



Newsletter Archives

Evolution of the Buddha Image

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Buddha Image as Perceived in the Mind

The Buddha image, which completely revolutionalised, by its great dynamism, unimaginably diversified iconography, massive scale and unique spiritualism, the art scenario in ancient India, seems to have evolved upon human mind during the lifetime of the Buddha himself, although this image of mind took some six hundred years to emerge into stone or clay like mediums. As the Buddhist tradition has it, even during Buddha's lifetime, the idea of making his images persisted in his devotees' minds. The widely quoted legend of king Udayana, commissioning Buddha's image to represent the Great Master during his absence and that of Anathapindaka praying Buddha to allow at least the images of Bodhisattvas, suggest that his followers contemplated the possibility of covering their Master's absence by his anthropomorphic representations even before the Mahaparinirvana.



The Thousand Buddhas (Ajanta Cave 7)

Buddhism was a wide spread phenomenon even in the Buddha's lifetime and every place and person, devoted to this new path, cherished the desire to feel the presence of the Master. May be, the managers of the new faith thought of making his absence good by his images. There reflects in the subsequent iconic cult of the Thousand Buddha a prior tradition of thought, which sought symbolic multiplication of his presence, a Buddha for each of his devotees and for each corner of the earth where the Dharma was pursued.

Buddha, however, seems to have discouraged it, or at least, there prevailed conflicting views, as to whether Buddha, the pure existence, the Dharma-kaya, which the Buddha was, be allowed to be transformed into a material medium. It seems the latter of the two views prevailed and, despite that Buddhism related themes and episodes from Buddha's life were sculpted, making of the Buddha's image remained forbidden till quite late. Obviously, the Buddha image, an entity different from Buddha himself, which had evolved in human mind during Buddha's lifetime itself, could not be immediately transformed into a material medium.

The Ever First Image: A Thing Discovered, Not Made

It should be remembered that, howsoever thin, there is a dividing line between making an image and discovering or conceiving it. It seems that the first ever image defined by humanity was not a thing chiseled to a likeness, but such likeness was only discovered in it, that is, it was by sheer appearance that the ever first image emerged and occupied man's altar and mind.



A heap of boulders processed by nature to human likeness. Attending the sermon.



A natural stone-piece. The loving couple.

As suggests anthropological evidence, man had discovered his first image during Neolithic days itself (12000 - 8000 BC). It seems, the helpless primitive inhabitant, suffering at the hands of invisible forces, which he found beyond his control, looked for an alike invisible guardian, a thing divine, to protect him from the ire of these forces. The questing mind perceived in a stone boulder, which revealed 'a face' or a 'likeness', the 'image' of this 'invisible protector'. This stone-piece, shaped to a likeness by nature's chiseling, was perhaps the ever first image. The primitive mind accepted it sometimes as it was and sometimes after sculpting it to a more accurate form and figure.

It suggests that the image of the Divine, discovered or made, and its worship,

were quite in vogue much before Buddha's days.

Necessity of an Image

The statues of dancing girls, figurines of mother-goddess, seals depicting human and animal likenesses and a wide range of terracottas discovered from excavations at Indus and Harappan sites (3000 - 1500 BC), suggest that image related activity had quite widened subsequently to create both the votive and the secular images.

Idol-worship seems to have set its roots much before Vedic era began. As no unified or standard theological format regulated this worship cult, it was confined to local modes, character and significance. The cult of worshipping divine guardians, such as 'Lokpalas', or 'Dikpalas', or the regional Naga or Yaksha deities, was also pre-Vedic. Sakya, the clan Buddha was born in, had its own Yaksha deity, the Yaksha Sakyavardhana, the benevolent guardian of Sakyas. As prevailed the custom, soon after his birth, the child Buddha was presented to Yaksha Sakyavardhana for child's long life and glory. A number of votive statues of Yakshas and Nagas, from 4th to 1st century B.C., suggest how wide spread was the cult of idol worship. Buddha and Buddhism had reasons to discourage it, but also the pressure to at least think of it, as during those days, images



were one of the most widely accepted modes of realizing the presence of the 'non-present'. It was but natural that some of his followers thought of his image to cover his absence and strengthen the propagation of Dharma.

