

Moore Albert C., *Iconography of Religions: An Introduction*, Philadelphia: Fortpress 1977, s. 142-169.

Early Buddhism: from Aniconic to Iconic

Buddha-images did not appear until the first century AD. For five centuries after the historical Buddha (who lived c. 563–483 BC) only symbolic forms were used to indicate his presence in veneration and sacred memory. This was not due to an explicit prohibition of images during these centuries of 'primitive Buddhism'¹⁸ nor to any backwardness in means of artistic expression. It is due to the nature of early Buddhism and its Indian background. The Buddha was essentially a reforming sage who taught truths about existence and a discipline, embodied in his community, the *Sangha*, leading to release from the wordly cycle of *samsara*. Like a prophet he was embodied in his message and to 'see' his word was to see him. Homage to him was not homage to his earthly human form. In its aniconic basis Buddhism here followed the ancient Hindu tradition of not representing the Vedic deities in personalized form. We have already noted the more elevated stream of thought in India which saw external worship or interior spirituality as the highest level. This elevation of the aniconic continued both in Buddhism and Hinduism even when the use of icons had long been an established and religiously justified practice. Throughout the subsequent developments in Buddhist iconography there was a recurrent emphasis on the aniconic as the original and superior form.

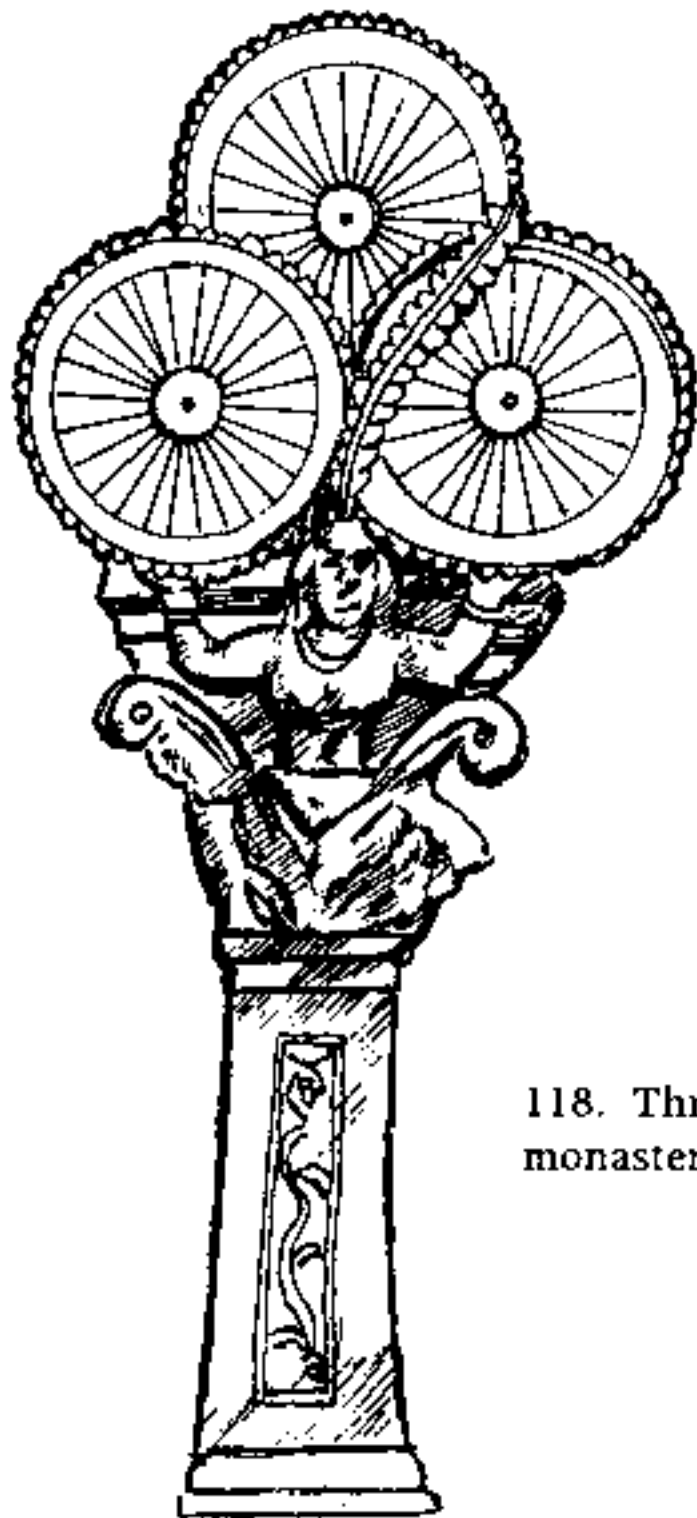
The special problem presented by the Buddha-figure, was that at his death he attained complete extinction in *nirvana*. If this was the real attainment of the Buddha it could not be brought down to the level of human vision. 'To suggest the transcendent nature of the Buddha a form had to be evolved that was visually impressive, yet spiritualized to an extreme, which in itself transcended the limits of the finite world and passed into the realm of the "Without Shape".'¹⁹ Since all forms of expression, including words, must fail to describe his essence, one could use at best the symbolic image (*pratika*) which did not claim to present a likeness to the eye but only an idea. The Buddha could be expressed just as well - or just as inadequately - by means of vegetable, animal or geometrical forms as by anthropomorphic images. It can even be argued that the aniconic presents *more* of a likeness than the too limiting human likeness, 'insofar as it reminds us of the relative unimportance of the

human mode, as merely a particular case among the possibilities of existence'.²⁰

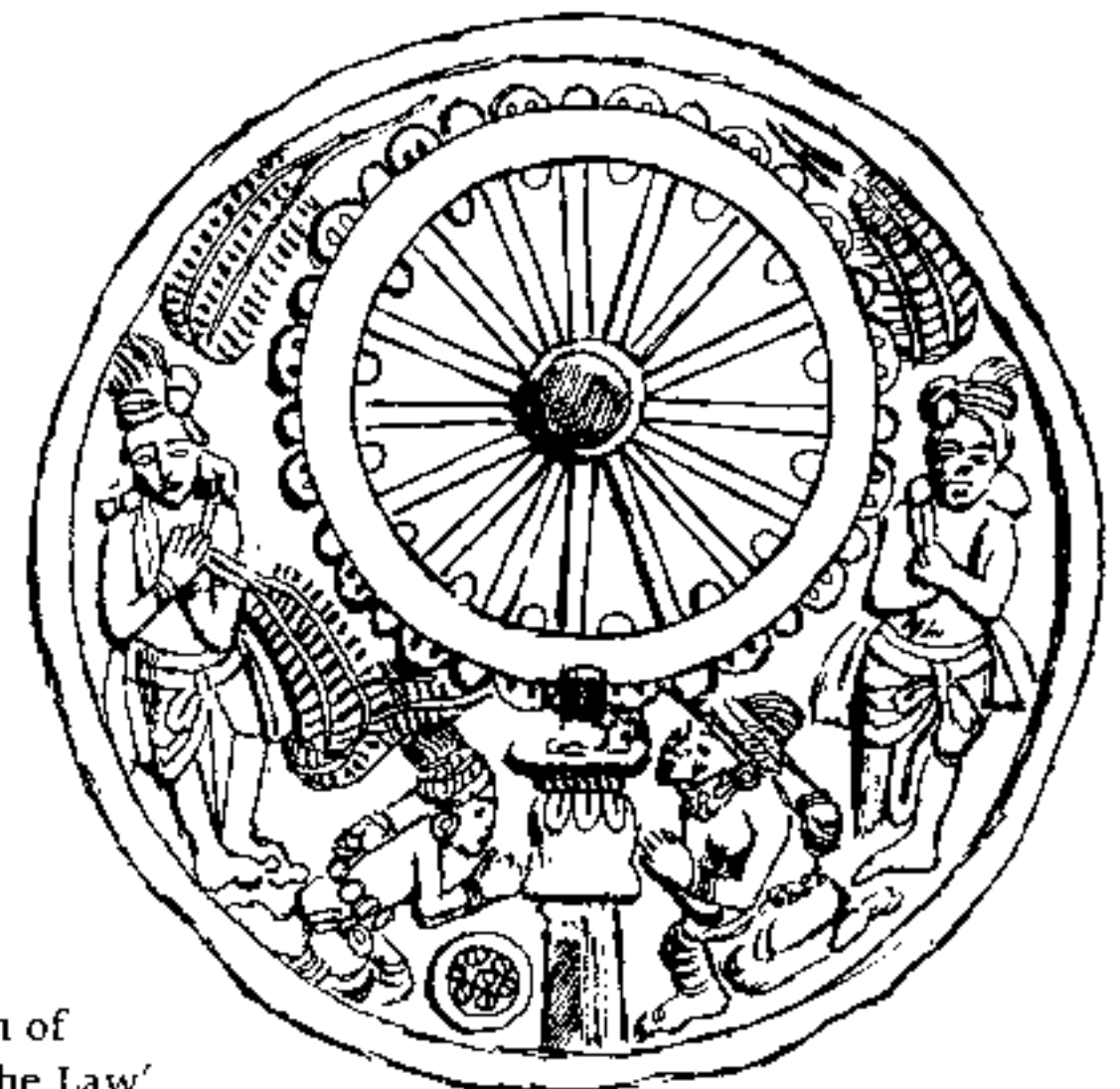
The major Buddhist symbols appear in the ancient phase on the monuments dating from the reign of the Mauryan emperor Ashoka, c. 250 BC, onwards. Among the pillars which had been erected throughout his empire, the one at Sarnath, near Banaras, features the famous lion-capital which is the national symbol of the Republic of India. In addition to the four lions surveying the four directions from the world-pillar, the plinth on which they stand depicts four solar wheels alternating with a lion, an elephant, a bull and a horse, all surmounting a lotiform bell. The four wheels may represent four great planets, but essentially they are ancient solar symbols showing the sun in its daily path of birth and re-birth; with this the sovereign identifies himself, as a world-ruler (*chakravartin*) and the cosmic pillar is thus an emblem of Mauryan imperialism. But the wheel is analogically the eternal Law (*Dharma*) which the Buddha 'turned' when he began teaching with his first sermon at Sarnath. It is therefore appropriate that the emperor Ashoka, as a convert to Buddhism, should have displayed this symbol at Sarnath



