



The Buddha Images: Re-examining Aniconism in Buddhist Art

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Abstract

Image of Śākyamuni Buddha in Buddhist art from the early days to the Pāla periods, is shown in two ways, one is in a symbolic and other in iconic form. This study is about the transformation of Buddha image from symbolic to iconic form which is based on the writings of the Buddhist scholars archaeological remains, sculptures and other facts. At the beginning of Buddhism after the Mahāparinirvāṇa of Śākyamuni Buddha in buddhist art tradition the Buddha was not shown as a person but used symbols like the stūpa, bodhi tree, empty throne, footprints and dharmacakra instead but some modern scholars, like S. L. Huntington doubted if these symbols really mean the Buddha. So this study looks again at what these old symbols mean and how Buddha images started to appear during the different time period. This research also discusses about how Buddha was depicted in images and have changed over time during the Kuṣāṇa, Gupta and Pāla periods. This study shows that in the Buddhist art the images related with the Buddha changed slowly because of philosophical and devotional reasons. This helps us understand visual culture and its implication on creating Buddha images developed in South Asia.

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Introduction

Buddhist art is an important part of Asian culture and religion. From stūpas and sculptures to manuscript paintings and metal statues Buddhist art has helped keep the teachings of Śākyamuni Buddha alive. Buddhist art has developed in ways in different places so it looks different in each region. The image of the Buddha is always at the center of Buddhist visual culture.

Śākyamuni Buddha, also known as Siddhārtha Gautama is revered as a spiritual teacher by millions of people around the world. As we study about the Buddhist art, and in the views of scholar there are two ways Śākyamuni Buddha is shown as in a symbolic form and afterwards as an iconic form. We see the Buddha as a representation and a symbols like the Bodhi tree, wheel, empty throne, footprints or stūpa that is aniconic representation. Buddhist monuments like Sāñchī and Bharhut are examples of this symbolic way of showing the Buddha.

Iconic symbols are easily recognizable and include representations of the Buddha's face, body, and other physical attributes. Aniconic symbols, on the other hand, are more abstract and less directly representational, and include elements such as the lotus flower and the dharma wheel. These symbols and gestures are used to convey spiritual teachings and to represent the Buddha's teachings and virtues. By examining the different types of symbols and gestures used in the depiction of Śākyamuni Buddha, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which these elements contribute to the representation of the Buddha and the meaning they convey.

Nowadays there are different varieties of arts related with Buddhism right from wooden to metal and from paper to canvas and there is no doubt that Buddhist art has helped flourish the teachings of Śākyamuni Buddha around the world. Buddhist art shows distinctive forms and characteristics reflecting the diverse culture and tradition of the countries in which it has spread. We can get information about Buddhist art and architecture from the Buddhist cannons both Pali and Sanskrit and with archeological remains. We can find the history of Buddhist art from the time of Śākyamuni Buddha but he was not shown in human form during the first few centuries of Buddhism. Scholars like David Snellgrove believes that it could be the reason that the Buddha had said time and again about the "nothingness".

In one instance, Buddha told his disciple Upasiva that, just as a flame is extinguished by the force of wind and is no longer considered to exist, a sage who has reached enlightenment is also released from their physical identity and is no longer considered to exist in the same way. It is not possible to measure or describe someone who has reached this state, as all elements of their being have been transcended. Therefore, early sculptures of Buddha often depicted an empty space, symbolizing this concept of "nothingness" (Snellgrove 23).

The serpent deities (naga, nagini) and tree spirits (yaksa, yaksini) can be seen in the second century BC. While the Buddha himself was still portrayed by impersonal symbols, we may also discover iconic representations of other beings such as mankind, gods, demigods, and genii. Therefore, the refusal to depict the Buddha in human form is not just the result of a universally recognized principle of aniconism or a law prohibiting the creation of images; rather, it has a philosophically radical justification regarding

the idea that the Buddha's true Nirvana essence is incomprehensible in visual form and human shape (Snellgrove 24). Although there are some stories of making images of Buddha when he was alive.

We can discover one of the stories in the *Divyavadāna*. It is said that Bimbisara, the ruler of Magadha, wanted a picture of the Buddha painted on fabric. The artist made an effort but failed. Then, after casting his shadow over it, the Buddha gave the order for the main principles of the faith to be written on it and for the outlines to be filled in with color (Grunwedel 68). In another story, Buddha spent some time in the Heaven of the thirty-three gods after achieving enlightenment, where he preached his teachings to his mother who had been reborn there. King Udayana of Vatsa, who greatly revered the Buddha, was concerned that he might not return and requested a picture of him. At the request of the king, the disciple Maudgalyana sent an artist to heaven using magic to memorize the Buddha's appearance and create a sandalwood statue of him that was five feet tall. When the Buddha returned, the statue came to life and welcomed him. The Buddha then gave statue the task of spreading his teachings to future generations (Seckel 173).

