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**The Buddha's Stūpa and Image.  
The Icons of his Immanence and Transcendence**

**Abstract**

This paper broadly explores the innate or doctrinal permutations of the Buddha's *stūpa* and image, and attempts to establish their mutual relationship. In the first instance the Buddha's *stūpa* was considered as the symbol or epitome of his enlightenment and *parinirvāṇa*, although as such the *stūpa* was considered to be empty, in the sense that the Buddha was utterly absent. However, eventually the *stūpa* received a whole gamut of doctrinal interpretations, which viewed it as an epitome or repository of the absolute Buddha-body (*dharmakāya*). In the case of the Buddha's image, the pattern of doctrinal developments is similar to that of the *stūpa*. Since the Buddha was absent from this world, initially he was not represented in iconic forms but only through symbols. Then again, eventually the Buddha was depicted in anthropomorphic forms, which did not reflect his mundane appearance. Instead his images were cast in conformity with doctrinal permutations, which propounded an idealised person or state of Buddhahood completely divested of the Buddha's historicity and mundane appearance. The Buddha's *stūpa* and image do have their respective interpretations and functions. But when they are combined and considered together, they may be viewed as the Buddha's transcendent and immanent presence in this world.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, stupa, Buddha image, cult, relics

The overall focus of this paper is not specifically or exclusively on the *stūpa* architecture and on the iconography of the Buddha's image, but predominantly on the historical and doctrinal considerations, which disclose their contextual and ideological background, and underpin their innate and mystic permutations. As monuments and icons,

*stūpas* and images do have their respective and distinct function and significance, but they also have certain ideological interconnections. Casting a broad vision, allegorically and philosophically, we begin our intellectual journey with emptiness and with empty cosmic space. We then advance to fill that empty space with the Buddha's *stūpas* and images. Finally we conclude our journey by dissolving all those *stūpas* and images in cosmic space and emptiness.

### Historical and contextual scenario

In one of his instructive discourses the Buddha makes the following statement, which he addresses to his disciples:

“The body of the Tathāgata continues to exist even though the roots productive of a new existence have been eradicated. As long as his body survives, so long the gods and men can see him. But, once his body is dissipated and his life is terminated, the gods and men will see him no more.”<sup>1</sup>

In another discourse Upasīva, one of the notable disciples, asks the Buddha whether there would be any consciousness in the person endowed with all-encompassing vision and liberated from *saṃsāra*, after being emancipated and becoming cold.

In reply the Buddha states that just as a flame agitated by the force of the wind dwindles and vanishes, so the Sage, once released from his psychophysical individuality (*nāma-rūpa*), becomes appeased and vanishes. No person can measure him or speak of him. When all phenomena are dissolved, all ways of speaking are also removed.<sup>2</sup>

Then again upon being asked by the mendicant Vacchagotta whether the Tathāgata exists after death or does not exist, the Buddha declines to give an affirmative or negative answer. Instead he explains to Vacchagotta that it is a speculative question, and that it is not conducive to spiritual progress and the attainment of liberation.<sup>3</sup> In other words, once the flame of a lamp is extinguished, it is futile and inappropriate to ask or speculate about the vanished flame.

Taking into consideration the above three discourses, it is poignantly apparent that once the Buddha passes away, his Saṅgha and lay followers would be doomed to experience and endure in their hearts his utter absence, and to gaze in their minds into the vacuum of cosmic space.

Essentially, prior to his passing into *parinirvāṇa*, the Buddha firmly signals the traceless dissolution of his human body and consciousness in conformity with his

<sup>1</sup> Dīghanikāya, I.46.

<sup>2</sup> *Suttanipāta*, verses 1074–1076.

<sup>3</sup> Majjhimanikāya, I.484–86.

fundamental teaching: all conditioned phenomena have the common characteristics of impermanence, suffering, and impersonality. Ultimately there is no such thing as a being (*sattva*), person (*puruṣa*) or a self (*ātman*), but merely a transitory stream of mental and physical phenomena or elements (*dharmas*). The world of living beings is no more than a constantly changing succession of illusory appearances. In this context the Buddha's human form had no greater reality or durability than the bodily forms of all other living beings. However, there is one tremendous difference, namely the Buddha has attained the supreme and perfect enlightenment (*bodhi*), and the final and utter emancipation from the bonds of *saṃsāra*. As an enlightened being, the Buddha is beyond all forms of existence, and transcends this phenomenal world of illusory experiences and appearances. In his absolute and perfected state, he also transcends and rejects the philosophical concepts of being and non-being. Thus bearing in mind the above scenarios, the Buddha as a human being, and as an enlightened being, is about to pass into *parinirvāṇa*, understood here as a complete dissolution of the Buddha's existence in *saṃsāra*.