111. Wheel on Ashoka's lion capital.



118. Three gems. Relief from a monastery at Lorian Tangai.

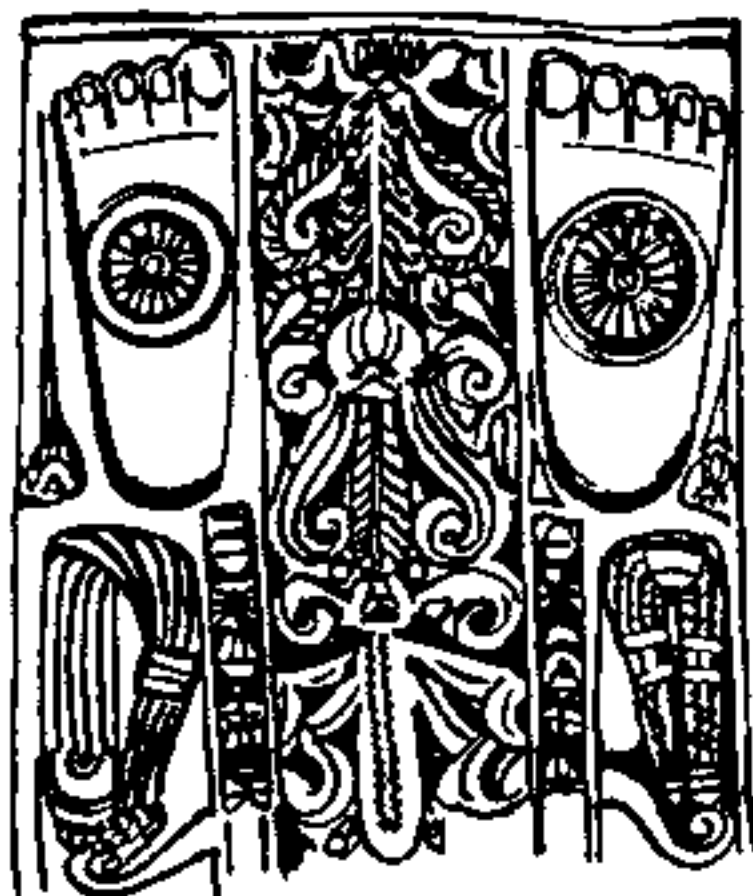


112. Dharmachakra: Veneration of Buddha turning the 'Wheel of the Law'.

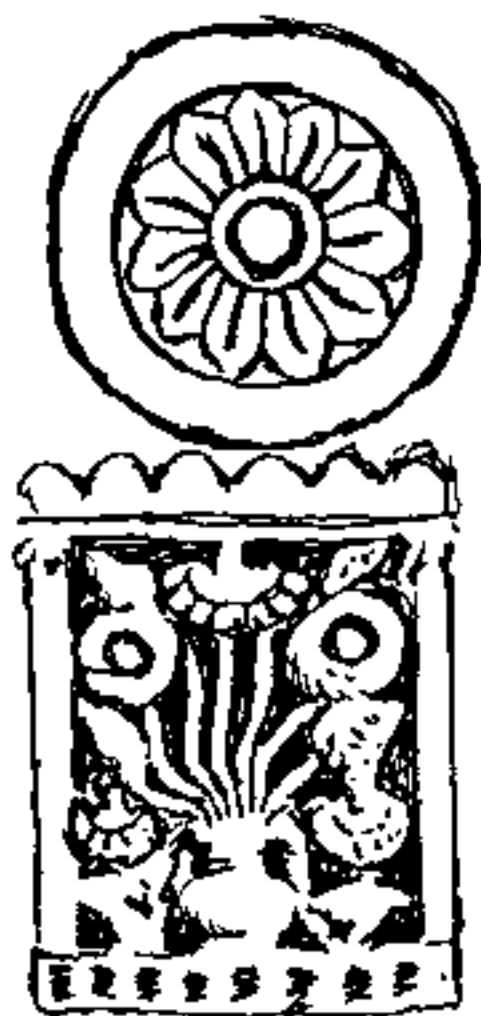
and thus also reinforced his own sovereignty by the Buddha's Dharma. Thereafter the Wheel of the Law (*Dharmachakra*) becomes an established symbol (with spokes of the wheel numbering 8, 24, 36 or even 64), and is venerated in aniconic worship of the Buddha in his teaching, as depicted on the Bharhut relief, second century BC. The wheel could also be tripled to represent the 'three gems' (*triratna*) which are confessed as the ground of the Buddhist's 'refuge' - the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. This symbol is the object of veneration in a relief from a monastery in the north-west, Loriyan Tangai, from the Kushan period, c. second century AD, but earlier the threefold formula was symbolized at Sanchi in much the same way as on the Jain tablet, as a three-shaped trident.

Associated with the Buddha's teaching is his missionary journeying, for which an appropriate symbol is the footprint of the Buddha, marked with the Wheel of the Law. As in Hinduism the footprint of Vishnu could be worshipped, this ancient symbol was used in Buddhism to indicate the presence of the Buddha; in the Sanchi relief of the second century BC the footprints are accompanied by honorific palms and garlands. Most Buddhist countries claim to have an impression of the Buddha's foot, copies of which are venerated in temples as next to actual relics in importance. Enormous footprints are found in Thailand and at Adam's Peak in Sri Lanka, a pilgrim site.

One of the richest and most evocative Buddhist symbols is the lotus (*padma*) which is found not only in India and east Asia but also as a symbol for emergence from the primeval waters in creation and in royal contexts in Egypt and the Middle East.²¹ The reliefs on the north gate at Sanchi, first century BC, conveniently depict the lotus in two ways. Viewed from above it is a circular symbol of total manifestation, a petalled mandala with its heart representing the centre of the universe and the true essence of all. Viewed from the side it is the aquatic flower opening out only above the water, miraculously sprouting from slime below to purity above. It is thus a symbol of birth and creation, as when the Hindu god Brahma emerges in a lotus from Vishnu's navel, but in the Buddhist interpretation it is a symbol of spiritual rebirth, above all the Buddha's enlightenment as he rises above the muddy world of gross matter and delusion to the transcendent state of nirvana. The lotus can therefore serve as a throne for the Buddha in later iconography; as the world-lotus it provides a universal ground for birth and manifestation, but as it leads upwards on its stalk (a cosmic axis) it symbolizes detachment from this world.²² The lotus also suggests the womb and has esoteric sexual overtones in the Tibetan use of the Buddhist formula: 'The Jewel is in the Lotus' (*Om mani padme hum!*).



113. The footprints of Buddha.

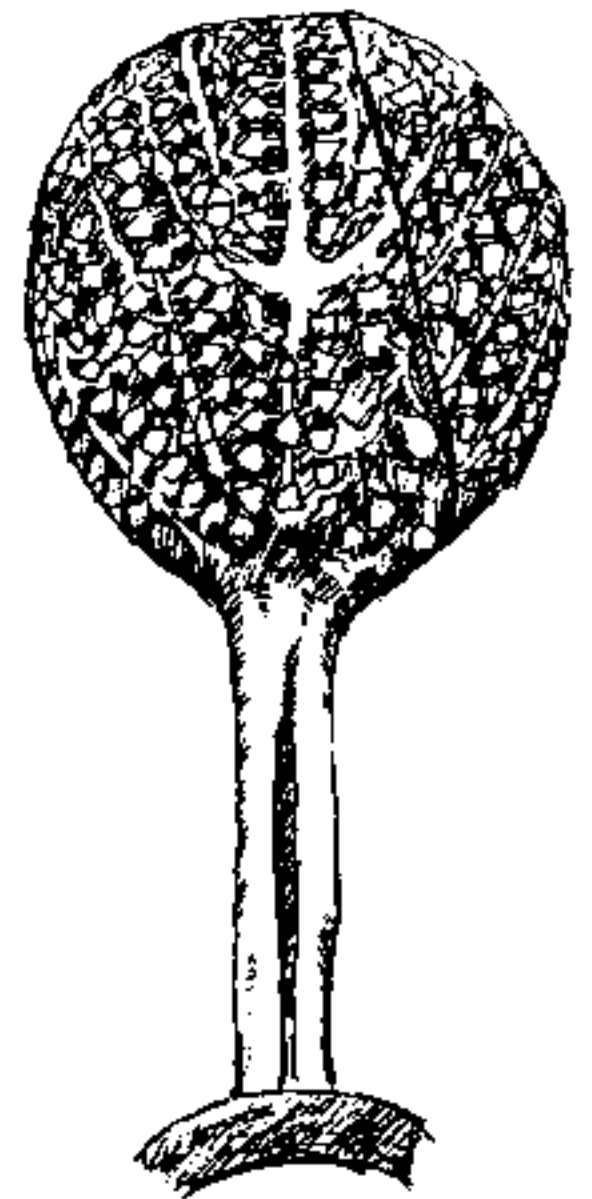


114. Lotus symbols from the north gate of Sanchi.

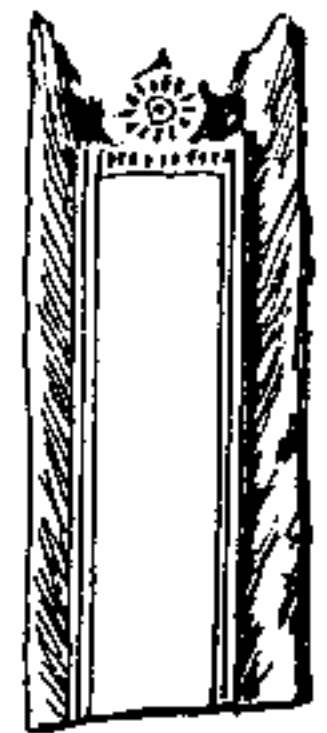
Another important symbol of the Buddha is the Bodhi-tree, the tree under which he sat when he attained enlightenment and wisdom in his Great Awakening. The relief from Amaravati, a famous Buddhist centre in south-east India showed attendants worshipping this aniconic symbol; but by this period (second century AD) the Buddha was also depicted in human form, and on the same slab shows on its upper frieze the seated Buddha being tempted by the daughters of Mara, the evil one, prior to his Awakening. Such a powerful symbol as the tree with its connotations of strength and life could easily be identified with this central event of the Buddha's earthly existence. This has led to the suggestion that tree-worship was the ancient source of Buddha-worship, that both the yakshas of ancient Indian popular cults and the later Buddha images were anthropomorphized human trunks from the stem of the tree.²³ However, the other basic symbols of the ancient Hindu tradition and Buddhism are too well established in their own right to be all subsumed under vegetal origins; it is preferable to see the tree as only one motif among these. The blazing pillar stands for the world axis as a symbol of the Buddha's cosmic centrality. Other aniconic symbols suggest the Buddha's absence rather than his presence – the empty throne, with cushions, in front of the Bodhi tree; the riderless horse; the honorific parasol covering no one; or even a floating plank to indicate the Buddha's miracle of walking on the waters.

Such aniconic forms as these could be knit together to represent the body of the Buddha. For instance a pillar of the north gate at Sanchi, first century BC, shows the Buddha's feet at the bottom and the lotus and 'three gems' symbol at the top, linked by a column of lotus palmettes.²⁴ At Amaravati pillars dating from c. AD 200 show the sun-wheel surmounting a column; also a stone medallion depicting Rahula being brought before his father, the Buddha, focuses the attention of the crowd of worshippers on a variant combination: a stool with footprints, an empty throne, a pillar as the Buddha's backbone, a wheel as his head crowned by the 'three gems'.²⁵ The aniconic is here moving towards the iconic.

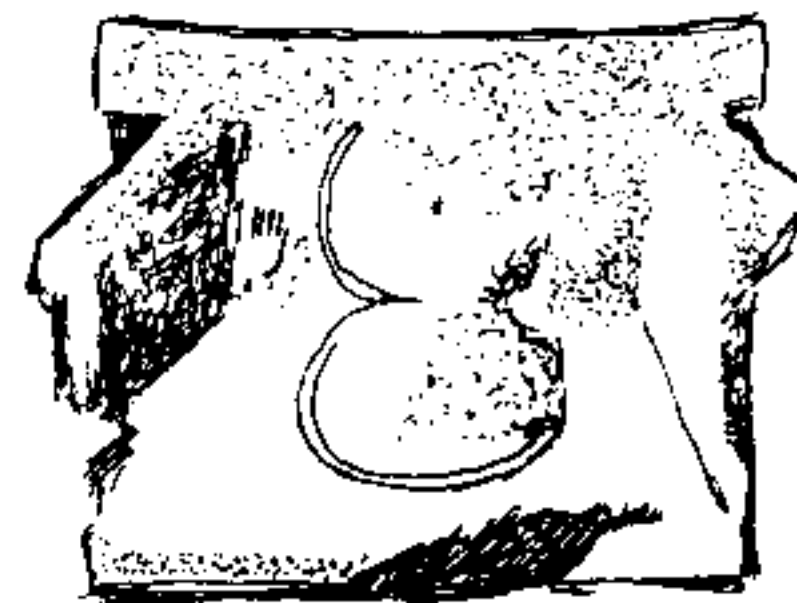
The most important and long-lasting Buddhist symbol of all is the *stupa* which in one form or another (such as the east Asian *pagoda*) is a sepulchral and reliquary monument to the Buddha.²⁶ It represents the supreme event of the Buddha's *parinirvana* – his death and attainment of the absolute state of nirvana. But its origins appear to lie in the pre-Buddhist cults and burial practices of ancient India, in the mounds which



