



The Fasting Siddhartha Sculpture: Hellenistic Influence and Symbolic Meaning

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Abstract

The study of the "Fasting Siddhartha" sculpture, an iconic piece in South Asian art, focuses on its Hellenistic influences, especially in its visual elements. This qualitative research reviewed literature and generated themes such as the historical context, the sculpture's analysis, Siddhartha's heroic journey, and cross-cultural comparisons. The Gandharan civilization, where the sculpture was created, reflects Greek architectural and artistic styles, similar to Greek sculptures like "Laocoön and His Sons" and "Venus de Milo." The work symbolizes resilience, humility, and self-discipline, illustrating Siddhartha Gautama's suffering. The study highlights the blending of Greek and Buddhist aesthetics, emphasizing the innovative approach to art during the Kushan period.

Keywords: Gandhara, Siddhartha, fasting, influences, symbolism, the prince of Kapilvastu

Introduction

The Fasting Siddhartha (Figure 1) is one of the most spectacular ancient Buddhist artifacts made in the Gandhara region. "Fasting" indicates holistic passion, which purifies the mind and body. Similarly, the name "Siddhartha" represents the birth name of Gautama Buddha, given by his parents. From the Hindu perspective, the combination of the two words, "Fasting" and "Siddhartha," represents not only the life of Siddhartha before his enlightenment but also the ways of life, passion, and spiritual pursuits. Gandhara was part of an ancient Indo-Aryan civilization near Jamal Garhi, in the Mardan district of Sikri (Figure 2), where the sculpture of Fasting Siddhartha was discovered by General Dean

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in 1960 AD. The sculpture was brought to Lahore and installed at the Lahore Museum in 1980 AD. This sculpture was highly influenced by the Hellenistic style in Greek art. The Greek creative and architectural influence on Indian art after Alexander the Great's conquests, from the end of the 4th century BCE to the early years of the Common Era, is reflected in the Hellenistic influence on Indian art and architecture (Broadman, 1998). Symbolism was a French and Belgian art movement that emerged in the late 19th century and was primarily a response against naturalism and realism. It was used in poetry and other art forms to symbolize absolute truths through language and metaphorical imagery (Balakian, 2003).

There is an ongoing debate about whether to name the craft "Fasting Buddha" or "Fasting Bodhisattva" because the representation embodies both Buddhahood and the journey to enlightenment. This article agrees with the view that the Fasting Siddhartha sculpture is influenced by Hellenistic art. The process by which the Buddha prepared himself for contemplation is explained in the *Abhiniskramana Sutra*. It describes his physical appearance as having a closed mouth, his tongue forced up against the palate, teeth squeezed, a thin and shriveled physique, hollowed eyes, and wrinkled skin. Those who witnessed him at that time felt a strange combination of devotion and wonder at the sight of the penance he was undergoing. The message of the hardship one must endure on the spiritual journey is conveyed (Awan, 2022). The combination of two powerful living traditions or cultures, Greek and Gandhara, may give birth to spectacular works of art like the Fasting Siddhartha sculpture. Some critics and scholars believe that this art form stands as one of the most cosmopolitan works of Buddhist art. It does not merely represent Buddhist philosophy but is also influenced by Hellenistic art, which emphasizes fantasy and heroic journeys rather than a particular religion or culture. Other scholars argue that this art form embodies the Buddhist religious identity of its people.

However, this study focuses on neither cosmopolitan culture nor religious culture rather on symbolic significance and its artistic convention and creativity. This study is unique to explore these areas that weren't discussed in previous similar papers. Thus, the focus on symbolism and influences was the key subject matter of this study which is a contribution to existing literature by adding more insights in these fields. Symbolism unravels the intangible form of the *Fasting Siddhartha*, while the study on influence focuses on the tangible form. This research paper aimed at exploring the notion of arty culture in Buddhist art tradition in ancient times by looking at an idol and the influences of earlier sculpture in eastern regions or territories. The objective of the study was to focus on observation and studies on *Fasting Siddhartha* exploring its meaning. The other objective of the study was to assist artists explore artistic conventions in terms of the boundary between art and creativity. The third objective was to assist individuals understand the power of inter-cultural activities.

