THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

A Discussion on the New Dimensions of Buddhist Art in India

Dr. Anand Shanker Singh
Principal, ISD College, University of Allahabad, India

Abstract:
After the First Council of reciting and memorizing the Buddhist Canon in Fifth century B.C., the Bhikshus and Bhikshunis sustained and propagated the Buddhist scriptures by oral transmission for several centuries. In the meantime, because of the desire to earn merit and to have religious visual guidance, the traditional lay Buddhists made the Buddha's image and symbols which created the impetus for the development of Buddhist art. This development can be viewed as the inevitable process that was initiated by the Asoka's dedication of making pillars, which were based on the axis mundi ideals in earliest Indian literature of the Rig Veda and made by the Indo-Persian artists after the collapsing of Alexander the Great's Persian empire, for the Buddhist holy sites during the third century BC. In fact, initially at these holy places, the historical Sakyamuni Buddha was made and represented symbolically, such as by an empty throne, a stupa, a residence hall of worship, or a tree, with the most popular symbols continuing to be included even after the introduction of the Buddha in human form. Indeed, there was no tangible evidences survives today of any statues or portraits of the Buddha having been created in the course of his lifetime, or for approximately four hundred years after his demise, even though his doctrines and sangha were still flourished since his time. In general, initiated by Asoka's building of inscriptive pillars, monasteries, and others, Indian Buddhist arts go through five phases due to indigenous and foreign influences: stupa architecture and its decorative motif, Greco-Roman art of Gandhara, Indo-Kushan art of Mathura, cave architecture of Western India, and later Buddhist Art of Bengal, including Burma. These stylistic arts have given the great impacts on the religious and secular life of the people in those related areas for more than two millenniums and thus Buddhism had created a great current of art in India. Under this artistic trend, many valuable artworks created and gave rise to emerge a special social phenomenon. Thus, the paper focuses on the dimensions of influence and impact of Buddhist art in India.

The art expression is considered as the essence of human life. According to ancient Indian literature, divine origin is envisaged for this art. Consequently, Visvakarma, is termed as Silpaprajapati, foremost among the artists and the master of a thousand arts. These various artistic works, painting was one of the most important fields and the Citralakshana, an ancient document, the chronology of which is uncertain recounts a long legend of the origin of the paintings ascribing it to Nagnaj it. A different legend is told, however, in the Visnudharmottarapurana of the seventh century AD. According to it, two mythical sages, twin manifestations of Vishnu, whose names were Nara (man) and Narayana were the pioneers of the field. Thus, the art of painting is attributed to Vishnu thereby clearly indicating its divine origin. Nevertheless, despite these literary references, which are often contradictory to one another the absence of any actual creations of earliest art makes it indeed impossible to say with absolute certainty what its fundamental character was. Similarly difficult to identify is the source of inspiration i.e. whether it was religious and hieratic or secular in its origin. But, according to the description given in the Visnudharmottarapurana, it is certain that as Sumern is the chief of the mountains; as Garnda is the chief of those born out of eggs; as the king is the chief of men; even so in this world is the practice of painting, the chief of all arts.

