

The Idea of the Buddha and its Transformation in the Visual Art Form: A New Approach to Understand the Origin of the Buddha Image.

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This paper situates and contextualises the question of the origin of the Buddha image in a broader area of understanding the development and transformation of the idea of the Buddha as contained in the oral and textual traditions of Buddhism. Here an attempt has been made to relocate the whole debate of the foreign/national origin of the Buddha image in its proper religio-spiritual and historical perspective.

Part I

There are very few issues as controversial as the origin of the Buddha image in ancient Indian art studies. The very question of the origin of Buddha image arose and acquired disproportionate magnitude in the art historiography of pre-independent India. There are two basic approaches discernible in the historiography of this period which are described by the historians as (A) Colonial/Imperial approaches based on racial prejudices and Euro-Centric models of interpreting Oriental' (emphasis was on the otherness) art and culture. Even the propounder of the theory of Greek origin Foucher himself expressed the compulsion of satisfying his European patrons through the theory of Greek origin of the Buddha image; (B) So-called Nationalist/Traditional models of art interpretation which came into being either as an academic and intellectual reaction to colonial models or as corollary to prevailing patriotism and awakening of national pride based on historicism. Here, it is interesting to note, that, in Indian art historiography the term 'national' was first used by Foucher himself in his reaction to Coomaraswamy's theory of Indian origin of the Buddha image, which was rightly refuted by Coomaraswamy [1972a: 1-2].

Foucher was supported by other scholars like Grunwedel, Smith, Rowland Jr., Bachhofer and others in his theory of foreign Origin of the Buddha image. Havell, Goloubew, Coomaraswamy, Lohuizen, Agrawal. Sharma, Huntingtons and several other scholars have opposed the theory of the foreign origin of the Buddha image on various grounds. This debate between the European and Indian origin of the Buddha image acquired politico-cultural dimension in pre-independent art-studies and became, somewhat, emotionally surcharged. It is interesting to note that during this

period, except Coomaraswamy, no other scholar tried to examine the issue in the light of textual and oral traditions and try to understand the formal qualities of the Buddha image as the manifestation of the idea of Buddha. Post-independent studies in Indian art and Buddhism are more concerned with the understanding of the idea of Buddha as contained in the oral and textual traditions, not only of India, but, of other Buddhist countries as well, particularly, of Sri Lanka, China and Myanmar. Way back in early thirties Coomaraswamy [1972a, 1986] had already drawn the attention of the scholastic world towards the meaning and definition of the 'Buddha as contained in the textual tradition of the Buddhist literature. He has drawn the attention of the scholastic world to the whole gamut of the problem of reconciling the existence of a historic Buddha with that of his cosmological counterpart. How the cosmological conception of the Buddha was crucial in the origin of the Buddha image was dealt with in the light of oral and textual traditions in several of his writings. Therefore, it seems a bit surprising when erudite scholars like J.C. Huntington [1989: 85-92], and others in their enthusiasm of interpreting the textual tradition to understand the origin of Mahāyānism as well as of the Buddha image, indulge in an unnecessary and unwarranted criticism of Coomaraswamy for ignoring the textual tradition and also the image tradition in wood and other impermanent materials. Coomaraswamy has not only pointed out several textual traditions pertaining to the Buddha image, but has also categorically stated that, “even before the Buddha figure is represented in official Buddhist art, the Buddha had become an object of adoration, a very personal god: and it cannot surprise us that the Master's figure should soon appear wherever Buddhist piety erected shrines and monuments. We know that images of Hindu gods were already in use in the 2nd cent. BCE and it is highly probable that Buddha figures were in similar private use long before they took their place in a public cult” [1974: 75]. Likewise, J.E. van Lohuizen-de Leeuw in her seminal work 'The scythian Period', [1949, reprint 1995] though generally agreeing with the views propounded by Coomaraswamy, nevertheless mentions the name of Victor Goloubew to give him credit for first propounding the theory of Mathura origin of the Buddha image in a very emotional manner such as “honour to whom honour is due” while regretting the fact that the credit for this idea is always given to Coomaraswamy, which, erroneously suggests as if Coomaraswamy himself was either unaware of the theory of Goloubew, or worst he did not acknowledge it [1995: 170]. This statement by a scholar like Lohuizen is not only incorrect and misleading but entirely unjust to Coomaraswamy as he not only credits this idea to Goloubew, but also disagrees with his theory of Mathura origin of the Buddha image - “I by no means positively assert that Buddha figures were first made in Mathura and afterwards copied in Gandhar though as Goloubew says, that is possible” [Coomaraswamy, 1972a: 27]. Lohuizen further states that Havell and Coomaraswamy on intuitive and emotional grounds have maintained

