

The Buddha: Aniconic and Iconic Representation

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Abstract

In the earlier period after the Buddha, Gautama Sakyamuni, Buddhists specified the Buddha as the symbols for worshipping in aniconic form at first and anthropomorphic or iconic form later in India. Among these aniconic representations of the Buddha, the stupa is the most popular form until now in comparing with other aniconic representations. The stupa is the first religious object for worshipping relating to the remains after the decease of the Buddha. Later, Buddha images have been carved as the iconic representations of the Buddha. It is an evidence that the Buddhists brought these representations of Buddha into existence and started worshipping. In this research, how the Buddha images and the stupas are related to each other will be analyzed with reference to three specific examples.

Keywords – Buddha, Aniconic or Anthropomorphic form, Iconic form

Introduction

In India, gorgeous cultural and historical heritage have been preserved. Basically, by studying on these preserved art and architecture of India, the religious origin, history, belief system, and customs can be analyzed. India can be divided into three regions: the North India, the South India, and the Central India. Agarwal (1996) asserts that the North India is not only ‘the abode of Hinduism but also the birthplace, and the homeland of Jainism and Buddhism’. Boddha Gaya, Bharhut, Sanchi, Gandhara, and Mathura are the main places where Buddhism has well developed, and there can be found many art and architecture relating to Buddhism.

Buddhists mainly worship and adore Gotama Buddha or Sakyamuni Buddha and the other former Buddhas as well who attained the enlightenment. Actually, Buddha did not want people to worship him but he encouraged them to follow his way to end reborn life cycle again and again called Samsara and to assume a certain stage regarded as Nirvana. Most people, however, not only pay respect and worship but also donate fruits, flowers, rice, curry, lighting, incense, and so on to him. In Buddha’s lifetime, he had four main important life events: the nativity or the birth, attaining the Enlightenment, delivering the first Sermon, and encountering the death or Parinirvana. There are many legendries, and researches on since when and how people wanted to produce, depict, and carve the images or statues Buddha in iconic form, or in anthropomorphic form, and other objects representing Buddha in aniconic form to represent the Gotama Buddha after his Parinirvana.

In order to produce Buddha image, there are many legendries and stories, and about that Buddha images or statues in iconic form or in anthroporphism did not occur in the early centuries of Buddhist art. On the other hand, there are other stories and legendries for that Buddha images were made since Buddha’s lifetime. There is no doubt that Buddha images have not been created for worshipped during Buddha’s life time because it is found that the earliest date of producing Buddha image was only in the early centuries of the Christian era in Gandhara and Mathura regions (Huntington 1990: 401). Moreover, Comparing the iconic form to the aniconic representation, it is explored that the carving of aniconic representation of Buddha is earlier than that of iconic form.

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In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, western scholars and Indian scholars started doing research on the early art relating to Buddhism. It is argued that Buddha images in anthropomorphic or iconic forms did not occur in the early centuries on the art of Buddhism. Scholars, Foucher and Coomaraswamy accepted this aniconic theory, and Foucher asserts that the earliest Buddha images were carved in Gandhara region in the first century C.E. In this early period, people represented the Sakyamuni Buddha in aniconic form using the symbols such as the bayan tree, the cart wheel, the throne, the two padas or a pair of footprints, stupa, and in composition form. All these symbols possess their own representative meanings concerning the Buddha's life events.

In the earlier centuries, Buddhists worshiped the Buddha representative symbols in aniconic forms especially of four main Buddha life events: the nativity or the birth, attaining the Enlightenment, delivering the first Sermon, and encountering the death or Parinirvana, and later, they produced the images or statues in anthropomorphic form of Buddha. In this early period of the art on Buddhism, people represented the Sakyamuni Buddha in aniconic form using the symbols such as the bayan tree, the cart wheel, the throne, the two padas or a pair of footprints, and stupas. Among them, the stupas were built, and carved into relief form, miniature structure in caitya hall eg. Karli caitya hall, Ajanta caitya hall, and main stupa like Sanchi. The erection of the stupa was originated from the enshrining relics of Buddha after his death. Therefore, the stupa is the first religious object for worshipping, relating to the remains of the Buddha. This research will mainly focus on three relations between the Buddha image, and the stupa.