115. Bodhi tree: detail of marble relief from Amaravati.

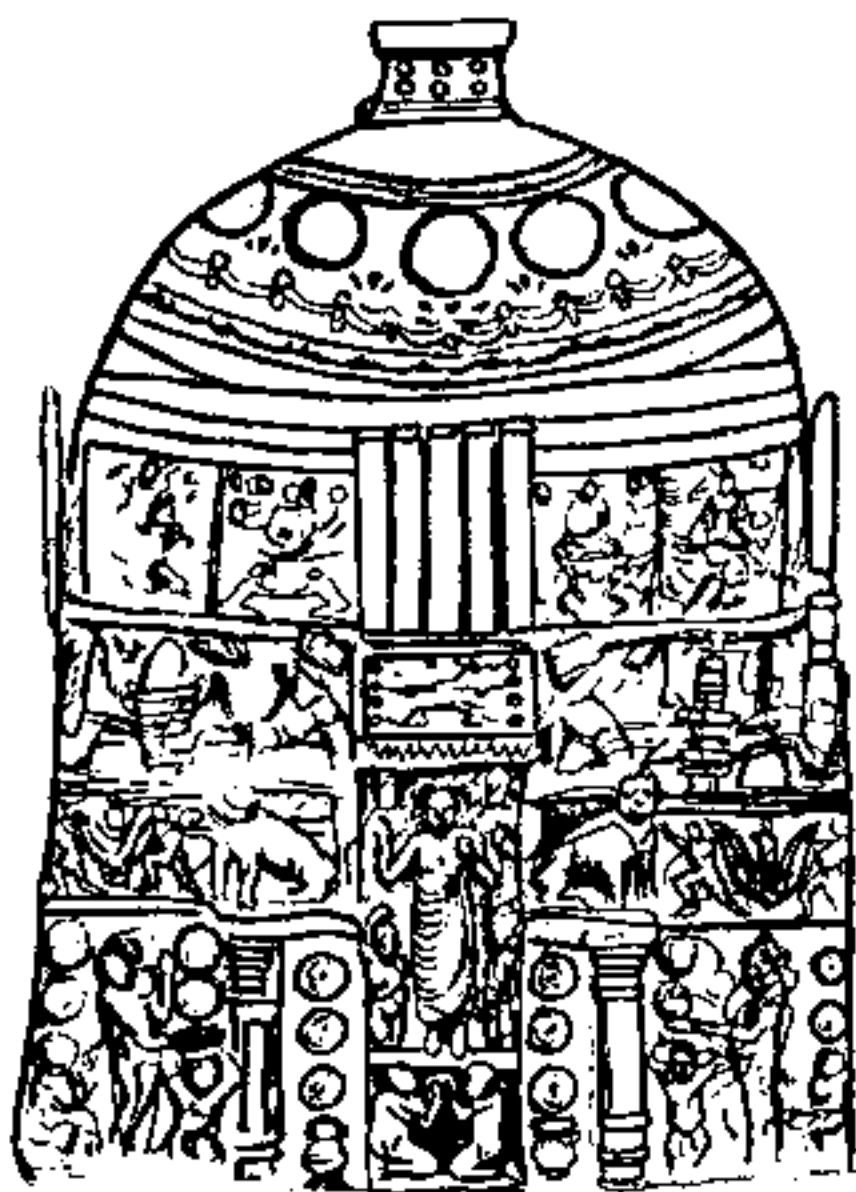


116. Blazing pillar: detail of relief on a stupa at Amaravati.



117. Empty throne: detail from Amaravati relief.

were raised over dead bodies to prevent their escape to terrorize the living. More positively such mounds could be revered as a tomb embodying the presence of the dead – especially if they contained the remains of princes and holy men – and could be hallowed in popular cults as sacred sites associated with yakshas and tree-worship. These origins are largely a matter of speculation, but Buddhist texts refer to the ashes of the Buddha being interred in this manner. The first tangible evidence for the actual veneration of the stupa appears in the time of Ashoka who is said to have distributed relics of the Buddha to all the main towns of his empire so that stupas could be built (the symbolic number of 84,000 is given). One of these third-century BC stupas survives as the core of the great (No. 1) stupa at Sanchi in north-central India, although it was enlarged and decorated in the following centuries and restored in modern times. It is a solid hemispherical dome, a massive impenetrable structure fifty feet high, surmounted by a reliquary box and mast with an honorific triple umbrella. Later legends attributed this design to the Buddha's own instructions to his first lay disciples – he folded his garments, inverted his begging bowl and placed his staff on top to show them how to make a stupa to enshrine his relics. However, there is clearly a great deal of cosmic symbolism in the dome or 'egg' (*anda*) and the mast-axis as well as the gateways orientated precisely to the four directions. In the traditional Indian rite of circumambulation (*pradakshina*) the worshipper walks round the processional paths three times, keeping the stupa to his right as in following the journey of the sun. He cannot scale the sacred dome or cosmic mountain.²⁷



Veneration of the stupa is clearly depicted in a number of reliefs – for instance on the north gate at Sanchi itself where both human and divine worshippers give joyful adoration to the Buddha by marching round with garlands, banners and musical accompaniment. Representations on tablets from Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda in the second century AD begin to depict the aniconic symbol along with impressive figures of the Buddha as a person. The significance of this for iconography is that the stupa itself is seen as the body of the Buddha. In principle the Buddha is dead and the stupa can only symbolize his absence, like other aniconic symbols; but because there are still relics of his mortal body in the stupa it is somehow animated with his continuing presence. On the one hand the overtones of royal burials helped to identify the Buddha with the World Ruler (*chakravartin*), dominating the cosmos in all directions as symbolized by the monument. On the other hand the popular veneration of

stupas encouraged by Ashoka helped the worshipper to conceive of the Buddha as still an immanent reality, made visible in the stupa with its various levels standing for the head and body of the Buddha.²⁸

Early Buddhist art was thus able to express the presence of the Buddha through his 'traces' in the form of symbols, sometimes in the midst of human figures portraying narratives of the Buddha's life. His own life could be summed up in four major symbols – the lotus for his birth, the Bodhi-tree for his enlightenment, the wheel for his teaching and the stupa for his death and achievement of nirvana.

The Buddha-image

The emergence of the fully personal image (*Buddha-rupa*) is interwoven with the development of Mahayana Buddhism in the crucial two centuries from the first century BC to the first century AD. The Mahayana system will be more fully discussed later in this chapter; meanwhile it can be seen as the 'Great Vehicle', the Buddhist way accessible to the multitude and open to more varied forms of popular piety than the austere simplicity of the earlier period. This proved of lasting importance for the use of the Buddha-image by the major schools of Buddhism all over Asia. We can note the factors leading up to this.

First, as in the development of Hindu images, is the popular piety of devotion, *bhakti*, now directed towards the person of the Buddha worshipped as Lord and redeemer, as the *bhagavata* who elicits total surrender, love and adoration. This has roots in ancient Indian popular religion in the cults of yakshas, images of which probably influenced the standing Buddha figures. Also reverence for the Great Man (*Mahapurusha*) and the use of distinctive signs (*lakshanas*) of greatness on his body were easily carried over when the Buddha was identified with the World Ruler as a spiritual conqueror. Already at Sanchi the third- to first-century BC decorated gateways express popular piety related to these figures; but they remain guardians and conveyors of material blessings, fertility and power. As accessory figures they are at the edge of the sanctuary which centres on the plain aniconic stupa representing the transcendent power and liberation of the Buddha.

Secondly, Buddhist cultic centres came to provide a more permanent home to receive images. Buddhism was distinctive in its social emphasis, leading to well-organized monastic orders and lay support for their maintenance. As monasteries grew larger to house the *sangha* more permanent buildings were erected, at first in wood but later hewn from

rock as cave temples modelled on the earlier wooden structures.²⁹ In the second to first centuries BC such monasteries were excavated at Bhaja and Karli near Bombay. Typically the monastic cells were gathered round a central rectangular hall for worship which was not as yet focused on an image. As with the ancient sacred place (*chaitya*) which Buddhists had hallowed with the symbol of the great open-air stupa, so these chaitya-halls now had their stupa inside for solemn circumambulation by the monks. In later centuries images of the Buddha were carved on the front of such stupas, as seen in caves at Ajanta and Ellura; this parallels the Hindu affixing of a Shiva image to the aniconic lingam form (fig. 89, p. 116). And the monks' assembly-hall became the typical Buddhist temple (*vihara*), the 'dwelling place' where the Buddha-image is housed.

Thirdly, the contribution of Mahayana Buddhism meant the harnessing of these tendencies in Hindu bhakti and Buddhist veneration to a new concept of the Buddha: 'He was now seen as the embodiment of an absolute world principle, a personification of highest truth, wisdom and goodness'.³⁰ Not only was he the great sage and teacher whose way transcended the gods; he now became a sacred person, a merciful redeemer whom his ardent followers wanted to see and revere with personal devotion. In one sense this was a return of Buddhism to its origins in the Hindu tradition, a process of 'conventionalization' which eventually led to absorption into Hindu theism.³¹ From the viewpoint of Mahayana apologetics, however, there was need for more accessible ways of attaining salvation than had been provided by the Old Wisdom school with its austere doctrine and conditions. According to Buddhist cosmology there had been a decline since the time of the Buddha, following the periodic cycles of improvement and degeneration, and only a few monks could now become Arahats and attain nirvana.³² The Mahayana claimed to meet the situation with a more positive and comprehensive way which made the Buddha and other saintly figures available to help in time of need, restoring lost teachings from the past and giving new hopes for the future. In iconography the result was to release the Buddha figure for depiction in personal form and to relate this comprehensively to all levels of the Buddhist cosmos - from earthly life to the heights of a proliferating Buddhist 'pantheon'. Through the Mahayana, then, Buddhism came to welcome the Buddha-image as a means of grace for monks and all worshippers.

All these factors were native to the scene of Buddhism in India, but a fourth element which came into play was foreign - the influence of Hellenistic and Roman art in north-west India where the 'Gandhara' school flourished from the end of the first to the fifth century AD. This



120. Head of Buddha.

was long after Alexander had brought Hellenism to the area, so that any classical Greek and Hellenistic influences were mediated now through provincial Roman style from Syria blended with Parthian elements.³³ The period of Kushan rule of northern India from the first to third centuries AD encouraged cosmopolitan culture and religious syncretism; hence the fruitful blend of Greco-Roman form and Indian iconography in the 'Romano-Buddhist' art of Gandhara.³⁴ It was a hybrid and eclectic style not remarkable for works of powerful originality. Nevertheless it contributed features of great importance in the history of Buddhist art because Gandhara was geographically at the cross-roads of India and Central Asia via which Buddhism entered China and Japan ultimately. One feature is the Westernized 'Apollonian' beauty given to the face of the Buddha to express his calm and benevolent humanity. This is evident in a stylized head from the fourth to fifth centuries, a period when Gandhara artists were returning to the great Hellenistic masterpieces for inspiration. Earlier works are less refined and sometimes stiffly conventional. This is due partly to the rhythmically draped garments derived from Roman statues; also the face is given a mask-like tranquillity to express the spiritual elevation of the Buddha. The combination of stylized form and spiritual beauty has become a recognizable feature of the Buddha-image throughout Asia.

