

A Study on Culture and Starting Of Buddhism Arts

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INTRODUCTION

The teachings given by Siddhartha Gautama at the Deer Park at Varanasi, India 2500 years ago have now spread worldwide, resulting in a rich tapestry of traditions which can seem quite confusing. Buddhism is a peace loving, compassionate spiritual path, so to bridge differences between its various traditions and to work together, representatives from all Buddhist schools convened at the World Buddhist Sangha Council, Sri Lanka 1966 and unanimously reached agreement that:

“We admit that in different countries there are differences with regards to the life of Buddhist monks, popular Buddhist beliefs and practices, rites and ceremonies, customs and habits. These external forms and expressions should not be confused with the essential teachings of the Buddha.”

Buddhism can be seen as a tree with one trunk and many branches and roots, the trunk symbolising the essential spiritual teachings, and the many branches symbolising the different traditions which have grown from that trunk to meet the needs of different cultures and individuals.

To understand the relationship between Buddhism and the arts, it is helpful to have a basic knowledge and understanding of some of Buddha's teachings, particularly the 4 Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the Vinaya and the different schools of Buddhism and their location.

Buddha's Teachings (Buddhadharma): Buddha's teachings are vast and profound, concerned principally with the nature of suffering and how to permanently alleviate it to find the lasting happiness and peace of nirvana or enlightenment. There are three traditional divisions of the Buddha's teachings:

1. the Sutras: Buddha's spoken word as recorded by his monks
2. the Vinaya: Buddha's teachings on how monks, nuns and laypeople should conduct themselves

3. the Abhidharma: a complex classification of Buddhist concepts

The 4 Noble Truths : The basics of Buddha's teachings, found in the Dhamma Cakka Pavattana Sutra or Discourse on Turning the Wheel of Dharma², are the Four Noble Truths:

1. The truth of suffering (dukkha): we all suffer physically and mentally to a greater or lesser extent e.g. birth, old age, sickness, death, getting what we don't want, not being able to get what we do want and associated emotional pain of lust, anger, hatred, pride, envy, sadness, stress and so on.
2. The origin, or root of suffering: looking deeply at the fundamental cause of suffering, our own deluded minds
3. The cessation of suffering: refraining from doing things that make us suffer, what causes lasting happiness
4. The path leading to the cessation of suffering: training in the path that leads to lasting happiness. This is the Noble Eightfold Path – right view, right thinking, right speech, right action, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration, and right livelihood. 'Right' in this sense means what is beneficial.

Looking deeply into the nature of suffering, the Buddha saw its cause and discovered that when suffering and delusion dissolves, the enlightened nature of mind present in all sentient beings is revealed, in the same way the open, bright, spacious sky is revealed when clouds disperse. For Buddhists, enlightenment involves uncovering something already within one, rather than actively creating something new or searching for something outside of oneself, and anyone can realize this state with motivation, perseverance and training. It is a process of becoming aware of and letting go of one's own ignorance, aggression, greed, pride and jealousy to reveal what has naturally been there – but concealed - all along: the compassionate, blissful, awake, knowing, empty essence of mind inherent in all living beings.

Spanning more than a thousand years, the Buddhist sculptures from northern India in the Norton Simon collection are remarkably varied and include some historically important and unique examples.

Although it was unintentional, the collection represents significant aspects of the development of Buddhist art in northern India. It contains two well-preserved pillars from the second-century BC stupa at Bharhut, a key monument for the history of Buddhist art in particular and Indian art in general. Fewer than a dozen pieces of sculpture from this important site are known outside India, and none as impressive as these pillars. The collection is exceptionally strong in the Buddhist art of Gandhara and Mathura of the Kushan period (1st-3rd centuries), containing some monumental examples of extraordinary quality. However, there are no specimens from the

Amaravati region, the other important early Indian school of Buddhist sculpture. The well-known Gupta period (c.320-600) of North Indian art is also less thoroughly represented than the earlier Kushan period. There are a number of metal and stone sculptures from the Pala period (c. 750-1150), which witnessed the last flowering of Buddhist art in Bihar and Bengal.

STARTING OF BUDDHIST ART

Buddhism is a historical fact; only it has not yet been completely incorporated into history: sooner or later that will be achieved. Meanwhile its initial period remains, we must confess, passably obscure. To add to our difficulty, the little that we think we know of the social and political state of India in the times of its birth has been learned almost entirely through its medium: thus the frame is no better defined than the picture. But the task, arduous though it may be, is not impossible. The fifth century B.C. is not so remote a period that it must always elude archeological research; the interval between the death of Buddha and the first information transmitted to us concerning him is not so considerable that we cannot flatter ourselves with the idea of discerning across it the veritable physiognomy of the work, if not - in conformity with the pious, but too tardy wish of later generations - the "actual features" of the worker. This hope is still more confident, and the ambition less audacious, when it is a question of the beginnings of Buddhist art. The appearance of the latter is a relatively late phenomenon, since it presupposes not only the development of the community of monks, but also a certain organization of worship on the part of the laity.