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In early centuries of the Christian era, Buddha images in anthropomorphic form were initially sculptured in Gandhara and Mathura regions, and the images have their own different features. Artists carved the Buddha images in the position of being seated, standing, walking, and lying with several hand gestures or mudra such as Abhaya mudra, Dharmacakra mudra, Bhumisparsha mudra, and so on. Images were engraved conveying the major thirty-two signs and minor eighty marks of the Great men or Mahapurusa. On the one hand, more and more Buddha images are carved, and on the other hand, stupas, the aniconic representation of Buddha are constructed. The tradition of constructing and carving and casting Buddha images are still popular and become essential properties among Buddhists. Based on the archaeological remains in Gandhara, a stupa was found to be an important and an essential part of most monasteries in the earliest time (Juhung, R 2003:156). Therefore, the relations between the Buddha image and the stupa firstly the relation between Dharmakaya of the stupa and yupakaya of the Buddha image, secondly the association of five successive Buddha images and stupa, and thirdly, the relation between the homology of the stupa and Buddha image.

The ashes of Buddhas and other obtained after cremating the Buddha body or the bodies of enlightened people, are called relics or crystal pearls. In early art on Buddhism, not only the stupas were carved in relief on gates, on pillars, on monuments, and so on, but also the main stupas are built enshrining Buddha's relics. Therefore, since the stupas enshrine the relics of Buddha, it can be assumed that they are believed to be the representation of both the whole body of Buddha and Parinirvana in some cases. Considering from another point of view, the stupas were originated from enshrining the relics, and were erected not only as the memorial marks at sacred places of Buddha but also as enshrined sacred objects including his relics and others. According to archaeological evidences, it is noted that a stupa is the configuration of

material remains at Buddha sacred sites consisting of a central structure with physical body of the Buddha, or housing an actual part of that physical body.¹

On the other hand, it can be asserted that some stupas are assumed as the house of Buddha images and are related each other. The building where ordinary people live in is known as house, and on the other hand the building where monks and nuns live in is called monastery. This kind of example can be found in the Buddhist iconographical art that the Buddha image and stupa can be interchangeable. The Buddha image inserted to a stupa's body, for example, in Ajanta Cave (fig. 1) shows the close relation between them. Snodgrass (1992:332) assumes that the combination of these two is "a revelation or emergence of this indwelling presence".² As the public worshipping place, people has constructed stupa in which a Buddha image or images are placed. Schopen (1997) argues that one of his two assumption points is "the stupa or reliquary at Sanchi is classified as an acariya-kula, a house of the teacher especially Buddha".³ Moreover, in comparison with Hinduism, Hindus built the temples for their gods and goddesses, e.g. Devakula temple, a house of Deva. Buhler assumes and supports this assumption that it is a comparable expression or a parallel expression like Hindu temples.⁴ Therefore, both the stupas and Buddha images represent the Buddha, and the presence of the Buddha to worship and venerate him but stupas are sometimes monuments and images are icons or replication of the Buddha.

Firstly, the relationship between the stupa and the Buddha image is traces as a focal point of the dharmakaya, and the yupakaya. The doctrine or dharmakaya is separated from his body or yupakaya. These mean dharmakaya known as the Buddha's teaching, and yupakaya is regarded as a wholeness of thirty-two major marks, and eighty minor signs of the Great man or mahapurusa. According to the doctrinal and symbolic interpretations of the architecture and other elements of the stupa, Skorupski (2012) states that the width of the base-foundation symbolizes the purity of the thirty-two major marks of a great being (mahapurusa), and its height denotes the twelve links of dependent origination (pratityasamutpāda).⁵ According to the Tibetan text, each part of the stupa represents each section of Buddha's Dhama. The cardinal points of each terrace of the basement indicate the doctrine. The first terrace represents the four types of the mindfulness (smrtyupasthana) such as the body, the sensation, the mind, and the things respectively. The second terrace epitomizes the four types of renunciation (prahana), and the third one as the four miraculous powers (rddhi - pada). The fourth terrace is different from the previous ones. Its center and four sides stand for the five faculties (pacentdriya).

