



Historical Significance Of Buddha Murti (Statue) W.R.T. Gandhara And Mathura Art Form

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Abstract: Currently, Buddhism is one of the foremost religions in the World, which gained a significant following within India since its revival in the mid-20th century by foremost scholars like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Bhikkhu Jagdish Kasyap and Anagarika Dhammapala etc. Within the academic field, specially in Indian social and humanities studies curriculum, Buddhist philosophy, history as well as the art and architectures achieved a special place. With excavation of Buddhist sculptures, icons and stupas, along with remains of mahāvihāras from regions of Gandhara, Mathura, Orissa, Ajanta etc. regions, studies on its architectural style and artistic significance, has been gaining interest of several scholars and art enthusiasts. In the present article, the inception and development of Buddhist sculpture making, along with the various ceremonies for crafting such idols has been discussed.

Keywords: Buddha, Gandhara, Mahāyāna, Mathura, Morality, Wisdom, Concentration, Caityas, Iconography, Pañcabuddha, Greek, Tibet

Introduction

The essence of Buddha Śākyamuni's teachings was about liberation from the impermanent cycle of *samsara*. He realized that even though the world is full of sufferings, still the sentient beings cannot see these sufferings because they are blinded by delusions. They consider the causes of suffering as the real happiness and remain immersed in it. That is why they are experiencing endless sufferings and are continuously increasing their cycle of sufferings. For this reason, Buddha Śākyamuni, in his first sermon at Sārnāth proclaimed suffering as the First Noble Truth and also told what its cause is (Second Noble Truth). If those causes are eliminated, then one can be completely free from all forms of pain and sufferings (The Third Noble Truth). For this, he showed us the solution i.e., the path of cessation of suffering (the Fourth Noble Truth). He taught that by following this path one can be free from all forms of sufferings and attain the state of peaceful nirvana i.e., enlightenment. This path preached by Buddha

Śākyamuni is what we call today as Buddhism. The Fourth Noble Truth or the *Ārya Mārga Satra* refers to the antidote to the causes of Suffering, which are classified in Eight limbs, which are as follows-

- i. Authentic View (Skt. *Samyak dr̥ṣṭi*)
- ii. Authentic Intention (Skt. *Samyak Saṃkalpa*)
- iii. Authentic Speech (Skt. *Samyak Vāka*)
- iv. Authentic Action (Skt. *Samyak Karmānta*)
- v. Authentic Livelihood (Skt. *Samyak Jīvikā*)
- vi. Authentic Endeavor (Skt. *Samyak Vyāyāma*)
- vii. Authentic Mindfulness (Skt. *Samyak Smṛtiḥ*)
- viii. Authentic Meditative Absorption (Skt. *Samyak Samādhi*)

He has synchronized training of morality (Skt. *Śīla*), concentration (Skt. *śamādhi*) and wisdom (*prajñā*) comprised in this path¹. By practicing them, a person can end his/her delusions (Skt. *kleśa*) completely, because delusions are the cause of this cyclic existence. Person acts under the influence of delusion which arises from craving (Skt. *Tṛṣṇā*). As a result, one is forced to take birth in the form of different species to enjoy or suffer the results of those actions. In this way, their progeny does not end. Therefore, Buddha propounded the way for the living beings to be free from delusion. He taught about the virtuous and non-virtuous deeds and gave the solution to reach peaceful-nirvana by accumulating the virtuous deeds and by abandoning non-virtuous deeds. In the later period, when Mahāyāna prevailed, we see that in order to attain Nirvana or Buddha-hood, a person has to accumulate merit and wisdom along with overcoming delusion. It takes thousands of *kalpas* (Eng. Aeon) to reach this position even through this path. By accumulating merit in each of these births, a person is eventually able to attain Buddhahood. In Buddhism, it is accepted that within every living being is the seed to become a Buddha. This Buddhahood is covered by afflictive obstructions (Skt. *Kleśāvaraṇam*) and cognitive obstructions (Skt. *Jñeyāvaraṇam*). When the living beings dispel these two obstructions then they become Buddha.