that the Buddha image originated on Indian soil, which is not only out of context but again misleading as Coomaraswamy has never propounded the theory of priority of either school i.e. Mathura or Gandhar - "The evidence is not sufficiently precise to warrant us in forming a theory as to the priority of either school. I am inclined to presume on general grounds a priority for Mathura: but that is not evidence. All that we can assert is that the earliest Buddha types in each area are in the local style" [Coomaraswamy, 1972a: 37]. Coomaraswamy's writings are littered with numerous literary and archaeological references. Unlike Havell, Coomaraswamy never argued only on emotional and intuitive grounds without furnishing sufficient arguments based on sound reasoning supported by 'scientific' evidences. Hence, Lohuizen's allusion to Coomaraswamy's instinctively correct feeling devoid of logical reasoning and argumentation albeit often in the right direction seems totally unwarranted. These views only suggest the significance and importance of Coomaraswamy's contribution to art studies - in so far as present day scholars still try to prove their viewpoints either by agreeing, or disagreeing with Coomaraswamy.

Part II

The idea of the Buddha - Form and Transformation

Nineteenth and twentieth century scholarship was more concerned with the problem of establishing the priority of either of the schools - Gandhar or Mathura - that also only on the criteria of formal features and stylistic delineation such as facial features, realism, abstraction etc. in the context of the origin of the Buddha image. Absence of the Buddha image was taken as the defining feature of difference between Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna schools, and credit to the origin of the Buddha image was always given to Mahāyāna school. But, now in the light of new researches various scholars have asserted that early textual traditions do not contain any express prohibition against image worship on the one hand, and on the other, development of Buddhism itself suggests that the germ of image worship was very much present in the early Buddhist tradition i.e. before the proper and formal division of Buddhism into Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna schools and their various sects.

Snellgrove [1978] has rightly remarked that the term 'image of the Buddha' means any legitimate traditional expression - symbolic or anthropomorphic - which represents the form and idea of the Buddha. Modern approach of scientific history completely ignores the canonical records where superhuman nature of the Buddha is accepted as the truth. But as Coomaraswamy [1986] has rightly stated that "...all that we can say is that while there may have lived an individual teacher who gave the ancient wisdom its peculiarly 'Buddhist' colouring, his personality is completely overshadowed, as he must have wished it should be, by the eternal substance (akālika

dharma) with which he identified himself". In the Hīnayāna the Buddha is considered only a pathfinder - one who shows the way to his followers; contrary to this Mahāyānists consider the Buddha both as the path and as the goal, and it is only with His grace that, like Bodhisattvas, they try to actualise the Buddha's cosmic nature to benefit all beings [G.C.Pande: 1993]. The term 'Buddha' literally means awakened or enlightened one. A careful perusal of the textual tradition reveals that he is portrayed throughout both as man and as the Buddha - clearly establishing his supernatural or Lokottara status.

Textual Tradition on the Form of the Buddha

The early textual tradition contains two forms of the Buddha. One is biographical in essence to the extent it provides glimpses of the historical Buddha, and the other corresponds to the cosmological and universal concepts of the Buddha in a supernatural sense. But it should be kept in mind that nowhere they are treated as mutually exclusive, or as two grades of beings i.e. human and divine, mortal and immortal. Nowadays, scholars often speak of the Buddha as a great reformer who had established a new order. But in Nikāya literature the Buddha himself condemns this viewpoint and declares that it is a vile heresy to say that he is teaching a Law of his own instead of Eternal Law i.e. akālika dharma. In Mahāsimhanāda Sutta of Majjhimanikāya Buddha 'roars the lion's roar' and declares: "Now if anyone says of me, Gotama the Pilgrim, Knower and seer as aforesaid, that my eminent Aryan gnosis and insight have no superhuman quality, and that I teach a law that has been beaten out by reasoning, experimentally thought out and self-expressed, if he will not recant, not repent and abandon this view, he falls into hell." [M.1.2.2-2]

Time and again it has been stated that "these profound truths" which the Buddha teaches are inaccessible to reasoning; he has verified them by his own "super knowledge" [Coomaraswamy, 1986: 75-n163]. The Buddha repeatedly says that he has seen the ancient way, the Old Path that was taken by the formerly All-Awakened, and that is the path he himself follows [S.11.106, cf. Coomaraswamy, 1986: n164]. According to G.C.Pande [1993: 6] all these references make it clear that what early Buddhism emphasized as the concept of dhamma is not a 'uniquely revealed and historical tradition of doctrines but the objectively independent nature of truth accessible universally'. Early Buddhism believed that a Buddha is born in every successive aeon. Buddhavaṃsa of Khuddaka Nikāya gives a list of 24 Buddhas who had appeared before Śākyamuni. The Buddha himself speaks about his supernatural powers. After attaining Sambodhi the Buddha declares his nirvāṇa and his dhamma as one that is never born, transcendental, deep, difficult to see, subtle, beyond dialectic etc. He declares himself to be the knower of all - unparalleled even by the gods of this