As an example of the standard Buddha image we take the seated figure of the Preaching Buddha from the second to third century AD. This illustrates the blending of Roman-Hellenistic and Indian Buddhist features. The symmetry and perfection of the body is an attribute of the Buddha as an ideal world-ruler; it is both enhanced and offset by the formal but asymmetrical robe which typically leaves the right shoulder bare. (In standing Gandhara Buddhas the body is almost completely draped.) Here the Buddha is seated on the thalamus of a lotus which was developed a century later at Gandhara into the full lotus-throne with its rich implications in Indian symbolism. (The two other main forms of throne were also developed later - the lion throne, expressing spiritual victory, and the stepped recessed cosmic symbol of Mount Meru.) Moving upward in the image we note its posture: the Buddha is seated in the ancient yogic 'lotus posture' with upturned soles. And like the yogi his body is powerful and well-disciplined, perfect in breathing and meditation. Here the Buddha is teaching, as indicated by the hand-mudra (see further below). Behind the head is a halo symbolizing the 'Buddha Light' radiating from his supreme wisdom, sometimes depicted later in the more vivid form of rays and flames from the head and body. It cannot be determined whether this has Indian origins or was borrowed in the Kushan syncretism



121. Preaching Buddha, Gandhara style.

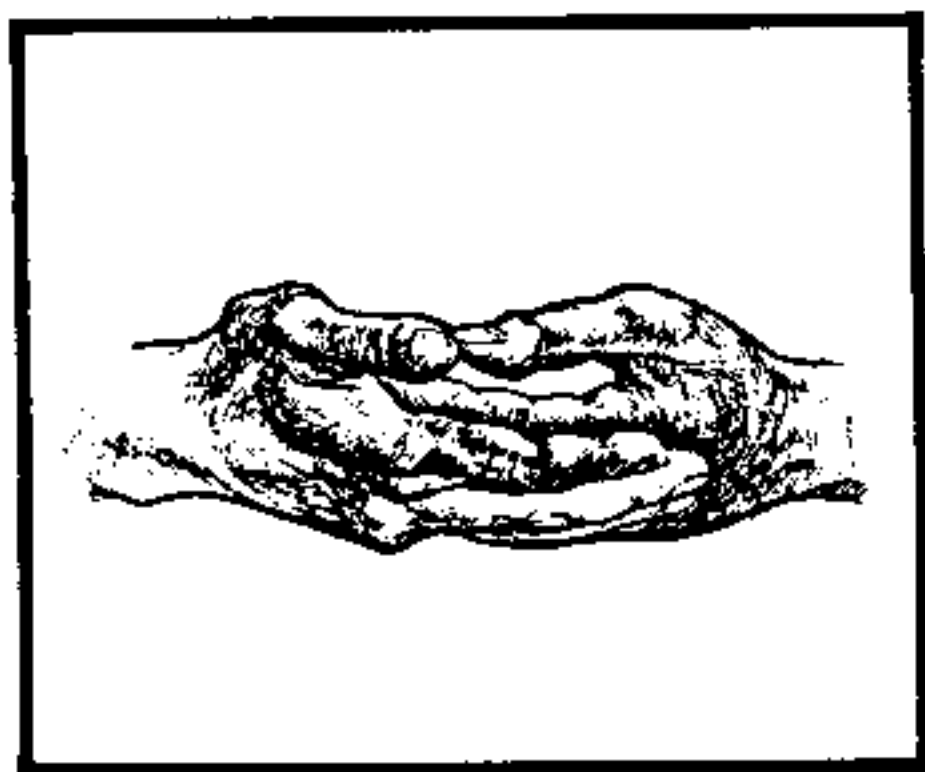
from Hellenistic images of Helios, deified Roman emperors or Iranian deities such as Mithra radiating light.

The head displays the distinctive marks of the Buddha as the Great Man. Long ear-lobes are a mark of nobility, presumably distended by heavy jewellery in Indian custom; but the Buddha had discarded all such material ornament. Between his eyes is the *urna*, a small crystal or white curl of hair symbolizing wisdom; it is not to be confused with the 'third eye' of Shiva, although this assimilation did occur in later Tantric Buddhism. Finally we come to the distinctive protuberance at the top of the Buddha's head, the *ushnisha*. The fact that this term originally meant a 'turban' makes it likely that it originated as the top-knot of hair on which the Indian princely turban was worn.³⁵ Here the hair is shown as abundant and wavy in a Gandharan style, perhaps influenced by the *krobylos* (top-knot of hair) of Hellenistic statues of Apollo. Whatever be the origin of this curious mark, the bump is interpreted as a receptacle of supernatural wisdom and power. In Thailand it was further developed into a lotus bud and even a flame pointing upwards. As for the hair style of the Buddha, this should have been short, for after Gautama cut his hair at the great renunciation it never grew longer than the short locks depicted later in 'peppercorn' or 'nail-shell' form curling to the right.

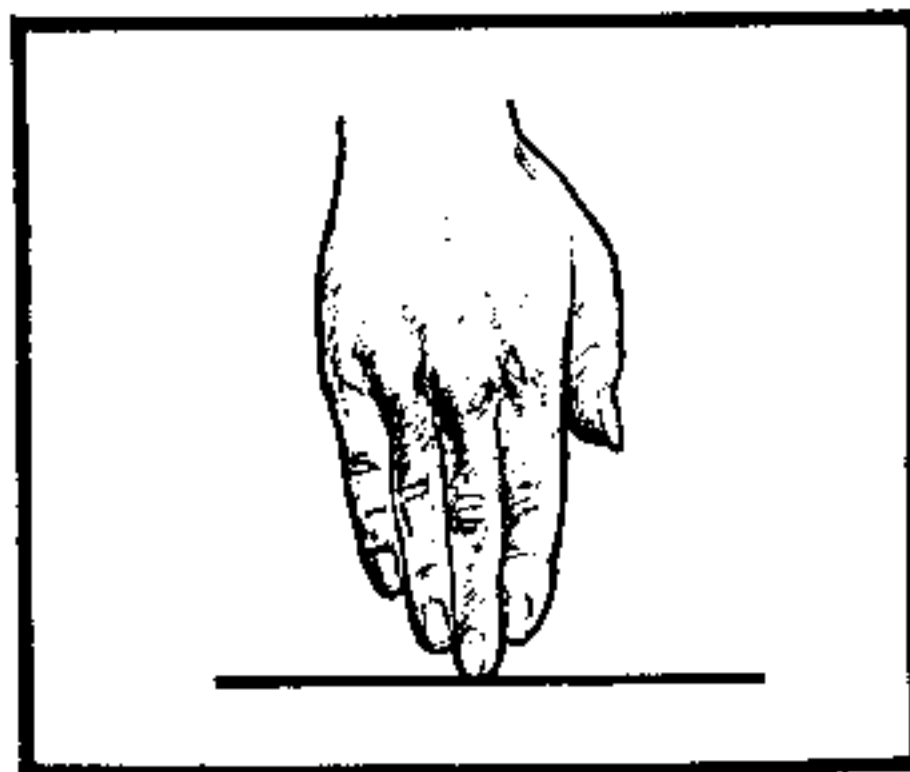
These iconographic details were derived from the traditional lakshanas on the body of the Great Man, listed in early Buddhist scriptures as thirty-two major signs and eighty minor signs. Naturally only a few of these could be depicted on a particular image, but the main features became standardized.

The hand-mudras are important because they appear in all images and indicate the activity of the Buddha. While many variants were developed

122. Dhyana-mudra.



123. Bhumisparsha-mudra.

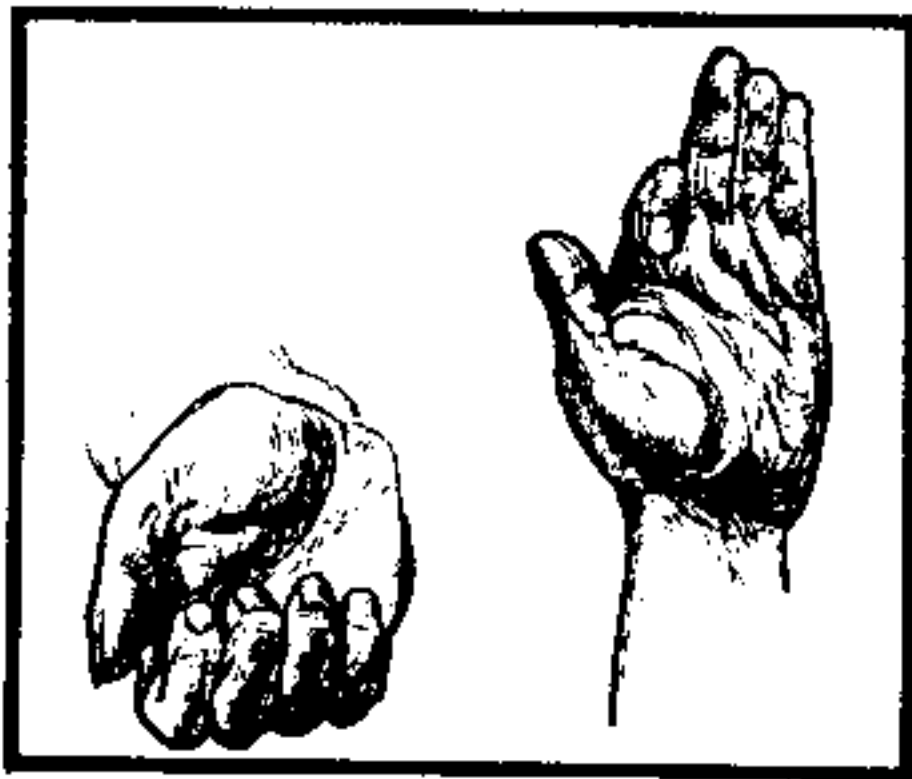
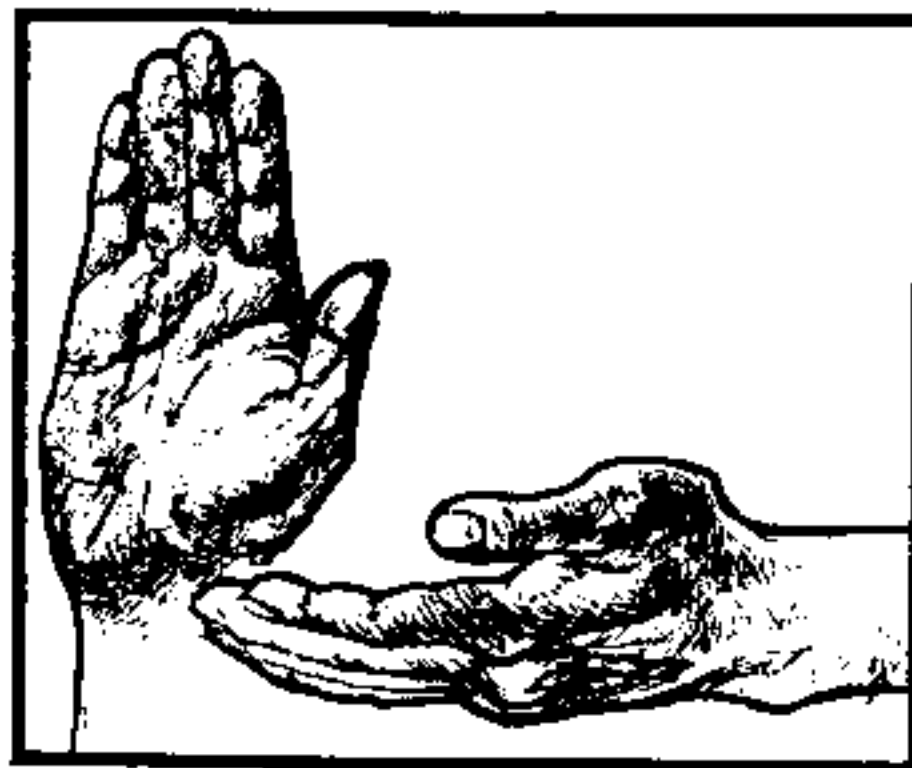
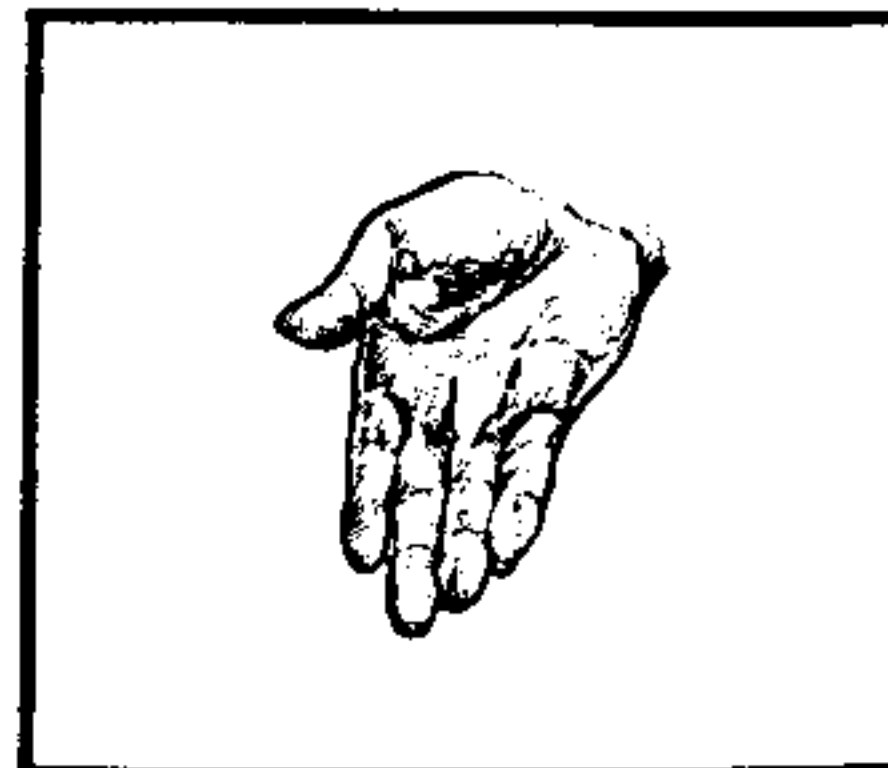