Scholars have been debating about what these old symbols mean. Scholars like Ananda Coomaraswamy, Alfred Foucher and other think that the Buddha was not shown as a person in Buddhist art because that was the tradition. Later scholars, like S. L. Huntington said that maybe these symbols do not mean the Buddha himself but rather special places, events and practices that are important in Buddhism. This debate has changed how we understand visual culture.

How Buddha images developed is still a question in the history of Buddhist art. Early Buddhist art has long been interpreted through the theory of aniconism, which holds that the Buddha was not represented in human form during the early centuries of Buddhism. However, later scholars, especially Susan L. Huntington, have challenged this assumption by questioning the interpretation of symbolic motifs and proposing alternative readings based on archaeological and contextual evidence. This scholarly disagreement creates a need to reassess the historical development of Buddha imagery. This paper is trying to look at the different perspective of scholars about Buddha's images. The objective of this paper is to explore how the Buddha was depicted in Buddhist art as well as to examine scholarly interpretations concerning the absence of anthropomorphic Buddha images in Buddhist art.

The question of whether early Buddhism permitted anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha has remained one of the most debated issues in Buddhist art history. Earlier scholarship generally supported the theory of Buddhist aniconism, while later scholars questioned this interpretation and proposed alternative readings of early Buddhist visual culture. The present study reviews these scholarly positions to understand the development of the debate and to identify the need for comparative analysis.

One of the earliest and most influential scholars of Buddhist art, Alfred Foucher, argued that early Buddhist art avoided representing the Buddha in human form. In his studies of Gandhāran art, Foucher proposed that the earliest Buddhist communities employed symbols such as the Bodhi tree, empty throne, footprints, and Dharmacakra as substitutes for the Buddha. According to him, anthropomorphic representations emerged later, particularly in Gandhāra under Hellenistic influence. His interpretation established a chronological distinction between symbolic and iconic phases of Buddhist art and strongly

influenced subsequent scholarship.

Along with the Foucher, Ananda Coomaraswamy further developed the theory of aniconism. Coomaraswamy interpreted symbolic motifs found in early Buddhist monuments as expressions of religious reverence toward the Buddha. He argued that the Buddha, having attained transcendence after enlightenment and Mahāparinirvāṇa, was considered beyond ordinary human depiction. Consequently, symbols became meaningful visual devices that indicated the Buddha's spiritual presence while avoiding physical representation. His writings helped popularize the notion that early Buddhist art consciously rejected anthropomorphic imagery.

Other scholars such as Benjamin Rowland and several twentieth-century historians largely accepted this framework and applied it to monuments such as Sāñchī Stūpa and Bharhut Stūpa. Narrative reliefs depicting empty thrones, Bodhi trees, and stūpas were interpreted as visual substitutions for the Buddha. This interpretation became dominant within Buddhist art historical studies and shaped the broader understanding of the origin and evolution of Buddha images.

However, later scholarship began questioning the assumptions underlying the aniconic theory. A major turning point emerged through the work of Susan L. Huntington, whose influential article *Early Buddhist Art and the Theory of Aniconism* critically reassessed traditional interpretations. Huntington argued that the theory of aniconism rests on weak textual and archaeological foundations. She noted that early Buddhist literature does not provide clear evidence prohibiting anthropomorphic images of the Buddha. Furthermore, she questioned the automatic interpretation of symbolic motifs as substitutes for an absent Buddha.

Huntington proposed that many reliefs traditionally interpreted as aniconic scenes may instead represent sacred places, pilgrimage centers, relic shrines, and acts of worship. According to her analysis, symbols such as the Bodhi tree, stūpa, or empty throne possessed independent religious significance and need not always signify the Buddha's absence. Her reinterpretation shifted scholarly attention from icon prohibition to broader issues of ritual practice, sacred geography, and devotional culture.

Despite extensive scholarship, significant disagreement remains regarding the interpretation of early Buddhist imagery. Earlier scholars emphasized symbolic substitution and religious restraint, whereas later scholars highlighted contextual interpretation and questioned the assumption of deliberate image avoidance. Most studies either support the traditional theory or critique it independently, but comparatively few works systematically analyze both positions together.