Statement of the Problem

The *Fasting Siddhartha* sculpture stands as a significant example of ancient art, merging Hellenistic influences with Buddhist themes. However, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding regarding how these two distinct cultural elements interact within the artwork. This study seeks to address the gap in knowledge about the visual elements and symbolic meanings of the Fasting Siddhartha sculpture. Specifically, it aims to explore how Hellenistic aesthetics shape the representation of Siddhartha's spiritual journey and the deeper significance of fasting in Buddhism. By examining the influences, similarities, and differences between Greek and Gandharan art, this research will shed light on the cultural exchange that enriched South Asian art during the Kushan period.



Figure 1: Fasting Siddhartha, 2nd Century AD, Fine-grained homogeneous bluish schist stone, W.21" H.33" D.10"

Methodology

The qualitative method was applied focusing on an analytical and descriptive approach, which was concluded through detailed observation of the art works. The method of creating external part of the body and drapery was a major observation and literature reviews regarding the same was conducted. The principle and element of art were used as major aesthetic theory to analyze the work of art. The relevant literatures were searched through various search engines such as PubMed and google scholar. The sculpture of the *Fasting Siddhartha* itself is a key primary source of study. The various related themes were generated manually by the principal investigator. This analytical study also instigates detailed observation of the major three artifacts from the Hellenistic period, such as "Aphrodite", "Laocoon and His Son" and "Parthenon frieze with Poseidon, Apollo, and Artemis", as well as Doric order (columns) from the Temple of Apollo in Greece which are explained in following sections.

Results

The Fasting Siddhartha sculpture, a masterpiece from the Gandharan period, reveals a deep synthesis of Hellenistic and Buddhist influences, showcasing the remarkable cultural exchange that occurred during the Kushan Empire. The results of this study highlight how the aesthetics and techniques drawn from Hellenistic art were integrated into Buddhist visual traditions, transforming the portrayal of Siddhartha and his spiritual journey.

The Dynasties during the creation

The Fasting Siddhartha was created during the Kushan Dynasty around the second century BCE; the rulers of the Kushan Dynasty were mostly Buddhists. Although it was ruled by the Kushan, the Gandhara valley was more like a melting pot, creating a hybrid of different cultures and societies that occupied the land, such as the Achaemenian Empire (550–330 BCE), Alexander the Great (327 BCE), the Mauryan Empire (305–232 BCE), the Parthians (7 BCE), the Kushans (1st–2nd Century CE), and the Sassanians (2–5th century CE). Kushans had a trade relationship with the Greeks. Thus, the people of Gandhara were more cosmopolitan in their visual aesthetics (Marshall, 1960). Kushan art was transmitted from Gandhara, a significant crossroads, to Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Indian cities like Mathura, Devnamori, and Amaravati. Furthermore, archaeological discoveries made at Begram, Pushkalavati, Taxila, Mathura, and Surkh Kotal had revealed that certain pieces of Gandharan art exhibit elements typical of the Hellenistic era. Kushan art was continuously changing as a result of external influences. In addition to assimilating earlier Graeco-Bactrian customs, it was open to Western trends as a result of global trade and commerce. Nonetheless, it never lost its uniqueness, expressing the sociocultural goals of its people and the value of regional craftsmanship.