### The Buddha's legacy

The Buddha clearly signals his demise and renounces the remainder of his life, but he does not utterly abandon his followers. Having reached Kuśinagara, the place of his *parinirvāṇa*, the Buddha instructs Ānanda that his bodily remains should be disposed in the same way as the remains of a universal monarch (*cakravartin*). He explains to Ānanda that his bodily remains should be wrapped in five hundred pieces of linen-cloth, placed on a funeral pyre and cremated. After the cremation a *stūpa* should be erected at the crossroads. Whoever places wreaths or perfumes before the *stūpa* with devout thoughts, will gain much benefit and happiness.<sup>4</sup> In another conversation with Ānanda, the Buddha identifies four places the sight of which should evoke noble emotions in his followers, namely the place of his birth (Lumbinī), the place of his enlightenment (Bodhgayā), the place where he set in motion the Wheel of Dharma (Sārnāth, Vārāṇasī), and the place of his *parinirvāṇa* (Kuśinagara).<sup>5</sup> Finally, after the Buddha's death and cremation, his flesh completely vanishes without leaving any ashes, and lo and behold, the only thing that remains are the Buddha's stainless relics (*śarīra*).<sup>6</sup>

It is apparent from the above scenarios that although he passed away, the Buddha left behind him a visionary legacy and his relics. He instructed his disciples to build a *stūpa* and to venerate it with acts of devotion and offerings. He also encouraged his devotees to go on pilgrimages to the four places of his principal life events. Thus the Buddha's instructions inspired a very unique and dynamic pattern of Buddhist life and practice with the primary focus on the worship of the *stūpa* containing his relics.

<sup>4</sup> Dīghanikāya, II.141-42.

<sup>5</sup> Dīghanikāya, II.140.

<sup>6</sup> Dīghanikāya, II.164.

## The stūpa story and architecture

After the Buddha's cremation, his relics were divided into eight shares and distributed among eight rulers, who built *stūpas* over the received shares of the relics. In addition two more *stūpas* were erected, one over the vessel or vase (*droṇa*) used for dividing the relics, and one over the embers.<sup>7</sup> Thus, shortly after the Buddha's cremation, altogether ten *stūpas* were built, eight containing proper relics, one containing the *droṇa* vessel, and one containing the embers. The subsequent history and conditions of these *stūpas* are not well known or documented. According to the available records, during his rule the emperor Aśoka (268–232 BC)<sup>8</sup> significantly enhanced and spread the cult of the *stūpa*. He is said to have extracted the Buddha's relics from the above eight *stūpas*, and enshrined them in a symbolic number of eighty-four thousand *stūpas*, which he erected in various parts of his empire.<sup>9</sup> This was the second and perhaps the largest redistribution of the Buddha's relics. During the subsequent centuries, and up to the present time, the *stūpas* continued to be constructed in India and eventually in other Buddhist lands of Asia. As the Buddhist history progressed and new doctrines were formulated, the *stūpa* architecture was modified and enriched with various elements, which reflected the doctrinal and ethnic innovations.

The original shape or architecture of the *stūpa* is largely a matter of academic speculations, although it is generally believed that the ancient *stūpas* were simple mounds of piled up earth. In one late Buddhist narrative, the visionary invention of the *stūpa* prototype, or perhaps of the *stūpa*'s physical appearance, is attributed to the Buddha himself. In this particular narrative the Buddha concretely demonstrates the basic *stūpa* design to Trapuṣa and Bhallika, the two merchants who visited him at Bodhgayā soon after his enlightenment. He folds his three monastic robes into squares and piles them up on the ground. Next he takes his alms bowl and places it upside down on the top of the robes. Finally he takes his mendicant staff, and positions it vertically over the alms bowl. It is in conformity with this allegorical model that Trapuṣa and Bhallika constructed a *stūpa* after returning to their native Bactria.<sup>10</sup> In fact the above *stūpa* model does not represent the first *stūpa* prototype, but it is a retrospective attribution, which reflects the already well established tripartite structure of the *stūpa*: foundation, dome, and superstructure.