124. Dharmachakra-mudra.



in the schools of Buddhism,³⁶ at least six basic ones should be described. The posture of concentration in yogic meditation is shown by the *Dhyana-mudra* in which the hands lie overlapping, palms upwards on the lap. When after arduous meditation Gautama attained 'enlightenment', he called the earth to witness his good achievement by touching the earth with the fingertips of his right hand, usually shown hanging over his right knee; this is the *Bhumisparsha-mudra*. Next, the Buddha taught the Dharma, and this 'turning the Wheel of the Law' in the *Dharmachakra-mudra* is shown by the fingers imitating the motion of a wheel, the hands being raised to the breast and the forefinger and thumb making a circle. The latter gesture is also used in the upraised hand of the *Vitarka-mudra* expressing exposition of doctrine and reasoning; it can also include appeasement, as when the Buddha quietened a maddened elephant. Protection and assurance to his hearers find expression in the raised right hand of the *Abhaya-mudra*; the left hand is usually held with palm upward, but sometimes both hands are raised in Thailand. Vow-fulfilling and the compassionate granting of favours are shown by the *Vara-mudra* with the hand held down, palm outwards. These mudras belong to the Hindu tradition originally but they have become pan-Asian features of the Buddha-image.

All that has been said points overwhelmingly to the Indian basis of Buddhist iconography. The Western elements in the formation of Gandhara art were important as additional factors in stimulating the development and shaping the widely-dispersed form of the Buddha-image. This is evident in the interplay of the Gandhara with other Indian styles, especially that which flourished in Mathura during the same period under the Kushan empire in northern India.³⁷ The seated Buddha from Mathura,

125. *Vitarka-mudra*.126. *Abhaya-mudra*.127. *Vara-mudra*.



128. Seated Buddha, Mathura style.



129. Mathura-style standing Buddha.

second century AD, is a much more natively Indian figure, less 'beautiful' than the Gandhara but more vigorous and expressive of the spiritual and physical power of the yogi. His strongly-built body expresses the confidence and victory of the Buddha, recalling the early Jain images from the Mathura area. Distinctive features are the wheel-marks of the Buddha on both the soles of the feet and the head raised in the *abhaya-mudra*; the head is crowned with an ushnisha like a tiered snail-shell; and the body is clothed only in a thin dhoti. The countenance is more ruddy and friendly than the stylized calm Gandhara face, and above all the Buddha is a strong and active hero - 'abounding with the energy of the "Awakened One" (Buddha), read to preach to a world in need of redemption'.³⁸ Here then is the core of genuinely Indian spirituality underlying the early Buddha image. Later Mathura sculptures gain in elegance and nobility, doubtless due to the influence of Gandhara. The standing Buddha, from fourth to fifth century, wears a long robe with symmetrical folds; but the Mathura style has transformed this into a thin, almost 'see-through' garment, the *sanghati* of the monk, with its rippling folds displaying the contours of the perfect body of the Lord Buddha like a 'second skin'.³⁹

In this period, the fourth to seventh centuries, the classic Gupta style combined these elements of the Indian tradition in images graced by aristocratic refinement and harmony. One of the most famous and influential of these was the seated Buddha from fifth-century Sarnath, at the 'Deer Park' where the Buddha had preached his first sermon. This theme is depicted iconographically in the hand-mudra; but interestingly the aniconic wheel of the Dharma is also shown (on the socle below the image, where men are worshipping the symbol). The Buddha is seated on a lotus-mat on his royal throne, with an ornate nimbus behind him and honoured by celestial beings above the flanking leogryphs. The yogic position gives a triangular form to the composition and the smooth slender figure conveys a typical inward spirituality:

The finest Buddha statues of the classical Gupta period, despite their delicate radiant beauty, soft lines and graceful majesty, seem to be withdrawn from the phenomenal world: they appear cool and inaccessible; the eyelids are half-closed, suggesting introspection; it is as though the Buddha is not looking at anything in the physical world but experiencing a vision by deep meditation.⁴⁰

The later Gupta images display more of the Indian warmth and outgoing humanity, as in the cave temples of Ajanta and Ellura of western central India. The large seventh-century image in cave ten at Ellura depicts the Buddha seated in the 'European' fashion, suggesting action and mani-

festation rather than detached meditation. It was this grand but also warm Gupta style which Buddhism brought as it spread through southern Asia in these centuries, (whereas the Gandhara style influenced northern and east Asian Buddhism). The vitality of the classic styles was continued in new forms in these lands.

As in Hinduism, the medieval period brought close standardization of Buddhist images; the use of the 'pointing frame' ensured the exact proportions as enjoined in the text of instructions for image-makers. Thus the unit of measurement, the *thalam*, is the span of length of the face, five of these making the height of a seated figure and nine of one standing.⁴¹ In Tibet this *navatala* of the ideal man was seen as the microcosm of the nine-fold division of the world.⁴² Legends were also recounted concerning the alleged origin of these images from the Buddha himself. Ordinary artists were said to have failed to capture his likeness, so the Buddha projected his own image for a picture or, again, had his shadow traced on the ground. One story about King Udayana of Kausambi told of the king's ardent desire for a picture after the Buddha's enlightenment, resulting in a sandalwood image, five feet high, which rose up to welcome the Buddha and was given the task of spreading his teachings.⁴³ Such legends gave legitimation to the portrayal of the Buddha by linking them to an 'authentic' archetype from the time of the historical Buddha with his express permission. At the same time they gave encouragement to popular belief in the miraculous power of such images and of true copies made of them.

Theravada Buddhism and Southern Asia

It is customary to contrast the so-called superstitions and metaphysical elaborations of the Mahayana with the more sober simplicity of the Hinayana school (preferably called the 'Theravada' or teaching of the elders, as representing the older wisdom). 'In the art of the *Hinayana*, in Ceylon, Burma and Siam, there is nothing but an indefinite repetition of the image of the earthly Buddha. . . . Its repetitiveness seems to recall the serene and majestic monotony of the Sutras.'⁴⁴ There is some insight here, but the contrast is a gross over-simplification. The countries of south-east Asia which now solidly follow the way of Theravada Buddhism are actually the inheritors of a much more complex religious mixture. In earlier centuries Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism prevailed for periods and contributed to the basic iconography of Buddhism accepted by all. Despite the differing emphases of the two major schools of Buddhism



130. Preaching Buddha. Sarnath.



131. Seated Buddha from Ellura caves.

their common ground should not be forgotten. For instance, the ancient theme of the Buddha and Mucalinda (the serpent giving shelter) is featured in the Mahayanist phase of classic Khmer art in Cambodia, but it recurs in later Theravada Buddhist art also.

The case of Thailand shows the influence of Gupta art in the seventh to ninth centuries, including Mahayana Buddhist influences from Srivijaya to the south and later from Cambodia, followed by Theravada Buddhism in the northern kingdom of Sukhothai in the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries. In the latter period emerged the classic 'Siamese' type of Buddha renowned for its elegant suppleness, balance and simplicity. The oval face and austere meditation accord well with the Theravada emphasis. The *Bhumisparsha* mudra is the one most frequently shown in Thai images. The lotus-bud and flame from the *ushnisha* emphasize the supreme wisdom attained at the Buddha's earthly enlightenment.



134. 'Walking Buddha'. Thailand.