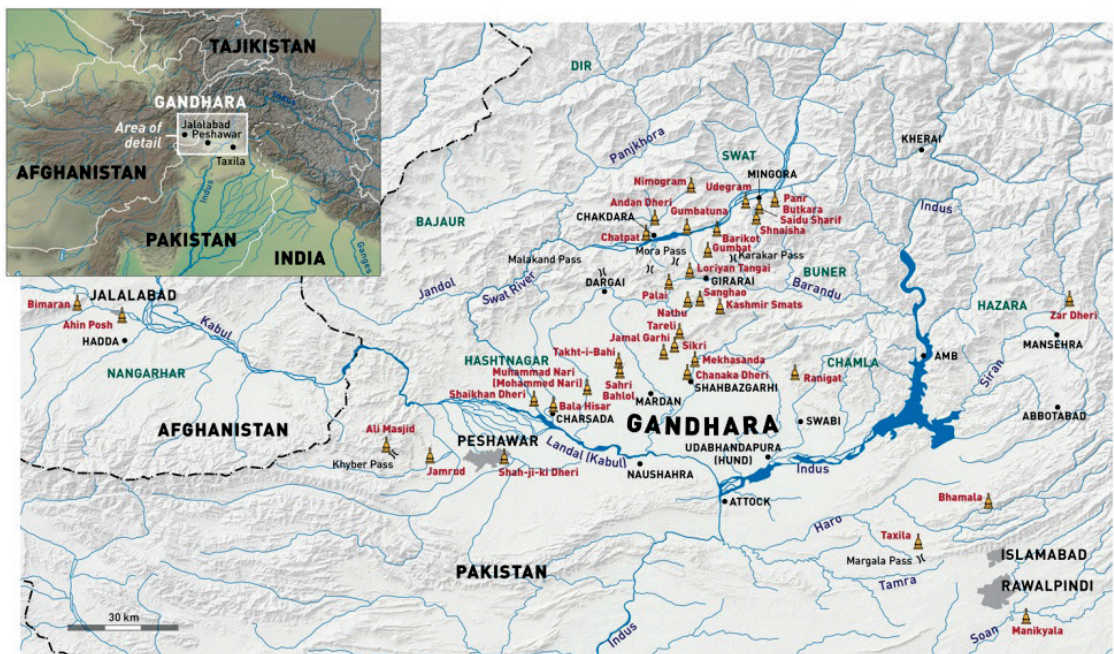


Figure 2: Findspot of the *Fasting Siddhartha*, Gandhara, present-day north-west Pakistan, including parts of south-east Afghanistan

Source: © AsiaSociety.org

Analysis of *Fasting Siddhartha* Sculpture

Almost like a dried tree or an empty pot, the *Fasting Siddhartha* is shown in a yogic and meditative posture where the fingers of the statue are broken and the hands represent a gesture of meditation. The Halo behind the head is large-rimmed and symbolizes the holy and sacred figure. The bones, skins, veins, and cloths are realistically presented, which embodies the six years of struggle of Siddhartha. A dot between two eyes represents vision and enlightenment; a tuft wisdom; and a beard deep absorption. Similarly, the long earlobes personify past wealth when he wore heavy earrings while he was in the royal palace. The simple robe (drapery) represents humility. Likewise, the grass below the body of Siddhartha signifies growth, the frieze Siddhartha's followers and supporters and a lamp the presence of God. The cross-cultural hybridity was visible in Gandharan art with almost copies of Graeco-Roman representations of heroes and gods, notably Apollo and his divine sister Artemis. The human form of Buddha was established in the Kushan period when he was stamped in the coins of the Kushan king Kanishka. Gandhara along with Mathura shared the role of portraying Buddha in sculpture. (Stewart, 2024) The iconography of the image was quite distinct depicting the shrunken eyes, calm demeanor and visible ribs. (Termatree, n.d). Many copies and iconographies had been created around the world, some resembling the original one whereas many deviating from the Sikri craft. Along with the images the narration was also different as the description depended on the perspectives of the observer, his/her background and the culture of that particular era (Rienjang & Stewart, 2021). Moreover, regarding the significance of this statue, Susan L. Huntington, the author of 'The Art of Ancient India, stated:

'One of the most dramatic visual contributions of the northwestern art schools to Buddhist art in the depiction of the Bodhisattava during the period of his extreme asceticism. This occurred prior to his enlightenment and led to his decision to espouse the doctrine of the Middle Way, a path between luxurious indulgence and extreme renunciation. Representations of the Bodhisattava as an emaciated ascetic are not found in the Indic sphere in general, but seem to have been important mainly in the northwest. From there, the iconic type was transmitted to East Asia. Here, the predilection towards classic realism so prevalent in the art of the northwestern Kusana realms adds drama to the execution of the details of the skeleton, the structure of the neck, and the wasted flesh of the body (Alam, 1998, p.14).

