

BUDDHARUPA

Observations on the evolution of Buddha image

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I

In the first two decades of this century, Western scholars like Albert Foucher and John Marshall had concluded that image or icon was not a characteristic feature of Indian religions till the advent of the Greeks, Iranians, and others from Western Asia. This conclusion about the origins of image and image worship under foreign influence was supported by the progressive and reformist Hindus - mostly belonging to Arya Samaj, Brahma Samaj or Prarthana Samaj - who held that idolatry was un-Vedic and un-Brahmanical and that image or image worship was a later Puranic feature. Theravada Buddhists spread all over South Asia and flourishing in Eastern India also accepted the concept of image being a foreign import to Indian soil; Theravadins pointed to Gautama Buddha's objection to any attachment or adoration of Rupakaya (Buddha's physical form).

Conservative and orthodox Hindus, who held that Pratima (likeness = image) was an indigenous and original item of Brahmanical religion, very strongly reacted to the findings of Western scholars and their Indian supporters. The Hindus had their stoutest champions in Kashiprasad Jayaswal and Ananda Coomaraswamy, who contended that Rupa (form) was not unknown to the imagery of early Vedic priests and sages, and that in later Vedic period instances of making or worshipping images are clear and frequent. Besides they contended that archaeological evidence of Indian images before the advent of the Greeks and other foreigners was not forthcoming for the simple reason that both ravages of time and iconoclasm of some invaders from the West account for such phenomenon. In 1924 a Western scholar, Victor Goloubew challenged the findings of Foucher and Marshall and pointed out that generations before the Gandhara image was designed in North Western India by Greek devotees, image of typical Indian style was made in Mathura.

Almost the same time the excavated objects, including images and icons, from the Indus Valley were being sorted and displayed for scientific investigation. The study of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa remains was somewhat completed by 1930, and an Indian scholar, R.P.

Chanda, found the earliest representation of Siva Pasupati and Yogi in Indus Valley culture. Chanda's finding was accepted by Western scholars and was ably utilized by brilliant men like Kashiprasad Jayaswal.

Jayaswal and other Indian scholars, including progressive or reformist Hindus, referred to the Tibetan tradition that there were exquisite and grand images in the Indo-Gangetic plains even before the Mauryas were ruling. The evidence of Lama Taranatha was quite handy.

An altogether new dimension was added to the question of Buddha image when the Soviet archaeologists made extensive excavations in Russian Turkistan shortly after Second World War was over. The Turkistan hauls contained a good number of Buddha and Bodhisattva images. The study of these images from Turkistan, made in 1960-70, is still on.

II

Modern scientific study of the Vedic religion was undertaken towards the end of 19th century but still now no categorical answer about the prevalence or absence of idolatry in Vedic religion is found. Max Muller and Macdonell, to mention only two Western scholars, were of opinion that 'the religion of the Vedas knows no idol' or that 'the religion of Vedas was not idolatry'. Indian scholars, except those who subscribed to the philosophy of Vedanta and Samkhya, straightaway rejected the findings of such Western authorities. Reference to the many deities featuring in the Vedic pantheon was emphasized by the Indian scholars who also contended that the Rupa (form) of such Vedic deities was not unknown and that in the later Vedic period images of some of the Vedic deities were well under way. Whether these images grew out of Rig Vedic imagery or were borrowed from the pre-Aryan inhabitants is the moot question; there could be no question about prevalence of images or icons in later Vedic period.

The scholars on either side, it appears lost sight of the great fact that many deities, many rituals or many ways of worship were accommodated in the Vedic religion. The Vedic seers made a most profound statement:

EKAM SAT : VIPRA BAHUDHA VADANTI "That which Is, is one. Wise men speak of it in many ways" (Eng. tr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji).

We have in this pithy utterance the truth that the Absolute or Transcendental may be realized in diverse ways. In such climate of co-existence 'a deity with form' (Sakara) and 'a deity without form' (Nirakara) could be worshipped in same hermitage or same household; men of different intellectual or moral denominations would aspire for spiritual bliss in their respective ways.