If among the productions of this art the sculptures are almost the sole survivors, we have at least preserved to us, notably in the labelled bas-reliefs of Bharhut, documents of the very highest rank. Certainly the stones are by no means loquacious: but they atone for their silence by the unalterableness of a testimony which could not be suspected of refacement or interpolation. Thanks to

their marvelous grain, they are to-day as they were when they left the hands of the image-makers two thousand years ago; and upon this immutable foundation we can construct inferences more rigorous than upon the moving sand of the texts. In the ever restless and changing play of the doctrines we are never quite certain that the logical sequence of the ideas is exactly parallel to the historical succession of the facts. On the other side, the routine character of all manual technique will allow us to detect with certainty, in the still existing monuments, the material traces of the procedures which must have been usual earlier: inversely,

and by a kind of proof backwards, the correctness of these postulates will be verified in that they alone will be found to render a satisfactory account of the often uncouth character of that which has been preserved to us. All these reasons seem to us to justify the task which we have undertaken. In the assault delivered from various quarters upon the origins of Buddhism we believe even that the attempt to go back to the very beginning of its art is, among all the methods of approach, that which has for the moment the most chances of success.

OBJECTS OF INDIAN BUDDHIST ART

1. Worship at a Stupa :

In early Buddhist art, the Buddha is rarely depicted in human form; instead, symbols represent his presence and his teachings. The stupa is one of many images used to indicate the presence of the Buddha. This raised sandstone carving from a fence rail that once encircled a stupa refers to the continuing presence of the Buddha on earth. At the center of the carving is the Buddha's funerary mound, or stupa. Worshipers stand to the left and right of the stupa. Celestial figures fly overhead and offer garlands and flowers in adoration. Two pairs of flowering sal trees frame the scene and add to its visual

symmetry. Some scholars think sal trees grew in the grove where the Buddha left his physical body and ascended into nirvana. Their presence here helps the viewer to identify the scene with the Buddha's death and his passing into the state of nirvana. Along the base of the dome are nine right hands—nine is an auspicious number in many ancient traditions—that represent worshipers encircling the stupa. One way of showing reverence for the Buddha is to walk slowly around the stupa and place your hands at its base.

2. Four scenes from the life of the Buddha :

With the incorporation of the Buddha's human image into art after the first century, sculptors began to depict legends surrounding the youth of Siddhartha, including stories of his birth and death. These legends and historical events were eventually consolidated into a clear story line that usually centers on four main events in the Buddha's life,

referred to as the Four Great Miracles. Thereafter, these four events were frequently depicted on narrative relief panels such as this. Such panels were often placed around the base of important stupas and can be considered in chronological order.



The first of these four panels represents the miracle of the Buddha's birth. Siddhartha, complete with halo, emerges from the right hip of his mother Maya as she stands beneath a tree. The baby's halo, which signifies divine radiance, is a symbol of honor that routinely appears on South Asian images of deities and royalty. Artistic and cultural elements borrowed from ancient Greek and Roman art include the wreaths around the women's heads, the long-sleeved blouses and gowns, and the cornucopias held by several figures.

The miracle of the Buddha's enlightenment appears in the second relief. The Buddha sits beneath a tree in meditation. Mara, the evil one, stands in the foreground, ready to draw his sword. Meanwhile, Mara's fear-some demon armies attack the Buddha from all sides. Notice the array of animals and half animal-half human creatures that make up Mara's army. Despite all this activity around him, the Buddha remains serene. Two soldiers underneath the Buddha's elevated platform are stricken down by the power of the Buddha's awesome presence. With his mudra, or hand gesture, of touching the ground, the Buddha calls the earth to witness his realization of enlightenment and thus his victory over the evil Mara.

Illustrating the miracle of the first sermon, the third panel shows the Buddha preaching to a crowd of monks and ordinary citizens. The deer depicted underneath his platform identify the location of the sermon: Deer Park at Samath. Between the two deer, which appear to be as mesmerized by the Buddha's teachings as the people gathered, is the wheel of dharma. The wheel is a pre-Buddhist symbol of kingship, and some Hindu gods are shown holding one. Although the Buddha gave up his earthly possessions and kingdom, this wheel refers to his spiritual authority and teaching. His first sermon is thus referred to as "the first turning of the wheel of the dharma [or law]."

In the final relief showing the miracle of the Buddha's journey to nirvana, local chieftains appear above him and express their intense grief. The monks, on the other hand, seem to be at peace. One monk sits directly under the Buddha's couch and calmly meditates, thus signifying his understanding that the Buddha's passing is not death but rather a release from the endless cycle of rebirth.