In this way, we can see that in the later period, Buddha idols, iconographies, stupas, etc. were built in the society for the purpose of accumulation of merit but there is no evidence that Buddha Śākyamuni has rendered it. It is said that Buddha himself prohibited the making of his own idols. This was the reason that idols of Buddha were not made for a long time. For this reason, in the beginning, his followers started worshipping *caityas*, Bodhi-tree, *cakras* etc. as symbols of Buddha. A popular Buddhist verse *Cetiyavandanā* chanted during Buddha puja offering states-

Vandāmi cetam sabbam thānesu patthitam

Saririkhātu mahābodhi Buddha rupam sakalam sadā

¹ Among these Noble Eight-fold Path, Authentic View and Authentic Intention are encompassed within Wisdom (Skt, *Prajñā*); Authentic Speech, Authentic Action and Authentic Livelihood are encompassed within Morality (Skt. *Śīla*); Authentic Endeavor, Authentic Mindfulness and Authentic Meditative Absorption are included within the training of Concentration (Skt, *Samādhi*). These Three Trainings constitute the three main pillars of Buddhism.

Eng.: I pay homage to all Cetiya,
That have been enshrined,
To the Buddha Relics, the Mahā Bodhi and
To all the sacred Buddha images.

Presently, some scholars believe that Buddhist idols were first built in Mathura during the Kuṣāṇa period. Whereas, some other scholars claim those were built in Gandhara. Despite this, the Buddhist literature gives evidence of the construction of the Buddha idol during the Buddha's lifetime. In course of time, along with the spread of Mahāyāna tradition, numerous idols of Buddha and Bodhisattvas started being made. Along with Ādibuddha and Vajrasattva, idols *Pañcabuddha* (Five Buddhas)² started being made. These *Pañcabuddhas* are the symbol of different knowledge and actions of Ādibuddha, not Maṇuṣi Buddha (Mortal Buddha). Then the appearance of various Bodhisattvas representing the Buddha's compassion, wisdom and power etc. and the idols of their *Dharmakāya* (absolute or truth body) and *Sambhogakāya* (enjoyment body) started coming into existence. Today, looking at the idols symbolizing these different types of peaceful and violent Buddhist arts, one naturally wonders as to when these idols started to be made and when did its rules and regulations and the classical methods start. Therefore, it has to pay attention to its historical and social aspects.

Methodology of the Research

In order to enrich the contents of the article the following methodologies were applied-

- i. Literature sources- Tracing the accounts of the life of Buddha Śākyamuni in the context historical accounts depicting event related to topic of the present article is a challenging task considering the fact that most sources available are in Pali, Tibetan and Chinese languages in hagiographic form and moreover each interpretation sometimes differs from the another. Commonly the Chinese interpretation of History of Buddhism and travelogues attributed to Fahien and Huen Tsang are among the primary sources cited here. The Tibetan interpretations available in historical chronicles like *Deb-ther Ngon-po* (Blue Annals) Go Lotsava Shonnu Pel, Buton's History of Buddhism (Wyl. bu-ston chos-'byung) or Taranatha's History of Buddhism (Wyl. rgya-gar chos-'byung) are sources depicts an extensive life story of Buddha and the spread of his teachings. With a comparative study of the Tibetan, Chinese and Indian sources, the background on the origin of Buddhist idol making, its spread and procedures are been mentioned in the present article.

² The Five Peaceful Buddha: Vairocana, Akśobhya, Ratnasambhava, Amitābha and Amoghasiddhi.

