

# THE CONTRIBUTION OF BUDDHISM TO THE WORLD OF ART AND ARCHITECTURE

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All civilizations whether primitive, ancient, mediaeval or modern have in the course of their development produced cultures. In the name of Culture they have created art and architecture, language and literature, music and dance social customs, codes of ethics and behaviour, laws, philosophy and religion. It is by examining a civilization's cultural contributions to the world that we can gain some idea and appreciation of its achievements. This becomes more visible when we look into different periods of the art and architecture from around the world. Every civilization's religion too, in the course of its history contributes something to the world in general and in particular to the world of art and architecture. Religious beliefs, ideas and ideals are sometimes given visual expression and sometimes form the subject matter of art and architecture. In a sense art and architecture provide mirrors to reflect a civilization's religion. In this respect Buddhism is no exception.

To contribute means to give. What Buddhism has given to the world is not only a profound analysis of, and a practical solution for the problem of human suffering but also a monumental and rich legacy to the world of art and architecture. Much of this legacy is visible even today in its homeland of India and in much of the eastern world. Today, I would like to give all of you gathered here, a glimpse at what is in a way Buddhism's fourth jewel, its art and architecture.

The very earliest examples of Buddhist art are not iconic but aniconic images and were popular in India after the death of the Buddha. This is because the Buddha, himself did not sanction personal worship or the making of images of the Tathagata, as to have done so would have contradicted his message to mankind. He taught and encouraged people to heed his example and be self-reliant in striving to put an end to human suffering and endless rebirth in Samsara and realise Nibbana for themselves. He was the living proof that this was possible and promised this was attainable by anyone through renouncing worldly and ego-centric desires and by making earnest efforts at mental development and purification as this would help one to eradicate the causes of suffering, greed, hatred and delusion and ultimately result in the attainment of Arahathship and Nibbana. Siddhatha Gotama was a Buddha, a self-perfected, self-enlightened human being and not a saviour of

men. He was a human role-model to be followed but not idolized. Of himself he said, 'Buddha's only point the way'. So this is why the earliest artistic tributes to the Buddha Gotama are abstract symbols indicative of major events and achievements in his last life and in some cases his previous lives. They also serve as reminders of his teachings and provide inspiration. Some of these early aniconic representations of the Buddha include:

1. The Buddha's footprints which were often created at a place where he was known to have walked or was the scene of one of the Jataka Tales which recount his lifetimes as the Bodhisatta, striving to fulfil the perfections necessary in order to become a Buddha in the future. Such an image exists at Swat in Pakistan and indicates what is believed to have been the scene of the Deer or Migara Jataka Story. Another example of this type of narrative imagery are the depictions of the Jataka Tales at Barhut in India.

2. The Bodhi-tree which is symbolic of Gotama's enlightenment at the age of thirty-five. A cutting of a tree, believed to have been taken from the original Bodhi Tree is enshrined at Bodh Gaya in the grounds of the Mahabodhi Temple. The Bodhi-tree image was retained and used in many later examples of Buddhist art.

3. The Lotus Flower which symbolizes both purity and enlightenment and is a popular motif in much Buddhist art and architecture and is very widely used in Tibetan Buddhist Art.

4. The Wheel which is a reminder of the Buddha's First Sermon. 'The Turning of the Wheel of the Law' delivered at Sarnath in Northern India and where stand the ruins of the ancient Dhamekh Stupa commemorating this major event. The wheel has also been adapted to symbolize the wheel of suffering in Samsara in Tibetan Buddhism and many examples of it are beautifully and skillfully depicted in Tibetan Buddhist Art on mandals, a type of meditation-aid and on the cloth paintings known as thankgas.

5. A riderless horse which recalls Prince Siddhattha's renunciation of worldly life for the ascetic life and the beginning of his search for the path to Enlightenment.

6. An empty throne which serves as a reminder of his passing away and attainment of Parinibbana.

After the Buddha's death out of deference to his wishes and devotion to his memory and his teachings, these symbols were widely used in the early days of Buddhist Art in India. Some still survive there and can be seen for example, at the Mahabodhi Temple built at Bodh Gaya, near the scene of the Buddha's Enlightenment. Some of them were also incorporated in later developments of Buddhist art and architecture and featured prominently in places as far afield as for

example, the Temples of Thailand. Many of these symbols are used in contemporary Buddhist art and architecture in both the East and West.