This study tries to find the gap by comparatively examining the view of different scholars regarding the images of Buddha and how they developed over time. Through critical analysis of both scholarly traditions, the study aims to contribute to a more balanced understanding of early Buddhist visual culture and the historical development regarding the image of Buddha.

This study is based on the qualitative and comparative research design. It primarily focuses on the previous scholarly writings. It uses books, articles and research studies about art history. The study describes developments in Buddhist art and analyzes the scholars view about iconic and aniconic representation.

Aniconic Representation of the Buddha Images in Early Buddhist Art

“Aniconic form” according to Merriam Webster dictionary (merriam-webster.com) it means without idols or images. Opposed to use of idols or images. When we look back at the making idols of the Buddha, at the beginning he was not shown as idols or images but with the symbolic representation of Buddha (Alfred 5).

Buddha in his final moments, instructed to Ananda to enshrine his relics within a stūpa after his Mahāparinirvāṇa. Following the Buddha’s cremation, his relics were distributed among eight principal claimants, including rulers and tribal communities, who constructed stūpas to preserve and venerate them. Additional stūpas were erected by Drona and the Mauryas of Pippalivana (Bapat 279). Important Buddhist pilgrimage sites such as Lumbini, Bodhi Gaya, Sarnath, and Kushinagar, along with places associated with the Buddha’s life, also became centers for stūpa construction (Vatsayana 39).

Archaeological and historical evidence further confirms the existence of stūpas dedicated to earlier Buddhas and Śākyamuni Buddha. In the third century BCE, Ashoka, the foremost royal patron of Buddhism, expanded the stūpa of the previous Buddha Kanakamuni (Snellgrove 20). He redistributed relics from earlier stūpas to establish numerous additional stūpas across his empire (Seckel 114). After this period the construction of stūpa spread widely across the regions where Buddhism flourished. Developing distinct local forms and artistic traditions. Thus, within early Buddhist aniconic representation, we can see the stūpa emerged as one of the earliest and most important symbols of the Buddha, particularly associated with his Parinirvāṇa.

Aniconic images of Buddha in Sāñchī and Bharhut Stūpa

Before the scholars of Buddhist art argued that early Buddhism avoided anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha during the Mauryan and Śuṅga early Sātavāhana periods. Instead, symbolic motifs such as the stūpa, Bodhi tree, empty throne, footprints, parasol, and Dharmacakra were employed to signify the Buddha’s presence. Scholars including Alfred Foucher and Ananda Coomaraswamy interpreted these motifs as deliberate substitutes for the Buddha, forming the foundation of the theory of Buddhist aniconism. Archaeological remains from Sāñchī Stūpa and Bharhut Stūpa appeared to support this theory, leading scholars to propose that symbolic representation preceded anthropomorphic Buddha images of Mathurā and Gandhāra during the Kuṣāṇa period.

The sculptural programs of Sāñchī and Bharhut, mainly developed during the second century BCE and enlarged during the Śuṅga period, represent important examples of early Buddhist symbolic art (Bapat 284). At first its size was small and it was made of mud and wood, but later during the Shunga, Satavahana period, it was made bigger by placing bricks, and with the stone fences or toranas or gates were placed in four directions (Vatsayana 45). Both stūpas feature elaborate railings and gateways decorated with figures of yakṣas, yakṣīs, nāgas, animals, trees, Jātaka scenes, and sacred objects (Chauley 15). Among these, symbols such as the chaitya tree, umbrella, wheel, and footprints were widely interpreted as indicating the Buddha’s presence (Mukherjee 116).

Traditional scholars regarded these reliefs as belonging to the pre-iconic phase of Buddhist art, dating from

approximately the fifth to the first century BCE. This interpretation holds that while particular instances from the life of the Buddha were depicted through symbols and not body forms, the throne stood for the enlightenment, the wheel stood for the delivery of the first sermon and the stupa stood for Mahaparinirvana (Rowland 6). Ananda Coomaraswamy on the other hand, pointed out that scenes like Siddhartha riding a horse, asceticism and meditation were each conveyed through symbols like the umbrella, the footprint and the tree respectively (Coomaraswamy 294). Such interpretations reinforced an old scholarly view that early Buddhist art was devotional and was based on symbolic depictions of Buddha.

Some modern scholars, such as S. L. Huntington, are not sure whether these symbols actually mean the Buddha. They believe that these symbols may represent places and events connected with Buddhist pilgrimage and worship. For example the dharmacakra may refer to the place where the Buddha taught in Sarnath and the Bodhi tree to the place where the Buddha became enlightened in Bodhi Gaya. This new way of thinking is important because it challenges the assumption that early Buddhists did not want to portray the Buddha as a person. Recent scholarship and new discoveries suggest that the shift from symbolic to representation was more gradual and complex than previously believed.