The Image from One Realized in Mind to That Realized in a Medium

It may, hence, safely be claimed that the Buddha image evolved first as an image of the mind and only then as the image transformed into a medium. In the creative process, the image of mind always precedes the image cast into a medium and the two stages are almost inseparable. In context to the Buddha image, however, both comprise two independent and distinct phases of evolution with a wide gap between. The image of mind seems to have appeared during Buddha's lifetime itself, but its visual aesthetics and transformation into a medium occurred around the 1st century A.D., that is, after some five to six hundred years. It is noticeable that this 1st century A.D. image is in no way a preliminary thing. It reveals, on the contrary, exceptional maturity of form and execution, something, which a newly innovated art form could hardly have. The spiritual fervor, which enshrouds it, is unique and adds to it further magnificence. Obviously, this Buddha image was not a newborn thing but rather only the visual transformation of the image, which had evolved long back and had matured over a period of six hundred years.

The two stages of the evolution of Buddha image are, thus, not only distinct but also quite meaningful. The anatomical perception of Buddha, such as his contemporary followers had in their mind, could represent his identifiable likeness but not the 'real Buddha', or the image that tradition had yet to define and mature. No physiognomy could characterize Buddha, as he was far beyond an anatomy. Samyutta Nikaya refers to Buddha equating himself with Dharma. He says, "who sees Dharma, sees me, who sees me, sees Dharma", that is, the sculptor was required to discover in the anatomical dimensions of the Buddha image the dimensions of the Dharma as

well. The Uttaratantra of Maitreya allows only such ones to draw Buddha's image who have imbibed into their beings charity, morals, patience and the highest point of excellence, that is, only him who has quality of soul, rather than the skill of hands, could draw the image of the Master.

Thus, before it was transformed into a medium, the Buddha image had to grow beyond its physiognomic dimensions and for that the gap in between its first emergence to its visual transformation was meaningful and significant. With Buddha's image, the sculptor's job was different. He was required to grasp rather 'the essential image' and not the mere physiognomy of the Great Master. The Lankavatara Sutra rightly puts it when it commands to paint beyond the aesthetic surfaces "the picture that is not in colors." Summarily, the camera vision of Buddha, or the image as it appeared upon the mind, alone did not comprise the Buddha image. The sculptor was required to imbue into it also the spiritual dimensions of his being and the dimensions of the Dharma. Hence, after its emergence and before its transformation into a visual medium, the Buddha image attained the desired level of excellence, which more than anything else represented his spiritual being and defined itself.

The Emergence of Buddhist Themes in Indian Art



Buddhist themes first make their appearance in art during the Mauryan era (322 - 180 BC) when Emperor Ashoka came out not only with Buddhist architecture but also a number of monolithic pillars surmounted with animal capitals aiming at invoking man's reverence for all creatures, which was the prime thrust of Buddhism.

Rulers of the Shunga dynasty (pre Christian era) were more specific. They sought to carve in stone episodes direct from Buddha's life, his teachings, scenes of adoration and other Buddha related themes. Buddha's anthropomorphic representations were, however, evaded. During over three hundred years of such Buddhist art his presence was made felt through a number of things or symbols but he was not directly portrayed.



The presence of Buddha realised in Stupa. The Shunga art idiom.

Transition from The Non-Visible to Visible Image



Dated carvings of 1st century B.C. from Chilla II

The first century B.C. marks the transition in Buddhist art from its non-visible to the visible image phase. Excavations at Chilla II (now in Pakistan) betray dated carvings of the 1st century B.C., which may be the earliest attempts at discovering Buddha's anthropomorphic image. In one of these carvings a stupa-form comprises figure's head,

while in the other, the stupa itself has been carved in anthropomorphic dimensions giving the impression of a human being.



Dated carvings of 1st century B.C. from Chilla II



Ajanta Cave 19

Ajanta caves and those at Pitalkhora, Kanheri, Bhaja, Karla etceteras powerfully depict this transition. The 2nd century B.C. caves have simply a stupa, without any kind of Buddha's anthropomorphic representations, enshrining them, whereas in the subsequent caves carved in the 1st century B.C. such stupa has Buddha's icons in its niches on all four sides.

It seems, the mind of the Buddhist sculptor, which had so far wrestled between the 'image' and the 'non-image', had at last discovered 'one' in the 'other', that is, the motif in man and the man in motif.

An Image for the Eye

The image proper, that is, a fully evolved image with anthropomorphic dimensions, appears around the 1st century A.D. There is, amongst the Buddha statues, reported from Mathura, a dated one of A.D. 81. Some of the gold and copper coins of Kanishka, who ruled from 78 A.D. onward, have Buddha images on their reverse.



