

The Buddha's Relics and Images: Extension of Buddha's Biographical Process

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ABSTRACT

This paper broadly explores the mutual relationship between relics stupa and Buddha image. Buddha relics Stūpa was considered as sacred symbol of his Parinirvāna, and which viewed as the Buddha -body (dharmakāya) or Buddha's transcendent and immanent presence in this world but if we see his relics and symbol tells the biography of Buddha and the causes of his final life and Buddhahood as well as their cessation. Relics are extensions of the Buddha's biography. It is perhaps possible to think of this as an assertion of the ongoing "presence" of the Buddha, but it is preferable to think of it as the further development of a powerful narrative. Simply put, though the life of the Buddha stops with his Parinirvāna, his biography goes on. (Similarly, though his life starts with his birth in Lumbini, his biography begins much earlier than that with his previous lives). Since the Buddha was absent from this world, initially he was not represented in iconic forms but only through symbols. Then again, eventually the Buddha was depicted in anthropomorphic forms which propounded an idealised person or state of Buddhahood. Images, stupas and even scriptures, as they all denote or signify the Buddha. stūpas and images do have their respective and distinct function and significance, but they also have certain ideological interconnections.

KEYWORDS: dharmakāya, transcendent, Parinirvāna, anthropomorphic

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I. INTRODUCTION

As is well known, when the Buddha, on his deathbed, was asked by his disciple Ananda who should replace him after he was gone, his answer was his teachings, his dharma. There was a sense, then, that the dharma could act as a substitute for the departed master, a claim that was taken quite literally in certain circles. "One who sees the dharma sees the Buddha"

Khanda Samyutta, "Vakkali Sutta" tells the story of the monk Vakkali who was full of devotion and love for the Buddha. Even when he was gravely ill, all he wanted was to see the Buddha, as he was ever so desirous to behold the Master bodily. The Buddha admonished him thus: "What good will it be to see this foul body? He who sees the Dhamma (Teaching) sees me. Seeing the Dhamma is seeing me, seeing me is seeing the Dhamma." [1]

Some later texts actually rewrote the Buddha's deathbed words to have him say that, after his death, the dharma, vinaya and his bodily relics will be his disciples' teacher. The fact remains that, in the context of the tradition that, both dharma relics and body relics could be used in similar ways as standings for the Buddha. For instance, stupas and images and other objects that served as reminders of the Buddha were often consecrated or "enlivened" by the insertion within them of a body relic (e.g., a piece of bone), or of a textual dharma relic (e.g., a written verse from the Buddha's teaching), or of both. [2]

There was, in fact, an established practice of making "textual bodies" or "dharma relics" (Skt: dharmasarira) so as to embody the Buddha. When Xuanzang was in Rajagṛha, for instance, he heard of a pious layman who, whenever he preached, busied himself at the same time in the manufacture of such dharmasarira, miniature stupas that he then further consecrated by inserting into the center of each of them a written verse from a sutra. [3]

After the *Mahāparinirvāna* of Buddha, all the Buddhist laity led them to show their gratitude and pay their homage to some symbol or other of his, and this gave rise to symbolic representations of him in Indian Art. "In Kalingabodhi Jātaka, Anathapindika seeks a solution to the familiar problem of where to direct lay people's offerings when the Buddha is away. Yet this request, conveyed by the monk Ananda receives an answer that is very different from the ones presented in the other examples. In this case, the Buddha approves only the use of a Bodhitree, not a figural image, as his substitute." Most of the symbols depicted in art were connected with

remarkable events in his life. These remarkable events play an important role in Buddhist art and these events are 'Aṣṭa-Mahā-Pratihārya.' This *Aṣṭa-Mahā-Pratihārya* has been frequently represented in single sculptural reliefs in. The dictionary meaning of 'Pratihārya' is "miracle." These eight events of Buddha life are remarkable as miracle.