Dr. Shashi Prabha Asthana (1947–1997) was an Indian archaeologist and art historian who specialized in ancient Indian and Buddhist art. She made significant contributions to the study of early Buddha iconography and Mathurā sculpture. Her research suggested that some of these Buddha images could be dated to as early as around 50 BCE, thus challenging established views about the provenance of anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha. This could mean that human representation could have started earlier than we thought. So better to rethink the aniconic representation of Buddha. Because scholars are still debating what these symbols mean.

Emergence of Iconic Buddha Images

The emergence of the Kuṣāṇa empire, whose early leader was Kujula Kadphises and whose reign reached its peak with that of King Kaniṣka, was significant for the growth and propagation of Buddhism and Buddhist art (Vatsyayan 399). Similar to Ashoka, Kaniṣka was a supporter of Buddhism, which he helped propagate through the construction of stūpas and monasteries. The latter, Huvishka and Vasudeva, were also patrons of Buddhist culture and arts. During the era of Kuṣāṇa rule, specifically around the turn of the first century AD, two schools of Buddhism sculptural art emerged: the Gandhāra style and the Mathurā school of art (Vatsyayan 400).

The Gandhāra style originated in areas like Jalalabad, Bamiyan, Hadda, Swat Valley, and Peshawar, in which the culture of Iran, Greece, and Rome was mixed with that of India. Referred to as Graeco-Buddhist or Indo-Hellenistic art, Gandhāra sculpture was a mixture of Buddhist iconography along with Hellenistic style and is commonly linked to the emergence of the Buddha's anthropomorphic form (Vatsyayan 410). The features of Gandhāra sculptures, generally made from bluish schist rock, included a thick monk's robe, curly hair, simple halos, and sometimes beards (Raimaji and Chandra 79).

At the same time, the Mathurā school developed in northern India as an indigenous artistic tradition rooted in earlier Mauryan, Sāñchī Stūpa, and Bharhut Stūpa traditions. Flourishing under Kaniṣka and his

successors, Mathurā art produced anthropomorphic Buddha images primarily from red sandstone, with important centers at Mathurā, Sarnath, and Kaushambi (Vatsyayan 400). Unlike Gandhāra sculptures, Mathurā Buddha images emphasized Indian artistic ideals, showing the Buddha with transparent monastic garments, *uṣṇīṣa*, elongated ears, halos, and strong bodily form, usually without beards or moustaches (Rowland 7). Although distinct in style, Gandhāra and Mathurā influenced one another and developed simultaneously under Kuṣāṇa patronage. Consequently, the origin of the Buddha image remains a subject of scholarly debate, with proponents of both schools presenting differing arguments concerning the earliest development of anthropomorphic Buddha representations (Vatsyayan 410).

Gupta Period

The Gupta Age which lasts roughly from 320 to 500 AD was considered to be “golden age” of Indian culture with outstanding political, religious, and most importantly artistic achievements (Hermann and Rothermund 90). Artistic tradition in the times of kings like Chandragupta, Samudragupta, Vikramāditya, Kumāragupta and Skandagupta reached its zenith resulting in development of unique artistic style. Gupta art stands among the finest stone sculptural tradition exemplified by such remarkable works as life-size Buddha from Sultānganj in Bihar (5th century AD)(Bapat 285).

In Gupta era artists created perfect images of Buddha following the tendencies typical for their predecessors’ works from Mathurā school but introducing the element of refinement, spirituality and elegance to those statues. During that time numerous images of Buddha were created, showing him in the posture of meditation with serene smiling faces, closed eyes, and symbolic gestures including such as *abhaya*, *varada*, *dharmachakra*, and *bhumisparsha*. These figures often emphasized spiritual calm, compassion, and inner realization (Raimaji and Chandra 88).

Regional styles also developed in Gupta Buddhist art. While the Sarnath school of art was noted for its translucent draperies and spiritual perfection, the Mathurā school of art retained its use of red sandstone along with greater attention to folds and bodily form. Gupta artists were also known for representing important episodes in the life of Buddha such as his birth, enlightenment, teaching, and his nirvana in their sculptures. Gupta Buddhist art was thus an artistic innovation of India and made an impact in the area of Central Asia (Rowland 150).