The Heroic Journey of Siddhartha

Without the description of heroic journey of Siddhartha, the meaning of *Fasting Siddhartha* would be incomplete and insignificant. Siddhartha's sacrification towards spiritual journey can be called as heroic journey (Campbell, 2003). The story of Siddhartha follows as: As the prince of Kapilvastu (present day Nepal, Figure 3), he was surrounded by a luxurious and beautiful environment provided by his father, King Suddodhana. At the age of 29,

Siddhartha left his sleeping wife, newly-born son, and luxurious palace in order to search for true enlightenment and a solution to peace in the human mind. Before he left his palace, Siddhartha had a trip outside the country several times with Channa (a helper of the palace), and he saw a sick man on the road, an old man, a Sadhu, and a dead body carried towards the burial space. He was extremely shocked and could not sleep for many days. He was consistently thinking, why do people suffer and die? He was searching for solutions to these problems, but he could not find any solutions while he was at the palace, and then a few months later he handed over all his luxurious and majestic clothes and ornaments to Channa and left for Bodh Gaya for meditation. He sat under the Bodhi tree and meditated and fasted for six years without proper meal. According to the eastern myth, he used to survive on few grains of rice every day. During the meditation, his glorious body turned into bone and skin, and his beautiful face into a skeleton, which was the major story. At the age of 35, Siddhartha achieved Nirvana, became Buddha, and a supreme *guru*. Buddha's 'Mahaparinirvana' (death) was at the age of 80, around 483 BCE. After five hundred years of Buddha's life, the statue of *Fasting Siddhartha* was created in the form of a sculpture (Figure 1).

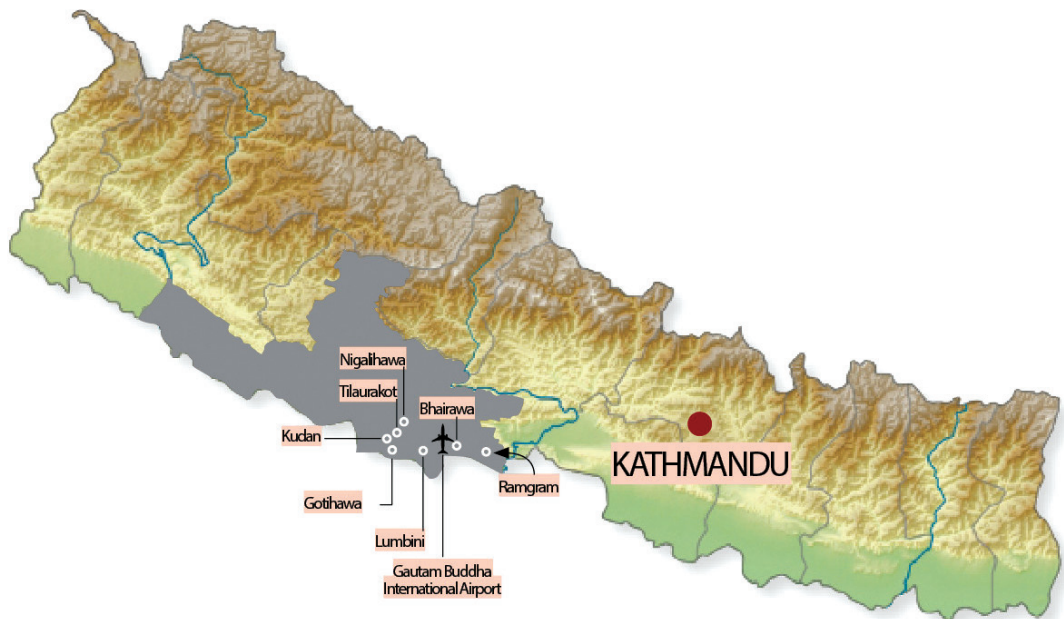


Figure 3: Birthplace of Siddhartha, Kapilvastu, present-day Nepal

Source: © Nepali Times, 2022

Influences

In the sculpture of *Fasting Siddhartha*, one can notice the motifs and stylization of the Hellenistic sculptures. The use of narration was highly adopted by the Gandharian from Roman. Siddhartha's followers (relief human figures) are shown in small size below his

figure; similarly, the sculpture is in a symmetrical balance from the bottom to the top, which is balanced through its triangular shape. The lamp below his figure looks similar to the Column of Roman Doric order from the temple of Apollo in Greece (Figure 4).