**Kanishka Coin
(100 B.C.)**



**Buddha Image (Stucco)
from Mathura. 1st century A.D**

The obverse side has figures of Kanishka himself. Buddha's stucco images are also reported from around the same 1st century A.D. The stucco image of the Buddha, in the collection of Mathura Museum, belongs stylistically to the same iconic group to which the A.D. 81 Buddha image belongs.

There are numerous other Buddha images, which do not have inscriptions on them, but stylistically they, too, belong to the 1st century A.D. or the earlier part of the 2nd. Such massive bulk of them, multiplicity of mediums, unique dynamism, spirituality and stylistic perfection could not be their character unless the Buddha image, even as a concept of mind, had a long period of maturity. Indeed, Metals, stone, clay, stucco all could not be the medium of a just born image.

Which First, Mathura or Gandhara?

There is almost unanimity as to the stand that the earliest and the fully evolved Buddha image came into being around the 1st century A.D., but, it is yet a matter of debate whether such early image, or rather images, were sculpted at Mathura or in Gandhara region (now known as the north west frontier in Pakistan). There are also conflicting views as to whether such images were of Indian origin or were brain-piece of Indo-Greek rulers and were thus foreign born. Most scholars assert that the Gandhara images of Buddha are earlier to those of Mathura. As regards Mathura, it definitely began sculpting Buddha's images in 1st century A.D. itself. It has a fully evolved inscribed image of A.D. 81. Incidentally, Mathura has also revealed a dated (AD 90) large size statue of King Kanishka of Kushana dynasty, of which now only the torso remains.

It is excellent in its modeling and anatomical proportions. Numerous other early images of Buddha, including a rare piece in stucco, are also reported from Mathura. They are either undated or the date has been effaced rendering it difficult to decipher. However, in their modeling, these images have great similarity with this Kanishka statue. It, hence, appears certain that they, too, belong to the 1st century A.D. and also that Buddha image was those days the prime theme and thrust of Mathura art.

The scholars asserting the priority of Gandhara claim that the Buddha image originated in Gandhara and the Mathura image of Buddha was the result of its inspiration, although as against the dated Mathura images, none of the reported Gandhara images of Buddha has a date inscribed on it. Such claim is based primarily on three assumptions, namely, (a) India's early art was aniconic or unanthropomorphic; iconic or anthropomorphic perception of Divine image came to India from Greek art through the Indo-Greek rulers of Gandhara regions and later through Kushanas (25 AD - 150 AD); (b) early Indian art was bas-relief based and sculpture was not its style; and (c) in its modeling Buddha figure is an Indianized version of the Greek god Apollo.

Is the Initial Buddha Image a Copy of a Greek Model or Evolved Out of Indigenous Models?

As regards the modeling of the Buddha image, these scholars assert its non-Indian origin. They emphasize that monks in ancient India wore hardly any or only minimum cloth. Hence, Buddha's voluminous drapery with heavy pleats, an imitation of Roman toga, is non-Indian. A hero-like heavily built physique does not befit an Indian monk. Buddha is known to have shaven off his hair. Obviously the Buddha image, modeled with matted hair (jatamukuta), is only an imitation of Greek models. And, finally, figure's aesthetic beauty is characteristic to Greek art. The art of



Headless dated statue of Kaniska. Mathura, The dated portrait statues of the Kushan royalty enable dating of undated Kushan Buddha and bodhisattva images. They also provide evidence of the impulse in the anthro-pomorphization of the Buddha.

Mathura inherited these features from Gandhara for its Buddha image. It hence represents a phase of Buddha image subsequent to Gandhara.



Sanchi. Worship of headdress. A fully evolved iconography in pre-image phase of Buddhist art. (2nd - 1st century B.C)

It is historically true that the Emperor Ashoka had friendly ties with Persian and Greek rulers and had emissaries at each other's court. Ashoka had at his court some Greek and Persian architects, artists and masons also and allowed them to import from their lands excellence of their country's art. It was a phase of large-scale exchange of art and cultural values and, as is sometimes acclaimed, some of Ashokan monolithic columns were the works of these Greek sculptors. Obviously, the Greek, and to some extent Persian influence on Indian art cannot be denied. It is, however, difficult to admit that ancient Indian art was aniconic and did not have iconic perception. As has been discussed before, India had iconic perception right since Neolithic days. As early as the Indus days, India had a well-evolved iconography and Buddha's image itself had evolved during his lifetime, though it was not, for whatever reasons, transformed into a visual medium. A vivid, versatile and dynamically charged iconography defined the Buddhist art of the said 'pre-image' period. Even Buddha's presence was portrayed, though not by his anthropomorphic representations.