world - who is willing to bless this blind world with the shower of nectar in the form of deathlessness through his act of Dharmacakrapravartana at Kashi. Even if he was a human being of flesh and blood, he proclaims his immortality and superdivine, supernatural status. This concept of supernatural Buddha is very much present in the Nikāya literature. This shows that the historical Buddha is not an empirically evolving person even in the Hīnayāna tradition. In Aṅguttara Nikāya the Buddha is described as distinct from all other kinds of beings, men or gods, Māra or Brahmā [AN. IV. 36]. This proves that he was thought by his followers as the divine source of spiritual grace and bliss in the early Buddhism, even during his own time. The question here is not whether the Buddha was an ordinary mortal or a supernatural being; the issue is - and, which is often ignored by the rationalists - that the Buddha himself desired of to be remembered and accepted by his followers as a supernatural being.

The cults of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas is characteristic of Mahāyāna. Trikāya concepts are intimately related to them. The seeds of Trikāya concepts go back to the earliest Buddhism and Pali texts which refer to him as Brahmabhūta, Dharmabhūta, Dharmakāya [G.C. Pande, 1993: 140]. The Buddha is supposed to have possessed several forms or bodies which is described as Rūpakāya, Dharmakāya, Nirmāṇakāya and Saṃbhogakāya. According to G.C. Pande [1993: 145] popular demand as well as theoretical compulsion led to a new understanding of the Buddha essence. The Mahāyāna-Sutrālaṅkāra describes Buddha's trikāya as follows : (1) The Natural body of the truth (Svābhāvika-Dharmakāyah). (2) Body of communion participation or common enjoyment of doctrinal truth (Saṃbhogika) in the assembly of Bodhisattvas. (3) Created body (Nirmāṇakāya) by which the good of beings is accomplished [G.C.Pande,1993: 146]. Manomaya Dharmakāya is also spoken of in some Mahāyāna sūtras. According to Pande three distinct Buddhological traditions are found in Mahāyāna. The first conceived the Buddha as the embodiment of Supreme Knowledge, the second considered him as the Transcendental Absolute Reality and the third described him as the Supreme Value, ideal, goal and means approachable through devotion and grace [G.C. Pande,1993: 148].

Textual and Oral Traditions on the Visual Transformation of the Idea of Buddha

There are numerous references to the carving, making or painting of the Buddha image by his followers in the textual tradition. Before we proceed to discuss them, it is proper to examine the so-called injunction, proscription or prohibition against the image worship in early Buddhism. The most famous Buddha vacanas in this regard are those which were uttered by the Buddha on his death bed. According to Saṃyukta Nikāya the Buddha told his follower Vakkali who desired to see the

Buddha in person, about the futility and insignificance of his desire to see his sensible body - 'अलं वक्कलि किं ते पूतिकायेन दिट्ठेन । यो खो वक्कलि धम्मं पस्सति सो मं पस्सति । यो मं पस्सति सो धम्मं पस्सति ।' [S. II, P. 341, cf G.C. Pande, 1976: 343]. There is no explicit or implicit suggestion here against image worship. The Buddha categorically states that one who sees Dhamma sees me or who sees me sees the Dhamma. In the first part he identifies himself with the Dhamma which is erroneously construed by some scholars as an injunction against his image worship as Dhamma (his teachings) is supposed to be invisible and abstract. But the second part of the statement is no less important which makes it clear that one can see the Dhamma by seeing the Buddha. Here Dhamma is identified with the act of seeing the Buddha who is very much visible to his followers. The seed of image worship and devotion to the Buddha are very much present here. To me it seems that the Buddha is suggesting two possible categories of worshippers. The first category is capable of seeing the cosmic and universal principles of the Dhamma and the Buddha and makes no mistake of seeing him merely as a man in human sense of the term. The second category is that, which understands the Dharma only by seeing the Buddha. If the first person referred here as the Buddha is different from the putikāya, then, who is he? If the Buddha was referring to himself then the statement could become irrelevant after his death when he will become invisible. Therefore, in the light of these conflicting possibilities this statement should not be treated as injunction against image worship. In fact, in his sermons the Buddha has repeatedly denied the novelty and human origin of his Dhamma by declaring his Dhamma through a 'lion's roar' (simhanāda) as 'उत्तरमनुस्सधम्मा, अतक्कावचरा, अनुत्तरं' which are equally applicable to him also as he has identified himself with the Dhamma, thus, paving the way for the idea that "the Buddha is only anthropomorphic not man."