Centralization, life size, narration, symmetrical balance, and the use of Greek and Roman motifs are the main features of the *Fasting Siddhartha* statue. Central characters or the key figures in Hellenistic sculptures were always centralized in the compositions, and were shown in larger than normal figures to create the power and value. The proportions of the figures in sculptures were realistically depicted in terms of form, anatomy, movement, and balance, also similar to the works of Renaissance sculpture; all the sculptures were made with idealized figures in a highly detailed manner. Some of the most admired artifacts from Greece's Hellenistic period were 'Aphrodite', 'Laocoon and His Son', and 'Parthenon frieze with Poseidon, Apollo, and Artemis'. Their characteristic features are very much similar to those of the *Fasting Siddhartha*. No part of the figures exists without the highly detailed nature of the sculpture of *the Fasting Siddhartha*; all three works of art represent ideal pieces described below.

Laocoon and His Son

Made during the 1st century BCE, the expression of the work looks like a painting from Baroque era (Figure 6). It has a dramatic character symbolizing it as one of the greatest sculptures from the Hellenistic period. The Laocoon shows willpower, concentration, and pain until his last moment. This work represents an event from the Trojan War. According to the world history encyclopedia, 'The 'Laocoon and His Son' depicts the suffering of the Trojan prince and priest Laocoön (brother of Anchises) and his young sons Antiphantes and Thymbraeus and is one of the most famous and fascinating statues of antiquity" (Meijer & Oppen, 2020).

The formal principles of this work, such as form, proportion, composition and organic unity play an effective role in the work which can be linked with the sculpture of the *Fasting Siddhartha*. In terms of composition, the priest Laocoon is shown larger than the other figures in the sculptures. The form of the figures is highly detailed; small visible and unnoticed parts of the body are also depicted, such as muscles and veins which show the excellent study of human anatomy as well as the good sense of proportion of human figures (Figure 9).

Venus de Milo (Aphrodite)

Crafted between 130 and 100 BC, Venus de Milo (Aphrodite) is the most powerful sculpture made during the Hellenistic period in Greece and symbolizes the Greek goddess of love, beauty, and sexuality (Figure 5). The anatomy and proportions of different parts of the body seem real and perfect. It shows a particular moment of a self as that of a Siddhartha's

sculpture which also shows a particular phase or moment in life. The folding and the direction of the drapery is alike to the sculpture of the *Fasting Siddhartha*. Draperies in both of these sculptures symbolize great nobility. The depth and flow of the hairstyles of Aphrodite and the Fasting Siddhartha share a striking similarity (Figure 8).

Parthenon frieze with Poseidon, Apollo, and Artemis

The Bas-Relief sculpture ‘Parthenon frieze with Poseidon, Apollo, and Artemis’ (Figure 7), currently located at the Acropolis Museum in Athens, is one of the most notable works from the Hellenistic period. Made during 440 BCE, it represents the beauty, power, and serenity of Greek gods Poseidon, Apollo, and goddess Artemis. The proportion, composition, detailed anatomy, form of the figures, folding and direction of the drapery are very similar to the sculpture of the *Fasting Siddhartha* (Figure 10).



Figure 4: Temple of Apollo, Greek

Source: © Carole Raddato, worldhistory.org



Figure 5: *Venus de Milo (Aphrodite)*, 130–100 BC, The Louvre Museum, Paris

Source: © Marie-Lan Nguyen, Creative Commons



Figure 6: *Laocoon and His Son*, 1st Century BC, Vatican Museums, Vatican City

Source: © Mark Cartwright



Figure 7: *Parthenon frieze with Poseidon, Apollo, and Artemis*, Bas-Relief, Marble, 440 BCE, Acropolis Museum, Athens

Source: © Sofia Suli, ancientrome.ru

Similarities and Differences

The following images show the similarities between Hellenistic sculptures and the sculpture of Fasting Siddhartha. In terms of form, lines, space shape, texture, balance, proportion and organic unity, which are the different elements and principles of art (Gustlin & Gustlin, n.d.), there is the harmony between two. However, the colors of the Hellenistic sculpture and Fasting Siddhartha look different. The main reason for this could be the mediums of the works, former were made of marble, and the latter were made of homogeneous bluish schist stone.