The Upanishads, aptly called the Vedanta, discuss the form of God in highly critical manner. Kena Upanishad makes clear that the Brahman cannot be comprehended with our sense organs. About vision of God, it says 'that which one sees not with the eye, that by which one sees the eye's seeings, know that indeed to be the Brahman, not this which men follow after here' (Eng. tr. Sri Aurobindo). Svetasvatara Upanishad states that the Great One has no likeness or form and lays down 'His form is not to be seen; no one sees him with the eye. Those who through heart and mind know him as abiding in the heart become immortal'. (Eng. tr. Radhakrishnan)

Rupa or form of God is expounded in Bhagavadgita by Krishna in answering Arjuna's query. Arjuna wanted to know in which forms or objects God should be meditated. In answer Krishna first enumerated all phenomenal objects, all fauna, all flora, and so on and so forth. Krishna then gave Arjuna a supernatural eye to behold the mystic power of God. Arjuna had then the vision to look up the entire universe, the process of its creation and the process of destruction of the universe. In short, Arjuna beheld that God was identical with cosmos. Such Cosmic Vision would lead to meditation or worship of God in multiple forms, diverse forms, even contrary forms as Sakara and Nirakara or Rupa and Arupa.

In a later supplement to Bhagavadgita it was thus proclaimed : 'Agni (fire) is the object of worship for the Brahmin, Devata (divinity) is worshipped in the heart of the Muni, Pratima (image) is adored by the men of low intellect, while one whose sight is not limited notices God everywhere' (Uttaragita). The spirit of co-existence between diverse forms and modes of spiritual striving eventually flowered into the great Puranic pantheon. Meanwhile Gautama Buddha's religion developed into what came to be called Mahayana. Mahayana had a grand pantheon and the Indo-Gangetic plains witnessed a period of co-existence between Puranic Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism. Exchanges of deities and rituals between the two religions developed the iconography of both.

The deity which had the same leading role in both Hinduism and Mahayana was Tara (Dolma). It is not yet established which religion had worshipped Tara first and which religion borrowed it from the other. There is controversy even about the provenance of the Goddess. Most scholars hold that Tara originated somewhere in Inner Asia. While some scholars locate Tara's homeland in the Pamir's region, others point to Mahachina on southern borders of Mongolia.

III

The Theravada tradition of Gautama Buddha's ban on BuddhaRupa is well-known among scholars both Buddhist and non-Buddhist. Mahayana (i.e. Northern Buddhist) tradition that Kausambi King Udayana, a devotee of Gautama Buddha, had the Buddha image made during the life time of the Master is treated as a mere legend by the modern scholars; many modern scholars would even profess ignorance of the First Image legend. With my lifelong experience of Mahayana scholars and monks in the Himalayan and Trans-Himalayan monasteries I cannot reject the Udayana legend of BuddhaRupa. According to Tibetan tradition, the first images, a few indeed, made in some sacred wood, were not meant for exhibition; Gautama Buddha's Rupakaya was not intended for public gaze. Generations later, according to the tradition, images were made in stone or clay and this was definitely before the Hellenistic devotees made images conforming to their own aesthetics.

The Gandhara Image raises a fundamental issue about Buddhism and Buddhist art. In discussing the origins of Buddha image it is hardly noticed that Gautama Buddha was the first prophet who spoke on spiritual matters for all mankind.

In India the Vedic Rishis and outside India Zoroaster, Moses, and Confucius preached for their own group: racial or tribal. In short the prophets before Gautama Buddha were founders of ethno-centric religions. Buddha spoke for all men and had no rules for eligibility on grounds of birth, caste and race. Five centuries after Gautama Buddha, Jesus

Christ preached for all mankind and another five centuries later Hazrat Mohammed preached for all mankind. Buddhist scholars point out that the Asokan missionaries, Theras and Theraputras visiting West Asia in 3rd century B.C. were pioneers in the movement that Spiritual Truth (Dharma) was not to be confined to the so-called elect.

For any appreciation of Buddhist art or Buddhist iconography, we must note as our first premise the fact that Dharma (as Buddha called his religion) was not for any particular race, tribe or caste. As in the expounding of BuddhaDharma, so in the shaping of BuddhaRupa, there was no question of civilized or barbarian. The Buddha image was thus destined to develop under diverse racial and territorial trends or styles. With Mahayana which was frankly and outspokenly a religion for all men belonging to different races and languages; therefore BuddhaRupa was bound to reflect diverse schools and styles of art. Buddhist iconography in India and outside India had no inhibition in learning new ideas and new forms every where. This resulted in a multi-splendoured iconography portraying a multi-splendoured pantheon.

