



## **Analyzing the Popular Image of Lord Buddha Using Marshall Fishwick's Seven Pillars of Popular Culture as a Methodological Framework**

**Shoshrin Sharma**

IACER, Pokhara University, Nepal

[sosreen.s@gmail.com](mailto:sosreen.s@gmail.com)

<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-8673-3041>

Received: May 22, 2026

Revised & Accepted: July 25, 2026

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### **Abstract**

**Background:** Gautam Buddha widely regarded as the founder of Buddhism, yet today his image is not confined within the boundaries of Buddhism, or any other singular religious, spiritual, or culture tradition. In the contemporary world the image of Buddha has transcended physical and cultural boundaries, Buddha has become a widely recognized symbol or an image of peace, wisdom, enlightenment, and self-realization. Hence this paper analyzes how a historical and a religious figure, initially the product of a definite singular civilizational culture, becomes a global icon of popular culture.

**Objective:** This paper examines the rise of Siddhartha Gautam from a prince, a spiritual seeker and teacher to a popular image recognized across cultural, religious, and national boundaries. To understand this transformation, this paper applies Marshall Fishwick's Seven Pillars of Popular Culture as the main methodological framework.

**Methods:** The study uses a qualitative and interpretive approach to examine historical accounts, Buddhist narratives, scholarly works, and selected modern representations of Buddha. These materials are analyzed through the pillars of Ethnos, Heroes, Demos, Mythos, Logos, Theos, and Eikons.

**Analysis/Findings:** The analysis shows that Buddha's cultural and philosophical roots, or Ethnos, shaped his spiritual journey, leading him towards renunciation, enlightenment, and that his return to society established him as a cultural Hero. While his teachings gained popularity among the Demos as they offered a path beyond suffering to a person of any race, creed, caste, and culture. Stories surrounding his life thus developed into Mythos and were communicated through oral traditions, religious texts, institutions, trade routes, literature, manga, cinema, contemporary digital media, and other forms of Logos. Likewise, his spiritual authority further



elevated him into Theos or godhood transcending him and his teaching beyond the limitations of time and age. Hence, we can see that the combined influence of these pillars transformed Buddha into an Eikon of peace, wisdom, enlightenment, and self-realization.

**Conclusion:** Fishwick's framework, therefore, provides a clear way of understanding how Buddha's image moved beyond its original historical and religious setting and became a global cultural icon.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Gautam Buddha, Popular Culture, Marshall Fishwick, Seven Pillars of Popular Culture, Mythology, History, Religion.

Although being the founder of one of the largest religions practiced in the world today that is Buddhism, the image of Lord Buddha is not confined to that of a religious entity or within the perimeter of Buddhism either. The image of Buddha in the contemporary world has transcended national and religious boundaries because the messages and spiritual philosophy of Buddhism. This popularity of Gautam Buddha raises a question: why is his image popular beyond the confines of race, religion, language, culture, etcetera? To find an answer to this question and to understand the popular image of Buddha, we can apply Marshall Fishwick's seven pillars of popular culture as a tool of inquiry. Hence, this paper is going to analyze the rise of Buddha as an image of popular culture in conjunction with the innovative framework of the seven pillars of popular culture as propounded by Marshall Fishwick.

We are going to look at Buddha's journey from a prince to an icon of peace, self-realization, and enlightenment from the ancient time to a star image of popular culture in the modern world. To do so we are using Marshall Fishwick's idea of "The Seven Pillars of Popular Culture" (1985) as an analytical tool. Therefore, as the first order of business a sketch of the order in which the seven pillars of popular culture will be used in this paper to dissect the image of Buddha is given in the following paragraph.

First, we are going to analyze Siddhartha Gautam and his origins with the help of the pillar "Ethnos" (Fishwick, 1985, p. 39), together with the journey that he took to become Buddha or "Heroes" (p. 59) as well as the influence of his roots or Ethnos in his journey. Third we will look at his influence on people both in ancient period and contemporary times that would be the pillar "Demos" (p. 19), followed by the creation of stories surrounding Buddha following his influence on people or his "Mythos" (p. 155). Then we proceed to look at how the communication of stories, or the pillar "Logos" (p. 103) further enhanced the image of Gautam Buddha throughout the world, leading to the formulation of religious practices and Buddha's rise to a god man which would be the pillar "Theos" (p. 81). And finally, we will summarize his rise to stardom as an icon of peace, enlightenment, and self-realization with the help of the pillar "Eikons" (p. 131).