To better appreciate Buddhism's contribution to art and architecture we have to take into account the two major schools of Buddhism, the Theravada or Hinayana and the Mahayana as these were to play significant roles in the creation and development of very different types of Buddhist art and architecture. The two schools arose as the result of a rift in the Sangha which had its cause in a dispute over the rule of life for monks. This occurred during the Second Buddhist Council, convened about a century after the first Council was called, in order that the Sangha Elders might recite and agree upon the Dhamma (doctrine) and Vinaya (discipline). This was necessary as the Buddha chose to name no successor. He explicitly stated that the Dhamma and Vinaya was to be his followers' only guide and teacher when he had gone. Later on this fundamental split caused the Dhamma itself to be interpreted differently and this brought about the rise of the two major schools of Buddhism with their different beliefs and ideals, which in turn were to have an important influence on Buddhist art and architecture. Despite the schism and the establishing of the two schools neither school's adherents abandoned the Buddha nor the ultimate goal of deliverance from suffering and rebirth culminating in the realisation of Nibbana or Nirvana. However, as the word, 'yana' implies, the vehicle used to reach that goal was different. It is this choice of vehicle which accounts for a difference in the beliefs and ideals which we see mirrored in the art and architecture created by Theravadins and Mahayanists throughout the history of Buddhism.

The Theravada School is the more orthodox and conservative of the two. Its adherents uphold the Dhamma and the ideal of the Arahant and look to the Buddha as the human role-model to imitate in their striving to attain deliverance from suffering and rebirth, and eventually Arahantship and Nibbana. Their vehicle to reach this goal is renunciation of all worldly attachments, the eradication of greed, hatred and delusion through following the Noble Eightfold Path and the cultivation of wisdom and insight. India is the birth-place of Theravada Buddhism and its art and architecture. There the artists and builders of Buddhist structures sought to portray the historical Buddha, and his disciples in the context of Theravadin beliefs and ideals. The chosen medium for this was the Buddha rupa or image and was developed in India. The earliest image we know of is actually a coin struck in the reign of King Kanishka. It shows a robed, standing Buddha. His head is surrounded by a halo, symbolizing his Enlightenment, and his hair is twisted into a top-knot, and one of his hands is raised in the gesture of blessing. The art of Buddhist sculpture and of Buddha images in particular, originated in India, and two distinct styles were created. One in the north, in Gandhara, where the image makers looked to the Greco-Roman tradition for inspiration.

The second style of Buddha image was directly influenced by the earlier Indian style of art peculiar to the south. The first images that we know of appeared in

Mathura. The Mathura Buddha images had straight hair tied up in a top knot, and were garbed in the traditional Indian dhoti. The Mathura Buddhas are often shown, smiling peacefully. As these images were most commonly made of sandstone they are much softer in contour and more rounded and curved than those made in the north. Many early Indian Buddhist images show the Buddha as having the thirty-two marks of a Buddha and with his hands placed in various positions displaying gestures of blessing, meditation and teaching. The number of Buddha images and Buddhist architectural structures which survive in India is very great indeed, but in all of the faces of every image, and in the art and design of every stupa. and temple or rock-cave vihara traces of the Buddha-Dhamma are visible.

As Buddhist Art developed and spread outside India the two basic styles were imitated as for example in China where the Gandhara style was imitated in images made of bronze. Gradually the faces on these images were made to look more and more Chinese and are even dressed in long flowing, robes and shawls, after the Chinese fashion. In those countries where Sarvastivada or Theravada Buddhism took hold and remained, such as Afghanistan, Laos, and Sri Lanka, famous for its enormous reclining Buddha. and in Siam, modern Thailand, which is famous for its exquisite and graceful 'Walking Buddhas' or in the temples and shrines of the ancient capital city of Pagan in Burma now known as Myanmar with its many temples, and in the temples of Malaysia, too the Buddha images housed there, show the influence of the early types of Indian Buddha image.