The last sermon delivered on his death bed by the Buddha to his beloved disciple Ananda is also often construed an injunction against his image - worship. He advises Ananda that instead of being anxious about the worship of his bodily remains he should pay more attention to his teachings - अव्यावटा तुम्हें आनन्द होथ तथागस्स सरीरपूजाय । इड्घ तुम्हें आनन्द सदत्थे घट्थ [D. II. 3]. After being repeatedly pressed by Ananda the Buddha expresses his desire of erecting a stūpa over his bodily remains in the same manner as was practiced in context of a Cakravartī king. It is noteworthy that here Ananda has not asked how to worship or pay homage to the Buddha when he is no more. He has only asked how to pay homage to his dead body and the Buddha has only prescribed the last rites to be performed according to the prevalent tradition of his time. There is nothing here which suggests proscription against image worship by the Buddha.

Often the following statement attributed to the Buddha in Dighanikāya is also taken in its literal sense as a prohibition against image worship - "Monks! even after

the extinction of the cause of the bondage (Bhavatṛṣṇā) the body of Tathāgata exists. Only till this body exists, God and human beings could see it. After the extinction of this body when flow of life ceases, both Gods and humans could not see it” [D.1.1.147]. This statement could not be construed as an injunction against the image worship for the following reasons: (A) Here the Buddha is only stating a natural phenomenon of the extinction and hence the non-visibility of his human body; (B) Afterwards, Gods and humans could not be able to see this body as it has already ceased to exist. But Gods and humans will not be able to see the Buddha is nowhere suggested; (C) If it is taken in literal sense, then, many contradictory possibilities arise. First of all, how is it possible that even after the extinction of the cause of bondage (Bhavatṛṣṇā) Tathāgata's Body Exists? Was the existence of the Buddha dependant only upon his physical body ? After his death Gods and humans could not see his body, if, this is taken as also to mean that they could never be able to see the Buddha, then, one will have to accept the fact that whatever was meant by being the Buddha also ceased to exist after his natural death, or, in other words the essence of the Buddha was only skindeep or body-specific; (D) This is untenable in the light of ‘यौ धम्मं पस्सति सो मं पस्सति; यो मं पस्सति सो धम्मं पस्सति’, where the Buddha is distinguished from his Kāya (Body). It is clear that the Buddha suggests his 'anuttara' status and denies he “being merely a man in literal sense; (E) This statement has got nothing to do with the question of his depiction in human form. The human form of the Buddha image was never thought as to be his portraiture. It was neither conceived in his individual likeness nor designed to function biologically i.e. to depict his historical personality. The whole symbolism of Indian religion and iconography becomes meaningless if one take the Buddha image only as the formal imitation of his physical body in human form. Whether the Buddha image be vegetative, aniconic, theriomorphic or anthropomorphic - it is no more than a symbol which expresses an idea.

The above deliberation clearly suggests that there is no express tradition prohibiting the making of human images of the Buddha in early Buddhism. On the contrary, Majjhimanikāya mentions Buddha having said that those who have not yet even entered the Paths, “are sure of heaven if they have love and faith towards Me” [M.1.142]. The development of Trikāya concepts also helped in the acceptance of human form as the Buddha image. Divyāvadāna tells us that hundred years after the nirvāṇa of the Buddha Sthavira Upagupta requested Māra to show him the Buddha's Rūpakāya, [G.C. Pande, 1976: 344]. Though a clearcut distinction is being made between Rūpakāya and Dharmakāya but further perusal of the dialogue between Māra and Upagupta reveals that Rūpakāya here is not treated merely as an imitation of his corruptible pūtikāya or human body as Upagupta justifies the worship of the Buddha image created by Māra by explaining that people do not honour the clay

(body) as such while worshipping an image, but without regard thereof, honour the deathless principles referred to in the earthen images :

“मृण्मयीषु प्रतिकृतिश्व अमराणाम् यथा जनः ।
मृत्यसंज्ञाम् अनादृत्य नमति अमरसंज्ञया ॥
तथाहम् त्वम् इहोद्वीक्ष्य लोकनाथवपुर्धरम् ।
मारसंज्ञाम् अनादृत्य नतः सुगतसंज्ञया ॥ [Divyāvadāna]

Besides the famous Divyāvadāna evidence on painting the Buddha image, Kaliṅgabodhi Jātaka tells us that the Buddha advised Ananda, who desired to set up a substitute for the Buddha to be worshipped by his followers in his absence, to use Mahabodhi-rukka (tree) as his substitute. Mahabodhi-Vaṃsa [PTS: 59] also contains this reference. According to Coomaraswamy by the term Uddesika, Vyakta or manifest, anthropomorphic images were indicated as is suggested in the Khuddaka pāṭha-Atṭhakathā [PTS, 1915: 222] where 'uddissaka-chetiyam' is explained by the term 'buddha-patimā' - an image of the Buddha. This suggests that during the time of the Buddha himself his human images were made and worshipped, but he himself preferred to be substituted by aniconic symbols lest he and his image might be mistaken merely as a man.

