

CAUSE OF THE ABSENCE OF THE BUDDHA'S IMAGE IN EARLY BUDDHISM

Dr. S.K. GUPTA

In the early Pali literature the Buddha appears as a young¹ religious teacher² who covered his one or both the shoulders with *diguna sanghati*³ and moved bare feet.⁴ He is described as shaven headed or with short hair.⁵ His perfect (*paripunna*)⁶ golden radiant body⁷ was marked with *mahapurusa laksanas*.⁸ His clean shaven face appeared as if melting with *karuna*. This description of Buddha's physical personality indicates that early Buddhists were familiar with a mental image in their teacher. But it is also a fact that they never tried to portray that image in any medium. They

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- 1 He appears as a young man having the physique of a young Nepali prince with powerful limits and features and determined face (Eliot, Charles: *Hinduism and Buddhism*, London, 1921, Vol. 1. p. 201.
 - 2 In the Nikayas he is described at so many places as a teacher, *Sattha*, of men and gods, the blessed. He preaches the *dhammum* (*dhammum deset*). *Digha Nikaya*, pp. 87-88: *Lalitvistara* p.3.
 - 3 *Mahavagga* (published in the Sacred Books of the East), Vol, XVII, p.112.
 - 4 It was believed that generally a healthy monk should not wear shoes (see, *Mahavagga*, Carmak-Khanda). Therefore, it may easily be presumed that being the head of the *sangha* the Buddha himself moved bare feet.
 - 5 According to the *Niddankatha* when the Bodhisattva became a hermit, his hair were reduced to two inches in length curling from left to right and remained so, as long as he lived (*Rhys David's Buddha's Birth Stories*, p. 93).
 - 6 *Suttha Nipata*, Sela Sutta, CI. Eliot, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 175.
 - 7 Cf. *Atthasalint* which mentions *rasmis* of six colors issuing forth from the Buddha's body (quoted by N. Dutta in *Aspects of Mahayana Buddhism and its Relation to Hinayana*, London, 1930. p. 104, in 3).
 - 8 *Digha Nikaya*, I. 89. Cf. *Samavayanga* (referred to in the Introduction to the *Augavijja*, p. 35): Agrawala, V.S. *India as Known to Paninis*, pp. 326-27.

always depicted him through symbols, such as wheel, stupa, tree etc. Thus the absence of the Buddha image in human form in early Buddhist monuments poses a problem to the student of Indian art. Why has the Buddha been represented in the art of Bharhut, Sanchi, and in the early phase of Amaravati through symbols what could have been the reasons of this phenomenon? Curiously enough, answer to these questions has never been seriously investigated.

Most of the scholars, European as well as Indian who have written on the problem of the origin of the Buddha image have merely accepted the fact that in the early Indian art the Buddha is represented through symbols. For them, the main problem has been 'where' and 'when' the first image of the Buddha was carved i.e. where does the origin of the tradition of the Buddha image lie. But no scholar has so far seriously posed the question as to why the Buddha image did not appear during the first 400 years of the history of Buddhism. Even Coomaraswamy⁹ never tried to explain this unusual phenomenon. ¹⁰Foucher and Bacchofer made a note of it but could not explain it properly. They were of the opinion that incapability of the artists of the early period was responsible for the absence of the portrayal of the Buddha in human form. But the evidence of Bharhut¹¹, Sanchi¹² Bodhgaya¹³ etc., where hundreds of anthropomorphic

9 Coomaraswamy, A.K., 'Origin of Buddha Images', *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. IX, No. 4.

10 Foucher, *The Beginning of Buddhist Art*, p. 120. ff. Cf. also Gangoli, O.C., *Ostasiatische Zeitschrift*, Vol. XIV, p. 44.

11 Cunningham, A., *Stupa of Bharhut*, Pls. XIV-XVIII, Cf. Coomaraswamy, A.K., *La Sculpture de Bharhut*, P. XIII, and IX.

12 Marshall, J., *Monuments of Sanchi*, Vol. II, pl. XIff.

forms of kings, yaksa, nagas, sages and warriors are found, belie this suggestion. Coomaraswamy has himself rightly remarked that the artist of the pre-Kusana period was not incapable of representing the Buddha in human form. According to him, the craftsmen who were capable of producing the Parkham and Patna images and reliefs of Bahrut and Sanchi could have had no difficulty in representing Gautama in human form, had they been required to do so¹⁴. We, therefore, feel that the real explanation of the absence of the Buddha image in the pre-Kusana period should be found in the religious ideas current in the contemporary society and not in the art tradition of the country. In this connection we would like to draw the attention of scholars to the following factors which we believe were responsible for the non-portrayal of the Buddha in human form in the pre-Kusana period.