The dome resembles the dharmakaya, and the gardlands around the dome characterize six kinds of intuitive knowledge (abhija), the pavilion also represents the purity of the three vehicles to attain the enlightenment (triyana), and so on.⁶ Moreover, 84, 000 stupas built by King Asoka are related to each section of the Buddha Dhama or Chapters in the Pali canon law. To produce a Buddha image, the thirty-two major marks, and eighty minor signs of the

¹ Gregory Schopen, 1997. *Bones, Stones and Buddhist monks: collected papers on the archaeology, epigraphy and texts of monastic Buddhism in India*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, P. 134.

² Snodgrass, Adrian. 1992. *The Symbolism of the Stupa*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, P. 332.

³ Schopen, Gregory. 1997. *Bones, Stones and Buddhist monks: collected papers on the archaeology, epigraphy and texts of monastic Buddhism in India*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

⁴ Ibid. (P. 129)

⁵ Skorupski Tadeusz. 2012. "The Buddha's Stūpa and Image. The Icons of his Immanence and Transcendence". *Rocznik Orientalistyczny*, T.LXV, Z.1, 180-194.

⁶ Skorupski Tadeusz. 2012. "The Buddha's Stūpa and Image. The Icons of his Immanence and Transcendence". *Rocznik Orientalistyczny*, T.LXV, Z.1, P-187, 188.

Buddha or the Great Man must be carefully taken into account and to be reflected in the image. However, some of them can be applied when making the Buddha images. Therefore, the stupa is the representation of both the dhamakaya and rupakaya of the Buddha, and the Buddha image is the presence of the Buddha and his rupakaya.

Moving to the second point, the Buddha images are also related in the architectural plan of the stupa. Buddha Sakyamuni has his predecessors and people represented them in relief. In the early period, Sakyamuni and his fore six predecessors¹ were carved reliefs on the gates for example: five stupas and two trees figure on the gate of Sanchi. Later, Buddhists reduced former three Buddhas: Vipasyin, Sikhin, and Visvabhu from the list of seven, and they recognized only five Buddhas; previous four Buddhas: Krakucchanda, Kanakamuni, Kasyapa, Sakyamuni, and the future Buddha, Maitreya.

The direction of the four-faced stupa is also associated with the five successive Buddhas. Each direction of the four-faced stupa is represented each of the four Buddhas as followed – Krakucchanda to the north, Kanakmuni to the east, Kasyapa to the south and Sakyamuni to the west. Moreover, stupa itself in the center of these four Buddhas represents the future Buddha, Maitreya.² Buddhas images inserted into the surface of the stupa's wall is the commemoration of the former Buddhas in this present world, and the expectation of Maitreya for the future.

This kind of association of Manusi Buddhas also appears on the stupa in many parts of Southeast Asia. With the evidence of the archaeological and epigraphical record, it is noted that the arrangement of the four Buddha images related with a stupa and the assumption of the center of the stupa as the future Buddha Maitreya appear can be seen in the Cambodian Buddhist art.³ In Nepal and Srilanka, the arrangement can also be found according to the legend, which was stated that King Asoka built the first model of “four stupas in the four directions to commemorate the four ages of the world”.⁴

The four Buddhas arranged in the cardinal points of the stupa are the familiar theme. However, different arrangement can be found in Myanmar. In Bagan, it is clearly seen that there are the images of the five Buddhas in the five directions or the pentagonal plan of some stupas.⁵ The arrangement of the five successive Buddhas in the architectural plan of a stupa was, doubtlessly, a canonical idea. This direct association of stupa and five Buddha images clearly indicates that stupa not only symbolizes the presence of the Buddha's rupakaya and dhamakaya but also represent the Buddhas of the past and the future Buddha.