The foundations (*vedī*, *nemī*, *medhī*) of the surviving *stūpas* are circular or square in shape, and some texts also speak of octagonal and other shapes.<sup>11</sup> Eventually these foundations, in particular square foundations, were increased to three, four or more concentric or pyramidal terraces or platforms. The dome (*kumbha* or *aṇḍa*) arises above the foundation, and it can have several shapes. Some texts specify four primary shapes:

<sup>7</sup> Dīghanikāya, II.166-67.

<sup>8</sup> The dates as given in E. Lamotte, 1988, 88.

<sup>9</sup> E. Lamotte, 1988, 240–241; J.S. Strong, 1983, 109–119.

<sup>10</sup> *Siyuki*, I, 47–48; M. Benisti, 1960, 42–43. See also E. Lamotte, 1988, page 66 and note 155.

<sup>11</sup> A. Bureau, 1962, 235; T. Skorupski, 2002, 165.

heap of grain (*dhānya-ākāra*), inverted alms bowl (*pātra*), oval or bird's egg (*khagāṇḍa*), and vase (*kalaśa*).<sup>12</sup> The Buddha's relics, inserted inside an urn or a reliquary, are deposited in the bosom of the dome. Thus the dome constitutes the essential component of the *stūpa*. The third *stūpa* element, the superstructure, includes a square pavilion (*harmikā*) surmounted by a tapered pole or spire (*yaṣṭi*). The significance of the pavilion is not conclusively determined. In some sources, the pavilion serves as a dwelling of the four kings and guardians of the cardinal directions (*lokapāla*). The eyes painted on some Nepalese *stūpas* are suggestively interpreted as the Buddha's all-seeing eyes, but more probably they betoken the four guardian deities. The tapered spire can be simple or elaborated. Depending on the *stūpa*, the spire supports one or a series of disc-like umbrellas (*chatrāvalī*).<sup>13</sup> On some Tibetan and Nepalese *stūpas*, the spire is sheltered by a large umbrella-like rain canopy, and surmounted by the sun and moon emblems.

In the course of time, the three principal elements of the *stūpa* were ingeniously and imaginatively enriched with new decorative and architectural additions, and their shapes and proportions were manipulated in a variety of ways, something that is amply reflected in the architectural variations of the existing *stūpas* in the Buddhist lands of Asia.

Some ancient *stūpas*, such as the one at Sāñcī, were also furnished with balustrades and gates positioned towards the cardinal directions. Some of such balustrades and gates were decorated with carved *jātaka* stories, and the Buddha's symbolic representations. At some stage after the institution of the Buddha's anthropomorphic representations, niches or chapels were excavated or constructed on the sides of *stūpas* to shelter images. Thus, as discussed later on, the Buddha's *stūpa* and image came to be merged or moulded together into a combined icon expressive and symbolic of the Buddha's imperceptible and perceptible configurations.

### The categories of the Buddha's relics

As we have seen above the Buddha's body was cremated, and his relics were divided and deposited in eight *stūpas*. Thus it would seem that initially there were no other relics. However, as the worship of the *stūpa* spread and became popular, a variety of narratives and legends were composed about a number of the Buddha's relics other than those deposited in the eight *stūpas*. When these narratives and legends are collated, they speak of seven major post-mortem relics: four canine teeth, two collar-bones (clavicles), and the cranial bulge (*uṣṇīṣa*).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> T. Skorupski, 2002, 165. Some texts also mention the domes shaped like a lotus bud (*padma*), water bubble (*budbuda*), bell (*ghaṇṭā*), and gooseberry (*āmalaka*). H. Ruelius, 1980, 269.

<sup>13</sup> The ancient *stūpas*, for instance at Sāñcī, had one or more umbrellas fixed above the *harmikā*. The umbrella is the emblem of royalty. The Buddha said that *stūpas* of the Tathāgata should have thirteen umbrellas, *stūpas* of *arhats* four umbrellas, of non-returners three, of once-returners two, and of stream-winners one umbrella. G. Roth, 1980, 184; A. Bareau, 1962, 236.

<sup>14</sup> Dighanikāya, II.167-68; K. Trainor, 1997, 121; J. Strong, 2004, 185.

In addition to the above seven post-mortem relics, there also exist records about several other relics of the Buddha, such as his alms-bowl, robe, shadow, hair, and footprints.<sup>15</sup> During the Tang period in China, elaborate festivals were conducted in honour of the Buddha's finger-bone relic.<sup>16</sup> Chapter twenty-eight of the *Mahāvāṃsa*, considered to be a rather late composition, contains one of the most comprehensive accounts of the distribution of the Buddha's relics. According to this source, in addition to the relics distributed after the Buddha's cremation at Kuśinagara, the Buddha's forty teeth, the hair of his head and body, and all his personal articles, including his alms bowl, robes, mendicant staff, and razor, were redistributed among the gods and men.