1. Buddha Was Regarded as a Man with *Putikaya*

In the Theravadin tradition the Buddha was conceived as a man-Siddhartha Gautama- the son of a chief of the Sakya clan. With his own efforts he became 'Buddha' the Enlightened One. In the Nikayas¹⁵ he is generally described as an *arhat*, a fully awakened One, endowed with knowledge and good conduct, happy, a knower of the world, unsurpassed, and a teacher of men and gods. But he was a mortal and his body was full of

13 Coomaraswamy, A. K., *La Sculpture de Bodhgaya*, Psz. XL, LIII. LIV.

14 Coomaraswamy in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol, IX, No. 4.

15 E.G. *Digha Nikaya.*, I pp. 87-88. Cf, *Lalitavistara*, p.3.

asravas. The story in which the Buddha is hurt by the stone flung by Devadatta also points to the fact that the former was regarded as a human being, subject to the physical laws.¹⁶ In the *Samyutta Nikaya* his body is called *Putikaya*¹⁷, i.e. a body of impure matter. So long as it lasted, the gods and men could behold him. After the dissolution of the body i.e. after cremation neither gods nor men could see him. This is the one reason why the Buddha was not portrayed in human form in the early Indian Art. It may be recalled that even after a century or two of his *parinivana* Hinayanists retained a human conception¹⁸ of the Buddha. They remembered him as a human saint but with attributes surpassing those of the gods. In purity and knowledge he was regarded as the highest of all the constituted beings¹⁹. In other words physically he was a man but through *sambodhi* he had attained Buddha-hood which placed him above men and gods. At one place the Buddha himself said that he was neither a god, nor a Gandharva, nor a man, but the Buddha²⁰. This statement has created some confusion among modern scholars. For example, it is said that from this statement it is clear that the Buddha does not include himself within the category of man²¹. But as pointed out by Thomas the gods and the other beings are such because of their being subject to the *asavas*. A god, i.e. 'god by birth' is one who through his *asavas* has attained that position. And so the denial that Buddha is a man is the denial that he is one who like

16 Cf. *Cullavagga*, p. 2936. Cf. also Misra G.S.P., *The Age of Vinaya*, p. 60 fn. 132.

17 *Samyutta Nikaya*, III, p. 120. Cf. *Majjhima Nikaya*, I, pp.190-91.

18 *Majjhima*, I, p. 171: Cf. *Mahavastu*, III, p. 326.

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Anguttara Nikaya*, II, p. 38.

21 Sinha, D.K., in *Indian Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XXXIX, 1963, p. 71.

all those who are not *arhats* is still in bond-age to the *asavas*²². Therefore, the inference may be drawn that by attaining *sambodhi* a man can supersede the gods²³. But this achievement has nothing to do with the physical body of the Buddha which was definitely regarded as subject to physical laws and could not be seen after his cremation.

2. Identifications of the Buddha with Dhamma

In the life time of the Buddha his personality was given the highest place of honor and after the *parinirvana* he was identified with the *dhamma*. In the Indian tradition *vachana* of a saint is regarded as more important than the saint himself. Most of the religious works of the ancient period are not famous for their authors but for the ideas and thoughts which were propounded by them. The same tradition was followed by the Buddhists. In the Pali Tripitaka man completely merges in abstract thoughts and the Buddha himself becomes a personification of Dhamma. The early Hinayanists conceived Buddha's *rupakaya* as that of a human being, and his *dharma-kaya* as the collection of his *dhammas* i.e. doctrines and disciplinary rules collectively²⁴. After the *parinirvana* that is after the dissolution of the *rupakaya*, what is left is *dhammakaya* which is abstract and cannot be materially visualized. Several passages can be cited from the Pali works which show the supremacy of *dhamma* over the Buddha. At the time of the *mahaparinirvana* the Blessed One said to his disciples, 'It may

22 Thomas, E.J., *The Life of the Buddha as Legend and History*, 1949, p. 215, fn. 1.

23 Every *arhat* has qualities that place him above gods. But neither the Buddha and nor the arhats are gods in the sense of the creators of the Universe or its ultimate reality (cf. Thomas, *ibid.*, p. 214).