According to the traditions or Buddhist texts of Southeast Asia countries especially Thai and Myanmar, there are four types of cetiyas; the first one containing bodily relics such as the corporeal remains of the Buddha, monks, and others who attained enlightenment Dhatu-

¹ Vipasyin (91 kalpas ago, 80,000 years)
 Sikhin (31 kalpas ago, 70,000 years)
 Visvabhu (31 kalpas ago, 60,000 years)
 Krakucchanda (in the present kalpa, 40,000 years)
 Kanakamuni (in the present kalpa, 30,000 years)
 Kasyapa (in the present kalpa, 20,000 years)
 Sakyamuni (in the present kalpa, 100 years)

² Snodgrass, Adrian. 1992. *The Symbolism of the Stupa*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1992, P. 132.

³ Thompson, Ashley. 2000. “Lost and Found: the stupa, the four-faced Buddha and the seat of royal power in Middle Cambodia”. In: *Proceedings of the 7th International Conference of the European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologists*, 1998, Berlin. P. 246.

⁴ Gisbert Combaz, 1935 L'Evolution du stupa en Asie. MCB, 4, 1935-1936 cited in Snodgrass 1992:134.

⁵ Pichard, Pierre. 1991. *The Pentagonal Monuments of Pagan*. Bangkok: White Lotus, P.14.

cetiya; the second one containing contact or personally objects used by the Buddha or Enlightenment beings such as Bodhi tree or begging bowl, Paribhogaka- Cetiya; the third one containing indicative objects and other representations of the Buddha such as Buddha images, stupa, paintings, and footprints, Udesaka- Ceitaya; and the last one, Dhama Cetiya¹ *cetiyas* containing the teachings (*dhamma*) eg. Canonical texts inscribed on palm-leaves. Among them, Dhama Cetiya is intangible. These all cetiyas resemble the memory of Buddha.

The last point to be focused is the classification and the identification of the stupa and the body of the Buddha image, and finding out the homology between them. The stupa represents the universe while the Buddha image is regarded as the cosmic body.² In Indian tradition, the sun, and the moon are recognized as the eyes of the Buddha or the Great person (maha-purusa). The structures of stupas have gradually developed from third century BCE to first century C.E. Concerning the shape of a stupa, there are three fundamental elements; (1) foundation (vedi, nemi, and medhi) that are circular, square, octagonal or other shape, (2) dome (kumbha or anda) in several shapes, and (3) superstructure including a square pavillion also called harmika surmounted by a tapered pole or spire (yasti).³ The circular shape of the dome is the original style of the stupa for example; Sanchi stupa, and later stupa's dome become complicated in several shapes. In the same way, the Buddha image can be separately studied into three parts; the head, main body and the base platform of his legs and thighs.

By identifying the stupa with the Buddha image, the basement of the stupa resembles the platform of the Buddha image (legs and thighs) known as Jangha Vedi, and in South East Asia the base also including throne or the Adamantine throne (Vajrasana) called the plinth. Moreover, in Tibet, the basement of the stupa and the Buddha image represent the legs of the Buddha, the dome seems Buddha torso, and the harmika resembles the head.⁴ There is another typical character to prove why the stupas have similar identity to the Buddha image. It is eyes painted on four sides of harmika of the stupas.⁵ This tradition can be seen in some Nepalese stupas. Continuously studying to the top parts of the harmika, the spire rises from the harmika, is assumed to be the Buddha's crown or cudamani. In Nepalese, Tibet, and Thailand, the Jyotis shaped pinnacles or finials of the stupas seem resemble to the flame above the usnisas of the Buddha images.⁶ For example; the finials of Thai stupas closely resemble the flames above the usnisas of Sukhotai images, being an adaptation of the Sinhalese ketumala. Therefore, both the stupas, and the Buddha images are the aniconic and iconic representation of the Buddha since the Buddha images are the stupa, and the stupas resemble the Buddha image as well. Furthermore, these both are known as the Udesaka- Ceitaya, the memorial representation of the Buddha.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been discussed above giving some instances about the relation between the stupa, one of aniconic representations of Buddha and the Buddha image, an iconic representation. According to the belief building the stupa enshrining the relics of the Buddha after the death, the early Buddhists worship and venerate the stupas as the physical representation of the Buddha. Therefore, not only human beings including flying and holy men