The different relics allegedly left by the Buddha were eventually classified into three or more categories. Certain sources appertaining to the Pāli tradition divide the Buddha's relics into three categories: 1. bodily relics (*śarīra-dhātu*) left immediately after the cremation, 2. contact or personally used articles (*pāribhogika-dhātu*), such as his alms bowl and mendicant staff, and 3. indicative or commemorative relics (*uddesika-dhātu*) such as images.<sup>17</sup>

The Thai tradition distinguishes four types of *cetiya*s on the basis of the articles that are deposited inside them: 1. *cetiya*s containing bodily relics (*dhātu-cetiya*); 2. *cetiya*s containing contact or personally used articles (*pāribhogika-*), including the *bodhi* tree; 3. *cetiya*s containing the teachings (*dhamma-*) in the form of the formula of dependent origination, or canonical texts inscribed on palm-leaves; and 4. *cetiya*s containing indicative objects (*uddesika-*), such as images, paintings and footprints.<sup>18</sup>

The Tibetan classifications of relics include the relics of the Buddha and of holy or enlightened lamas and teachers. Out of several classifications we present here only one classification, which distinguishes four categories of relics: 1. Bodily remains (*sku gdung gyi ring bsrel*), namely the bones of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, *śrāvakas*, and holy lamas. 2. Mustard-seed-like relics (*yungs 'bru lta bu'i ring bsrel*), which are the Buddha's multiplying relics (*'phel gdung*), and the relics (*ring bsrel*) of accomplished luminaries (*mkhas grub*). 3. Indicative relics (*sku bal gyi ring bsrel*) which include the hair, nails and other similar objects. 4. Relics of the absolute body (*chos sku'i ring bsrel*) which have the form of *dhāraṇīs* (*gzung*).

The Sanskrit terms *dhātu* and *śarīra*<sup>19</sup> primarily denote the mustard-seed-like relics, which emerged after the Buddha's cremation, but in a broader sense they also denote all other relics as discussed above. These relics can also emerge during the lifetime of holy persons, from their heads or clothes, or again from other relics, images or *stūpas*. They are described as being brilliant white in colour and approximately the size of mustard seeds or rice grains. Some sources say that they can also appear in different colours

<sup>15</sup> Fa-hsien, 34–37, 39, 88, 109. See also *Siyuki*, I, 45, 67, 98–99.

<sup>16</sup> K. Chen, 1964, 278–80; B. Faure, 2003, 1141.

<sup>17</sup> *Jātaka*, IV.228–29; K. Trainor, 1997, 89; Y. Bentor, 1994, 23.

<sup>18</sup> Y. Bentor, 1994, 23.

<sup>19</sup> Transcribed in Chinese as *shililuo* or *sheli*, Japanese *shari*. Translated in Sino-Japanese as *reikotsu* (sacred bone), and in Tibetan as *ring bsrel* (lasting object). B. Faure, 2003, 1128.

and dimensions.<sup>20</sup> In his commentary on the *Parinibbāna-sutta*, Buddhaghosa says that the Buddha's remains resemble jasmine buds (*sumana-makula*), pearls (*muttā*), and gold (*suvanṇa*).<sup>21</sup> In one account the Buddha tells Ānanda that he decided to fracture his diamond body (*vajrakāya*) into granules resembling mustard seeds, and to disperse them in the world so that his followers, without seeing him, may worship his relics and gain merit, due to which they may become reborn in happy places, or again so that they may gain the path of deliverance.<sup>22</sup> The relics are also believed to have the power and capacity to move between places, or to abandon the places where they receive no veneration, and to travel to the places where they would be worshipped.<sup>23</sup>

The identity of the Buddha's relics is rather controversial and doctrinally problematic. As already discussed above, in conformity with the early Buddhist teachings, having passed into *parinirvāṇa*, the Buddha had completely disappeared from *saṃsāra*. From the perspective of this doctrinal position, the Buddha is absent and consequently his relics and *stūpas* are empty and powerless. On the other hand there evolved convictions and doctrines recorded in texts and inscriptions, which firmly assert that the Buddha is present in his relics, and that they are endowed with his attributes and powers. We indicate below a few sources, which affirm the Buddha's infinite lifespan and presence in his relics.