132. Mucalinda, Naga serpent-king sheltering Buddha. Cambodia.

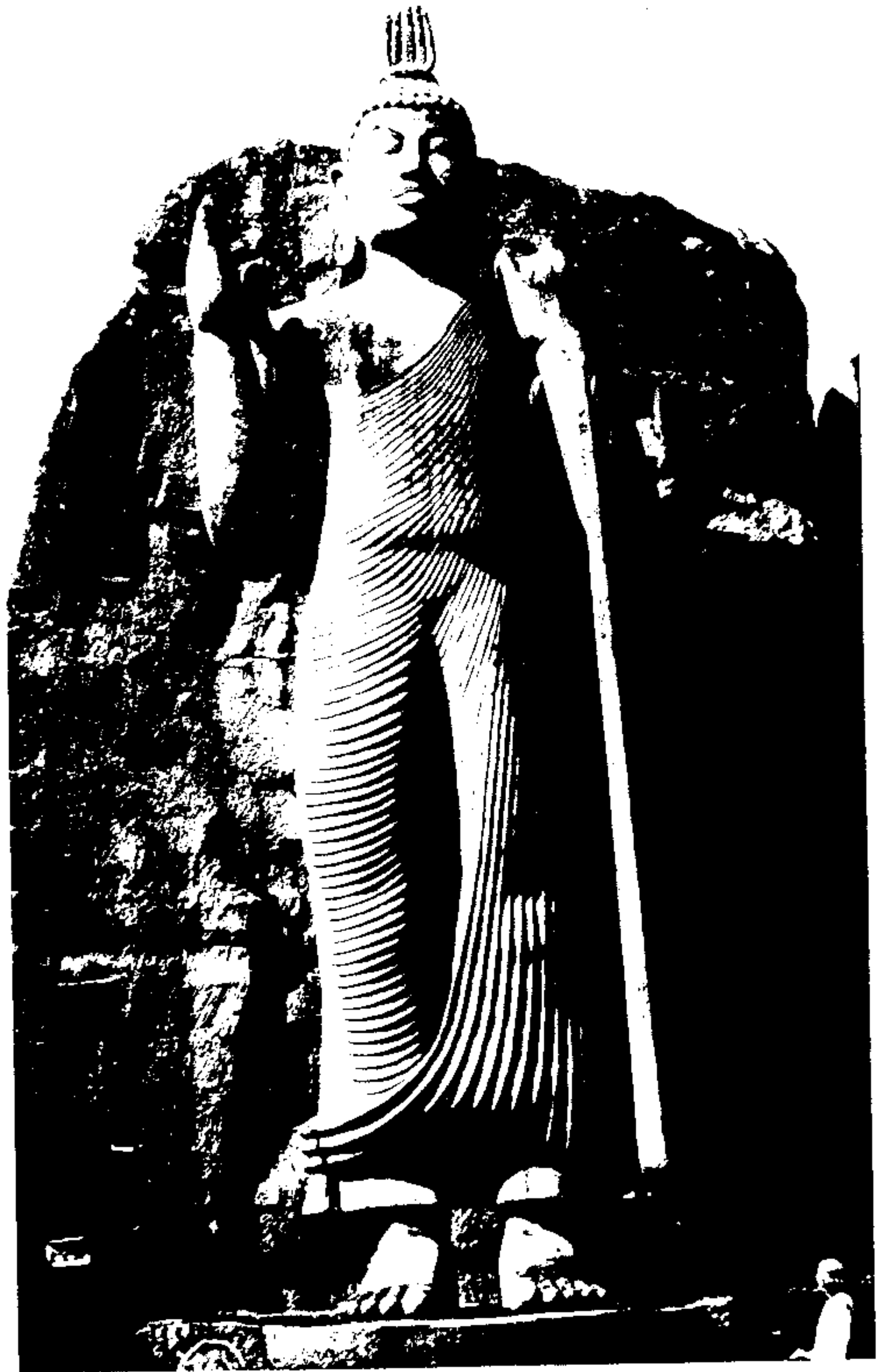


133. Buddha meditating at the Great Awakening. Thailand.

Yet this period saw other Thai images, some of them colossal, of the Buddha standing or reclining; such colossal images were a long-established Buddhist form, (for instance at Bamiyan in Afghanistan, fourth to fifth century) expressing the idea that in the golden age of the Buddha things were bigger and better. A unique development in Thai iconography was the beautiful 'Walking Buddha' of the fourteenth-century Sukthothai style. Here the Buddha is shown descending from heaven to perform his superhuman work as a missionary teacher of the Dharma, expressed by his mysterious gliding pace. The exaggerated proportions of the wide shoulder and long arm derive from the attempt to depict realistically such marks recorded in the texts as 'arms like the trunk of a young elephant'; these physical attributes may represent an attempt to relate man to the world of nature.⁴⁵

In addition to cult images which portray some incident in the life and mission of the historical Buddha, there was much scope for narrative pictures in the Jataka stories, said to be told by the Buddha himself about his former lives. These may go back to pre-Buddhist Indian legends and are depicted in some of the earliest Buddhist reliefs where the Buddha is still in aniconic form. Out of the large collection of five hundred and forty-seven Jataka tales about the Buddha's succession of lives in animal, human and semi-divine forms, ten acquired a special place as illustrations of moral virtues in popular teaching; thus Sama the devoted son shows loving kindness, Mahosada the clever sage, wisdom and Prince Vessantara, charity. The ever-popular series has been the subject of much Buddhist art. An early nineteenth-century monastery, Wat Suwannaram, west of Bangkok features the ten stories as murals on the lower level of its interior, in addition to other large murals depicting the Buddha's enlightenment and the heavens and hells of Buddhist cosmology.⁴⁶

Ceylon (Sri Lanka) came to be regarded as the fountainhead of Theravada Buddhism because of its early conversion to Buddhism (by Mahinda, son of King Ashoka, in the third century BC) and by its preservation of the Pali scriptures and Theravada teaching. Hence Thailand in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries AD looked eagerly to Sinhalese Buddhism for the true canons of texts and images by which to renew and purify its own practice of Buddhism. Despite periodic conflict with Tamil Hinduism, Buddhism (chiefly of the Theravada school) was maintained over the centuries by an alliance of *sangha* and kingship in a Buddhist state.⁴⁷ Impressive monuments survive from the early centuries, such as the enormous stupas (called *dagobas* or relic-chambers) and Buddha images from the third century AD onwards. The Gupta style contributed monumentality and beauty without conventional or superficial prettiness, as

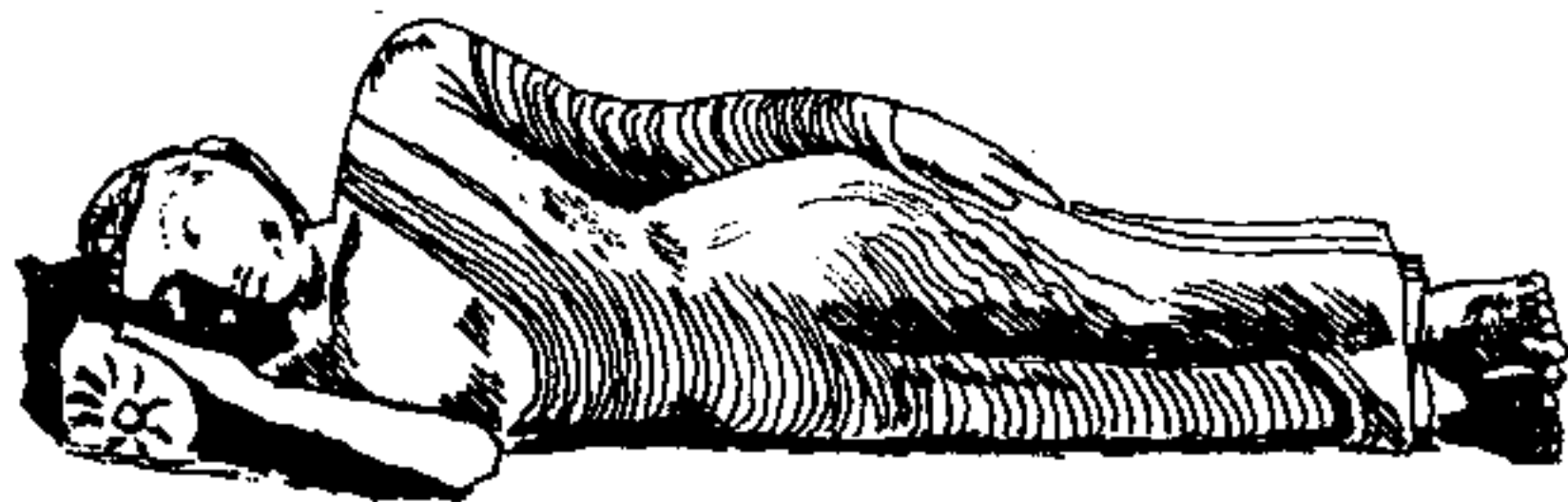


135. Colossal rock hewn standing Buddha
Sri Lanka

seen in the colossal forty-six-foot Aukana Buddha (c. eleventh century) in central Ceylon. This rock-hewn figure raises the right hand in majestic compassion and with the left clasps a thin robe of many graceful folds; the Buddha's small curls are surmounted by a five-pronged flame. A more refined and distinctly Sinhalese style is seen in the magnificent twelfth-century complex of Gal Vihara in the medieval capital at Polonnaruva. Three colossal statues depict the three main bodily postures of the Buddha – seated in meditation, standing and reclining at his parinirvana. Although now exposed to the elements these images are still in worship and their size in no way detracts from the refined simplicity of the Buddha in Theravada teaching.⁴⁸

If, however, we turn to the popular practice of Sinhalese Buddhism, both traditional and modern, it is not confined to the adoration of the supreme Buddha figure. Even if he transcended the gods and cut across their authority to achieve salvation, the gods continued at other levels of religion. They were featured as guardians at the entrances to Buddhist stupas in antiquity and appear likewise in later ages; at an entrance to the round Buddhist relic-house (*Wat-a-dage*) at Polonnaruva stands a Naga-king in his splendour holding his offerings of rice and flowers with two fat gnomes at his feet. Modern studies of Buddhism in Ceylon, Burma and

137. Stone sculpture of Naga-king guardian, Sri Lanka.



136. Rock-hewn reclining Buddha in his parinirvana, Sri Lanka.



Thailand have been seeking to analyse the complexities of this situation in terms of such categories as the 'Little Tradition' (local folk religion) with some illumination.⁴⁹ Yet the worshipper himself may not be aware of any incongruity and he may regard the various levels of worship as appropriate within the traditional Buddhist framework.

This is made possible by the established Buddhist cosmology with gods ruling the various heavens and a hierarchy modelled on the structure of authority in the feudal system and more modern administrative officers.⁵⁰ Thus in the Pali Canon the ruler of the second lowest heaven is Shakra (formerly the Vedic Indra) and he may appear along with Maha Brahma in representation of scenes from the life of the Buddha. The lowest heaven is ruled by the four great 'world guardians', usually depicted as young kings. These six gods are frequently portrayed together at the entrance to image-houses. Below them at the earthly level where human needs can be met are the four guardian deities, mostly of Hindu origin but now linked to Ceylon. Saman was originally Yama and after coming to Ceylon in antiquity became identified as the god of Adam's Peak, the site of the Buddha's footprint; consequently he may be accepted as next to the Buddha and depicted in local temples, as a white figure on a white elephant.⁵¹ The great god Vishnu is accepted generally as a bodhisattva, a Buddha-to-be. The warlike Shaivite god Karttikeya was renamed Katagarama from his famous shrine in the south-east corner of Ceylon and is now the most important god of Ceylon whose festivals draw devotion from Buddhists as well as Tamil Hindus and others.⁵² There are many other local gods, now largely subordinated to the authority of Katagarama. In popular religion there are presiding deities of planets and hosts of demons (*yakka*), both evil and benevolent, who are depicted in the imaginative and often awesome Sinhala masks for traditional rituals and folk plays.⁵³

These gods are worshipped in their shrines (*devale*) and the ritual offered there (*deva pujava*) parallels the *Buddha pujava* in the temple.⁵⁴ However, it is much less public than the latter; typically the images of the gods are kept behind curtains like Hindu gods whereas the Buddha image in the temple is open for all to view. This coexistence of two religious systems, one based on canonical Buddhist concepts and monastic teachings, the other on Hindu and indigenous traditions, is found in the other Theravada Buddhist countries with parallels in other religions. In the personal practice of Buddhists the two belong together, as complementary and interwoven. In principle they can be separated along the lines stated by a perceptive English observer of seventeenth-century Ceylon: there are two sorts of festivals,

some belonging to their Gods that govern the Earth, and all things referring to this life; and some belonging to the Buddou, whose Province is to take care of the Soul and future well-being of Men.⁵⁵

From the viewpoint of canonical Buddhism belief in the gods is irrelevant, for the gods are impermanent and inferior and praying to them for worldly concerns cannot help towards the true Buddhist goal of salvation which is liberation. Buddhism may be called in Western terms 'a transpolytheistic, non-theistic religion of contemplation'.⁵⁶ Accepting the ambiguity in practice which has evidently been a feature of Buddhism since earliest times, there is no question that the Buddha is ultimately acknowledged to be supreme.