Although this reflects Brahmanical ideals, it clearly indicates that the painting tradition was foremost among other artistic activities during the ancient period. Besides these, in early Sanskrit literature, there are several references to the secular aspect of the art, with the further information that it was in wall painting that the ancient artists largely excelled. As in the case of the views of the Brahmanical canon, it is noteworthy that the Buddhist tradition also held the view that "there is nothing finer in the world than the art of painting." This establishes the fact that Buddhism not only encouraged but was also appreciative of the painting tradition to a large extant. Hence, it is generally believed that with the advent of Buddhism, a new idea was introduced into painting and religious subjects became the main theme of the artists of the time. Nevertheless, comparatively few references are available in Buddhist texts relating to this ancient Buddhist tradition of painting. In this context, it is significant that the word "cittakamma" or pictorial art is referred to in Buddhist literature only rarely. Interesting passages occur particularly in the Samyutta Nikaya and the Attasalini, in this regard. It is to be noted at this point that Coomaraswamy has pointed out that the early translation of the text of Attasalini missed the point and confused the issue to a large extent. (Gregory Schopen; 1997)Thus, the use of the word "artistic" is indefinite and does not bring out the parallel between the general consciousness and the special functioning of aesthetic institution. It is evident that almost all the references in the Buddhist texts relating to paintings are in the sense of idiomatic phrases rather than mentioning or appreciating actual existing painting traditions. Hence although it is not necessary to focus attention on such references, it must be emphasised here that in addition to the extant murals, this idiomatic usage also clearly indicates a ' highly utilised stage of paintings of the Buddhist tradition during such an early period, Thus, according to a legend, narrated in the Mulasarvastivadin Vinaya, Buddhist painting tradition appears to have been in use during the time of the Buddha himself. This legend states that faced with the task of announcing to king Ajatasatru that the Buddha had passed away and fearing a violent reaction, Mahakassapa there came up with a novel way of gently breaking the news. He instructed the minister Varshakara to have a painted scroll prepared with depiction of the four great miracles of the Buddha's life i.e. the birth, enlightenment, first sermon and the great decease. Besides this, another statement in the Cullavagga of the Vinaya Pitaka is also important. It states that the Buddhist monks who then lived in rock caves were permitted to plaster the walls of their dwelling caves and to embellish them with paintings by the Buddha (David L. Snellgrove; 1978). It is obvious that in these instances, they were only permitted to execute the paintings of flowers and creepers but were prohibited from drawing the figures of human beings since they were not pleasure seeking persons. Note that the rule has not strictly been followed by the later Buddhists as evidenced by the murals of Ajanta and elsewhere. Apart from these kinds of references mentioned in the Buddhist canonical texts, the same texts also incorporate data relating to some of the techniques of paintings of the early period. It is however, evident that these descriptions basically belong to the Buddhist painting tradition of the early period of India. In fact, as Percy Brown has also pointed out, since India was the birthplace of Buddhism it may be assumed that it was also the birthplace of the Buddhist school of painting? Due to non-availability of the relevant evidence although it is difficult to speak with any precision as to the beginnings of Indian painting, it is certain that at last in the second or first century BC Buddhist painting tradition was a fairly developed art as represented by some of the murals of cave at Ajanta.

It is obvious that though the history of Buddhist mural painting tradition in India goes as far back as the commencement of Buddhism somewhere in the sixth century BC (Joseph M. Kitagawa and Mark D. Cummings; 1989). When considering the utility of these religious arts, it must not be forgotten that these artistic creations were not placed upon monuments because they needed to be there for the value of the monument. In addition, it must not be supposed that the object of these paintings was to provide entertainment for or to gratify the aesthetic needs of the peoples, monks or the places where there were executed. It must also not be confused that if sometimes, specially relating to some of the Jataka stories, the subjects seem to be out of keeping with the ascetic life of a monastery, it is only because the Bodhisattva before attaining Buddhahood is said to have experienced life in every phase before he obtained salvation, the perfect experience (Paul J. Griffiths; 1994). As a result, though incidentally the paintings depict an intimate revelation of Indian life of the period, it would be a mistake to suppose that the painters intentionally recorded current events as history. It has been suggested by some scholars that at least Ajanta was an academic centre and its monks or the students tried to concentrate on different doctrines of Buddhism. It is certain that most of the scriptures had been written by this time and also the deep knowledge of monks about these scriptures is reflected in Ajanta inscriptions. In fact, they bear perfect harmony with the Buddhist sacred texts and the Buddhist philosophy, which, is beautifully interwoven in the eulogies composed in classical Sanskrit. In addition, it is conspicuous that an analysis of the inscriptions at Ajanta reveals that out of thirty-one donors mentioned, twenty are monks, an aspect which will be discussed in the seventh chapter in detail. Thus, a comparatively large number of monks among the donors and the different categories within these positively suggest that Ajanta was not only a flourishing Buddhist establishment but also a centre of monastic education. This is further substantiated by the fact that at Ajanta, at least four of the caves are preaching halls, the others all being larger living caves, so that in the end there was accommodation for 600 or 700 monks as estimated by scholars. Hence, most probably these murals were also drawn for the fulfilment of the requirement of students at the centre, in addition to the edification of its' lay worshipers. Thus, when considering the purpose of executing these Buddhist mural paintings it is clear that the objective was to earn merit and the main aim was to visualise the ideals of the Buddhist creed and to illustrate by pictorial parables some of the beautiful sentiments of the Buddhist religion. Since originally these were designed to appeal to the higher feelings of the spectator, sustained by their supreme charm the littleness of the viewer's own personality vanishes and he becomes exalted and absorbed. In other words, the paintings have been used for instilling faith and ardour; four good deeds and conduct; and avoidance of misdeeds and wickedness in the minds of both monastic and lay worshipers. In fact, painting was a lively medium through which such an exemplary life could be taught to the sinner and the sacred knowledge revived in the memory of the saint. It was also primarily an attempt to present the spirit rather than the form of religion a story rather than an idea (A. Ray; 1994). Although the ancient Buddhist mural paintings survive at several places in India and the problem of dating these remains a very difficult task, since there is not adequate evidence to establish their exact chronology. Hence, it is significant that some scholars have attempted to give chronological data based on stylistic considerations of the paintings at some of the sites. But, any attempt at working out a chronology based on the stylistic form of the relevant paintings would be questionable since one particular style of a period would be popular even in a subsequent period.