In the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, the Buddha states that the Tathāgata's body is a diamond body (*vajrakāya*), which is indestructible and immutable for countless aeons. It is not the body of a man or god; it is not subject to fear; it is not mixed with food; it is not a body; it does not involve origination (*utpāda*) or cessation (*nirodha*); it is unlimited, infinite, traceless, formless, pure, immovable, without sensation, and unconditioned (*asaṃskṛta*).<sup>24</sup>

In one of his commentaries Buddhaghosa affirms the identity of the Buddha while he was alive with his bodily relics after death. In another place he also states that a monk's failure to worship at a *ceṭiya* is equivalent to negligence to attend upon the Buddha.<sup>25</sup>

The inscription on the Shinkot reliquary states that the Buddha's relics are a living being "endowed with breath" (*prāṇasameta*).<sup>26</sup> Similarly the inscriptions at Nāgārjunikoṇḍa indicate, in Schopen's words, "that their redactor did not think of the *dhātu* or relic as a piece or a part of the Buddha. He seems, in fact, to have thought of it as something that contained or enclosed the Buddha himself, something in which the Buddha was wholly present."<sup>27</sup>

The available accounts of the Buddha's three *parinirvāṇas* also reinforce the belief in the Buddha's tangible presence in his relics and *stūpas*. According to the Theravāda sources, the Buddha's first *parinirvāṇa* occurred at Bodhgayā, where he became enlightened and

<sup>20</sup> J.S. Strong, 2004, 10, 46.

<sup>21</sup> K. Trainor, 1997, 120.

<sup>22</sup> P. Skilling, 2005, 289.

<sup>23</sup> K. Trainor, 1997, 130; J.S. Strong, 2004, 224.

<sup>24</sup> *Hōbōgirin*, 178.

<sup>25</sup> K. Trainor, 1997, 92–93.

<sup>26</sup> E. Lamotte, 1988, 431; G. Schopen, 1997, 126.

<sup>27</sup> G. Schopen, 1997, 158.



liberated from the bonds of defilements and ignorance. The Buddha's second *parinirvāṇa* took place at Kuśinagara, and consisted in the dissolution of his psychophysical aggregates. The third and final *parinirvāṇa* is due to take place at the end of the cosmic dissolution of the world, when the Buddha's relics will completely disappear. At that time all his relics will reassemble at Bodhgayā, assume the form of his golden body, and then burst into flames and utterly disappear. The overall idea is that so long as the Buddha's relics remain in the world, his *parinirvāṇa* is incomplete, and thus as much merit can be gained from worshipping the Buddha's relics as from worshipping the Buddha himself.<sup>28</sup>

We have discussed above the categories and nature of the Buddha's relics, because they are the kernel or heart of *stūpas* and the rationale for their construction. As structures the *stūpas* are symbolic of the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*, but it is their content, namely the relics, that endows them with spiritual symbolism and mystic potency.

### The stūpa symbolism

As such the *stūpa* is not considered to be a burial site, but it is seen as the epitome of the Buddha's liberated mind and *parinirvāṇa*. The Buddha's presence in the *stūpa* is also controversial and problematic, like his presence in the relics. The traditional Theravāda maintains that the Buddha is not present in any physical form,<sup>29</sup> and the *Abhidharmakośa* postulates that the *stūpa* is empty in the sense that the Buddha is absent.<sup>30</sup> By contrast some Mahāyāna sources assert that the Buddha's life is timeless and that his *dharmakāya* is timelessly present. The Buddha's presence is contained in the *stūpa*, and although the *stūpa* enshrines relics, the devotees perceive it as the Buddha.<sup>31</sup>

A number of the relevant texts superimpose doctrinal and symbolic interpretations on the architectural and other elements of the *stūpa*. We give here only one indicative interpretation of the *stūpa*'s primary elements. The width of the base-foundation epitomises the purity of the thirty-two major marks of a great being (*mahāpuruṣa*), and its height denotes the twelve links of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). The dome epitomises the Buddha's absolute body (*dharmakāya*), and its encompassing garland symbolises the six kinds of intuitive knowledge (*abhiññā*). The pavilion represents the purity of the three vehicles leading to enlightenment (*triyāna*), and its girth is expressive of the four noble truths. The spire of thirteen umbrella-discs epitomises the thirteen stages leading to the attainment of buddhahood.<sup>32</sup> In some texts the *stūpa* is invested with practically the entire array of Buddhist teachings and the Buddha's attributes: the

<sup>28</sup> D.W. Chapell, 1980, 130; G.P. Malalasekera, 1960, I, 804; II, 303; K. Trainor, 1997, 13.