24 Dutt, N., *op. cit.*, p. 102.

be that that some of you might thought—the word of the master is ended, we have no teacher more. But Dhamma and Vinaya that have been preached by me will be your teacher after my death²⁵. In the same way Ananda explained to Gopaka Moggallana²⁶ that monks had now a refuge in *Dhamma* (*Dhammapatisarana*), which, he further pointed out were Buddha's doctrines and disciplinary rules. The identification of *Dhamma* with the Buddha is also evident from the conversation of the Buddha with Vakkali monk²⁷. Vakkali on his death-bed ardently desired to see the Buddha in person; on this the Blessed One said *Alam Vakkali kim le putikayena*²⁸ *ditthena. Yo kho Vakkali dhammam passati so mam passati. Yo mam passati so dhammam passati*, i. e. He who sees Dhamma sees Me; he who see Me sees the Dhamma²⁹. In other world he said that Dhamma should be looked upon with the same attention and reverence by his disciples as they paid him³⁰.

3. Buddha Himself discouraged the Human Representation

Buddha himself discarded his worship in material form. He has been shown as systematically trying to rebuke and suppress the popular

25 *Digha Nikaya*, II, p. 154.

26 *Majjhima Nikaya*, Gopaka Moggallana Sutta.

27 *Samukta Nikaya*, III, p. 120: *Majjhima Nikaya*, I, pp. 190-91.

28 Here, Buddha himself refers his body as *putikaya*.

29 *Samiyukta Nikaya*, edited by L. Feer, Pt III, p. 120. Cf. *Majjhima Nikaya*, I, pp. 190-91. p

30 In *Suddamma Sangha* (X.p. 65) Buddha says “45 years 84000 *dhammakandas* have been reached by me. Ialone only pass away while there are 840000 *dhammakhandas* which like 84000 Buddha's (*Buddasadisa*) will admonish you”.

tendency to build up a cult of his image. A later text, the *Vajrachhedikasutra* contains an emphatic injunction: ‘he who looks Me through any material form, or seeks me through any audible sound, has entered in an erroneous course and shall never behold the Tathagata.’³¹ In these conditions it was not possible and proper for anybody to depict Buddha in human form. The injunction against it was so strong that even when the Buddha permitted the devotee to offer worship to relics he did not forget to mention the supremacy of dhamma over worship. For example, the *Vakajataka* records the following conversation between the Buddha and king Bimbisara. The latter says: “When you are gone, O Blessed One, I shall be unable to do you honour, to make you the customary offerings and it will grieve me. Give me a lock of your hair, give me the pairing of your nails; I shall place them in a shrine in the midst of my palace. Thus shall I retain something that is part of you, and each day shall I decorate the shrine with fresh garlands and I shall burn rare incense. Responding to the king’s wishes the Blessed One said “Take my hair and nails; keep them in a shrine but in your mind keep what I have taught you”.³²

This is only an echo of the canonical words of the *Mahaparinibbana Suttantanta* put in the mouth of the Buddha of the Buddha in his answer to a question of Ananda about what the Order should do after his death.

31 As referred to in ‘Notes on Early Indian Art’, *Journal of U.P. Historical Society*, Vol. XII, p. 71, 1939.

32 It is important to note that the portrait which Buddha is said to have sent to Ceylon, contained a verse on its back which eulogies the Dhamma by saying: “whoever roams within the orbit of this discipline of the Doctrine without lapse shall put an end to all miseries by avoiding the circles of the births”. *Schieffer’s Tibetan Tales*, No. XIII. p. 243 (tr. by Palston).

In our view, apart from the above causes the denial to represent Buddha in human form should also be considered in the light of the earlier and contemporary religious traditions of India. Was it an entirely new idea contributed by the Buddhist? Or was it the natural outcome of the long religious tradition? Even if it was not the natural product of an old tradition it must have been definitely influenced at least by two factors of early religious tradition: (1) absence of anthropomorphic images in the Vedic religion, and (2) common use of aniconic and other symbols in the later Vedic period.

1. The Vedic religion was religion of sacrifice (*Yajurvedharmā*) where fire (*Agni*) in its natural form was the main medium through which mortals approached the deities (*devas*). Though these deities were conceived by the Vedic seers in human form, they described them so in world only. During the ritual of sacrifice some hymns were recited for the god concerned, in which his anthropomorphic form could also be described. In such a religion there was no need of images. In the Upanisadic conception of the Supreme Being also there was no room for the anthropomorphic idolatry. The *Brahman* and *Atman* were quite abstract conceptions and could not be represented in line and volume. In the Epics and the *sutra* literature anthropomorphic images of the deity are not preferred. In the period when these works were composed, aniconic symbols and not images were worshipped. Even in the late *Sukranitisara*³³ it is mentioned that the image maker should make images in such a manner that they

33 *Sukranitisara*, IV. 4.147.

would lead to the success of the *dhyānāyoga*. Therefore, images of gods could have been in form of aniconic symbols.

