NOTES & TOPICS

Book Review

SANGS-RGYAS STONG
- An Introduction to Mahayana Iconography
by Nirmal C. Sinha
Published by Sikkim Research Institute of Tibetology,
Gangtok, India, Price Rs. 150

That the Buddhist art and BuddhistIconas go together needs hardly any elaboration and
is conspicuous through its various modes of creation of such artistic objects as painting,
sculpture or icons. It is more so in the case of Mahayana art forms as developed and
practised in Tibet, Mongolia and trans-Himalayas. What is however, not so well known or
usually go unnoticed is the fact that these art forms together with their basic concepts had
also traveled to the north along with Buddhism from India. The principles underlying these
art forms totally differ from those of the Western mode of expression essentially represen-
tational in character and based on mass, volume, dimension etc. treated against
perspective view of things and objects. On the other hand the art forms practised and
developed in India and the countries of South East Asia, China, Japan, Central Asia and
Trans-Himalayas professing both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism have been based
on linear decorative compositions on a single plane in total disregard of the perspective
view. This applies with the icons both Brahmanic and Buddhist where the same linear-
decorative principles predominate rather than the anatomical perfections of the Greek
models be it depicted in Buddha Rupa, forms of gods and goddesses or symbolic repre-
sentation of sea, animal, floral or other motifs or any other natural phenomena.

Buddhist art is for that matter the Mahayanic art due to its strict adherence to scriptural
injunctions and intitate doctrinaire preoccupations defy any direct understanding by a
common observer. It is with a view to facilitate such understanding that the Sikkim
Research Institute of Tibetology has come out with its latest publication "Sangs-rgyas
Stong; Sahaara Buddha, sub-titled "An Introduction to Mahayana Iconography"-- a handy
exposition of the secrets of Mahayana Buddhist icons, lucidly narrated by Prof. Nirmal C.
Sinha, the Director of the Institute and formally released by Mr. T.V. Rana, the
Governor of Sikkim and the President, Sikkim Research Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok.

The author in his preface has stated the objective of the publication that: "A book on
Mahayana Iconography simple for the beginner and lucid for the general reader is not an
easy task. The task is made doubly difficult when it is desired that the book should be
acceptable to the specialist". That both these purposes have been amply served is clearly
manifest on the pages of the book. In fact and as stated by the author, he followed the advice
of a specialist of Stella Kramarsch's standing according to whom "the best exposition of
Mahayana icons was to present or project the believer's point of view". The author had
accepted the assignment "with due humility keeping in mind the advice" of a leading
authority at Madame Stella Kramarsch and drawing upon his "on-the-spot knowledge" of
Mahayana monasteries in Himalayas, Trans-Himalayas and Bakhals. Himself a distin-
guished historian and an authority on Northern Buddhism, the author's treatment of the
subject testifies to his insight and his claim of direct access to the mysteries of the Mahayana pantheon as depicted through art forms.

It is indeed a fascinating study to know about the proliferation of Buddha Rupa into thousand (Sahara) through the meditative visions of the devotees or through the believers' eyes, about the t-rols (Pratika) and their significance, the emergence of three levels of Buddha Rupa (Trilaya) and above all the overriding principles of 'Dharma' encompassing all animate being through which one gets a glimpse— a rare acquaintance with a world since shrouded in mystery but profoundly implied with a sense far exceeding the mundane estimates of our life.

If we consider the circumstances of Buddhism's entry into Tibet, we would find that its impact was that of a distant echo— much of it had an appeal towards mystery so that the search was inwardly. Naturally, the result was partly fantasy, early deep meditational trance— further resulting into vision of images and emergence of numerous forms with numerous variations depending on the individual attainment of the devotees.

In this context, Buddha Rupa also become symbolic in the eyes of the believers, Buddha is not 'Rupa Kaya' (sacred form or 'Bhavas'). He is an 'embous' (of the Absolute— 'Shunya' or Void) rather than a 'body' (of imputations). However for the sake of comprehension of our senses we need to pass through the stages and travel gradually from least to transcendent. Hence, the emergence of Buddha Rupa in three levels (Trilaya), Nemanaka kaya (assumed body) Manusha Buddha or Bodhisattvas, who appear in human form to alleviate sufferings of sentient beings; Shambhoga kaya (the body of bliss) super human capable of blessing the devotees in personal manner, Dharma kaya (the cosmic body) the incomprehensible Absolute beyond all limits of time, form, cause and effect cycle— the void or 'Shunya'.

This is the conceptual framework under which the artist who is also a devotee and belongs to the Sangha has to visualise the technique, forms and colours suitable for depicting the imagery. The process is therefore, one of complex appreciative perception achieved through meditative practice. The artist in this case is himself a believer and a visionary with a third eye.

The author who knows his job as well as the land of Sahara Buddha well, we have a lucidly compressed account of Mahayana Iconography though as an introduction and would look forward to a more comprehensive history of the subject comprising a much wider perspective of its occurrence over the past centuries.

However, the author's occasional turn towards emotionally arousing episodes from the Gitas, Upanishad or even the Tantras could only reveal his deep sense of commitment and belongingness to the high order that gave rise to such splendid brutes or spiritual culture hidden for long behind a mysterious world of existence. Mr. T.V. Rajagopalan, the Governor and the President of KIT in his well written foreword has rightly commended the author in the following words: "His knowledge of Buddhism and Buddhist Doctrine is encyclopedic'.

Last but not least, the beautifully produced book became all the more revealing with highly ornamental canonical line drawings of Lama Karjan Aisen and the colour plates reproduced from the Thanaks that gave much more to it than a mere collection of printed matter between the covers.