The primary Buddhist monument, both in early and present-day Buddhism, is the stupa, originally a reliquary mound or tumulus. Although the cult of the stupa is attested archaeologically only from the 3rd century bce onward, the canonical tradition links this cult to the great events associated with Shakyamuni’s decease. Mythologically, the stupa is the supreme symbol of the Buddha in his fully realized state beyond the bonds of mortality. Carved stonework preserved from the 2nd century bce onward, especially from the ancient stupas of Bharhut and Sanchi in India, reveals the great Buddha myth in visual form. The scenes on these stupas depict not only the great events of the Buddha’s last life but also those of his previous births as well. In the earliest period symbols were used to represent the figure of the Buddha in scenes from his life as Shakyamuni, a tree indicating his enlightenment, a wheel his first preaching, and a miniature stupa his final nirvana—because the sanctity of his being was thought to be too great to be portrayed physically. The tree cult involved ancient pre-Buddhist traditions that coalesced with the act of the enlightenment as performed beneath the pipal or bodhi tree. The wheel was the symbol both of the universal monarch and of the Buddha as universal guide and teacher. The stupa cult, with its extraordinary preoccupation with human relics, may have been a special Buddhist development related to the belief in nirvana as a supramundane state. It is in marked contrast to the usual Brahmanic horror of mortal remains as unclean. Sculptural representations of the Buddha appeared in northwestern India from about the 1st century bce, and stereotyped images of him soon became the model for use throughout Asia. Common types of Buddha image are those that represent his calling the earth to witness against Mara by touching it with the fingertips of the right hand, the meditating Buddha protected by a cobra's hood, and the Buddha lying on his right side as he enters final nirvana. The Buddha protected by a cobra's hood represents a coalescing of the Buddha myth with the pre-Buddhist cult of snakes as protecting divinities and derives from a legend in which the Buddha was protected from a rainstorm by a great *naga* king named Mucilinda (David Seyfort Ruegg; 1989). The Buddha image was adapted to all the main scenes of Shakyamuni's life. While the later stupas in India and Southeast Asia achieved ever-greater artistic splendour, they remained the symbols of Shakyamuni's transcendence and preserved the iconographic traditions concerning scenes from his previous lives as well as his last life. Famous examples are Amaravati in South India, dating from about the 3rd century ce, and Borobudur, which was built in Java between 778 and 850 ce and embodies Mahayanist components in its symbolic structure. It also displays the close association between later developments and the great Buddha myth of Shakyamuni.

Temples and monasteries hewn out of rock were used by Buddhists at least from the 2nd century bce until the 8th century ce and probably later. Early cave monasteries, famous for their temples with internal stupas set in a kind of sanctuary, are Bhaja, Bhedsa, and Karli, all within reach of Mumbai. Other cave monasteries famous for the development of the iconography of the Buddha are Kanheri, Nasik, Ellora, and, especially, Ajanta, which contains fine murals dating from the 1st century bce to the 9th century ce. These mainly represent Shakyamuni in his last life and in his previous lives as a compassionate bodhisattva. Magnificent cave temples and monasteries were established in many other Buddhist areas, especially in China. The iconographic traditions of Shakyamuni thrive to this day chiefly in Sri Lanka and the Southeast Asian countries where Theravada Buddhism prevails. In the Mahayana countries of Nepal, Tibet, China, Japan, Mongolia, and Korea, the same iconographic traditions are observed whenever an image or painting of Shakyamuni is required. So long as Buddhism remains, the visual representations of Shakyamuni will continue to be meaningful. The starting point of all the later-developed traditions of the Buddha was the great Buddha myth. The early idea of a series of buddhas in time, first 7 and later 24, soon allowed for the idea of a future buddha Maitreya, whose cult became popular throughout the Buddhist world. Next came the tendency to focus attention on other buddhas in buddha lands distributed through endless space. In the Indian context the most important of the new buddhas that came to be recognized were gradually systematized into a set of five Celestial or Dhyani Buddhas (Alan Sponberg and Helen Hardacre; 1988). The buddha who was usually placed at the centre of the group was Vairocana, the Illuminator, the universal sage or chakravartin buddha. He is often depicted using the gesture of preaching or by the symbol of the wheel of *dharma*. The buddha of the east, Aksobhya, is iconographically associated with Shakyamuni in the "earth-witness" posture. The cult of the "Imperturbable" buddha probably derives from the cult at Bodh Gaya, the historical place of the Buddha's enlightenment. The buddha of the south was Ratnasambhava, the Jewel-Born, who represents the Buddha's selfless giving, indicated by the gesture of giving gifts, right hand open, pointing outward and downward. Amitabha was the buddha of the western paradise, around whom an important devotional cult developed. The buddha of the north was Amoghasiddhi, "Infallible Success," who represents the Buddha's miraculous power to save, indicated by the hand gesture of giving protection, right hand raised, palm outward and pointing upward. These five celestial buddhas seem, in the early stages of their development to have been celestial manifestations of various aspects of Shakyamuni.