<sup>29</sup> K. Trainor, 1997, 166.

<sup>30</sup> *Kośa*, IV, 747-48.

<sup>31</sup> *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, H. Kern's translation, 298-310, particularly pages 299-303, 307. See also Hirakawa, 1963-1964, 88.

<sup>32</sup> For further details see G. Roth, 1980, 187-193; T. Skorupski, 2002, 166-168.



four noble truths, the thirty-seven limbs of enlightenment, emptiness and compassion, and the Buddha's personal attributes and powers.

The Buddha's presence in his *stūpas* is a recurrent subject of Buddhist deliberations and debates, but essentially all such deliberations form an integral part of a much wider spectrum of Buddhist speculations and theories, which are concerned with the Buddha's identity, presence and activities in this world after his *parinirvāṇa*. The ultimate goal of true Buddhists is to eliminate the cycles of rebirth, and to abandon the realm and toils of *samsāra*, and the Buddha was the first one to have attained the final emancipation from the clutches of *samsāra*. After his demise, his followers explored various ways of explaining the Buddha's nature, and also the identity of his relics enshrined in *stūpas*, which they treated with veneration. As we have seen some strands of early Buddhism maintained that the Buddha ceased to be present in this world after his *parinirvāṇa*, and some believed in his tangible presence in the relics. The Mahāyāna adepts produced a fairly coherent and tenable theory of the three buddha-bodies, which enabled them to retain the Buddha's presence in the world on mundane and supramundane levels. In their form-bodies (*rūpakāya*) the countless Buddhas are active in countless world systems. All Buddhas jointly abide in the absolute body (*dharmakāya*), which constitutes their common ground. Essentially this body epitomises the quintessence of buddhahood; it is formless, and beyond human comprehension and verbal expressions. In addition according to the Mahāyāna position, the *dharmakāya* as the buddha-potentiality is present in all sentient beings. Thus although the Buddha has passed away, the nature of buddhahood continues to operate in the world on different levels and in different forms. This being the case, it can be said that the relic *stūpa* does clearly epitomise the Buddha's mystic presence in this world.

As already stated above, the *stūpa* is not a grave or burial site, but it is the monument expressive of the Buddha's enlightened mind and *parinirvāṇa*. Then again it is a depersonalised architectural icon of the Buddha's immanent and transcendent abiding among his followers. Finally, we note that some texts also suggest that the *stūpa*'s architectural configuration resembles or epitomises the Buddha's seated position.

### The Buddha's imageless icons

Since the Buddha's human body and personality were utterly dissolved, the immediate generations of his followers did not produce his iconic or anthropomorphic representations for a considerable period of time. It is generally agreed among the Buddhist scholars that the first anthropomorphic images of the Buddha were invented and produced around the beginning of the Common Era.

Initially in the early sculptures, the Buddha is not represented in iconic or anthropomorphic forms, but his presence and deeds are represented by an empty space, which becomes transmuted and makes itself visible in the form of symbols. These uniconic

symbols epitomise the highest truth realised by the Buddha, and they are expressive of his true nature as being identical with the supreme truth, the Dharma. It is not the Buddha's human body or personality that preoccupied the minds of his immediate and later followers, but it was his enlightened identity with the Dharma. The Buddha said: the person who sees the Dharma, sees the Buddha, and again the person who sees the Buddha, sees the Dharma.<sup>33</sup>

The uniconic or symbolic depictions of the Buddha mostly epitomise the specific events or deeds, which he experienced or performed during his lifetime. The Buddha's nativity is symbolised by the goddess Lakṣmī, or by his mother, the queen Māyā, leaning against a tree in the Lumbinī grove. The attainment of enlightenment at Bodhgayā is articulated by the *bodhi* tree and the empty diamond seat (*vajrāsana*) beneath the tree. The first sermon is indicated by a wheel (*cakra*), the emblem of a great being or universal monarch (*cakravartin*), and the *parinirvāṇa* is symbolised by the *stūpa*. Finally the Buddha's presence is also marked or indicated by footprints. Thus all these symbolic representations serve as the abstract or indicative icons of the Buddha's life events and activities. In other words they do not epitomise the Buddha as a person, but they are expressive of the truths and deeds, which he realised and performed.

