

The Buddha's True Face



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Essays on Buddhist History & Culture

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In the Dhammadayada Sutta of the Majjhima Nikaya the Buddha says: "Monks, be heirs of my Dhamma, not heirs of material things." Obviously the Buddha wanted his disciples to give more attention to his liberating teaching than to things like his bodily remains or personal possessions. Nonetheless, after his Parinirvana his disciples felt deeply his absence and longed for some form of closeness to their beloved teacher. In time, this led to the cult of relics. It also led to a great interest in what the Buddha looked like. There are many references in the Tipitaka to the Buddha's personal appearance. The Anguttara Nikaya says: "It is wonderful, truly marvellous, how serene the good Gotama's presence is, how clear and radiant his complexion." In the Sonadanda Sutta, he is described as being "fair in colour, fine in presence, stately to behold". Although these and other passages from the suttas make it clear that the Buddha was extraordinarily handsome, they are only descriptions. Devotees wanted more than that, they wanted to actually see the Buddha's face. Consequently, the legend gradually developed that several very ancient and exceptionally beautiful Buddha statues were not just artist's impressions of the Buddha but actual portraits of him. The most famous of these statues was at Bodh Gaya. The earliest Buddha statue found at Bodh Gaya and now in the Indian Museum in Calcutta



The earliest Buddha statue from
Bodhi Gaya dated 383 CE

dates from the year 383 CE. Although much damaged it is still an impressive piece of sculpture, the facial features in particular showing serenity yet determination. In about the first half of the 5th century, a statue was installed in the then newly built Mahabodhi Temple and within a very short time the belief arose that this statue was a portrait of the Buddha. It came to be known as the Image

of the True Face or more commonly, as the Mahabodhi Image.

The Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang who visited Bodhi Gaya in the 7th century has left us this detailed description of the Mahabodhi Image. "He (the statue) was facing the east and as dignified in appearances as when alive. The throne on which he sits was 4 feet 2 inches high and 12 feet 5 inches broad. The figure was 11 feet 5 inches high, the two knees were 8 feet 8 inches apart and the two shoulders 6 feet 2 inches. The Buddha's features are perfectly depicted and the loving expression of his face lifelike. The statue stands in a dark chamber in which lamps and torches are kept burning, but those who wish to see the sacred features cannot do so by coming into the chamber. In the morning they have to reflect the sunlight onto the statue by means of a great mirror so that the details can be seen. Those who behold them find their religious emotions much increased". The story concerning the statue's origins as told to Xuanzang

is as follows. The brahman who built the Mahabodhi Temple wished to enshrine a statue in it but for a long time no suitable sculpture could be found. Eventually, a man appeared who said he could do the job. He asked that a pile of scented clay and a lighted lamp be placed in the temple chamber and the door be locked for six months. This was done but being impatient the brahman opened the door four days before the required time. Inside was found a statue of surpassing beauty, perfect in every detail except for a small part of the breast which was unfinished. Sometime later, a monk who spent the night in the chamber had a dream in which Maitreya appeared to him and said that it was he who had moulded the statue.

Six hundred years later the Tibetan pilgrim Dharmasvamin was told a story about the image's origins reminiscent to this one but differing from it in details, indicating that the legends were constantly evolving. According to Dharmasvamin, three brothers fell into an argument about which religion was the better. On being told that Buddhism was inferior to others the youngest brother went crying to his mother. She called the three boys and told them to go to the Himalayas and ask Mahesvara for his opinion. Mahesvara of course confirmed the younger brother's belief in the supremacy of Buddhism and all three brothers decided to become monks. The eldest built a monastery at Veluvana, the second built one at Isipatana and not to be outdone, the youngest brother decided to make a Buddha statue for the Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya. In a dream he was told to get material consisting of one part precious substances, one

part fragrant substances and one-part sandalwood paste, place it in the main shrine of the Temple and to keep the door closed for a particular period of time. This was done but he opened the door before the appointed time and inside found the statue complete except for the little toe on the right foot. The mother of the three boys who had known the Buddha when she was a young girl, declared that the statue was exactly like the Buddha except in four respects. Whereas the Buddha's usina was invisible, it could be seen on the statue, the Buddha moved but the statue did not, it could not teach the Dhamma and it did not radiate light.