This is shown by the dominant position given to the Buddha-image in the temple; it is elevated to a sacred place as the focus of attention. Although strictly speaking the Buddha is dead and the image can only be a reminder of his doctrine and goodness in affectionate memory, the act of consecration makes it an object of great respect. The climax of consecration is the *netra pinkama*, the 'eye ceremony' in which the craftsman paints in the eyes at an auspicious moment in the closed temple. He does this only after hours of ritual preparation lest he be involved in some evil due to the dangerous gaze:

Moreover, the craftsman does not dare to look the statue in the face, but keeps his back to it and paints sideways or over his shoulder while looking into a mirror, which catches the gaze of the image he is bringing to life.⁵⁷

After this the image is treated as an object of devotion, like a king or an honoured monk, as in the traditional anointing or bathing of the Buddha-image which is still performed weekly at the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy. The worshipper at the temple makes offerings before the image. Many homes have Buddha-images and shrines as a source of blessing; increasingly the picture of the Buddha replaces the picture of his disciple Sivali as the one to whom one prays for blessings on the household.⁵⁸ All this suggests more than the memory of a great sage; worshippers behave as if he were numinously present, 'a powerful and omnibenevolent god, a supreme being who is still in some way present and aware. (Perhaps we might say that cognitively the Buddha is dead but effectively he is alive.)'⁵⁹

In Sinhalese Buddhism as in Hinduism there are no doubt different levels of meaning given to the image, according to the attitude, interest and understanding of the worshipper. In any case the Buddha image has an assured place against any attempt to set it aside as absurd or unnecessary for developed intellects. In this context it is illuminating to

read a recent justification of the use of images by a monk who draws on modern psychological explanations.⁶⁰ Bhikku Punnaji opens his case by appealing to everyday practice, as in the acceptance of statues of heroes and the treasuring of a photo of a loved one. As applied to religion this means the veneration of symbols which express faith in spiritual values – hence the symbol is not to be confused with what it represents. The value of the Buddha-image lies in its making the abstract visually vivid and concrete, as in advertising. (Indeed, the Bhikku suggests that the more Buddha-images to be seen on the road-side, the better the answer to the multitude of symbols in public life which express material values so attractively.) This is all the more essential because behaviour is so largely determined by the unconscious and only a thorough ‘reconditioning’ can ensure a change for the good towards spiritual values. Hence the psychological importance, first, of repeating right thoughts and habitual actions. The physical act of raising the arm in salutation or of bowing in homage induces a right attitude to the Buddha’s way; it is still better to offer flowers and chant hymns before his image because the principle of ‘acting as if’ creates a better mood. Secondly there is a need for the right integration of emotion and reason if mental ill-health is to be avoided. Image-worship has a rational foundation but this is part of the power of ‘right imagination’ to guide the strong forces of the emotions. The right emotion is faith (*Saddha*) which is the seed of spiritual growth:

We plant this seed properly in our minds when we see vividly in our imagination the ideal; when we visualize it in concrete form. There is no better way to visualize it in concrete form than to look at the Buddha in person, or in his absence, to look upon the serene face of the Buddha image.⁶¹

Mahayana Buddhism

The Mahayana was responsible for developing not only the image of the Buddha as the focus of temple devotion but also a vastly expanded ‘Buddhist pantheon’. This came to a spectacular flowering in the Buddhist iconography of China, Korea and Japan with further developments in Tibet and Nepal. Hence the term ‘Northern Buddhism’⁶² is sometimes used; but this is permissible only if we remember that the Mahayana originated in India, both northern and southern, from the first century BC and that it was also influential in south-east Asia, where some of its greatest monuments are found, as at Borodbudhur. It is important to maintain a synoptic view of the forms of Buddhism as an Indian and a pan-Asian phenomenon.⁶³

The Mahayana developed and elaborated features common to all schools. Already in the ancient period there was a belief in a succession of Buddhas who had come to earth in distant ages. The stone roundel reliefs from Bharhut, second century BC, depict these previous Buddhas aniconically, each by means of his distinctive Bodhi tree which worshippers adore and deck with garlands - for instance Kashyapa by the Nyagrodha tree. The earlier number of six or seven such Buddhas grew later to some twenty-four, probably matching the similar succession of twenty-four Tirthankaras of the Jains, with overtones also of the Hindu Avatars.

More significant than these mythical past Buddhas, who are dead and gone, is the Future Buddha who is alive and waiting for the era when he is to preach the true Dharma on earth. In this sense Maitreya ('the friendly one') is called a *bodhisattva* because he has vowed to become a Buddha and is a Buddha-to-be, a figure of messianic hope. He will follow the pattern of his predecessor Shakyamuni who came in the earthly life a young prince before enlightenment and final Buddhahood. These two are recognized as bodhisattvas in Theravada countries. The Gandhara image of a bodhisattva, from the second century AD or later, could well be of Maitreya. In addition to the moustached version of an Apollo-type face and formal drapes, the figure wears heavy jewellery and a fancy hair-style; this represents the rich lay costume of the princely bodhisattva. It may also represent an actual royal personage or noble donor divinized like the later Khmer rulers in south-east Asia.⁶⁴ In any case this contrasts with the image of the Buddha who has cast away such worldly ornaments and has the distinguishing marks of the *urna* and *ushnisha*. The bodhisattvas were probably first depicted at Gandhara as attendants of the Buddha later becoming more individual figures with their own marks.

The crucial development came through the Mahayana doctrine of transcendent bodhisattvas as beings who not only strive for Buddhahood (as earthly disciples might do) but, having attained infinite wisdom in their perfected essence, remain available to help others. Their compassion, self-sacrifice and redeeming grace help struggling mankind towards salvation and ultimate Buddhahood. Here lies the basic difference between Theravada, which may be called 'the Buddhism of liberation through self-effort', merit being earned by monk and layman in their own strivings, and Mahayana with its liberation by 'Other-Power', merit being transferable by the bodhisattvas to others.⁶⁵ This opened up the possibility of a whole array of bodhisattvas as heavenly intermediaries



138. Previous Buddha, Kashyapa, venerated in aniconic form of the bodhi tree.



139. Standing bodhisattva (Maitreya?).

who, unlike Buddhas, are able to hear and answer prayers and work benevolently for the good of the world. Iconographically they may first have followed the triad-model where the Buddha instead of being flanked by Hindu deities such as Brahma and Indra, had now his chief attendants in Maitreya and Avalokiteshvara. Out of this developed a whole 'hierarchy of sacred figures' with different levels of spirituality, depicted in a corresponding 'hierarchy of styles'.⁶⁶

These developments are all to be seen in the single figure of Avalokiteshvara whose very name is the epitome of the bodhisattva: the lord who looks down mercifully on the world's suffering (or alternatively, lord of resplendent brilliance). In the late Gupta art of the seventh century he appears in a grand wall painting in cave one at Ajanta. With princely head-dress, perfect ovoid face and supple animated body he gathers up many of the themes of the Hindu tradition - the poise of the dancer, the gestures of the hands, the elegant ideal beauty, the magnetic power of the cult-image.⁶⁷ But he also transcends the gods' world of splendour in his compassionate gaze. He holds a blue lotus, from which attribute comes his other name Padmapani, 'the one holding the lotus'. In the same period he is shown along with Maitreya as a majestic door-guardian for a colossal Buddha in the sanctuary of cave two at Ellura.

Meanwhile the princely aspects came to the fore in south-east Asia as Avalokiteshvara was brought on the wave of Hindu and Buddhist advance. The Gupta and Pala styles appear in the splendid, if damaged, image from eighth-century Thailand which received Mahayana Buddhism from the southern kingdom of Srivijaya. Most impressively he was



140. (*far left*) Avalokiteshvara-Padmapani from large cave wall painting at Ajanta.

141. (*left*) Avalokiteshvara from Thailand.

identified as Lokeshvara ('Lord of the World') with the later Khmer rulers who saw themselves as 'Buddharajas'. The climax of this was the Bayon at Angkor Thom where four colossal masks of Lokeshvara gaze imperturbably over the four directions from each tower; the face is that of King Jayavarman VII of the early thirteenth century. Characteristic here is the smile which has often been a puzzle to Europeans. It probably originated in the Hindu tradition where the smile signified spiritual release, and the sense of inward ecstatic bliss here is conveyed in a mysteriously ineffable 'sublime smile'.⁶⁸ This is seen in the small sandstone head of Lokeshvara in the Bayon style. Also important here is the small meditating figure of Amitabha Buddha in front of the raised coiffure; this is usually a means of identifying Avalokiteshvara who as a bodhisattva manifests this particular Buddha on whom he attends. (As 'Buddha of Boundless Light' Amitabha is said to have fathered him spiritually when a white ray of light came from his right eye in a moment of earnest meditation.)

A wide range of activities and postures became associated with Avalokiteshvara as the worker of miracles who could take many forms for his merciful works. Chinese images drew on the Hindu tradition of gods with many arms and faces to express readiness of Kuan Yin to see all and show his compassion; the form with four faces and twelve pairs of arms became very popular. More complex still was the eleven-headed Kuan Yin as seen in the eighth-century T'ang image. The number of heads could be interpreted in China and Tibet as expressing different levels and aspects of the bodhisattva (who was said to have split up his



142. (right) Lokeshvara from Cambodia.



143. (far right) Kuan Yin with eleven heads. China.



146. (above) Life-size standing image of Kannon from Heian Japan.

own head to multiply ways of salvation for man); but this probably originated as local or minor deities which were incorporated into a more powerful figure.⁶⁹ A further development of this was the 'thousand arms' by which he was able to save all mankind and a thousand worlds and this is literally depicted in the central image of Kannon and the serried ranks of standing Kannon in the thirteenth-century Japanese temple of Sangyusangendo, Kyoto. In the Chinese bronze image made by Tibetans in the eighteenth century we see the thousand hands radiating with an eye in each palm, except for the original central pair of hands together in the *namaskara* mudra of worship. Nine heads have bodhisattva crowns, the tenth is crowned with skulls and Amitabha crowns the topmost (see Frontispiece). At the same time the majestic princely tradition went on, as in the strong serene standing figure of Kannon from ninth-century Japan, or the twelfth-century Kuan Yin from Sung China seen in the Indian posture of 'royal ease' and lavishly ornamented.

The compassionate nature of the bodhisattva led to certain feminine characteristics being emphasized in China, with the result that Kuan Yin has sometimes been labelled 'the Chinese goddess of mercy'; this is erroneous for bodhisattvas transcend distinctions of sex. Avakitesvara could assume the form of a woman or a girl as a temporary expedient in his works of mercy; but even some of the 'feminine' pictures may show 'him' with a moustache.⁷⁰ Since he was capable of granting human wishes his help was sought by women seeking to bear children and this cult of the 'bringer of children' led later to a popular form



144. (right) Kuan Yin in posture of 'royal ease'.



145. (far right) Kuan Yin as 'giver of children'.

Chinese devotion on the periphery of Buddhism. The nineteenth-century white porcelain figure shows Kuan Yin as a woman clad in white (an early tradition associated with white light and perhaps also the White Tara who emerged as a tear from the eye of Kuan Yin to become his spiritual consort). This popular statuette is for homes, not temples of Kuan-yin; and the child which the woman carries in her arms is not her (his) own. Popular syncretism has here drawn on the great tradition of the bodhisattva.