- ii. Fieldwork- A fieldwork for collecting the primary sources, i.e., the Tibetan canonical text was conducted during last few months, to various research museums and online databases like Asiatic Society of India in Kolkata, Mahabodhi Society library in Kolkata, Visva Bharati library and Internet Archive Database. Mahabodhi Society Library possess various research documents related to Sino-Indo-Tibetan Studies. Apart from that, it has the entire set of works of Fahien and Huen Tsang in their Library. Cheena Bhavana is a renowned center a vast library possessing numerous Indian Buddhists texts translated into Chinese. It also has numerous texts which were restored into Sanskrit language and translated into English language, like Pali Suttas in Bengali and English translation. Asiatic Society of India, Kolkata has the entire Tibetan Buddhist Canon, as well as numerous research papers, books on similar topic.
- iii. Data Mining- Online archival databases like Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC), Adarshah and Internet Archive has been analyzed for unveiling both primary sources and secondary sources within the millions of texts within its contents. These online archives helped in gather numerous significant texts like Oral Instructions of H.H. the XIV Dalai Lama which were later published in the printed form, and is available as e-book format in BDRC archive. Numerous Tibetan Canonical editions of Tangyur like Narthang, Lhasa, Derge and Coné etc., are available within the Adarsha database, along with their catalogue which helps in identifying the locations of the texts within the xylographs. Internet Archive is the largest archival website containing millions of books which could be read online, thus helps in both time management and financially.
- The list of citations that are presented in the bibliography are mostly the sources consulted while preparing the synopsis. Few rare books are also being mentioned here which were gathered from renowned libraries of India by means of field work and data mining. The list is presented at the end in the reference. The text citations are prepared following the APA (American Psychological Association) style.

Results and Discussions

Evidence of Buddha Idol Making in Śākyamuni Buddha's Time

There are many proofs in Buddhist literature that the making of Buddha idol started at the time of Buddha. It is known from *Divyāvadāna* that the portrait of Buddha started being made during Buddha's time.³ King Rudrayana of Roruk sent a valuable gift to king Bimbisara of Magadha. When its value was assessed, it was felt that the gift was more valuable than the amount of money in Bimbisara's treasury. Magadha King was in confusion as to what to send instead? It was decided that a request should be made to Tathagata Buddha about this. Buddha Tathagata said that- "there is nothing more valuable than Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. That is why make my image and send it by writing the *Sūtra of Twelve links of Dependent Origination* (Skt. *Pratītyasamutpāda-sūtra*) on it." Likewise, the painters were called.

³ *Divyavadāna*, p.p.- 465-466

The problem was how to make a picture of Bhagavāna Buddha, because nobody's eyes could stand in front of his glory. Then Bhagavāna himself suggested that a cloth should be hung on the front wall. When the morning rays came out, He stood at the door. His shadow fell on the cloth and painters painted the picture of Buddha after seeing the reflection. After that, the *Sūtra of Twelve Links of Dependent Origination* was written and sent with great fanfare. Another interpretation states that Buddha stood near a pond and the artists made the portrait based on His reflection on water.

Similarly, it is also said that the fame of Buddha had reached the country of Sinhala during the lifetime of Buddha. The princess of Sinhala country got curious to know about Buddha. It is said that the picture of Buddha was made to satisfy this curiosity⁴. Its details are found in *Muktalatāvadāna*. Muktalatā was born as a princess of Sinhala. Once upon a time, some merchants of Śravastī, while sailing in the sea, stayed in Sinhala. At the night, the merchants were singing the teachings of Buddha in hymns. The princess heard them and, in the morning, went to those people and inquired about those words and came to know that they were the Buddha's teachings. On hearing this, reverence and curiosity arose in her mind about how the Buddha looks. She sent three Drona⁵ pearls and a message as a gift to Buddha. On receiving the gift and the message of Muktalatā from the hands of these traders, Buddha also made his beautiful portrait and sent it to the Sinhala princess⁶.

It is mentioned in the text *Samyaksambuddha-bhāṣita-pratimā-lakṣmaṇa* that when the Buddha was about to go to preach the Dharma to his mother Māyādevī who was living in the Tuṣita heaven, Śāriputra in Jetavan asked Lord Buddha, "Lord, how should devout noble sons and daughters worship and honour the Buddha in the absence of the Lord or after attaining Parinirvāṇa?" Then Buddha commanded Śāriputra to make a gross, beautiful and flowing idol of dimensions of the nyagrodha tree in such a situation, with all the limbs and appendages⁷. In this context it is said that when Buddha went to Tuṣita heaven, Jetavan vihāra seemed empty to Anāthpindaka. He felt it was not right. When Bhagavāna is not present, a statue of His should be kept instead and thus, he plead to Śāriputra with his request. Śāriputra requested the Lord and He gave His permission, so an idol of Sandalwood was made and placed in the shrine chamber.