Other notable surviving examples of Buddhist art which mirror the Theravada tradition are to be found at Lumbini in Nepal, the site of the Buddha's birth and in India at Bodh Gaya, Saranath. Kushinagara, Nalanda and at the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, Myanmar, and also at the massive temple complex at Angkor Wat in Cambodia and the very simply, designed yet impressive Temple of the Sacred Tooth in Kandy, Sri Lanka.

The main difference between the Theravada and Mahayana Schools of Art is their subject matter. This difference was a direct reflection of the different ideals and beliefs held by the two schools. For the Theravadins the ideal is the Arahat, who like a Buddha seeks to eradicate suffering and rebirth in Samsara through renouncing the world, and through the eradication of greed, hatred and delusion. This achievement is made possible if one follows the Middle Way and the Noble Eightfold Path as taught by the Buddha Gotama. Nibbana is the Theravadin's final goal and is attainable through the practice of insight. These beliefs and ideals form the subject matter of Theravada Buddhist Art. On the other hand, although the followers of the Mahayana School of Buddhism uphold the goal of Nirvana also and deliverance from endless suffering and rebirth in Samsara, they have a different spiritual hero. Their hero is not the Buddha Gotama, but the Bodhisattva. A Bodhisattva is a kind of divine saviour, whose role is to aid any being desirous of deliverance and Nirvana. In Mahayana Buddhism anyone can become enlightened and renunciation of the world in order to win Arahatship is not absolutely

necessary, but the practice of specific rites and rituals and meditations and visualizations is. These spiritual practices will aid the practitioner in purifying the mind and will also attract the help of the Bodhisattva. The Mahayana School recognised the historical Buddha Gotama, the Shakyamuni, but raised him to the level of a god. He then became but one of many, many divine Buddhas and was eventually regarded as a powerful emanation of the Supreme Essence. It was these celestial Buddhas that were portrayed in Mahayanist Art and very beautifully too in countries such as China, Vietnam, Japan and Korea and of course Tibet where the Mahayana Tradition is followed.

As the Mahayanist school of thought evolved it developed many separate sects which attracted many followers such as the Zen sects of China and Japan. As has been said earlier, Mahayana Buddhism does not uphold the ideal of the Arahat but the Bodhisattva ideal and along with the Cosmic and celestial Buddhas form the subject matter of Mahayanist Art as well as the populous pantheon which surrounds the many Buddhas and Bodhisattvas that belong to the Mahayana Tradition. The word, Bodhisattva, means, 'a being of wisdom' and is a being whose perfections are fulfilled and who stands on the threshold of Nirvana but postpones the attainment of it out of compassion for all other unenlightened beings trapped in Samsara. The greatest virtue of the Bodhisattvas, and there are many, both male and female, is their compassion in contrast to the supreme wisdom of the historical Buddha. This boundless compassion it is what makes a Bodhisattva a saviour and not a human role-model as was the Buddha Gotama. It is also believed that anyone can become enlightened who asks for their help and who practises all the special mediation exercises and performs all the relevant rituals such as chanting. Mahayana Buddhism is much more mystical than Theravada Buddhism, and therefore so is its art. The figures we see depicted in Mahayanist Art such as Maitreya, Avalokiteshvara, Chenrezig, Manjushri, Tara and Kuan Yin, are all Bodhisattvas. Their beauty and other-worldliness is inexpressable in words, but impressively and well conveyed through the medium of art. We can see them portrayed on wall paintings, on silk scrolls or their images delicately carved of wood, and also notably in the Buddhist caves of China such as those at Longmen, and in the surviving temples of Tibet and the Tibetan exile's place of refuge at Dharmasala in India and in the Mahayanist Buddhist holy places of Nepal, Vietnam, Mongolia and in the Buddhist places of Indonesia, in the east as well as in the many Tibetan centres which in recent times have been founded in the West, such as Samye-Ling, in Scotland.

Throughout the history of Buddhism the supporters of both these major schools have provided countless fine examples of Buddhist art and built magnificent stupas and temples. As one of the functions of Art is to mirror and another is to inspire then most certainly, the ideals and beliefs mirrored in both the major schools of Buddhist Art are a source of inspiration and encouragement to anyone wishing to follow the spiritual beliefs and ideals they reflect.