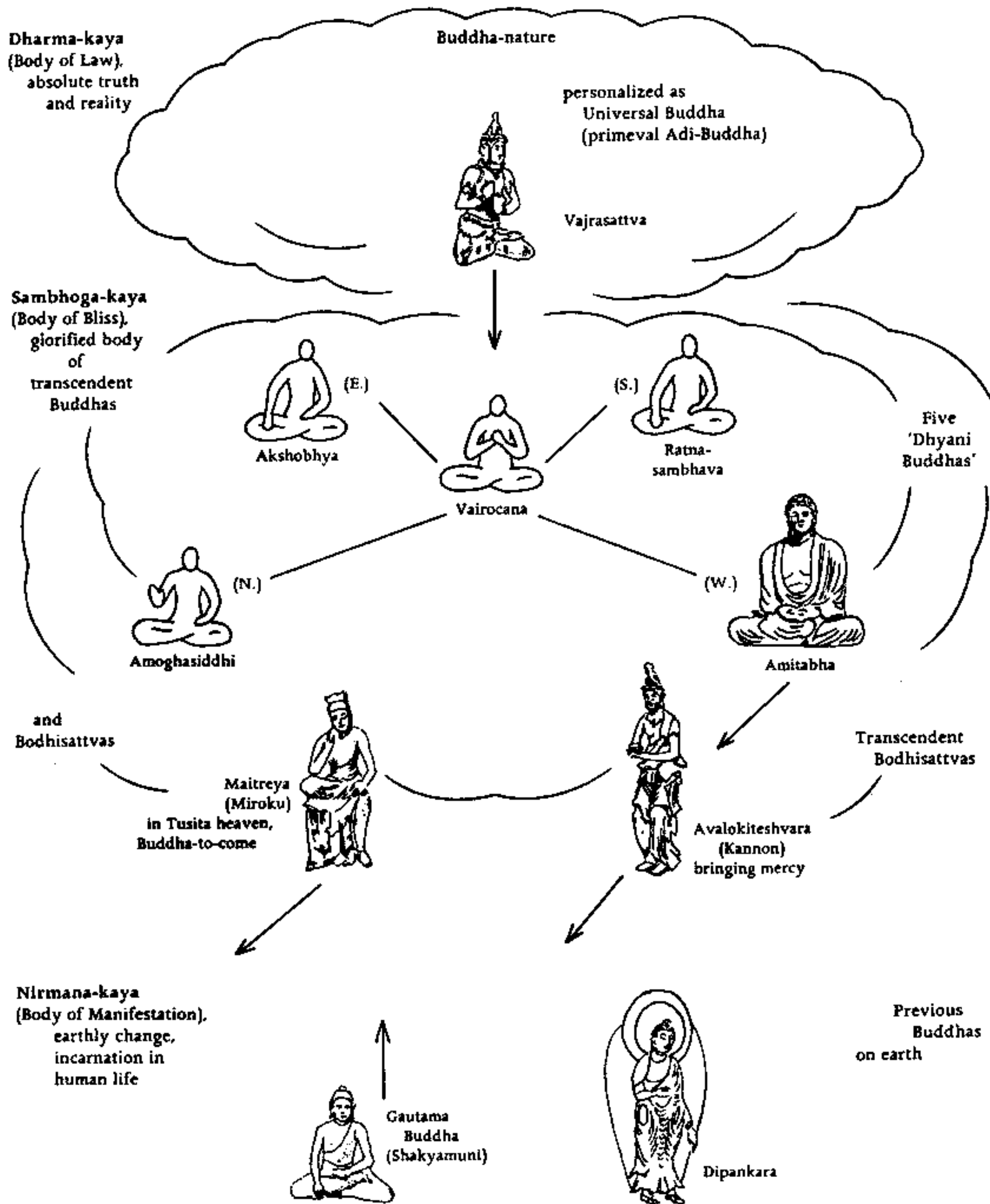
However much Buddhist iconography may have owed in detail to such popular cults or even to the vision of artists, these were channelled by a primary source of inspiration – the Mahayana scriptures which were written from the first century BC onwards. The Sanskrit originals were eagerly translated into Chinese as Buddhism was brought into China via central Asia and their teachings continued to be illustrated in art through the following centuries in this area. For instance, in the rich provincial art of Tun-huang is a tenth-century painting of the miracles of Avalokiteshvara delivering his devotees in the nick of time from brigands, flames, serpents and other earthly dangers. This is based on the ever-popular twenty-fourth chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* (Saddharma Pundarika) which was written in Sanskrit, first to second century AD. The whole scripture presents Buddhism as a way of salvation open to all through the simpler yet higher way of Mahayana; it glorifies Shakyamuni as the supreme Buddha amid a galaxy of Buddhas, past and present, from all universes. The vivid parables and visions of the *Lotus Sutra* inspired Buddhist iconography in China and Japan.⁷¹ For instance in chapter eleven a heavenly stupa descends containing a previous Buddha Prabhutaratna with whom Shakyamuni converses; this visionary scene was much depicted. Vivid popular material was also in the legendary account of the life of the Buddha in the *Lalita-vistara* and the colourful visions of paradises such as the *Sukhavati*, the 'Pure Land' of Amitabha. Even the more subtle dialogues of the *Prajnaparamita* literature (texts dealing with wisdom as the highest perfection of the bodhisattva) gave rise to illustrations and some images of the female figure of *Prajnaparamita*.⁷² This attractive embodiment of supreme wisdom shares in some of the splendour and kindness of the bodhisattvas yet being female she can hardly be classified as such; she is called symbolically 'the Mother of all Buddhas' and seems to be rather the female counterpart of the supreme cosmic Buddha, embodying wisdom in the form of the traditional Indian Great Mother figure.⁷³ The beautiful Javanese image shows *Prajnaparamita* bejewelled but meditating and teaching on a lotus-throne, with an *urna* marking her forehead with highest wisdom. Special interest is

147. *Prajnaparamita* as Queen Dedes.

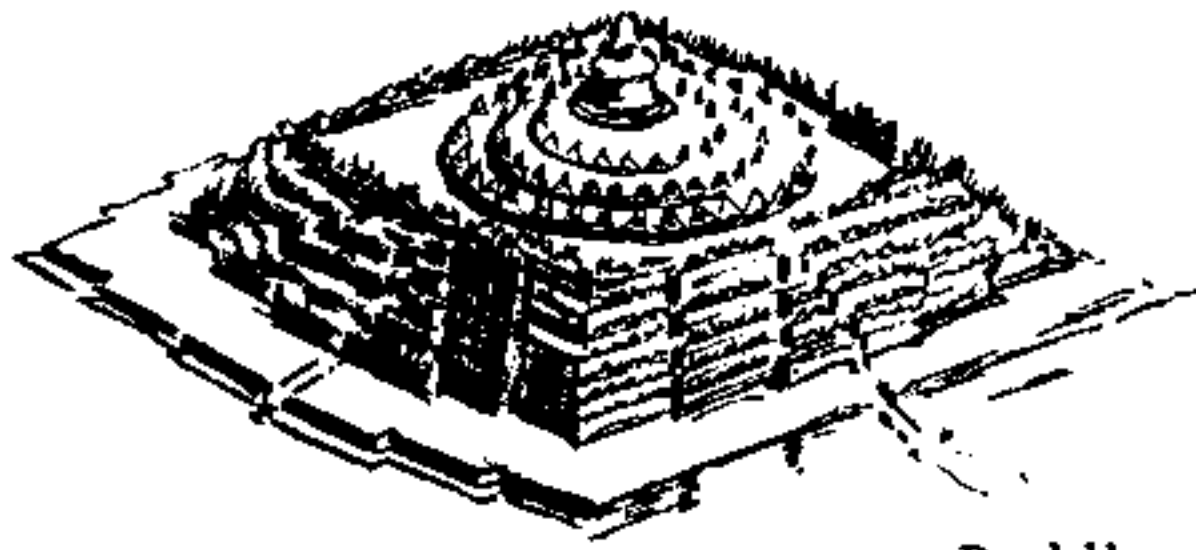
added by the fact that this is also a portrait of Queen Dedes in early thirteenth-century Java who is thus identified with the supreme Buddha - a parallel to the kings of Angkor but here in female form.

With the Mahayana sutras (literally 'guides') as the inspiration of much iconography there was the further need for a comprehensive doctrine to supply a cosmology and metaphysical framework for all these sacred beings. Were the Buddhas earthly or heavenly, human or super-human? Where should the bodhisattvas be placed? The answers were provided by the Mahayana doctrine of the 'three bodies' (*trikaya*) expounded by the fourth-century sage Asanga, if not earlier. According to this every Buddha has three bodies, the highest level being the absolute which unites and embraces all Buddhas. Even the myriads of Buddhas can thus be seen as manifestations of the one supreme Buddha; consequently the Mahayana Buddhology in its developed form is monistic.⁷⁴

This may be more helpfully, if still inadequately, expressed in the schematic form of a diagram featuring selected examples. The *Dharma-kaya* is the Buddha-nature as the absolute body of truth, reality and 'natural law' conditioning all things; it is indescribable, being the absolute essence and impersonal. Yet it can be personalized, in a sense, in the universal or primordial (adi-) Buddha, venerated especially in the esoteric Buddhism of the Vajrayana as Vajrasattva ('diamond natured') or Vairocana (the 'sun-like' Buddha). Beneath this body is the *Sambhoga-kaya*, the 'body of bliss' or glorious superhuman body which can be perceived only by visionary powers, by the spiritual eye of the bodhisattva. Here are the transcendent Buddhas, lords of the paradises which many believers strive to attain; they teach their bodhisattvas and project the earthly Buddhas for mankind's deliverance. Over twenty transcendent Buddhas might be enumerated, but a conventional selection gives five so-called Dhyani (meditation) Buddhas orientated to the basic directions. At the centre is Vairocana, represented by the colour white; Amoghasiddhi (green) is at the north; Akshobhya (blue) east; Ratnasambhava (yellow) south; and Amitabha (red) west. The last is by far the most popular and venerated, but mudras, attributes, seasons and cosmic elements are linked to each.⁷⁵ The *Nirmanakaya* is the 'body of manifestation' where the Buddha-nature is transformed and revealed so as to be accessible at the earthly level. This is where the previous Buddhas, such as Dipankara in a remote era, came after preparing through many lives, and likewise the last Buddha, Shakyamuni in the earthly life of Siddhartha Gautama. Maitreya is still in the Tushita heaven waiting to come. Meanwhile the bodhisattvas such as Avalokiteshvara are available to bring their compassion and merit on earth. Although the earthly



148. The Mahayana cosmos
according to the Trikaya doctrine (the 'three bodies' of Buddha)
pictured in selective and schematic form.



149. Borobudhur, monument in central Java seen from the air.

Buddhas are mortal and are extinguished from this life after their work is done, this is the realm where their teaching lives on, available to all men in explicit words and deeds.

The importance of the *trikaya* doctrine is that it provides a comprehensive framework which relates man at the earthly level to the Buddhas at the very highest level. The various intermediaries and sacred beings, from the aloof to the active, are arranged in a meaningful hierarchy and the proliferating iconography of the Mahayana is contained in an orderly and inter-related system. This did not remain at the merely theoretical stage but was embodied in one of the most stupendous monuments of Buddhism at Borobudhur in central Java. Built under the Shailendra dynasty, c. AD 800, it uses some basic symbolism of the religions of India – a great Buddhist stupa for circumambulation, a microcosm of Mount Meru, and the mandala pattern of the heavenly circle in the earthly square. The four square terraces feature the four Dhyani Buddhas regularly in niches on the sides appropriate to their directions, with the central Vairocana on the surmounting terrace. Then the three circular terraces at the top express the austere enlightenment of meditating Buddhas enclosed in stone-latticed stupas, with a massive unadorned stupa providing the final crown and central axis. All this marks an ascending path from the world of appearances to the world of enlightenment, from the world of earthly desires at the basement level to the final release of nirvana. The Mahayana *trikaya* doctrine is followed in this progression from the first gallery where the life of the Buddha is illustrated by reliefs based on the Lalita-vistara, then to the pilgrimage of Sudhana to encounter the bodhisattvas, depicted in the following galleries, leading to the austere spirituality of the Absolute at the circular summit.

For this reason Borobudhur has rightly been called a psychophysical pilgrim's path; the terraces lead the pilgrim through the different cosmic spheres, levels of apprehension, and stages of redemption. It is an initiation course into the Buddhist faith, executed in stone.⁷⁶

The upward Buddhist path thus returns after the rich and varied iconography to contemplation of the bare aniconic symbol.

Summary

Both Jainism and Buddhism as heterodox movements originating in ancient India carried over the symbolism of the Hindu tradition including the gods who were given a subordinate position to Mahavira or Gautama. Devotion to the Buddha, the veneration of the stupa and the cult of relics led to the development of the Buddha-image in the Gandhara and Mathura styles. This Indian basis remained, but Buddhism became a pan-Asian religion open to diverse influences, especially through the Mahayana school as it developed an enlarged hierarchy of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Nevertheless iconic and aniconic forms have continued side by side because ultimately the image is only a means to understanding and experience, a symbol pointing beyond itself:

But each Buddhist work is in one way or another symbolic. It has a meaning that transcends its appearance and immediate purpose. It stands for the Absolute, or the Nought (or Void) - that for which all images are only provisional signs.⁷⁷