2. The last section of the Vedic literature, starting from the *khilas* up to the *Brahmana's*³⁴ and *Aranyakas* and *Grhyasutras*³⁵, we have references to the images of the gods and their shrines³⁶. But, it is doubtful whether these images were of the Vedic gods such as Indra, Agni, Mitra and Varuna, etc. According to Banerjee³⁷ they were the aniconic symbols of the bucolic deities like Isana etc. Archaeology has not yielded images of this period. The only archaeological materials associated with the Aryans constitute the Painted Grey ware and some copper tools found from the Ganga valley. It is true that one of the copper tools seems to be anthropomorphic in shape³⁸. But by any flight of imagination it cannot be taken as an image of a god. The Epic literature also mentions aniconic symbols of deities. The *Mahabharata*³⁹ for example refers to the images of Vishnu and of Visvesvara⁴⁰ and his consort, which might have been aniconic images—the former a Salagrama⁴¹ and later a phallic emblem of Siva in which Siva and Uma are symbolically represented.

34 *Sadvimsa Br.* X.5. Cf. Bhattacharya, B.C. *Indian Images*, Part I. p. XXIX.

35 *Paraskaya Grhyasutra*, III. 14.8.

36 The terms used to denote the shrines of gods are *devagrha*, *devayana*, and *devakula*, etc.

37 BANERJEE, J.N., *Development of Hindu Iconography*, p. 69.

38 Seo Lal, B.B., 'Further Copper Hoards from the Gangetic Basin', *Ancient India*, No. 7, pp. 20ff, Pls. V, VI and IX.

39 Some of the passages of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* clearly represent anthropomorphic images of the gods. But the span of time of these works is so wide that in the absence of other contemporary evidences one can easily assume them as later additions.

40 *Mahabharata*, III. 84. 135.

41 *Mahabharata*, III. 84. 124.

As far as the archaeological evidences are concerned, they all indicate the prevalence of use of aniconic or pure symbols. For example, the earliest coins known as the 'Punch Marked'⁴² usually contain five symbols some of which may be treated as animal symbols such as elephant and bull may stand for theriomorphic representation of deities; mountain and tree may also have some cult significance. Here it may also be recalled that the Janinas continued to worship *ayagapattas*⁴³ for a long time. Even the Bhagavatas refer to the worship of only '*Pujasila*'⁴⁴ as late as the first century B.C.

From the above discussion it is apparent that in the pre-Christian centuries the religious set up in north India was such that it did not need any images. Although the origin of image worship is a debatable point in Indian religious history, yet no one can disagree with the view that in that period only the worship of symbols was prevalent in the various religions. With the decline of the Vedic religion and emergence of bhakti oriented Bhagavatism a large number of symbols were needed. Most of them were borrowed from the folk cults as they were held in high esteem on account of their association with certain spiritual entities which now became

42 For the Punch Marked coins see, Spooner, D.B. *Archaeological Survey of India – Annual Report*, 1905-6; 1913-14, p. 211. Coomaraswamy, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*, pp. 43-55. Prasad, D., *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, New Series, 1934. No. XLV, pp. 16-55; cf. also Allan, J., *Catalogue of Coins of Ancient India*, London, 1936. Bhattacharya, P.N., *Memoirs of Archaeological Survey*, No. 62; ef. also a detailed article on the identification of symbols in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal*. XLV, 1934.

43 The supposed reference to the Jain image in the Hathingumpha inscription of Kharavela is also probably to some sort of an ayagapatta (ef. Barna, B.M., *Old Brahmi Inscription*. No. 1. *Indian Historical Quarterly*, XIV, pp. 261 II., itra. R.I. *Antiquities of Orissa*. II, pp. 16ff.

44 In the Ghosundi inscription found at Majjhamika (modern Nagari) a reference is made to god, Sankarsana and Vasudeva who were given the title '*Bhagvata*' and were as yet worshipped in form of a '*Pujasila*' (*Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XXII. pp. 203-4).

associated with cult divinities. This religious environment must have influenced the Buddhists also. One should not forget that the Buddha himself followed the old tradition and allowed his followers to make a stupa on his relics on the pattern of the Chakravarti kings. In this atmosphere it was but natural that the human representation of Buddha's person took such a long time to materialize.

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