According to the version of this legend told by Hiuen Tsiang it was an image of sandalwood rather than a painting That was made for Udayana [Coomaraswamy, 1972: 6]. Coomaraswamy has also cited several inscriptional evidences from Long Men which tell us about images made in gold or made in his exact likeness which reminds one of the Buddha himself on Vulture Peak or of his shadow left in the cave at Nagrahara [Coomaraswamy, 1972: 7]. Fah-hian on the other hand credits king Prasenajit for the First Creation of a sandalwood image of the Buddha which was worshipped at the famous Jetavana Vihāra even during the lifetime of the Buddha himself. Recently, Padmanabha S. Jaini [1981] has pointed out to a similar story contained in the Burmese tradition, particularly in the collection of Jataka stories known in its Pāli translation as the Paññāsa Jātaka and in Burmese version as Chieng-Mai Or Zimme Pannāsa. According to him the 37th Jātaka of this 13th century collection (Vattangulirāja Jātaka) narrates almost identical story which credits king Prasenajita for the first creation of a sandalwood Buddha image during the Buddh's life time. It affirms the tradition reported by Fah-hian which predates that of Hiuen Tsiang by 200 years, thereby, giving credence to the earlier oral Buddhist traditions. The Sri Lankan tradition, as contained in the Mahāvāṃsa also speaks of a golden image of the Buddha kept in the relic chamber of Ruwan Vail Saaya Dagoba of King Dutthagāminī in the middle of the second cent. BCE. [Sharma, R.C.1984: 144: Snellgrove, 1978: 140]. Unfortunately, these oral and textual traditions are never

taken seriously and are described either as later additions or interpolations on the basis of actual image worship of later times or rejected on the ground of the late dates of these texts. Non-availability of the Buddha images belonging to pre Christian centuries also supports this tendency.

The image of the Buddha - Symbolic and Anthropomorphic

The first artistic expression of the image of the Buddha which has survived in the early Buddhist art in stone (earlier wood and cloth painting traditions can not be ruled out) is of symbolic nature. In the art of Bharhut, Sanchi and the first phase of Amaravati, the Buddha is depicted through many popular symbols such as foot prints, Bodhi tree, lotus or lotus vase, Dharma cakra either as pillar capital or on a seat, elephant, horse, lion, stūpa, etc. This phase of early Buddhist art coincides with the semi-Mahāyānic phase of Buddhism in which the idea of the Buddha as a personal god, as a manifestation of the superhuman and supernatural Buddhata had already developed. This phase is often described by the scholars as the 'Non-image as Image' or iconography without icons'. The reluctance to depict the Buddha in human form was neither due to any injunction in the Buddhism nor the outcome of a universally valid and popular aniconism. As the idea of the Buddha changed in the religion, accordingly its visual transformation and manifestation also changed in the art tradition. The early Buddhist art insists firmly upon the unique status of Buddhahood. The idea of the Buddha as Cakravartī, Yogī, Mahāpuruṣa having superhuman knowledge, power and, 32 major and 80 minor signs, and the popularization of āṅgavijjā, the elements of Buddhānusrīti and taking refuge in the Buddha along with, the popular Bhakti traditions - they all helped the depiction of Buddhist narratives along with symbolic images of the Buddha. Composition of an imaginary body of Buddha is represented by the method of grouping several symbols at Sanchi and later at Amaravati. A form of standing Buddha is tried to be depicted at Sanchi with the help of a pillar or yaṣṭi like symbol which supports a dharmacakra on top and Buddha's Footprints at the bottom alongwith a description 'Bhagvato pamāna laṭṭhi' which clearly indicates the presence of the Buddha [Snellgrove, 1978: 41]. At Amaravati also similar suggestive depictions are seen [Snellgrove, 1978: 36-39]. Coomaraswamy's assumption that 'it is highly probable that Buddha figures were in private use long before they took their place in a public cult' [1974: 75] is worth noticing. Huntington has proposed several explanations other than aniconism for the absence of the Buddha image. According to him there was no necessity to depict the Buddha in human form as (1) the focal points of the narratives represented in this art was either to emphasize the virtue and unselfish behaviour of the Jātaka characters, or, (2) in case of depicting the events of Buddha's life, to emphasize the importance of the sites as tīrthas. In the case of stūpa decoration also it was not necessary to use the Buddha images because (3) the emphasis was on the relic inherent in such