None of the above symbols, which represent the Buddha's principal life events, can be considered or treated as a single or unique and universal symbol of the Buddha's person or his activities. Considered individually, each symbol encapsulates and depicts one specific event or deed. Considered together, they do denote the Buddha's doctrinal or perhaps mystic image, but they do not project the Buddha's image as a person, because his body and personality were dissolved at the time of his *parinirvāṇa*.<sup>34</sup>

As all or most of the symbolic representations are linked with the Buddha's specific buddha-events, and the places where he performed his buddha-deeds, they denote the Buddha's mystic dimensions, without taking into account his involvement in the sphere of *saṃsāra*. The Buddha did live and teach in this world and for the sake of this world, but his early and later followers disregarded the Buddha's mundane humanity, and focused on his transcendent and universal character. Essentially the Buddha's followers had no interest in the mundane personality of the Buddha, but they consistently and persistently endeavoured to formulate, expand and enrich, and to depict the buddha-ideal beyond and above history, time, and embodied reality in any historical and biographical sense.

<sup>33</sup> Saṃyutta, III.120. Some texts assert that the Tathāgata's body is the *dharmakāya* born of morality (*śīla*), meditation (*samādhi*), wisdom (*prajñā*), liberation (*vimukti*), and knowledge and vision of liberation (*vimuktijñānadarśana*). These are the five pure (*anāsrava*) or transcendental (*lokuttara*) *skandhas*. Dīgha, III.279; Saṃyutta, I.99; Aṅguttara, I.162; Śāstra, III.1349, 1384.

<sup>34</sup> For an insightful interpretation of the above symbols, and indeed for the origin and iconographic developments of the Buddha image in India and other Buddhist lands of Asia, see D.L. Snellgrove, ed., *The Image of the Buddha*. See also Dietrich Seckel, 1989, 180: "The Symbolizing Principle."

## The Buddha's anthropomorphic images

As already mentioned, it is broadly agreed among Buddhist scholars and art historians that the first anthropomorphic images of the Buddha appeared in sculptures during the initial centuries of the Common Era. Gandhāra and Mathurā are considered as the two principal regions in which the first Buddha images were intellectually conceived and concretely sculptured in stone. Stylistically, the Buddha images produced in these two regions, are differentiated as respectively the Gandhāra and Mathurā styles, or as appertaining to the Gandhāra and Mathurā schools.

Once again, the Buddha's followers and the artists whom they commissioned did not seek to depict the Buddha in anthropomorphic or human forms, which would in any way approximate to the appearance he may have had during his lifetime. The Gandhāra and Mathurā schools showed no interest in the mundane appearance of the Buddha, but instead they strove to depict the idealised or superhuman Buddha, drawing on two distinctly different sources of inspiration. We cannot discuss here the details of these sources of inspiration, but we only sketch their principal theoretical and cultural configurations.

The Buddha's sculptures produced in Gandhāra are characterised as being inspired or influenced by the Hellenistic perceptions and visions of the Olympian gods, and perhaps also the Greek emperors. In a nutshell, in the Gandhāra sculpture, the Buddha is not represented as a bald-headed mendicant, but as a royal and divine figure deprived of his human attributes. The Buddha's body is enveloped in a plentiful monastic cloak, which markedly resembles the himation of the ancient Greeks, or the toga of the ancient Romans. His hair is arranged in wavy strands knotted together on the top of the head. This rich mound of hair is reminiscent of the hairstyle of Greek gods. He often wears masterly groomed moustache and beard. The overall appearance is realistic, but at the same time it projects itself as a superhuman and super-divine figure worthy of respect and devotion.

The Mathurā school largely drew its inspiration from the literary sources about the Buddha as the Lord (*bhagavān*), universal monarch (*cakravartin*), and great being or superman (*mahāpuruṣa*). According to the relevant texts, the great being is described as having on his body thirty-two major marks (*lakṣaṇa*) and eighty minor marks (*anuvyañjana*) of distinction.<sup>35</sup> In the Mathurā sculptures, the Buddha's head is covered with clusters of short hair curling to the right. He has elongated ear-lobes, almond-like eyes, and perfect facial features. He is cloaked in his buddha-robe, and when seated, he sits on a lion throne (*siṃhāsana*). Once again in a nutshell, the overall appearance projects a majestic and superhuman figure, exuding tranquillity, supremacy, and transcendental aloofness.

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<sup>35</sup> For the lists of the thirty-two *lakṣaṇas* and eighty *anuvyañjanas*, see *Śāstra*, I.271-79; *Lakṣaṇasuttanta*, *Dīghanikāya*, III.143-44; *Mahāvīyutpatti*, 236-267, 269-349. There exist legendary accounts, which allege that the first images of the Buddha were produced during the Buddha's life, and under his authority. For a discussion of these legends see C. Wickramagama, 1984, 249-255.