Fahien, a Chinese traveler of the fourth century and Huen Tsang of the seventh century both of whom visited India have also given details of the construction of the Buddha statue during Buddha's lifetime. According to Fahien, during Buddha's long absence, King Prasenjit made a sandalwood statue

⁴ Rigdzin Paljor, *zhi khro rab 'byams rgyal ban yid kyi sku gzugs las cha tshad glu dbyangs sgrog*, Dharamsala, 1987

⁵ 1 Drona is equal to approximately 12.5 Kilograms.

⁶ Tenzin, Pema. (2013) *Muktalatāvadāna*. Sarnath: CIHTS.

⁷ 'Samyaksambuddhabhāṣitaṃ Pratimālakṣaṇam', *Dhīh*: 35. P.- 126

of Buddha and worshipped it and installed it on a high seat where he usually sat⁸. Similarly, according to Huen Tsang, King Udayana of Kausambi got a sandalwood statue of Buddha made and installed it for worship⁹. According to the Tibetan historian Lama Taranatha, after Buddha's Parinirvana, there were no skilled sculptors in India. Accordingly, the Buddha statue was started by Brahmin Jassa's younger son Kalyāṇa. Jassa had three sons. Among them, Jaya built a statue of Buddha and a vihara in Sarnath, Varanasi as per the instructions of his mother. The second son Sujaya built the statue and temple of Buddha in Venuvana of Rajagriha. The younger son Kalyāṇa built a statue in Vajrāsana (Bodhgaya). It is said that he had forbidden anyone, even the temple people, from entering the temple for a week. After six days, the mother knocked on the door. He said that it has been only six days, the door will be opened tomorrow morning. Then the mother said that she will die that very night, so, even if she sees, no one will be able to know whether his idol resembles Tathagata or not. At his mother's plea, he opened the door and the mother inspected the idol made in the temple thoroughly. All the body parts resembled Buddha. But due to not being completed for a week, some imperfections remained from the point of view of craftsmanship, like the thumb of the right foot. Some consider the depiction of the coiled hair to be incomplete¹⁰.

Some scholars considers that construction of *Caitya* for worship had also started from the Buddha era in Eastern India. It is known from *Mahāparinirvānasūtra*, *Kṣudrakavinayavastu* etc., texts that Buddha had given the order to build *Caityas*. Similarly, it is known from *Avadānaśataka* and *Divyadāna* that making stupas on the nails and hair relics of Buddha and worshipping them had started in the Buddha era itself. Stupas are mentioned again and again in Mahāyāna sutras like *Saddharmapuṇḍarika* etc. It is mentioned in *Aṭṭhakatha* of *Kusa Jātaka* of *Khuddakanikaya* that golden idols of Buddha were worshipped. In this way, Buddha idols are also mentioned in *Vinaya Atthakatha* of Buddhaghosa and in *Pancasudhini* and *Manorathpurni*.¹¹

Construction of Caityas and Stupas and their Symbolic Worship

According to *Mahāparinirvānasūtra*, when Buddha's close disciple Ānanda asked Buddha about how to respect the relics of Tathagata when he was about to attain Mahāparinirvāna, Buddha replied that the body or relics of Tathagata should be respected in the same was as the relics of a *cakravartin* king are respected. Just as a stupa is built on the remains of the body of a *cakravartin* king, similarly a stupa should be built for Tathagata. This shows that the tradition of building stupas was already prevalent in India.

⁸ Giles, H.A. *The Travels of Fa Hsien*. p.p.- 30-31. London

⁹ Samuel, Bill. *Buddhist Records of the Western World*. p.p.- 235-236

¹⁰ Taranatha, Lama. (1972) *Bhārat Mein Boudhdharna Kā Itihās*. Patna: K.P. Jayaswal Research Institute. p.p. 14-15

¹¹ Lal, Angne. 'Boudh Pratima Vigyan: Ek Vihangam Dristi', *Dhih: Vol. 32*. Sarnath: CIHTS. p. 108

Iconographic Standards

In both Theravada and Mahayana literature, there is a similar description of Thirty-two Major and Eighty Minor Marks of Buddha, which was sufficient for the making of the Buddha statue. In the regions of Mathura, Udaypur and Madhya Pradesh statues of Saṃkarṣaṇa, Vāsudeva and Balarāma were found which dates back to second & first century before common-era. Still, scholars believe that Buddha's statues were not made till the first century BCE. Only symbolic worship was prevalent. A.K. Coomaraswamy in his book '*The Origin of the Buddha Image*' stated it as 'imageless iconography'¹².