IV

Gautama Buddha himself noticed a tendency among his disciples to adore the Master's Body. He very much deplored this tendency and disapproved any cult of image or icon for his followers.

An old disciple Vakkali, while on deathbed, was very eager to see Buddha in person. Buddha came to him and said "O Vakkali, why you crave to have a look at this body of impure matter. Vakkali, one who perceives Dharma perceives me. One who perceives me, perceives Dharma" (Samyutta Nikaya). Buddha said that his Teaching was important and not his Body. On different occasions through dialogues and sermons Buddha spoke against adoration of his Rupakaya i.e. Buddha Rupa. Disciples and devotees would not defy the Master while present on earth. King Udayana of Kausambi had however got the master's image made in sacred wood. This image was for record and not for public exhibition or wide circulation. However the tendency to adore BuddhaRupa continued and even the Stupas containing the Buddha relics would have often events of the Master's life depicted on the walls around. The reliefs and friezes executed by Maurya and Sunga artists on the Stupas preserve the first expositions of BuddhaRupa. By the first century of Christian era Rupakaya was popular with the common people, that is, believers of lower intellect. Buddha images in stone and clay were quite prevalent in the first century A.D.

The portrayal of the Master's Body was however after the Indian tradition which stood for an idealistic form. The Master's Body, to quote Buddhaghosha (5th century A.D.), was adorned with eighty minor signs and thirty two major signs of a great man. Therefore a Rupakaya adorned with eighty minor and thirty two major signs could not inspire a grossly realistic form. Mathura, Amaravati and Sarnath produced different types of BuddhaRupa but none of these types was realistic. Gandhara under the influence of Hellenistic aesthetics produced what may be labeled as "most realistic"; Gandhara style could not spread all over Jambudvipa.

This does not mean that Buddhist artists and devotees were hostile to all foreign aesthetics. The image of Gautama Buddha as shaped in Indian ethos was a sublime synthesis of realism and idealism, a perfect mixture of fact and fancy. In this process there

was to be no compromise with gross realism as found in so many Gandhara images. Mahayana with a pantheon of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas was free to adopt or incorporate ideas and forms of other peoples who took refuge in Buddhism. Vast and varied contents of Mahayana could be depicted to the satisfaction of both Indian and foreign imagery.

Theravada (Hinayana) permits only one image, the image of Gautama SakyaMuni, the Historical Buddha. Mahayana pantheon contains the Historical Buddha, other mortal or mundane Buddhas, celestial Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and the Primordial Buddha manifested in five forms. The number in Mahayana pantheon is conventionally counted as thousand. This large number, thousand or more, is grouped in three tier; the top tier is composed of the Five (Primordials), the middle tier consists of emanations or reflexes from the Five, and the bottom is composed of Historical Buddha and his precursors and successors. For the believer the tiers are Three Bodies : Dharmakaya or the Cosmic Body, Sambhogakaya or the Body of Bliss, and the Nirmanakaya or the Mundane Body.

Mahayana accommodating many peoples, many regions, and many languages could thus adopt ideas and forms of so many different cultures. Even the most important members of the Mahayana pantheon may have begun in foreign lands and under foreign aesthetics. Thus Amitabha, one of the five Dharmakaya, is considered by some scholars to have originated in Iranian climate. Manjusri, the topmost Sambhogakaya, is claimed by many scholars to have originated in borderlands of Manchuria and Mongolia. Avalokitesvara, the lord of the pantheon, is also thought of having some non-Indian elements.

The recent discoveries in Russian Turkistan suggest connections of Mahayana with many cultures besides the Bactrian Greek.

Researches by Russian scholars like LITVINSKIJ, MASSON and BONGARD-LEVIN have thrown much light on many obscure points but the history of BuddhaRupa is yet to be completed.

This article presents a gist of the first part of the book, "Buddha Image in Mahayana Tradition", scheduled for publication in autumn 1991. Details of references and the original Sanskrit, Pali and Tibetan texts will be found in the scheduled publication.