While the Gandhāra style images eventually discontinued to be produced, the Mathurā style continued and inspired the subsequent generations of buddha-images in India and beyond.

Just to reiterate, the anthropomorphic images of the Buddha do not reflect the image of the historical Buddha as a human being, but they project the iconic image of idealised and abstract buddhahood.

### **Is there the ultimate Buddha-icon?**

Just as in the case of aniconic or symbolic representations, essentially there is no single image or icon of the Buddha, which can be treated as the ultimate icon. There is a whole series of images, which epitomise the Buddha's life events and his activities: birth, enlightenment, first sermon, and so on.

Then again, as Buddhism asserts the existence of countless Buddhas, in addition to the images of Śākyamuni Buddha, we have images of other Buddhas who preceded him such as the Buddha Dīpaṅkara, and of the Buddhas described in Mahāyāna texts, such as Amitābha, Akṣobhya, Bhaiṣajyaguru, and so on. We also have multiple images of the Buddhas of the ten directions, and of the so-called thousand Buddhas. Finally in the *tantras*, we have the fivefold manifestation or icon of buddhahood, as represented by the five cosmic Buddhas, Vairocana and the other four Buddhas, who epitomise the five aspects of the buddha-omniscience and activity. In the *tantras*, we also have the collective icons or manifestations of buddhahood arranged in *maṇḍalas*. As diagrams the *maṇḍalas* epitomise an ideal and perfected universe, which is replete with Buddhist deities, who collectively encapsulate the totality of buddhahood. Individually all those deities symbolise particular aspects of the buddha-qualities and activities, or of the Buddhist teachings.

Thus, in Buddhism there are single and multiple icons, but it is difficult to identify and indicate any individual and specific icon as the ultimate icon or image expressive of the all-encompassing silhouette of Śākyamuni Buddha.

### **Relationship between the stūpa and the image**

In relation to buddha-images, the *stūpa* has always commanded, and continues to command, the position and status of primacy and pre-eminence. As already indicated above, the *stūpa*'s superiority derives mainly from the fact that it contains the Buddha's relics. Right from the very beginnings, the Buddhist way of life and devotion were centred on the worship of the relics, tangibly reminiscent of the Buddha as the ideal of human perfection, although significantly removed into the realm of idealised abstraction.

The images played, and continue to play, the important role in the worship of the Buddha as tangible expressions and the locus of devotional focus directed towards the idealised state of buddhahood. But they never dislodged the centrality of the *stūpa*.

The *stūpas* with images inserted on their sides, as it were combine the distinctive roles and functions of the Buddha's *stūpa* and image. Some of the most powerful images, like the *stūpas*, contain the Buddha's relics. Thus the Buddha's relics unite and underpin the mystic sacredness and potency of the Buddha's *stūpa* and image. In this configuration, it could be postulated that the *stūpa* and the image, as a combined icon, epitomise the Buddha's mundane and transcendent permutations. However, if we must reduce the things to one or zero, then perhaps the relics should be identified and envisaged as the ultimate icon of the Buddha in this world.

### Concluding reflection

According to the perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*),<sup>36</sup> conventionally or from the perspective of human truths, there are beings, mendicants, holy people, arhats, Bodhisattva and Buddhas. However, from the perspective of the ultimate truth, there are no living beings, no arhats, no Bodhisattvas, and no Buddhas. Thus ultimately, all mundane and supramundane images of any kind arise from emptiness, but in order to gain their true apperceptions one must dissolve them in emptiness, the ultimate imageless reality of all imagined phenomena, beings and icons.

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| CHJ    | Ceylon Historical Journal  |
| EFEO   | Ecole Fraicaise d'Extreme Orient   |
| HR     | History of Religion  |
| IHQ    | Indian Historical Quarterly  |
| JAOS   | Journal of the American Oriental Society   |
| JBRs   | Journal of the Bihar Research Society  |
| JIABS  | Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies   |
| JICPBS | Journal of the International College for Postgraduate Buddhist Studies, The International College for Postgraduate Buddhist Studies, Tokyo |
| MASC   | Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of Ceylon   |
| MCB    | Melanges Chinois and Bouddhiques   |
| MRDTB  | Memoires of the Research Department of the Tōyō Bunko  |
| PUP    | Princeton University Press   |
| TJ     | The Tibet Journal  |

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<sup>36</sup> *Pañcaviṃśati*, 261.8-13.

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