3. Seated Buddha :

This Buddha was created to grace the altar of a Buddhist monastery in Tibet. Sitting serenely with one hand in his lap, the Buddha extends his other hand to touch the earth in a traditional symbol of his enlightenment. To ensure that worshipers recognize this figure as the historic Buddha, the square pattern on the robe recalls the patchwork of fabric scraps that were sewn together for the only garment the Buddha wore as he wandered the land. Characteristic signs of the Buddha's superhuman perfection include the tightly curled hair covering his ushnisha, the bump on the top of his head that symbolizes his immense knowledge. The dot in the middle of his forehead, called an urna, indicates his understanding of all things. His long earlobes, which were caused by the heavy earrings he wore when he was a prince, refer to his rejection of his earthly wealth.

This hollow-cast copper figure was covered in gold using a complex gilding process that is still in use today. A mixture of gold and mercury was applied to the surface of the copper figure, then heated over a smokeless fire until the mercury evaporated and the gold adhered to the surface. The gilded surface was then polished with a smooth stone. Relics or charms could have been inserted into the figure's hollow body before it was sealed with a thin metal plate. Such relics might have included holy texts, precious objects, and ashes or bits of bone left over after the cremation of an enlightened being or great Buddhist teacher.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN BUDDHISM AND THE ARTS

Buddhism offers many training methods, including the arts, for guiding individuals towards enlightenment, and all traditional Buddhist arts are intended to be reminders and inspiration pointing the individual towards the ultimate nature of phenomena and the ultimate nature of mind.

A non-Buddhist seeing a Buddhist bow to a statue of a Buddha or Bodhisattva might assume this is idol worship, but for the Buddhist who has an understanding of the Four Noble Truths and practises the Noble Eightfold Path, prostration is a profound practice which includes surrendering the delusions of pride, arrogance, greed and ignorance preventing enlightenment, a wish to become like the Buddha, a recognition of the Buddha within and much more.

Buddha images and other Buddhist art showing, for example, the life of the Buddha, also serve educational purposes in areas of low literacy, helping people to understand the teachings and reducing suffering. Many people who make Buddhist art regard it as a spiritual practice, for in order to make truly sublime work, it helps if one meditates and has the right view and intention from

the outset.

The aim of Buddhist art is to inspire and remind: a Buddhist artist practising the Eightfold path would be aiming to express the qualities of the enlightened mind through their work, with no interest in personal fame or originality for its own sake, as this would be counter to Buddhist practice.

THERAPY OF BUDDHIST ART

All Buddhist images, artefacts and texts were made for spiritual purposes. It can be offensive to mistreat them and they should be shown respect. However, how this is interpreted can be confusing, as different cultures have varying traditions for the respectful treatment of Buddhist images, artefacts and texts. For example, one view is that no Buddhist image or text should be used commercially, while another view is that if the image has the potential to benefit the minds of living beings, then a commercial context might be acceptable.

Since the former view would be acceptable to all traditions, it might be easier for organisers to work from this perspective, and this is what is broadly detailed below.

Marketing :

Although it is usually acceptable to include an image of the Buddha or Buddhist symbols on a poster promoting a Buddhist event in a respectful way, it would not be respectful to use an image of Buddha, Bodhisattvas, deities, monks, nuns, teachers, artefact or text for any commercial purpose or purpose other than in keeping with Buddha's teaching. It would usually be considered offensive to use Buddhist images and texts for wrapping paper, coffee mugs, tea towels, tee shirts and all other commercial uses including licensing. Sometimes a Buddhist organisation will create objects for sale to fund raise, but with an intention of respect and to benefit others. If you are thinking of doing this, it is advisable to work in collaboration with a recognised Buddhist organisation.

Display :

Location of images – In Southeast Asia, Buddha statues are normally placed in a location removed from ordinary worldly affairs. Other traditions place a Buddha image in a place of prominence as a constant reminder of the importance of Buddhist teaching in all aspects of life. Both traditions are motivated by sincere respect for the teachings, but organisers may need to be aware of the practices relevant to the different traditions.

Height of images – Traditionally the image's feet were at or above the eye level of people in the room in order to avoid accidentally soiling the images. The Buddha image

was higher than any other figures displayed in the room. Elevation serves as a reminder of the importance of avoiding pride and ego." In general any Buddhist image, symbol, artefact or text should not be placed on the floor, walked over, sat on or had secular items placed on top of e.g. it would not be respectful to place a coffee cup on top of a Buddhist text or image.

Temples - in general treat all Buddha images with great respect; do not lean or climb on a Buddha, or point the feet directly at one and remove shoes before entering temple. Meat should not normally be brought into Temple grounds and there should be no photography or video taping without permission.

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