The eight episodes are divided into two groups, each group is associated with the place where it occurred, and these places being in turn as a pilgrimage centre. The main group birth at Lumbini outside Kapilvastu, related to which is also the Dream of Maya Devi (*garabhavakranti*) and the great departure (*abhinishkramana*); illumination (*abhisambodhana*), related to it the *maradharaśana* at Bodhi Gaya, the first sermon (*dhammacakrapavattana*) at Migadava near Sārnāth; Extinction or death (*Maha-parinirvāna*) at Kuśinagara. The second group is: the great miracle at Shrāvastī; descent from the *Trayastrīma* (*Tushita* in Pāli) heaven at Sankasya, identified with the present SahetMahet; the Monkey offering honey to the Buddha at Vaishali; Taming of the elephant Nālagiri at Rajagriha.

The Stūpa Symbolism

With the evolution of Stupa-worship, of which a chief determinant seems to have been the impact and stress of the Buddhist lay mind. From the lay mind the bhakti movement spread into the monk mind and stupa worship becoming a rite of monastic life, and monks like Upagupta of Mathura of the Divyavadana legend becoming apostles of Bhakti. The Bhakti- movement in Buddhism first manifests itself round the stupas of Sanchi, Bhilsa and Bharhut.

In his pilgrimages to Buddhist sites, Asoka erected shrines and memorial pillars. According to later legendary accounts, he so opened up the original ten Stūpas and distributed their relics in many new ones throughout India, thus helping to popularize the cult of devotion at Stūpas.

The Mahāparinirvāna sūtra refers to the Buddha's remains as *asthi* (bones) and specifies that they are collected and placed in a golden urn (MPS., pp. 360, 432) Moreover, as we shall see, the tradition in time came to feature, as relics, the teeth, collarbones, neckbone, forehead bone, breastbone, usnisa bone, fingerbone, etc., of the Buddha, which clearly retained their osseous nature. More immediately, however, such bits of calcined bone and ashes have been found in countless Buddhist reliquaries of various shapes and sizes made of various materials such as clay, stone, crystal, and precious metals.[4]

Among the more famous relic finds in India are those made at Piprahwa, a site that some have identified with the Buddha's hometown of Kapilavastu; at Vaisali, where relics were unearthed from what was possibly one of the original eight stupas built over the Buddha's remains; and near Peshawar, where a magnificently embossed gold reliquary was found in which there were three small fragments of bone that "are undoubtedly the original relics deposited in the stupa by [King] Kanishka which [Xuanzang] tells us were relics of Gautama Buddha" Lesser finds, however, and often stupas of more modest dimensions, such as the so-called "votive" stupas, may not contain any relics at all.[5]

The best-preserved ancient Buddhist Stūpa, dating from the first century CE in its present form, is at Sāncī in central India. It was built over a Stūpa dating from the third century BCE, which may have been built or embellished by Asoka. The four gateways, or *torānas*, place the Stūpa symbolically at a crossroads, as the Buddha had specified, perhaps to indicate the openness and universality of the Dhamma.

The stupa or Dagoba, originally a funeral mound, becomes a symbol of the last great event of the Buddha's life the Parinirvana, and usually enshrines relics of the Buddha. (authentic relics have been discovered at Taxila). In the Mahāparinibbana Sutta, in answer to Ven. Ananda's question about what should be done with the Tathagata's body after his Parinibbana, the Buddha said that it should be cremated like the body of a Universal monarch and the corporeal remains from the cremation should be honoured by stupas erected over them at the crossroads. The Buddha further mentioned that there are four persons worthy of a stupa, namely: a Supremely Enlightened Buddha, a Pacceka Buddha, an Ariyan disciple and a Universal monarch.