In Buddhism Buddha statues are expressions of devotion of the artists who make them and aids to contemplation to those who worship them, and therefore it is not correct to say that "Buddhists worship idols". That this is not a new idea, a modern rationalization, is amply proved by the writings of Robert Knox who, in the 17th century, described the Kandyans attitude to Buddha statues thus: "As for these images, they say they do not own them to be gods themselves but only figures representing their Gods to their memories, and as such, they give them honour and worship." Nonetheless, the Mahabodhi Image was sometimes worshipped as if it were the Buddha himself; food was offered to it and devotees would drape robes over it. The Chinese monk, Yijing who visited Bodh Gaya in the 7th century wrote: "Afterwards we came to the Mahabodhi Temple and worshipped the Image of the True Face of the Buddha. I took bolts of thick and fine silk which had been given to me by the monks and laymen of Shantung, made a robe to it the size of the

Tathagata and myself offered it to the image. Many myriads of small canopies which were entrusted to me by the Vinaya master Huien of Pu I offered on his behalf. The meditation master teacher An Tao of Ts'ao asked me to worship the Image and I did this in his name. Then I prostrated myself completely on the ground with my mind undivided, sincere and respectful. Firstly, I wished that China might experience the four benefits and that those benefits might prevail throughout the whole universe. Then I expressed the desire to be reborn under the Naga tree so that as to meet Maitriya and practice the true Dhamma and realise the knowledge not subject to rebirth."

A Chinese inscription found to the north of the Temple written by the monk Ko Yun in 1022 says of the image: "The great hero Maitreya out of compassion for all beings left them the real likeness — The image is respected by the heterodox, cherished by the discerning and although 2000 years old it's face remains new." The inscription also tells us that Ko Yun and his companions draped the Image with a robe made of silk that they had bought with them all the way from China for the purpose. This practice of putting robes on the statue in the main shrine of the Mahabodhi Temple continues even today. As time went by the image was even believed to be able to speak and perhaps such a belief should not surprise us too much. Many people in the theistic religions believe that their god talks to them in dreams or in prayer. In fact, one of the last references we have to the Mahabodhi Image mentions it speaking. In

1300, the Tibetan Tantric adept Man-luns-po travelled to Bodh Gaya and made a vow before the Mahabodhi Image to neither eat nor drink until it spoke to him. After waiting eighteen days he got his wish when the statue said: “Oh son of noble family! Proceed to Mount Potala and their practice in the manner of Bodhisattvas in the presence of Avaloktesvara.” The details of Man-luns-po’s subsequent journey suggest that that he did actually go to the sacred mountain in Kerala.



The statue placed in the Mahabodhi Temple in 1880

Being as it were the most lifelike symbol of the Buddha, the Mahabodhi Image attracted the attention of devoted Buddhists but also those who hated and wanted to destroy Buddhism. The most notorious of these was the fanatical Bengali Saivite king Sasanka. Early in the 7th century, his minions attacked Bodh Gaya with the intention of destroying the Mahabodhi Image. Xuanzang relates what happened. “King Sasanka wished to destroy this image but having seen its loving expression his mind had no rest or determination and he returned homeward with his retinue. On this way he said to one of his officers, ‘We must remove the

statue of the Buddha and replace it with one of Mahesvara.’ The officer having received this order was moved with fear and sighing said, ‘If destroy the statue of the Buddha I will reap misfortune for many kalpas. If on the other hand I disobey the king, he will kill me and my family. I am doomed whether I obey or not. What then shall I do?’ On this, he called to his presence a man who was a Buddhist to help him and sent him to build across the chamber and in front of the Buddha statue a wall of brick. Out of a feeling of shame at the darkness placed a burning lamp in with the statue and then on the wall drew the figure of Mahesvara. The work being finished he reported it to the king who was suddenly seized with terror. His body became covered with sores, his flesh rotted off and after a while he died. Then the officer quickly ordered the wall to be pulled down and although several days had elapsed the lamp was found to be still burning.”