Both Buddhist Traditions made a huge and impressive contribution to mankind which can be chronicled for over two thousand years and follows the progress the Buddha-Dhamma made as it spread outwards from India in all directions. To better appreciate just how much Buddhism influenced the world and contributed to the world of art and architecture, it is necessary to understand how and why Buddhism spread as far as it did. Buddhism owes its success and its many converts to the catholicity of its appeal and its promise of deliverance from suffering. This is true of both traditions. It also was widely adopted and in some case fully integrated into an existing culture as was the case in Japan. And this success was possible because of the non-coercive approach of its missionaries. However, Buddhists did sometimes suffer persecution and even death and was the case in India, Tibet and China. Buddhism was also successful because at various times in its history, it enjoyed royal patronage, as for example, that of the great Mauryan King Asoka and some of the later rulers of India including the Pala Kings, the last Buddhist Kings of India. Outside India it was embraced by King Tissa of Ceylon, in 247 B.C.E., the Mon ruler of Thaton. and later in 1056 by the Burmese King Anawrahta the founder of Pagan, in Siam in the eleventh century by King Rama Khamheng and in 1327 by Cambodia's King Jayavarman VII who ruled from his capital at Angkor. It was also adopted by the rulers of Laos and in the eight century in Indonesia by King Sailendra who sponsored the building of the largest Buddhist monument in the world, Borobodur. This devotion to Buddhism and the enthusiasm for Buddhist culture shown by these royal converts and most of their subjects was sincere and the world of art and architecture was all the richer for it.

Another significant factor to influence the spread of Buddhism and indirectly the development of Buddhist Art and Architecture was the tremendous volume of trade which existed in the ancient world most notably along the Silk Road, which was a trade route not only for goods but for ideas as well. The spread of Buddhism in its homeland of northern India began the day the Buddha and the first sixty Arahats went forth to preach the Dhamma. "For the gain of many, for the welfare of many, in compassion for the world." Although Buddhism in India was to die out as a result of the revival of Hinduism and in the aftermath of the Moslem invasions in the seventh century, it was able to spread, and evolve and survive in many other places since. The visible proof of this is to be seen in the many examples of Buddhist Architecture. The size of Buddhism's contribution to the world of architecture is enormous. There are two basic types of structure found in those places where Buddhism spread and developed and they are the Vihara and the Stupa. The word vihara, means "an abode", and its function was two-fold. It was intended to house Buddha images and art and also to serve as a dwelling place for monks. King Bimbisara donated the first Vihara, Veluvana at Rajagaha. to the Buddha himself and his disciples. This was a monastery sited in a Bamboo Grove. Much later on monks would dwell in the shelter of India's caves. One of the most famous cave complexes is the magnificently embellished caves at Ajanta, with its brightly coloured Buddhist murals. Another impressive cave complex is in Afghanistan. As the Vihara evolved in style it was adapted to the climate and terrain of the countries

to which Buddhism spread and its design changed and evolved and eventually reflected the cultural characteristics of the lands where either Mahayana Buddhism or Theravada Buddhism had taken root and flourished. The more modern styles of Buddhist temple remain a type of vihara. These structures are made from a variety of materials such as stone in India and Sri Lanka, and from wood as can be seen at Kyoto and Nara, in Japan. Brick was also used and some of the surviving temples of Pagan are made of brick. Sandstone is the material used in the building of Malaysian temples.

The second type of Buddhist structure is the Stupa and is itself an object of worship as it was intended to serve as a relic chamber for the Buddha's remains. The earliest examples of the Buddhist stupa were raised in India, as for example the dome shaped stupa at Sanchi, the ancient Dhamekh Stupa at Sarnath and those built inside the caves at Ellora and Ajanta. In time the basic Indian stupa-design evolved into the Dagoba in Sri Lanka, the Chorten in Tibet and the Pagodas of China, Korea and Japan. One of the finest examples of all is the splendid Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon. As with Buddhist Art, the materials used in the building of viharas and temples and the various types of stupa and pagoda varied and depended on the materials available in the places where they were built. So we find some stupas are built of marble or other types of local stone or brick and even wood, as was the Goose Pagoda at Chagan in China. Happily in the west where Buddhism is becoming a very popular religion, the artists and architects who work on Buddhist building projects turn to the rich and varied legacy of Buddhist Art and Architecture for their inspiration.