The stupa, the origins of which go back to pre-Buddhist times, is both a monumental reliquary and a commemorative monument. It usually contains a precious casket in which are preserved the bodily relics of the Buddha or of his disciples (bones, nail clippings, hair, etc.), objects which had been for their personal use (clothing, staff, alms-bowl, etc.), or again, sacred texts. It is generally erected on a site made famous by a wonderful or an unusual event which had occurred during the last life or the previous existences of the Master and his disciples, whose memory was to be perpetuated. [6]

Distribution of Relics and dissemination of Buddhism

The Mahā-Parinibbāna Suttanta, which can be dated approximately in the fifth century BCE, states that after the cremation of the Buddha's body at Kusinārā, the fragments that remained were divided into eight portions. These eight portions were allotted as follows:-[7]

i] To Ajātasattu, king of Magadha, ii] To the Licchavis of Vesālī, iii] To the Sakyas of Kapilavastu, iv] to the Bulis of Allakappa, v] To the Koliyas of Rāmagāma, vi] To the Brahmin of Vethadīpa, vii] To the Mallas of Pāvā, viii] To the Mallas of Kusinārā.

Drona, the brahmin who made the division, received the vessel in which the body had been cremated. And the Moriyas of Pipphalivana, whose embassy claiming a share of the relics only arrived after the division had been made, received the ashes of the funeral pyre. Of the above, all except the Sakyas and the two brahmins based their claim to a share on the fact that they also, like the deceased teacher, were Kshatriyas.

These men returned home and built ten stupas: eight for the relics, a ninth for the jar and a tenth for the pyre ashes. The eight original relic stupas erected over the eight portions of the Buddha's bodily relics are also called Dona stupas because they enshrined one dona (or one measure of capacity) of relics.

In the depiction of these events on two bas-reliefs at Sānchī, it is clear from the scenes of armies engaging in combat that the so-called "war for the relics" was actually thought to have taken place. In our texts, however, hostilities never quite break out, and instead the matter is resolved by the arbitration of the brahmin Dhūmrasagotra, also known as Drona. Drona goes about his task in an apparently equitable and satisfactory fashion, dividing the relics of the Buddha into eight equal shares, each one of which is then taken away to be enshrined in a stupa in the recipient's home country. When this process is finished, Drona asks the assembled kings for the urn in which he measured out the relics, and he is accorded that. He resolves to build a stūpa over it. Finally, to close the episode, a young brahmin of Pipphalāyana arrives belatedly; finding that all the relics have already been distributed, he asks for and is given the embers of the cremation fire, which he takes away to enshrine in a stupa as well. Later traditions were to suggest that other relics (such as four teeth of the Buddha) were acquired by other persons including various divinities on this occasion, or that Drona was involved in stealing some of the relics. For the present, however, we have a situation in which what was left of the body of the Buddha has been divided into eight shares and enshrined in different localities throughout North India. The brahmin of Yethadipa claimed his because he was a brahmin; and the Sakyas claimed theirs on the ground of their relationship. All ten promised to put up a cairn over their portion, and to establish a festival in its honour. Of these ten cairns, or stupas, only one has been discovered—that of the Sakyas. The careful excavation of Mr. Peppe makes it certain that this stupa had never been opened until he opened it. The inscription on the casket states that "This deposit of the remains of the Exalted One is that of the Sakyas, the brethren of the Illustrious One."

Stupa worship took a new dimension after Emperor Asoka converted to Buddhism and built 84,000 stupas all over his empire. As the corporeal relics enshrined within a stupa stood as a symbol of the presence of the Buddha, prayers were normally offered and rites of worship performed, such as offering of lights, flowers, garlands, incense, bunting, and cloth wrapped round the mound. The corporeal relics of the Buddha are called 'sarira-dhatu' in Pali. There are two accounts regarding the collection of the relics from the Dona stupas by King Asoka, after their initial enshrinement by the eight tribes.

There are certain problems with this inclusion of images in the category of relics. First of all, it should be noted that the "Kalingabodhijātaka," does not actually refer to relics (dhatu) but to various sorts of cetiya (Skt.: caitya; shrines or memorials). There is no doubt that all of these cetiya are in some ways "reminders" of the Buddha, but that does not necessarily make them all "relics." Indeed, the "Kalingabodhijātaka" itself makes an important distinction between uddesikacetiya (e.g., images), and the other two types of memorials. The uddesikacetiya, it says, are "lacking in a foundation [avatthuka] by virtue of their being a matter of mind only [manamattakena]". In other words, unlike body relics and contact relics (relics of use), they do not have the basis of any direct physical connection with the Buddha. For this reason, perhaps, bodily (or textual) relics were sometimes used to "reinforce" an image's connection to the Buddha, and were inserted into images at the time of consecration.