Two of these buddhas developed an important mythology and cult of their own quite apart from their role in the group of five Dhyani Buddhas. The first of these was Amitabha, the great buddha who presided over the western paradise and became the central figure in the traditions of Pure Land Buddhism. The Pure Land tradition, which probably began in northwestern India about the beginning of the Common Era, was most successful in China and Japan, where it became the dominant Buddhist tradition. The second of the five great buddha figures with a very important independent history was Vairocana. This "central" buddha developed an important role throughout the Buddhist world and emerged as the central buddha figure in the Esoteric traditions of Japan. The Dhyani Buddhas prepared the way for the psychophysical theories of the tantras. The five were associated with the centre and four compass points, namely, the macrocosm, conceived as a unity of the Five Great Elements. They were also identified with the microcosm of the human personality understood in terms of the Five Components- *rupa*, *vedana*, *samjna*, *samskara*, and *vijnana* and with the Five Great Evils, typifying normal phenomenal existence (Frank E. Reynolds and Jason A. Carbine; 1995). The Indian god Bhairava, a fierce bull-headed divinity, was adopted by Tantric Buddhists as Vajrabhairava. Also known as Yamāntaka and identified as the fierce expression of the gentle Manjushri, he was accorded quasi-buddha rank. The bodhisattvas also developed manifold forms. Maitreya, the buddha-yet-to-come, was already known prior to the beginning of the Common Era and became the focus of a major devotional cult that spread across Asia. This early cult seems to have prepared the way for the Pure Land traditions involving Amitabha, which gradually superseded it. From the 1st century ce onward, a number of other celestial bodhisattvas were recognized, and cults of various kinds developed around them. Bodhisattvas who became popular included Manjughosa or Manjusri, the representative of divine wisdom, and Vajrapani, "the one who wields the ritual thunderbolt and who, as lord of *yakshas*, entered the pantheon as a great protector. Avalokitesvara, the lord of compassion, first appeared in India and subsequently became an important figure in virtually every Mahayana and Esoteric Buddhist tradition

