who make obeisance to the Buddha are two of his most important disciples, Mogallana and Shariputra (6). Their presence symbolizes the importance of using skillful means and knowledge in the search for enlightenment. Also in the back row is a figure with a begging bowl over his shoulder (5). This is Phra

Malai whose story was immensely popular in the nineteenth century; he was a Buddhist monk who achieved extraordinary powers through his accumulated merit and was able to visit numerous hells and heavens and then travel back to report on what he had seen. His accounts of these visits offered vivid reminders of the inevitable results of one’s actions and his story was widely used as a preaching text at funerals.

The ceramic jars and cloisonné vases (7a and b, 8) were made in China for the export market. They are typically Thai in shape and pattern and were produced in China using model books supplied by Thai. One jar (7a) has a top that mimics the spires of Thai Buddhist architecture, and the other (7b) is a more typical Chinese shape with a lid that can be turned upside down to create another bowl.



THAI TELLINGS
OF
PHRA MALAI

TEXTS AND RITUALS
CONCERNING A POPULAR
BUDDHIST SAINT

BY

BONNIE PACALA BRERETON

ONE

DETAILED SUMMARY

A long time ago, so it is said, there lived on the island of Lanka¹ an arhat² and mahāthera³ named Phra Malai. Endowed with great compassion, Phra Malai one day used his extraordinary powers to travel to hell to bestow mercy on the suffering beings there. Upon his arrival, the hell beings begged him to seek out their relatives in Jambudīpa, the human realm, and ask the relatives to make merit on their behalf. Phra Malai returned to the human realm and did as he was asked, and after the relatives performed acts of merit, the hell beings were reborn in heaven.

Then one morning, as he was going out to receive alms, the arhat encountered a poor man who had picked eight lotuses in a pond where he had gone to bathe. The man presented the lotuses to Phra Malai and as he did so, he requested that, as a result of this act of merit, he never be born poor again.

Phra Malai accepted the offering and told the man that his wish would be granted. Once again he used his extraordinary powers to fly to Tāvātimsa Heaven to worship the Cūlāmaṇi Cētiya, in which the hair relic of the Buddha is enshrined.⁴ After presenting the eight lotuses as an offering, Phra Malai met Indra,⁵ the deity who presides over this realm. As they conversed, Phra Malai learned that Indra had built the cetiya to provide the *devas* (deities) in heaven with a means of continuing to make and accrue merit. Without this way of making merit, their next birth would be in a lower state.

Phra Malai then asked Indra when Metteyya⁶ would leave his abode in Tusita Heaven to come to worship the cetiya. Indra replied that he would come on that very day, since it was an *uposatha* day,⁷ one of the times for his regular visits.

*metteyya, the future
Buddha*

right side, dressed in yellow, those on the left in red, and those behind Metteyya in green.

Phra Malai then asked Indra how Metteyya had made merit. Indra replied that Metteyya had practiced the Ten Perfections for an infinite number of years. In addition, he had performed the Five Great Sacrifices, giving up material possessions, wealth, children, wife, and even his own life.

Finally, Metteyya, having paid reverence to the cetiya, greeted Phra Malai, asking him where he had come from. Hearing that he had come from the human realm, Metteyya inquired about the nature and characteristics of the beings there. Phra Malai commented on the diversity as well as the suffering of life in that realm. Some people were rich, he noted, but most were poor; some were handsome, but many were plain; some lived a long life, but many died young; those who did good deeds were few in number, those who sinned were great in number; and so forth.

Upon hearing this reply, Metteyya wished to know how the people of Jambudīpa made merit. Phra Malai explained that they performed meritorious acts in a multitude of ways: some presented offerings; some listened to sermons; some had Buddha images cast; some built residences for the Sangha; some presented robes; some dug ponds and wells. They performed these good deeds according to their abilities, all because of their wish to meet Metteyya in the future.

Metteyya responded by giving Phra Malai a message for the people of Jambudīpa: those who wished to meet him should listen to the recitation of the entire *Vessantara Jātaka*—all one thousand verses—in one day and one night. In addition, they should bring offerings of one thousand candles, incense sticks, flowers, and other gifts to the temple.

The Bodhisatta then told Phra Malai about the deterioration of Buddhism that would come about after Gotama Buddha's teachings had been on earth for five thousand years. Human nature would degenerate both physically and morally. The life span would decrease to ten years, and incest,

promiscuity, chaos, and violence would be commonplace. In a tumultuous outbreak of fighting and bloodshed, virtually everyone would die, except for a small number of wise people who had retreated to the forest and hidden themselves in caves.

After seven days, they would emerge and create a new society based on mutual goodwill and a commitment to morality. Gradually the human life span would begin to increase again. Following a period of intense rainfall, the earth would flourish with vegetation, and villages would be thickly populated. The surface of the earth would be as smooth as a drumhead, rice would husk itself, people would be handsome and free from physical disabilities, spouses would be faithful to one another, and all beings would live in harmony.

At that time, Metteyya would be born in the human realm and attain enlightenment. Then the Bodhisatta described to Phra Malai the various acts he had performed during previous lifetimes to earn sufficient merit to enable him to become the next Buddha. Each act involved the practice of *dāna*, "generosity," and each would have a specific beneficial effect on humankind in the future. For example, because Metteyya had listened and responded to a beggar's request for alms, no one would be deaf or mute during his Buddhahood. Because he had radiated loving kindness, everyone would be gentle and loving.

Metteyya continued his discourse, describing to the thera how he would help all beings transcend *samsāra*, the cycle of rebirth and continued suffering, by freeing them from the ties of greed, hatred, and delusion. Finally, after exhorting Phra Malai to take this message to the people of Jambudīpa, the Bodhisatta returned to Tusita Heaven. Phra Malai then went back to the human realm and delivered Metteyya's message. The people responded by making merit with great devotion. The text ends with a reference to the man who had offered Phra Malai the eight lotuses early in the story. After his death, he was born in Tāvātimsa Heaven as Lord of the Lotuses; wherever he walked, lotuses sprang up to receive his feet—all