Classification of Relics

Theravada classification of "relics," which distinguishes, in addition to bodily relic shrines (saririkacetiya, also called dhatu[ka]cetiya) such as stupas, and shrines of use (paribhogacetiya) such as bodhi trees, a third category called commemorative or "indicative" shrines (uddesikacetiya). This latter class refers to objects that remind one of, or somehow point to or re-present, the Buddha, and includes, primarily, Buddha images.

Pāli tradition divide the Buddha's relics into three categories: 1. bodily relics (śarīra-dhātu) left immediately after the cremation, 2. contact or personally used articles (pāribhogika-dhātu), such as his alms bowl and mendicant staff, and 3. indicative or commemorative relics (uddesika-dhātu) such as images.

The actual remains of parts of the Buddha's body (bones, teeth, and hair), objects that once belonged to the Buddha, things associated with the Buddha's teaching (the sinking stupa and the inscription), and then a host of more ambiguous traces of the Buddha's former presence (his shadow image, his footprints, and the rock where he washed his robe). The first three of these items correspond pretty much to important Indian relic classification schemes that distinguish (1) body relics, (2) contact relics, that is, objects that the Buddha owned or used or with which he was closely associated, such as bowls, robes, bodhi trees (or in this case, his staff); and (3) dharma relics, by which was meant either whole sutras, or a dharma verse (such as the "ye dharma ..." formula given earlier), or a dharani, or anything somehow recording the Buddha's teaching.[8]

Buddhist stupas may be divided into four types:

Saririka or Relic Stupa: These stupas contain the corporeal relics of the Buddha, the Chief Disciples, Buddhist teachers and saints. Stupas containing the relics of the Buddha, which are considered the most sacred objects of worship, are usually very large and grand, as they have been enlarged and renovated several times by successive Buddhist kings of India. According to legend, Emperor Asoka broke into seven of the original eight relic stupas, except Ramagama stupa, took a major portion of the Buddha's relics and distributed them in 84,000 stupas all over his empire. As a result, even today, we can still see some of these stupas outside India, e.g., Dhammarajika Stupa in Taxila near Islamabad, Pakistan.

Paribhogika or 'Object of Use' Stupa: These stupas were built over the objects used by the Buddha. Buddhavamsa XXVIII records that after his Parinibbana, stupas were built to enshrine various objects used by the Buddha, e.g., the water-pot and girdle in Pataliputta, the razor and needle-case in Indapatttha (Delhi) and so on

Uddesika or Memorial Stupa: These stupas commemorate important events in the Buddha's life, including those of his previous births or spots hallowed by his presence. A famous memorial stupa is the Sujata Stupa at Bakruar village built by Asoka to commemorate the offering of milk rice by the Lady Sujata to the Bodhisatta before he attained Enlightenment. Another memorial stupa is the Dhamekh stupa in Sarnath erected over the site where the Buddha preached the Anatta Lakkhana Sutta to the Five Ascetics, who all became Arahants. It contains no relics but clay tablets containing the Buddhist creed "Ye dhamma hetuppada bhava".

Votive Stupa: These are usually small stupas erected at the sacred sites by devotees mainly as an offering for making merit. The most number of votive stupas can be seen at the four places of Pilgrimage, viz: (i) Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha; (ii) Bodhgaya, the place of Enlightenment; (iii) Deer Park in Sarnath, venue of the First Sermon; (iv) Kusinara, the place of the Buddha's Parinibbana. Besides these four holy sites, many votive stupas can also be seen at the four places of miracles, namely: Sankasia, Sravasti, Vaishali and Rajgir.

According to Mitravotive stupas are either monolithic or structures built of bricks. Some contain Buddha images within the core. Others contain manuscripts of Buddhist texts, tablets or plates inscribed with verses from the PaticcaSamuppada or the Buddhist creed "ye dhamma hetuppada bhava". These texts are considered to be of paramount importance to Buddhists as they record the essence of the Buddha's Teachings.