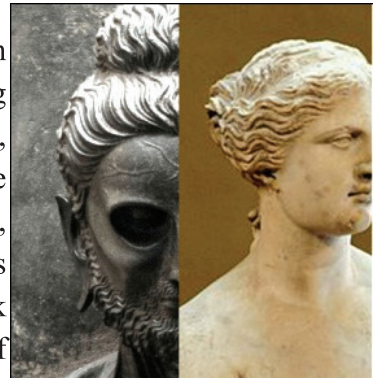


Figure 8: The frontal features of Fasting Siddhartha and Aphrodite

Source: © Koshal Hamal, Marie-Lan Nguyen



Figure 9: The features of the body look show the detail structures and exaggeration of the form Fasting Siddhartha (left) and Laocoon and His Son (Right), Source: © Koshal Hamal, Mark Cartwright



Figure 11: Detail of the Fasting Siddhartha and Parthenon frieze with Poseidon, Apollo, and Artemis
Source: © Sofia Suli, Koshal Hamal

Discussion

There are different school of thoughts whether to name the statue as Fasting Buddha or Fasting Bodhisattva or Fasting Siddhartha. The convincing thought is that as the statue depicts the stage of fasting before enlightenment, Fasting Siddhartha or Fasting Bodhisattva would be appropriate (Awan 2022; Rinpoche, 2018). Fasting teaches us resilience, fortitude, humility and gratitude in life. The adversities during the process provides us a lesson to appreciate everything in life. The story illustrated that Buddha received rice from Sujata during the process, which nourished his emaciated body, so

it was mentioned that Buddha opted the middle way, a way of moderation which he experienced during the meditation process that mental cultivation and insight, not bodily deprivation would lead to enlightenment (Rinpoche, 2018). The emaciated Buddha came to be understood by the Theravādin community as representing the Buddha's six-year fast that followed his great departure from the palace and preceded his enlightenment (Rienjang, & Stewart, 2021).

One of the contrasting school of thought by Robert Brown was the Gandhāran fasting Buddha images appear to have been linked to the enlightenment cycle, not the six-year fast. The Greeks had an influence in the art. The artists were either Greeks or the ones who learnt from Greeks. The article agrees that the characteristic of Gandharan art was the anthropomorphic representation. The Greek figures were represented with wavy hair texture, heavily pleated body-hugging garments, slender with visible muscles; these features were visible in Indian sculptures as the one of Fasting Siddhartha (Sculptures: It's All Greek to Me!). Created during the Kushans period, the visual aesthetics of the Fasting Siddhartha belongs to one of the most iconic objects of multicultural hybrid character. It is because of the form and design of the attire worn by Siddhartha, the detail of human anatomy, and the formal visual elements and principles such as form, lines, space, shape, texture, proportion, unity, balance, and harmony, which are highly inspired by the Hellenistic visual aesthetics in the sculpture. All the motifs used for sculpture have different symbols with significant meaning. Holiness, vision, wisdom, absorption, humility, growth, enlightenment, concentration and the presence of God are some of the most important symbols. No motifs are used without symbols, which was the most interesting finding of this study.