The main repository of Indian Mahayana and Vajrayana iconographic traditions is Tibet, where Buddhism was introduced from the 8th to the 13th century. In the early Buddhist tradition, Gautama is represented as denying the importance of questions concerning the nature of the universe. It was enough to realize that normal existence consists of a process of continual birth, death, and rebirth, a process from which, by following the path the Buddha discovered, one might achieve release (Jacob N. Kinnard; 1999). If the early texts are correct, however, such an ordinance did not prevent the Buddha, and certainly did not prevent his followers, from accepting the general cosmological beliefs of the time, modified by conclusions drawn from the Buddha's own teachings. The cosmology, as it was systematized in the Buddhist tradition, included an infinite number of cosmos, all of which have the same structure. Each cosmos has three different realms, each of which is within the confines of samsara (the ongoing cycle of birth, death, and rebirth) and is regulated more or less strictly by the law of karma, according to which good and pious deeds are rewarded while evil and impious deeds are punished. At the top of the cosmos is the *arupa-loka*, in which the most exalted brahma deities live and in which there are neither material qualities nor mythological activity. The brahma deities, who are associated with the next-lower level, called *rupa-loka*, do have a role in Buddhist mythology; particularly in the cosmogony through which the lower strata of the cosmos are restored after the eschatological cataclysms that periodically destroy them. According to an influential version of the primary creation myth, found in the *Agganna Sutta*, certain brahma deities whose abode was above the destruction begin—as the waters that are left from the old cataclysm start to coagulate below them—to savour the taste of the matter that constitutes these lower strata. As the strata take form, these brahma deities gradually descend into the lower realms and eventually become the first inhabitants of the new earth, from whom all humans descend. Below the realms of the brahma deities is the *kama-loka* (Jacob N. Kinnard; 1999). This realm includes a set of six *gatis* that have played an important role as a setting for mythology in virtually all Buddhist traditions in Asia. The highest of these six destinies is that of the *devatas*. Within this destiny there are many heavens, each inhabited by many deities. Mythologically, the most important are the Tushita Heaven, where the future buddha Maitreya awaits the time for his coming to earth; the Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods, which is presided over by Inda; and the Heaven of the Four Guardian Kings, protective deities who are found in many Buddhist myths. The second of the *gatis* is the destiny occupied by human beings. The *Agganna Sutta* continues the story of creation by recounting the process through which the primal people devolved from their original idyllic earthly situation. Human vices and human conflicts emerge until a king called Mahasammata is chosen to keep the peace and slow the pace of decline. Beyond this story of the beginnings of social life, the human realm is the locus for a myriad of widely diversified mythic stories about pious monks, nuns, kings, and other laypersons. The third *gati* is the destiny of the *asuras*, who in Indian mythology are the traditional enemies of the *devas* or *devatas*, though in the Buddhist mythology they generally play a limited role. The fourth *gati*—the destiny of the animals—provides the setting for stories about many fabulous creatures, including *nagas*, Garuda, lions, and elephants. The two remaining *gatis*, those of the *pretas* and the hell beings, are mythically important in two respects. The descriptions provided of the punishments that are inflicted in these realms are very vivid indeed. In addition, there are widely distributed and well-known mythic stories of compassionate bodhisattvas and Buddhist saints who make journeys to these *gatis* to assuage the torment of those who suffer and to secure their release.

In different areas of Asia, new gods, goddesses, and demons were incorporated into the cosmology and Shiva were often depicted as *devas*. Despite these new mythic contents, however, the classic cosmological structure was kept remarkably intact. Although the contemplative elite may deny the real existence of gods and demons together with the rest of phenomenal existence, the majority of Buddhists have preserved indigenous religious beliefs and practices. It has already been noted how Mara, the manifestation of spiritual evil, was presented in the earliest literature in terms of local demonological beliefs. It is also the case that the early stupas and entrances to cave temples were decorated with local male and female deities who were seen as converted defenders of the new faith. This proved to be a satisfying way of justifying the continuance of the cult of local deities, and it has been employed in varying degrees in every Buddhist land. Thus, there developed a pantheon of minor deities that continued to take in new members wherever Buddhism was established. The Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions welcomed these local deities and have admitted some of their cults into the liturgies in honour of buddhas and bodhisattvas. Such favoured deities include Mahakala, the great black divinity; the mother goddess Hariti; Kuvera, the god of wealth; and especially Hayagriva, a fierce horse-faced god who is powerful in driving off unconverted demonic forces. The Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions have also identified local deities as manifestations of various buddhas and bodhisattvas (Gregory Schopen; 1997). This process is particularly prominent in Japan, where the identification of buddhas and bodhisattvas with indigenous *kami*. In other cases that are equally widespread, local gods and demons have been conquered, converted, and taken into the pantheon or relegated to the periphery. Perhaps the most interesting example is found in Tibet, where it is commonly believed that Buddhism became established in the 8th century only as the result of the wholesale subjugation of local deities—a subjugation that must, from time to time, be repeated through the performance of rituals marked by their dynamism and ferocity. In Theravada, Buddhism has had to come to terms with local beliefs. In some cases well-organized pantheons have been built. In Sri Lanka, for example, various local, Hindu, and Buddhist deities hold places within a hierarchy headed by the Buddha himself. In Myanmar the traditional hierarchy of local *nats* is headed by Thagya Min nat. Identified with Indra, he becomes a divine protector of Buddhism, who reigns in the Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods. These neatly organized systems, even where they exist, are, however, only a small part of the story. Throughout the various Theravada countries, a wide variety of deities and spirits have been incorporated into the Buddhist world as the inhabitants of particular realms within the Buddhist cosmos or as the guardians of various images, stupas, and temples.

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