The stupa of the ancient type which is a characteristic of the Mauryan and Sunga period is a solid hemispherical dome (anda) constructed of brick or stone, resting on a circular terrace (medhi) serving as a processional circular path (pradaksipatha) which is reached by one or several stairways (sopana). The stiipa is surmounted by a square pavilion (harmikā) on which was fixed a pole (yastī) supporting a series of parasols (chattrāvalī). The stiipa is generally surrounded at a certain distance by a balustrade (vedikā) made of wood or stone : it consists of a series of upright posts (stambha), joined at the base by a plinth (ālambana), at the top by a coping (usnīsa), into which are inserted, by means of tenons and mortises, two or three horizontal cross- pieces (sūci). The balustrade is breached at the four cardinal points by a tall gateway (torana) consisting of two vertical jamb-posts topped with a capital and supporting three architraves of horizontal lintels separated into three partitions by dies or square panels placed in the prolongation of the jamb-posts.[9]

The Buddha's anthropomorphic images and Relics

The Buddha images did not appear until the first century C.E for the five centuries after the historical Buddha, only symbolic forms were used to indicate his presence in veneration and sacred memory. Early Buddhist art was able to express the presence of the Buddha through his 'traces' in the form of symbols. For about the first three hundred years, during BCE 480-180, the Buddha was represented only through the help of different symbols, such symbolic representation fulfilled to a certain extent the need for a concrete object of worship. His own life could be summed up in four major symbols – the lotus for his birth, the Bodhī-tree for his enlightenment, the wheel for his teaching and the *Stūpa* for his death and achievement of nirvana. [10] There is no Buddha image in early art, even in biographical relief-scene where the Buddha image should be a centre figure in relief art.

A.Coomaraswamy pointed that "Buddha-like heads with an usnisa-like protuberance, and many short curls, are represented on several of the Bodhgaya railing medallions. There is, indeed, a prominence very suggestive of an usnisa to be seen on the head of the Naga figure on the Patliputra railing. I cannot recall any pre-kusana sculpture in which an urna is represented, nor any earlier example of even a Buddha with webbed fingers than the Mankuwar image. In the representation of the hair in many curls, which does not appear until after the middle of the second century C.E., it is evident that literary tradition has been followed." [11]

The cult of stupa worship became firmly established in the minds of the Buddhist laity and it became unthinkable to replace it with another object of worship, especially a Buddha image, something not favored by the monks. Therefore something drastic must have happened to cause a change in the mindset of the Buddhists. the invasion of Northern India after the fall of the Mauryan Empire, first by the Indo-Greeks and then by the Kushans, both of whom adopted Buddhism and came up with their own ideas of an object in veneration of the Buddha – the Buddha image.

Congregational and ritualistic worship has become part and parcel of monastic life. The circumambulation of the sanctuary is as much a ritual act as the offerings of flowers, lights, and incense. The worship of the Buddha image has come into vogue, but the ancient canonical worship of symbols still continues a compromise, however, is effected by having two kinds of shrines in a monastery- the Buddha -ghara for image worship and the Cetiya-ghara for symbol-worship.

With the introduction of the Buddha image as a memorial shrine, the issue now was how to treat this new symbol, which had no status as a memorial shrine because it was not sanctioned by the Buddha. Among the symbols, the most powerful was the stupa because the Buddha himself gave his approval before he passed away.

In a situation where no sacred relics are available, even verses of the Dhamma inscribed in gold, silver or copper foil or even clay, can serve the purpose. In the Ajanta and Ellora caves, we see a compromise effected by the engraving of an image on the stupa itself or recessing the image inside it (fig-1).[12]