¹ S. L. Huntington (1985) states only three relics types, Sariraka (piece of the body), paribhogaka (things he used), and Udesaka (reminder, i.e., representations, or images). The last Dhammacetiya is also referring to the doctrinal reminders such as the written and oral canonical texts.

² Snodgrass, Adrian. 1992. *The Symbolism of the Stupa*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, P. 360.

³ Skorupski Tadeusz. 2012. "The Buddha's Stūpa and Image. The Icons of his Immanence and Transcendence". *Rocznik Orientalistyczny*, T.LXV, Z.1, P-183.

⁴ Snodgrass, Adrian. 1992. *The Symbolism of the Stupa*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, P-361.

⁵ See Fig. (2) and (3).

⁶ Ibid.

but also animals, worship and adore flower garlands, foods, fruits, and so on to the stupas. On the other hand, the stupa stone relief at Sanchi stupa 1 demonstrating some people playing music, dancing, venerating, and worshipping to the stupa refers to the sacred place, Kusinagara where Sakyamuni Buddha died. Huntington (1992) argues that the stupa is the representation of the sacred places. Moreover, some stone stupa reliefs such as Amaravati stupa relief at British Museum, and stone relief of a stupa on the Prasenajit railing pillar at Bharhut, show the stupa build in the forest. Therefore, it can be assumed that the stupas refer to the sacred places where the Buddha's life events happened. After analyzing of stupa in-depth, the representative aniconic depiction of the Buddha, it can be assumed that the early Buddhists believed him as a person who attained the liberation from the salvations and suffering or Sansara and therefore, they worshiped and venerated to the stupa representing the Buddha in aniconic form after his death.

The primary purpose of the stupa is the memorial establishment of the Buddha although the Buddha image represents the living Buddha. They both have different functions, and purposes. However, both of them represent the presence of the Buddha and primary object of veneration for the Buddhists. Buddha image is doubtlessly the portrayal of the Buddha's dharmakaya while stupa represents both dharmakaya and rupakaya. The clear relationship between the stupa and Buddha image is the combination of the Buddha image inserted or attached to the stupa's body which indicates the equal value. This architectural relation is not only the visible evidence to prove the stupa relationship with image, but also the indirect association, which can be found in the canonical texts. The identification of the stupa and image can vary according to their respective subjects for the reasons that these are represented in the art.



Figure 1 – The correlation between stupa and Buddha image, Ajanta Cave
Photo: Imagining Buddhahood in South Asia Lecture (2016)

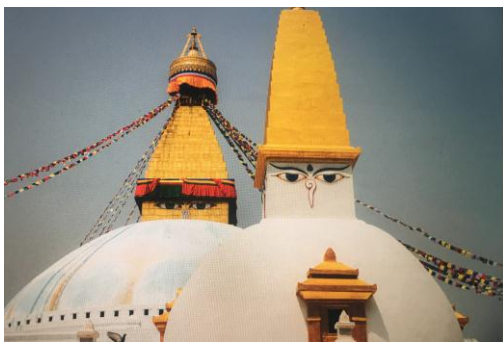


Figure 2 – Tibet Stupa Design



Figure 3 – Tibet Stupa Design

Source from Google

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