All the Buddhist structures that were ever built by their very existence contributed something to the world and are holy places, places of learning and sanctuary for the people who were to use them and the repositories of some of the greatest treasures of Buddhist Art. They were and those that have survived continue to be a source of personal inspiration for all who saw them either in person long ago or even see them depicted in a drawing or a photograph these days. As was said, earlier Buddhist Art and Architecture mirrors the beliefs, ideas and ideals of both the Mahayana and Theravada traditions.

Buddhism in India together with its art and architecture reached its zenith during the Gupta dynasty which was established in northern India in 320 A.D. It was to last into the seventh century. The best known examples of Buddhist Art are from this period and were to form the standard of comparison for all subsequent Buddhist art and architecture both in India and in the rest of the Asian countries where it spread, took root and flourished. The Gupta period also saw the advent of Buddhism's decline in India. It slowly waned for three reasons. First was the rise of Mahayana Buddhism in India which was to bring Buddhism closer to Hinduism. The second reason was that Hinduism enjoyed the support of Kings and underwent a revival. This was so successful that in time it was to absorb the now strongly Mahayana influenced Buddhism. The third reason for Buddhism's decline was the

various Moslem invasions, the last of which was waged in the seventh century A.D. and was directly responsible for Buddhism's slow decline and fall. However, at this time as we shall see Buddhism spread out of India to Nepal, later on to Sri Lanka and then eastwards to South East Asia and survived.

In short, Buddhism and its art and architecture was to spread geographically outwards from India in two directions. One was to the northwest into Afghanistan, Iran and then along the Silk Road to Central Asia and then further east to China, Korea and Japan. This development came about not only because of the activity of Buddhist Missionaries, but also because of the work of those Indian traders and the migration of those Indian emigres who settled in Central Asia. These people carried both Hinduism, and Buddhism and much of Indian culture with them wherever they went. This is obvious when we look at the wealth of Indian and Buddhist Art which was created there and can still be seen, today. However, in China, Korea and Japan Buddhism did not supplant the existing cultures but was totally integrated into them.

At the end of India's Gupta period Buddhism was taken to Nepal, Sri Lanka and to the South East Asian Mainland. As I said before, this outward movement was the direct result of the changes taking place in India at the time. Indian commerce also played a part, in Buddhism's spread to these places and were to be greatly influenced not only by Indian culture but also by the work of Indian merchants and monks, who brought with them not only religion but also their country's civilization - writing, art, architecture and methods of ruling as well. The influence of Hinduism was to touch these places before that of Buddhism did, but in time the two coexisted. In the end, however, Hinduism could not endure for long abroad because of the very rigid caste system it supported. Nevertheless, traces of Hindu culture have survived in these places and testify to the great contribution India made over the centuries to all of the Asian world and is still going on. Nowadays India's culture is being carried abroad by the large numbers of Asians emigrating to Australia, Europe, Africa and the United States of America and South America. They are the current carriers of Buddhism and its fourth jewel Buddhist Art and Architecture.

Now, I would like to tell you a true story. The late John Blofeld, a Buddhist scholar and writer of great repute once told the story of how he first became attracted to Buddhism when he was young. One day, he spied a strange statue in shop in Brighton. Sussex and his curiosity was awakened. When he asked what it was, the shop-keeper kindly told him it was a statue of a Buddha. Although, he could not afford to buy it then and there, he very much wanted to. For days he could not get the image with its calm and peaceful expression out of his mind. As soon as he was able to afford it he bought it and it became his most treasured possession and kept it with him always. Seeing that statue, was for him a turning-point in his life. Later he began a life-long investigation into Buddhism.

Buddhism has been making contributions to the world's cultures through its teachings, its art and architecture for more than two millennium long. May this continue!

Thank you very much for your attention.

'May all beings be happy!'