It is true that the early Indian art, which was by and large thematic in its rendition, found in the bas-relief technique a more suitable art-mode for depicting or serializing a running theme, but it is not true that it did not have sculptural art. These reliefs themselves were sculpted deep enough to acquire dimensions of sculptural art.



Sanchi. Bas-relief with sculptural multi-dimensionality. (2nd - 1st century B.C)



**Didarganj
Yakshi from 3rd/
2nd century B.C**

The Yaksha and Yakshi statues from the 4th, 3rd and 2nd century B.C. are examples of a well evolved and elaborate sculptural art to have prevailed in India long before she had any links with Persian and Greek worlds.

As a matter of fact, in a rapidly changing ritual and religious climate in India, Buddhism was finding it increasingly difficult to desist anthropomorphic icons. Idol-worship was in vogue amongst various sections, specially the lower strata of Indian society and Vedic Aryans had almost given up their impersonalism and unanthropomorphism. This compelled Buddhism, too, to give a fresh thought as to resorting to image of their Master, which could help counter these factors. As a result, in the 1st century B.C. itself, the Buddhist mind had begun striving for realizing the Divine Master in iconic representations. May be, the Greek models further emboldened it to go for them.

Much emphasis has been laid on the modeling aspect of Buddha image. As a matter of fact, it was around Mathura, towards eastern part and in Central India that there prevailed a well-evolved tradition of sculptural art. All Yaksha and Yakshi statues are reported from these areas, Patna, Didarganj, Parkhama etceteras. In their physiognomic character Mathura's Buddha images are close to these earlier models. They have the same heroic gorgeous build, round face and format, aesthetic beauty and dynamism. What distinguishes them from these earlier models, or even from Greek models, is their spiritual realization and beatitude. The Mathura images of

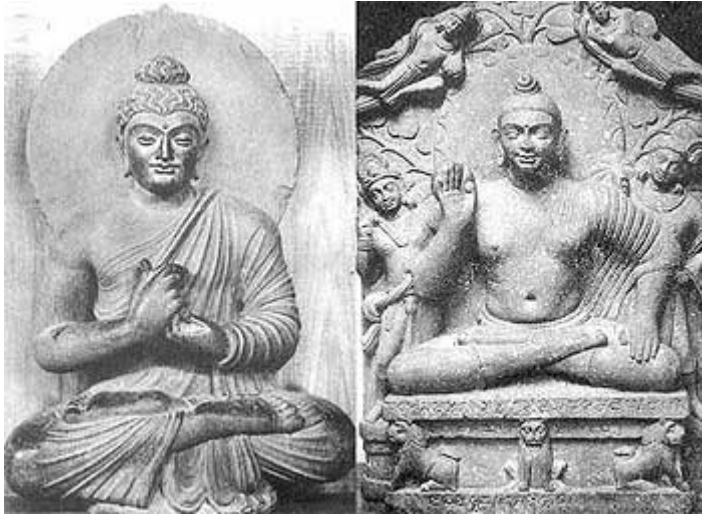
Buddha do not have such voluminous drapery as have Gandhara images, which have greater Greek influence. They have been clothed more like Patna Yaksha and Didarganj Yakshi.

Mathura versus Gandhara

Thus, it is obvious that Mathura image of Buddha, irrespective of whether it preceded Gandhara image or the Gandhara image preceded it, is an independent and full fledged genre grown out of indigenous tradition and by sharing elements of Greek art reaching it through its Kushana rulers. The two types have some elements in common but the points of departure are no less. Gandhara images of Buddha are more akin to Greek models, whereas Mathura images show a continuity of its own indigenous tradition.



**Relief with scenes from the
Buddha's life showing clear Greek
influence. Pakistan (ancient
Gandhara); 2nd/3rd cen. Gray
schist; 60 X 37.1 X 7.3 cm (235/8 X
145/8 X 27/8 in.)**



In Mathura art tradition, Buddha image has longer earlobes, thicker lips, wider eyes and prominent noses. In Gandhara images, eyes are longer, chin more angular, earlobes shorter and noses more sharp and better defined.

Pursuing Greek models the Gandhara sculptors preferred voluminous drapery with heavy pleats for their images. It covers almost the entire figure of the Great Master. In Mathura, the drapery is thin and transparent, has subdued pleats and usually covers his person only

partially. In Gandhara images the curls of hair in jatamukuta are more pronounced, while in Mathura images the jatamukuta rises as coils a rope and is more like that of a recluse in Vedic tradition. And, finally, the Gandhara images have greater aesthetic charm as compared to Mathura images.