In the 13th century Bodh Gaya came under attack again, this time by Muslim invaders, and the monks used a similar strategy to save the Mahabodhi Image. Dharmasvamin tells us: “They blocked up the door in front of the Mahabodhi Image with bricks and plastered it, near it they places another image as a substitute. On its surface they drew an image of Mahesvara to protect it from the non-Buddhists.” Dharmasvamin was also told that formerly the Mahabodhi Image had two beautiful gems in its eyes that emitted a light so bright that it was possible to read by it. During a lightning raid a little before his visit a soldier had put a ladder against the image and prised the eyes out. As he was climbing down he

slipped and fell, dropping the gems and smashing them, after which their light grew dim. The Tibetan historian Taranatha tells us a legend he heard about the origins of these gems. He relates that when the man who had built the Mahabodhi Temple had placed the statue in it, he happened to find a wondrous self-illuminating gem. When he expressed regret that he had not found the gem earlier two holes suddenly appeared in the statue's eyes. As he prepared to cut the gem in two, so he could put it in the statue's sockets, a second gem miraculously appeared.

The Mahabodhi Image had a considerable influence on art in India and other parts of Asia through copies of it which were taken to various Buddhist countries. Baladitya's huge temple at Nalanda had a life size copy of the statue in as did the main temple at Vikramasila. When the Chinese pilgrim Yijing returned home in 698 he brought with him a picture of the statue and presented it to the Fo Shou Chi Monastery. The Chinese envoy Wang Hsien Ts'e made four separate trips to India, visiting Bodh Gaya during two of them. He returned from his last trip with a model of the Mahabodhi Image which he deposited in the Imperial Palace. He also found himself flooded with requests from people in the capital for copies of the statue. The Tibetan monk Chag Gar-com (1153-1216) is said to have made a copy of the statue and enshrined it in a temple especially built for the purpose. He first saw the original during a pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya where each day he would buy flowers in the market and strew over the statue. A Buddha statue the same dimensions as the image was installed in the great stupa at Gyantze in Tibet in 1421.

The measurements for this copy were obtained from Sariputra, the last abbot of Bodh Gaya, when he passed through Tibet on his way to China in 1413. This copy can still be seen in the topmost shrine on the east side of the great stupa of Gyantze.

In the 19th century, a Buddha statue in the earth witnessing gesture was found near the Sri Mahabodhi in Anuradhapura, the only such statue from ancient Sri Lanka. Although I have no proof I suspect that this also was a copy of the Mahabodhi Image. Nor was sculpture the only art form influenced by this famous statue. The origin of one ancient India style of painting pictures of the Buddha was traced back to an impression made by smearing the Mahabodhi Image with yellow sandalwood paste and pressing a cotton cloth on it. When the Tibetan monk Dharmasvamin was in Bodh Gaya in 1234 he said the Mahabodhi Image was still attracting devotees. He wrote of it: "One is never satiated to behold such an image and has no desire to go and behold another. Even people of little faith when standing in front of the image feel it impossible not to shed tears." The last reference to the Mahabodhi Image is an inscription from about the 15th century carved on a stone railing around the Mahabodhi Temple. It was written by a Buddhist pilgrim from "the mountainous country of Parvata" named Jinadasa and specifically mentions that he had come all the way from his home to gaze at the Mahabodhi Image.

After that the statue was lost to the world, perhaps it was destroyed by Islamic iconoclasts although there is no record of this. For nearly 500 years the asana inside the Mahabodhi Temple stood empty. In 1877, the

embassy sent by the king of Burma to repair the Mahabodhi Temple installed a statue inside it but this was a rather unattractive image made out of old bricks and plaster. Then in 1880, Joseph Beglar was commissioned by the Indian government to repair the Temple. His unofficial adviser in this task was the great archaeologist Alexander Cunningham. After work on the Temple was finished the two men felt that there was still something missing, a fitting statue in its main shrine. Numerous Buddha statues were lying all around Bodh Gaya but on examination they were all found to be unsuitable, either too small, damaged or of Bodhisattvas rather than of the Buddha himself. Finally, a statue was located in a small shrine in the Mahant's residence, the Hindu monk who laid claim to own Bodh Gaya village and its temple. The statue was undamaged, with fine feature and just the right size, neither too small so as to look insignificant in the shrine or too large so as to make it appear cramped. The fragmentary inscription on the base of this statue says that it was commissioned by the Chhindha Purnabhadra in about the 12th century. When Cunningham asked the Mahant if he could have the statue he refused. But he was a resourceful man and he finally was able to pry it from the Mahants grip. What promises, flattery or threats he used we do not know. Today this statue sits in the Mahabodhi Temple, its serene and being gaze looking down on those who come from all over the world to worship it.