monuments. According to him in Buddhist contexts (4) a relic was more preferable than an image and this might have been the reason for non-depiction of the Buddha. He also suggests that (5) it is incorrect to assume that the religion is totally focused upon him, or other Buddhas, to the exclusion of other emphases [1985: chap 5 and notes]. But these interpretations are more of conjectural nature than based on sound evidences or right reasoning. For a pilgrim the tīrtha is the God, in whose honour he performs the pilgrimage. Therefore, it will be unthinkable to him to honour the depiction of a tīrtha merely as a religious site minus the presiding deity. What Huntington sees as the depiction of a religious site, traditional Buddhists may consider it as the image of the Buddha. Likewise, to honour the inherent relic on a stūpa is not the least in conflict with the act of worshipping the image of the Buddha. Stūpas are treated as the Dhammakāya of the Buddha and Pāli tradition expressly tells us that 'यो धम्मं पस्सति सो मं पस्सति, यो मं पस्सति सो धम्मं पस्सति'. Huntington is right in his assumption that it is not necessary to explain the absence of a depiction of the Buddha in the extant early Buddhist monuments either by a theory of aniconism and textual prohibition or by the belief that the Hīnayānists did not employ images in their worship and to think that these early extant monuments belong to Hīnayāna [1985: 70]. Huntington and several other scholars have tried to explain the paucity or non-availability of the Buddha images before Kushan period by the theory of the use of perishable material like wood, cloth paint etc. in the art of pre-Kushan period [1985: 627]. This proposition - though attractive and plausible - creates another equally difficult problem and that is - why the stone was not employed in the art of that period on the one hand, and on the other, why these prevalent traditions of making wood, clay, cloth, painting images of the Buddha was totally ignored in the early stone art of the stūpas. It is true, that to a great extent, the debate on the question of the origin of the Buddha image is confined on the analysis of the first surviving' examples rather than the first images' [Huntington, 1989: 86]. More so, the question simply can not be brushed aside by the theory of perishable material used in the first images' now lost. Had the Buddha images been depicted in the first surviving stone art then the theory of the use of perishable material would have been plausible. But as that is not the case, it loses all its credibility as far as the explanation of non-depiction of the Buddha in the 'official' Buddhist art is concerned. As to the question of they being used in private by the masses or by the ardent followers, it not only seems plausible but assumes somewhat serious connotation in the light of several oral and textual traditions.

Part III

Analysis of the theories on the origin of the Buddha image

As the question of the origin of the Buddha image is intimately associated with the question of establishing the priority of Mathura and Gandhar schools in the

colonial and nationalist discourses, therefore, it is imperative to state that from the very beginning the whole exercise was meant to explain the Buddhist art only in terms of art styles in modern sense of the term, thus, negating the religio-philosophic conceptualization of the form of the Buddha and its physical manifestations. As this paper is devoted to the critiquing of the theories on the origin of the Buddha image, hence, it will not describe the well known art evidences from Gandhar and Mathura. We can group various theories regarding the origin of the Buddha image in two broad categories: (1) The theory of the foreign origin of the Buddha image propounded by Foucher, Grunwedel, Smith, Bachhofer etc. 'Foreign' elements are interpreted as Greek, Roman, Hellenistic, Parthian, Bactrian etc.; (2) Secondly, the Indian origin of the Buddha image propounded by Goloubew, Coomaraswamy, Lohuizen, Agrawal, Sharma etc.

The question of the origin of the Buddha image is intimately associated with the problem of priority of Gandhar and Mathura schools. Herein lies the third theory which may be divided into three sub-categories: (A) One group of Scholars suggest the foreign origin of the Buddha at Gandhar which paved the way for Mathura type of the Buddha images; (B) Another group of scholars suggest that both Gandhar and Mathura developed their tradition of making the image of the Buddha independent of each other, at more or less the same time. Gandhar images were based on Apollo type models and Mathura images were based on the models of standing yakṣa images. At Gandhar the idea of the Buddha is Indian but the style of representing that idea in a visual form is of mixed foreign origin due to several reasons which is interpreted either as the inability of indigenous Gandharan artists to depict the human form of the Buddha which necessitated the occasion of directly importing competent artists from Greece or Rome or by the suggestion of taking the help of the artists of foreign origin residing in the region of Gandhar (C) The third group of scholars, particularly, Lohuizen proposes that the Buddha images were first carved at Mathura at least half a century earlier than Gandhar and later they were introduced there [Lohuizen: 1981].