In later phase of Mathura art, the Gandhara influence was more pronounced, although it was also its deteriorating phase and it did not have much of the Buddhist art after 3rd-4th century. Gandhara art style dominated the Buddhist art scenario and thereby the iconography of Buddha image for some two hundred years, that is, across the second and third century, but its influence was more pronounced in north-west region and some part of central India. At centers like Ajanta, Pitalkhora, Kanheri, Amaravati, Bhaja etceteras, the Buddha images of the corresponding period show altogether different features.

They little incline to be robust or heroic in their over all build. There emerged in their physiognomy a kind of feminism or the tenderness of a prince rather than the toughness of a monk.



Buddha image from Ajanta. A simpler iconography

Buddha Image Under the Guptas



Under the benevolent patronage and inspiration of the Gupta rulers (320 - 646 AD), the art of sculpture attained its all-time height. The Buddha images of Mathura and Gandhara phases were definitely magnificent and gorgeous, but the Gupta images were not only different but also without a parallel before and after. In accordance with the artistic perception of a spiritual image and of the era, these Buddha images of the subsequent period have enshrined on their faces a kind of celestial calm, serenity, a gentle smile, divine glow and unique composure. (illus) With a distinction of its own, there developed at Sarnath a great center of Buddhism and Buddhist art. Sarnath came out with its own image of Buddha, unique in its spiritual perception and enchanting in aesthetic glow. There enshrines upon the lips of Sarnath Buddha image a gentle celestial smile and on the calm oval face the lyrical tenderness of a full blooming rose. It has retained the long earlobes of the Mathura image but its massive physiognomy has been replaced by a tender slender figure with long arms and fine delicate long fingers. The robe has greater transparency as has a wet silk garment. The image has greater thematic thrust and is more expressive. Embellishment becomes more pronounced and the earlier

halo has now a more decorative character.

Some two hundred miles ahead of Sarnath, towards its east, as also some two hundred years after Sarnath image of Buddha had evolved, there developed at Nalanda, under Pala rulers (750 - 1185 AD), who were themselves followers of Buddhism, an alike significant center of Buddhism and Buddhist art. Nalanda was a great center of Buddhist learning as well attracting hundreds of Buddha's eager disciples from all over the world to come to Nalanda to study and learn the Law. They wished to carry with them the icons of the Great Master. Hence, the Buddhist image shifted now from stone, stucco or clay to metals - copper, bronze, brass and gilded copper. Stylistically, the Nalanda image of Buddha followed broadly the features of Sarnath, but the figures were now taller and the robe was longer trailing much below the knees. The Nalanda images have slightly open eyes and a more transparent garment.



Buddha: A Monk Teacher Pala style, circa A.D. 7th-8th century Nalanda, Bihar, Eastern India Bronze, 27.8 X 8.8 X 6.8 cm



Buddha Calling Upon Mother Earth to Bear Witness Pala, Bengal, circa A.D. 11th century Stone, 56 X 32.5 X 17.5 cm

The Pala patronage continued for over three hundred years. In the meantime there evolved under them several other centers of Buddhist art, though the images of this subsequent period, rendered both in stone and metals, did not make any significant departure from the earlier tradition. Buddhism was by now the dominant religion of China. In tune with its local tradition, China added to Buddha image the grandeur and magnificence befitting an emperor as also its dragon like traditional motifs. This Chinese influence came back to India and defined Buddha images of the subsequent Pala period. These images show exceptional interest in dragon type Chinese motifs and other decorative elements.

Buddhism and Buddhist art began losing its significance in India except in the Himalayan region after the Pala period. In India, Buddhism was now the religion primarily of Tibet, Nepal and Ladakh like hilly regions where it is yet the principal faith of people. These places not only interpreted Buddhism in their own way but also discovered their art style, idiom and mediums. They preferred textile as their prime medium and Thangka as their art form. Stone worth sculpting being a rarity, stone images were evaded. Different from earlier perception, Buddha was their benevolent deity protecting them from all their calamities and at the same time redeeming them from the cycle of death and birth. This multiplied Buddha's iconic perception and Buddha emerged now in various roles from the giver of medicine to salvation.

During over 2500 years of its emergence the Buddha image has always been growing and evolving and is today the most loved and preferred image for a drawing room, irrespective to whom and to which land it belongs.



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