Sukumar Dutt used the term bhakti in Indian terminology where an attitude and condition of heart and mind in which the devotee turns from the ethical and other aspects of religion to prayer and adoration and complete self-surrender to the adored. Uddesika form of cetiya actually came into existence for the purpose of worship. Cetiya-ghara was a place of congregational worship and this shows that the sangha life had shifted from vinaya to the cultivation of Bhakti and its ritual expression in worship of the stupa or the Buddha image.[13] Thus from the beginning of Buddhism we can see that the sraddha and Bhakti appear side by side in Theravada Buddhism. The Ti-sarana, first invented for the use in the ceremony of ordination.[14] Stupa worship or other symbol worship preceded the image worship because of devotion and adoration. Stupa worship became a symbol of divine presence as a Buddha image. [15] Stupa worship is a worship of Buddha relic so we can say that it belongs to *sarira puja* and it is very holy for all Buddhist but on the basis of mind stupa worship has different meaning for the follower; or we can say it had to go through two phases or it had two ways i.e. *sarira puja* used for lay followers (rituals and sacramental character) but its canonical concept (doctrine and discipline) as a memorial and converted into symbol worship which is followed by monks. This form of worship became universally popular among all Buddhist (lay men and monks) and spread with the spread of Buddhism in all over the country. The Buddha image originated along with all symbols where the footprints and the *physical*, character of the "great man" (*mahā, purisa*)[16], the physiognomical marks of the Buddha is also a great symbol which is the most earliest specimens of Buddha image. So Bhakti concept is already appeared in the Theravada canon but the Theravada follower are bound with a rigid thought to associate with the symbol. But the devotee motive seems to have been strong feeling and emotional desire and spiritual need for designing an image. Later period the symbol worship and image worship are parallel seems for worshipping for both monks and laymen. On the basis of archaeological evidence, in the third century A.D., both forms of worship being recognized and choice depend on the worshipper to worship image or symbols, i.e. the worshipper was free to offer worship either stupa or Buddha-image. The provision of double shrines (one is stupa or cetiya-ghara and the other one is Buddha image) in a single monastery, is a transition of ancient symbol worship to image worship in Buddhism which can be seen in Nagarjunakonda monasteries where double shrines with stupā and Buddha-image stood side by side.[17] It shows that the worship becomes a combined worship of both symbol and image. Even this can be seen before 3rd century CE, the famous Bimaran reliquary is golden circular box studded with rubies was found in 1840 by Charles Masson in a stupa at Bimaran in Afghanistan. The fact that coins of the Saka king Azes were found associated with the casket and some scholars credit to the reliquary to the 1st century B.C. Around the drum of the little box group of four figures of the Buddha flanked by three worshippers, including Indra and Brahma. The style of the drapery of these figures is related to such stone examples as the Buddha from Loriyan- Tangai and Charsada from the 2nd century CE. (Fig 2). The provision of double shrines in a single monastery, one enshrining a stupa (cetiya-ghara) and the other Buddha image (Buddha-ghara) symbolical of the transition, which will be described later, from ancient symbol-worship to image worship in Buddhism.

II. CONCLUSION

The Buddha image is basically a memorial shrine, an object to remind us of our Master. Therefore, one should not treat it like a piece of art and forget the real purpose of setting up an image shrine. When one pays homage to the Buddha with the image as object, one should always remember to focus on the Buddha's virtues, not the physical appearance of the statue. To achieve this, it is imperative that one should spend some time reflecting on the Buddha's virtues with proper understanding and concentration using the formula for the Recollection of the Buddha.

"True Buddhism," understood as the original teachings of the Buddha, was thought to have nothing to do with such things as relics. Thus, the American Monist Paul Carus, whose book, *The Gospel of Buddha*, achieved considerable popularity around the turn of the century, turned down the offer of a Buddha relic from a Sri Lankan monk, telling him, "The worship of relics, be they bones, hair, teeth, or any other substance of the body of a saint, is a mistake. The soul of Buddha is not in his bones, but in his words, and I regard relic-worship as an incomplete development in which devotees have not as yet attained to full philosophical clearness" Along

these lines, it was often assumed that those who had reached “full philosophical clearness” were the cultured monastic elite, while those who had not and worshiped relics and images were the laity.[18]



(Fig-1) Image of the Buddha in Cave 10



(Fig-2) The Bimaran casket, representing the Buddha, is dated to around 30–10 BCE

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