Fasting Siddhartha was named after the discovery of this sculpture, by the General Dean in 1960 AD. The title was given by the museum's higher cabinet meeting at the Lahore Museum through deep observation. Here, the work 'fasting' plays a significant role in this sculpture. This is a fascinating word because 'fasting' belongs to all cultures and societies. Apart from Siddhartha's purpose of fasting, the word 'fasting' for people has a specific purpose as fasting tests a person's patience; it makes people humble, down-to-earth and thankful for everything that they have. They realize the pain, suffering, and hunger of the less fortunate. According to Islam, fasting begins before the breaking of dawn (with the Fajr prayers) and ends at dusk (with the Maghrib prayers). During this time, people are forbidden from eating, drinking, and misuse of body, mind, and soul for evil purposes (no swear, fight, think of hurting others, or think foul thoughts). It is the time of abstinence; people's entire existence has to be pure. People should spend this time in the remembrance of Allah and should pray a lot. According to the label of the *Fasting Siddhartha* at the Lahore Museum:

“... This historical and anatomical details of this piece may not be true to life, yet the graceful serenity of the face, the natural drop of the drapery on the shrinking body, and

stately recreation of yogic absorption, the unarrested growth of the beard and body hair, all are so superbly realistic in execution that they overlap all anatomical discrepancies.” (Source)

In Buddhism, sitting position of the *Fasting Siddhartha* represents a ‘Dhyana Mudra’ (meditation gesture) of Buddha. Dhyana or Samadhi mudra is the hand gesture that promotes the energy of meditation, deep contemplation, and unity with higher energy. The circling of energy created by the triangle which is formed when the thumbs of the two hands touch promotes cleansing of any impurities on an etheric level. Even by looking at this Buddha hand gesture (let alone practicing it!) one can connect to the energy of deep peace and serenity. Thus, this justifies that the symbol of the *Fasting Siddhartha* on a different level represents the Buddha’s six years of meditation (Huntington, p. 142) in a ‘meditation gesture’ where Siddhartha was highly suffering to find the ‘truth’ for others. Hence, this was Siddhartha’s reason for fasting. Hermann Hesse mentions, in his novel *Siddhartha*, that “Everyone can perform magic; everyone can reach his goals if he is able to think, if he is able to wait, if he is able to fast” (Hesse, p. 26).

From the perspective of Hinduism, the main purpose of fasting is to clean our mind and body. Hindus believe that fasting is not only part of various worships of gods and goddesses but also a part of self-discipline. N.S. Rajendran writes about the doctrine of fasting in Hinduism as follows:

“Hindus believe that fasting is a means of showing that one can deny one’s physical needs for the sake of spiritual gains. The scriptures reveal that fasting brings about an attunement with God by bringing about a harmonious relationship between the body and the soul. This is therefore absolutely necessary for the individual since it takes care of his physical and spiritual demands. Hindus believe that the world is too full of distractions that keep people away from pursuing the path of spirituality. So, one must strive to put restraints on oneself to focus one’s mind. One way of focusing is fasting. In most religions, including Hinduism, fasting means abstinence from food in observance of a holy ceremony or religious ritual. The popular belief that fasting is only for attaining spiritual well-being is partially true. There are various benefits of fasting backed up by health experts (Rajendran, pp. 30-33)”.

N.S. Rajendran explains that Hindus view fasting as a way to prioritize spiritual growth over physical needs. They believe that fasting helps create a connection with God by aligning the body and soul. This practice is important for individuals because it addresses both their physical and spiritual needs. In a world filled with distractions, fasting helps people focus on their spiritual journey by encouraging self-control. While many think fasting is only about spiritual benefits, Rajendran notes that it also has various health advantages, supported by experts in the field.

Conclusion

The whole figure of the *Fasting Siddhartha* represents the power of fasting, a meditation gesture as well as the struggle phase of Siddhartha to find out the 'Nirmana' to human suffering. Also, this study revealed that the inspiration for western method and technique does not only come from the time of Raja Ravi Varma and the Bombay Progressive Artists' Group (PAG), but also from ancient times. The influence of western technique teaches the unconventional ways of art making: the importance of inspiration and method of art making has no boundaries or limitations to exploring something new, but the content of the work could be personal, local or national. The symbols of *Fasting Siddhartha* also propagate the morals of self-discipline in human behaviors. The limitation of the study is that more literatures could have been reviewed and the methodology could have been more ideal. This study doesn't incorporate the influence of other cultural context except Gandharan and Hellenistic period, so there is a future prospect of analyzing other impacts on Fasting Siddhartha. The significance of the study is that it explored the influence of culture on the sculpture of Fasting Siddhartha, the setting which is found less common in available literatures.

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