Nevertheless, there are considerable differences of opinion among historians and archeologists regarding the historical making of the Buddha statue. Some scholars believe that the Buddha statue was first made in Mathura during the Kuṣāṇa period, while some believe that it started in Gandhara. When Buddha statues began to be made during the Kuṣāṇa period, scholars believe that the sculptors had models of statues of Yakṣa, Saṃkarṣaṇa etc. in front of them. That is why the Buddha statues of that time became very shapely and beautiful. Those scholars who accept the creation of the Buddha in Gandhara believe that the sculptors had Greek and Hellenistic designs at the time. Due to its influence, the early Buddha idols made there appear strong, with hair, moustache and adorned with clothes. Those who believe that it originated in Gandhara in the north-west argue that the first Buddha idol was made in Gandhara art and its creators were Greek artists. From them, the artists of Mathura adopted this style. On the other hand, those who give their opinion regarding its first creation in Mathura art believe that there was an independent tradition of making Buddha idols in the Mathura region, which was completely free from the influence of Gandhara art.

Construction of Idols of Bodhisattvas and Tantrik Deities

In the Kuṣāṇa period, along with the statues of Lord Buddha, statues of Bodhisattvas were also being made. Some scholars associate it with Mahāyana tradition. They believe that in Mahāsaṃghika, Sarvāstivāda and later Mahāyāna sects, Buddha has been given a super natural form and as a result, many Buddha and Bodhisattvas and later under the influence of Mantrayana, many Hindu gods and goddesses appeared in the Buddhist tradition and started being worshipped and their statues were made. The primary among these are the *Pañcabuddha*, i.e., Vairocana, Akśobhya, Ratnasambhava, Amitābha and Amoghasiddhi, Sculptures of bodhisattvas like Avalokitesvara, Maitreya and Vajrapani etc.¹³ were also made. Later, in North India, with popularity of Tantrik Buddhism, statues of tantra deities and protectors were also made.

¹² Coomaraswamy, A.K. (1972) *The Origin of the Buddha Image*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal

¹³ Ārya Avalokiteśvara (The Bodhisattva of Compassion), Ārya Mañjuśrī (Bodhisattva of Wisdom), Ārya Vajrapani (Bodhisattva of Power).

Conclusion

It is documented in Buddhist scriptures that making statues of Buddha of a size of a small mustard seed will also bring great merit to the maker. In Buddhist texts, it is said that the statue must be made of clay, stone, wood, bones, iron, gold, silver, crystal, red pearl, conch etc. Making Buddha statues with these ingredients helps in reducing the demerits of the maker to some extent. Likewise, in Mantrayani sect, it is believed that making idols of Buddha, root guru, tutelary deities, dāka or dākinis, dharma protectors etc., also brings great merit to the maker. People seeing, praying or circumambulating these idols are gaining merits for gaining a higher realm in their next life.

As mentioned previously, the literary sources cited from Pali, Sanskrit, Tibetan and Chinese are primarily cited for the origin and development of Buddhist architecture, its variation in other regions. Similarly, statues present in Museums of Bihar, Kolkata National Museum, Sarnath Museum etc., which were excavated by various scholars from Madhyadesa, where Buddha Śākyamuni primarily resided and preached are of great significance and clues for further availability of such statues, Buddhist monasteries, Stupas etc. Similarly, in Kashmir where the Gandhara, Greek influenced artform has been found are of great historical significance of not just India, but its relation with cultures of other Asian cultures as well as the western cultures. Keeping aside the political conflicts, archeologist and historians with help of Buddhologist can unearth more of the lost treasures of Indian knowledge and architectural achievements. Likewise, the procedures of making a Buddha Idol requires a virtuous mind, with thought of welfare of many along with self. Thus, keeping this ritual in mind, avoiding all evil, selfish or thoughts of worldly pleasures one must construct a statue, stupa or monastery.

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