Post-Gupta or Early Medieval Period

Following the collapse of the Gupta Empire, the period was marked by a phase called the Post-Gupta or Early Medieval period (around 500-750 CE). Though politically fragmented during the reign of dynastic rule, Buddhist art continued to thrive in prominent religious sites like Sarnath, Nalanda, Bodhgaya, and Kurkihar. (Huntington, *The Art of Ancient* 224). This phase saw images of Buddha maintain numerous traditional aspects associated with the classical period like peaceful facial features, closed eyes, *uṣṇīṣa*, elongated ears, and gestures like *abhaya*, *dharmacakra*, and *bhūmisparśa*. On the other hand, there was an increasing level of stylization of figures with ornamented halos and back-slabs featuring floral and celestial motifs.

The Post-Gupta era was marked by an increase in the popularity of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, which promoted the depiction of Bodhisattvas and Buddhist deities, along with Buddha. The depiction of deities such as Avalokiteśvara and Maitreya, amongst others, became more common (Harle 129). It is important to note that all the developments in art became a crucial link between the spiritually advanced art of the Gupta era and the intricate, tantric-based art of the Pāla era, thus playing an integral part in the development of Buddha imagery in Indian history .

Pāla period

Pāla Dynasty refers to a dynasty of rulers who were in charge in Bihar, India, between 750 CE and the 12th century. Pāla dynasty was established by Gopal I and achieved its peak period under DharmaPāla and DevaPāla reigns (Paul 29). Pāla Empire extended into the areas that today constitute Bangladesh and Northern/Northeastern India. Pāla Kingdom had big cities like Pātaliputra, Vikrampur, Ramavati, Munjer, Tāmralipta, and Jagdallā. The Pāla period saw the development of the Pāla art style, also known as the Magada art style, which was centered in Magada. The Pāla rulers were Mahayana Buddhists and their rule saw the flourishing of Buddhism and Buddhist art. The Pāla period also saw the flourishing of Tantric art, which had an influence on art in Nepal. During this time, many Buddha statues were created based on Tantric traditions, including representations of Avalokiteswara, Manjusri, Tara, Pañca Buddha, and Heyvajra.

In the Pāla art style we can find the construction of new styles in the statues due to the influence of Tantra. Due to tantric influence, idols with many arms, legs and heads were made at that time. Sculptors use a lot of ornaments and jewels to give beauty to the idols. Idols decorated with many ornaments like crowns, necklaces, bracelets, bangles etc. were made at that time. With the intention of beautifying the idols the sculptor has also filled the halo with the decoration of flames and flowers. Most of the idols in the Pāla art style are made in double lotus seat for standing and sitting idols (Raimaji and Chandra 92). The figure of Buddha during this period exhibits a satisfied and enigmatic smile and a plump smoothness of stiff limbs. Buddha statue were decorated with Jewel crown. Jewelleries are also added to Sanghāti (Vatsayana 445)

Conclusion

This study of aniconic and iconic representations of Śākyamuni Buddha demonstrates that the development of Buddha imagery in Buddhist art was neither sudden nor linear but evolved through complex historical, philosophical, and devotional processes. In the early Buddhist stupa some monuments such as Sāñchī and Bharhut employed symbols including the stūpa, Bodhi tree, empty throne, footprints, and dharmacakra. Earlier scholars such as Alfred Foucher, Ananda Coomaraswamy and others interpreted these motifs as deliberate substitutes for the Buddha, thereby supporting the traditional theory of Buddhist aniconism. According to this view, the absence of anthropomorphic images reflected religious reverence and the transcendental nature of the Buddha.

However, some of the modern scholarship such as Susan L. Huntington, has challenged this interpretation by questioning its textual and archaeological foundations. Huntington argues that many

symbols traditionally identified as representations of an absent Buddha may instead signify sacred sites, pilgrimage centers, relic worship, and devotional practices. This reinterpretation suggests that early Buddhist visual culture was more diverse and context-dependent than previously assumed. The discussion therefore indicates that symbolic motifs possessed multiple layers of meaning and cannot always be reduced to a single explanation.

The making of the anthropomorphic Buddha images in the Kuṣāṇa era especially within the regions of Gandhāra and Mathurā represented a critical shift in the Buddhist art tradition. Through the religious devotion and interaction with local artistic culture, the representation of the Buddha developed until the Gupta and Pāla eras when it attained much spirituality and intricate iconography. The use of mudrās, bodily features, and symbols contributed significantly towards enriching the representation.

So, the distinction between aniconic and iconic representation should not be understood as a rigid opposition but as part of a dynamic and evolving artistic tradition. Early Buddhist art reflects a combination of symbolism, ritual practice, sacred geography, and changing devotional needs. A balanced consideration of both traditional and revisionist interpretations provides a more comprehensive understanding of the historical development of Buddha imagery and the richness of early Buddhist visual culture.

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