An analysis of these theories makes it clear that except Coomaraswamy and later on Agrawal, no one has tried to explain the origin of the Buddha image in the light of the idea of the Buddha and its development across the time and space as it is contained in the textual traditions. For example, Coomaraswamy clearly states, “In isolating the concept of style and comparing two different styles it is taken for granted that the theme (*vastu*, *Anukārya*) remains constant. In fact, however, this is not so, nor can it be so; things known are always in the knower according to the mode of the knower and not as they are in themselves. Notwithstanding that the label “Buddha” and the details of the iconography remain the same, the theme “Buddha” as a

problem set before the Gupta artist is not in fact identical with the theme “Buddha” set before the Kushan artist” [Coomarswamy, 1977: 77]. Recently J.C. Huntington has also suggested the same line of interpretation and has emphasized the fact that the two traditions of Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna developed in a parallel manner from an early date and hence, their sequential arrangement and impact upon the origin of the Buddha image is erroneous in outlook [1985: 70]. Elsewhere, also, citing the example of an inscribed pedestal of the image of Amitābha dated in the 26th year of Huviṣka, he advocates the existence of Sukhāvātī cult at least one hundred or many more years ago [1989: 85ff]. According to him Alexander Cunningham had discovered a plaque from Saṅkāśya ([published in ASR 11-1880] that contains the remains of a seated Buddha figure in Śuṅga art style [1985: 627]. Another sculpture, a Chinese work that clearly bears a Buddha figure provides more definite evidence of the early Buddha depictions as it is dated equivalent to 36 BCE [Huntingtons, 1985: 627]. Huntington is of the view that 'the existence of an early Chinese Buddha image virtually demands that we presuppose that an Indic image-making tradition had already been established, upon which the Chinese practice would have been based, since, in the early phases of their adaptation of Buddhism, the Chinese looked to India, the homeland of Buddhism, as a source for the religion' [Huntingtons, 1985: 627].

In the post independent studies the debate on the Gandhar origin of the Buddha image is centered on the new discoveries from Gandhar region, particularly, from Swat in the excavation of Butkara I, II and III. These excavations prove that this region was an important, flourishing site and centre of Buddhism and Buddhist art, at least since the Śāka-Parthian period. Butkara I and III images are supposed to be the earliest depiction of the Buddha in human form and they betray strong Parthian and early Indian influences [Nehru: 1989; Lohuizen: 1981; Huntingtons: 1993]. The most important point is that some of the images portray the Buddha in ekāṁśika saṁghāṭī like Mathura art idiom. The date of Swat relief and images is based on the series of associations like a coin of Azes I, comparison of art style of the earliest phase with that of Taxila's earliest relief and association of the sculptures with some in situ evidences. Earlier they were placed in 1st cent. BCE and later these Buddha images were placed in the early decades of 1st century CE [Nehru: 1989]. Lohuizen was of the view that Gandhar was imitating Mathura even before the canonical form of the Buddha image was established at Mathura [Lohuizen: 1981; Nehru: 1989]. Notwithstanding the heated argument in favour of the priority of either of these two art schools, the importance of these discoveries lies in the fact that they suggest the pre-Kushan origin of the Buddha image. Here reference must be made to the discovery of Chilas, which lies on the Karakoram Highway, beyond the Shangla Pass. Chilas is a small town

situated in a unique high-altitude desert, which extends all the way up to Tibet. The surroundings have many hundreds of rock carvings, some even dating back to the pre-historic times. Buddhist rock carvings have been found mainly following the old routes of trade and pilgrimage along the Indus, Gilgit and the Hunza rivers. In the area of Chilas, a tremendous concentration of Buddhist carvings and inscriptions has been discovered and these are yet to be properly documented. Inscriptions are in Indian scripts - Kharoṣṭhi, Brāhmī, proto-Śārdā and some of them are also in Bactrian, Tibetan, Chinese and even in Hebrew characters.

The importance of Chilas lies in the fact that carvings display a vast variety of Buddhist iconology and the development of architectural forms and designs, especially that of the stūpas. According to Volker Thewalt [1985: 779] the oldest representation of stūpas very closely resemble the types in Central India, particularly in Sanchi and Bharhut. Rock carvings of the most archaic stūpa-type have been discovered in Chilas II and Chilas III. Besides the representations of stūpas and decorative designs, many carvings have been discovered, which depict the Buddha himself and several Bodhisattvas [Jettmar, 1982, 1995; Dani, 1983]. Jātaka stories are also very common. In the site known as Thalpan Bridge, the Buddha is displayed in both Ekāṃśika and Ubhayāṃśika saṃghāṭī. It is interesting to note that the figures of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas have been found nearly exclusively in the sites of Chilas I, Thalpan Bridge with a few exceptions at Thor-Nord, Chilas II and Shatial. The process of documentation, classification and fixing the chronology of these rock carvings is still going on. Stylistic and epigraphic, petroglyphic evidences may be crucial in fixing the date of these Buddhist carvings. At the moment we can only say that these discoveries bear concrete evidence and testimony to the fact that Buddhism went via the silk route to Central Asia and China much earlier than various scholars suppose it. As some of the carvings are very close in their resemblance to Bharhut and Sanchi styles, we can say that the antiquity of these carvings goes back to 2nd – 1st cent. BCE, in the context of Buddhist art. This has a direct bearing on the issue of origin of the Buddha image in the Gandhar region. The depiction of ekāṃśika saṃghāṭī in Butkara I, III and other Swat series sculptures is also connected with the fact that Mathura Buddha type iconography was already established.

Much of the debate on the 'foreign' origin of the Buddha image was based on the colonial definition of Gandhar region and the Oriental theory of 'otherness' having a strong sense of racial prejudices and biases which distorted the whole perspective of understanding the Buddhist art in general and origin of the Buddha image in particular. Now the question of foreign origin itself has become meaningless as the focus has shifted from mere analysis of the formal qualities of the Buddha image to the idea conveyed therein and how the diverse manifestations of formal

qualities of various art schools directly correspond to the culture-specific understanding of the idea of the Buddha by his followers. Gandhar, Buddha is a conscious and original transposition of the idea of the Buddha, which was conceived differently by different people.

Another point, which I wish to make in regard is the definition of the Gandhar itself. A careful perusal of all the major works on Gandhar reveals many inconsistencies. Propounders of the theory of foreign origin of the Buddha image often confuse the definition of Gandhar as the eastward extension of west and, thereby, isolate it from India which naturally preempts all the arguments in favour of the foreign origin of the Buddha image as Gandhar itself becomes the foreign land. If Gandhar was a recipient and Greece, Rome, West Asia were the donors then Gandhar should be treated as something different from them and that difference lies in its Indianness which is accepted without question when the same set of scholars speak of the invasions of Alexander and Indo-Greeks over Gandhar, in terms of Indian conquest. Likewise, when the propounders of the theory of Indian origin speak of the Indian impact on Gandhar then, it becomes contradiction in terms. Do the same scholars also talk about the Indian impact on Mathura, Bharhut, Sanchi etc.? Therefore, first it should be made clear that Gandhar was an integral part of ancient India which because of its situation at the crossroads of Asia was conquered and governed by the successive waves of foreigners. Foreign elements were naturally present there. They were not borrowed from outside by indigenous elements. Greeks, Romans, Persians, Parthians, Śakas, Kushanas lived there in perfect harmony for a long time before the Gandhar Buddha was created. When due to the internal change and transformation within the Buddhist Church necessity for creating the Buddha image arose, it was but natural that local art styles and art idioms were preferred as the visual language to express the idea of the Buddha. The whole question of the origin of the Buddha image - merely in terms of formal art style - seems meaningless. Buddha was Indian only in a historical sense of the term, as his true nature and form is cosmological and universal which was understood from the very beginning of the Buddhism. Even with features like moustache and other anatomical peculiarities Gandhar Buddha could never be described as foreigner to Indian Art because like its Mathura counterpart it represents the eternal ideal of Buddhahood. This ideal was never 'misrepresented' or 'misinterpreted' as was construed even by scholars like Coomaraswamy [1974: 81] because to the people for whom it was created it was no less a Buddha than its Mathura counterpart. As mere external form of the script does not change the meaning of the content expressed in different languages and scripts, in the same way mere external and formal qualities of art styles could not make the Buddha of one style as 'foreigner' and the other as 'national'. It was the choice of the regional Buddhist churches to adopt any art style capable of

representing the Buddha in a way which was discernible to the masses. Hence, the influence of foreign art style should not be confused with the question of the origin of the Buddha image as was rightly remarked by Coomaraswamy - “It will be easily seen that the study of 'influences' should be regarded as one of the least important aspects of the history of art, and hybrid arts as the least important of all arts. We can think one another's thoughts, ideas being independent of time and local position, but we cannot express them for one another, but only in our own way” [1977: 228].

Recently, scholars like Paul Le valley have again opened the debate of Greek influence not only on the Buddha image, but, on entire early Indian sculptures including famous yakṣas and yakṣis - in terms of monumentality and iconometry - on the basis of purely imagined process of borrowing these elements by the Indian artists as the gift from Greece or worst they being taught by their Greek counterparts and later on becoming so obsessed with the beauty and grace of these Greek ideals that they never dropped the practice of copying them. Anyone denying it naturally will be considered 'nationalist' as Coomaraswamy was termed by Foucher on being criticized for his 'Greek origin of the Buddha image”. But, what Coomaraswamy has stated on the reaction of Foucher to his 'Indian Origin of the Buddha image' holds ground in context of Valley's theory also - “In scientific writings, references to the nationality of those who do not or may not agree with us are not always in the best of taste; not all of M. Foucher's eloquence can make them gracious, and in any case they are no good substitute for reasoned argument” [1972a: 2-ni].

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