First of all, let us take a look at the origins of Siddhartha Gautam or his Ethnos. According to Fishwick "Ethnos has to do with roots" (1985, p. 39), it deals with people and "their divisions group, races, and language" (p. 39) and also religion and philosophy. Ethnos as a concept is concerned with the origins of anything that examines, the home, history, language, race,



religion, ethnicity, etc., that give an individual or a culture its unique identity. According to Fishwick, a culture does not appear out of thin air, it is a product of a specific place and time (pp. 39-58). This contextual product of a specific time and place is Ethnos, in a sense the cultural DNA an individual will carry out into the wider world.

Siddhartha was born as a prince in the kingdom of Lumbini. It is believed when he was born eight brahmins in the court of his father had foretold his fate “that the child had a glorious future: he would either become a Buddha, who achieved the supreme spiritual enlightenment, or a Universal King, a hero of popular legend” (Armstrong, 2008, pp. 27-28). So, to prevent him from becoming a sage Siddhartha’s father kept him inside the palace surrounded by luxury and happiness (p. 28). This brings us to the idea of “call to adventure” (Campbell, 2008, p. 41), that many heroes receive prompting them towards a hero’s quest and in case of Siddhartha Gautam cannot be uncoupled from his Ethnos.

According to the legends, even though he was surrounded by luxury one day Siddhartha escaped from his proverbial golden cage that was his palace, and came across a sick person, an old person, and a dying person. This prompted him to ask questions about why people get sick, grow old and die. Likewise, it is also believed that he also came across an ascetic who had denounced the material life to seek answers to similar questions. This sequence of incidents prompted Siddhartha to leave behind his life of luxury and become a hermit himself, seeking answers to the questions about the nature of life, as well as that of the wider creation (Armstrong, 2008, pp. 29-30). In this way we see that the call for action guided Siddhartha towards his journey of a hero, even though his father had done all he could to prevent it.

This call for action that would eventually lead Siddhartha Gautam to a spirit quest, was influenced by his environment in time and space or his Ethnos. As discussed earlier “Ethnos has to do with roots” (Fishwick, 1985, p. 39). As Siddhartha was born in Lumbini a small kingdom that was a part of the greater the Indian subcontinent, which was a collection of spiritual, philosophical and civilizational atmosphere that professes self-realization as a tool to uncover the secrets of life and reality. On top that at least initially he was clearly influenced by the dominant Vedic mystical tradition prevalent in the Indian subcontinent at that time. As Richard Gombrich states, “the Buddha probably began with an advantage in that he was born and bred in north-eastern India on the very margin of Vedic civilization” (2009, p. 26). And these mystic traditions put a lot of emphasis on uncovering the nature of reality and an individual’s position in it through self-reflection. It then becomes clear to see why Siddhartha decided to go through the path of renunciation, and deep meditation to find answers to life’s pressing questions.

Hence, we can then argue that his cultural roots or his Ethnos gave Siddhartha the foundation and vocabulary for his spirit quest. He did not have to be the one to invent the idea of attaining enlightenment through a spiritual journey, as the culture he was born in had already spent centuries describing the parameters of a spirit quest. And if Siddhartha was born in any other culture, it is easy to see that his spiritual journey could have taken a different flavor, whose efficacy and resonance with the wider world is very difficult to gauge properly.



As we re-examine the call for action to find an answer to life's suffering that led Siddhartha towards his hero's journey, we can uncover a complete picture of him being a hero in popular culture. A hero "is the superior man, embodiment of composite ideas, savior of people" (Fishwick, 1985, p. 59). A hero in popular culture is a person who represents the highest aspirations of a society or culture and goes on a quest to embody those highest aspirations which ultimately change them forever (pp. 59-80). This quest follows a pattern of what Joseph Campbell calls the Hero's journey: a journey that starts with a call for action or a moment where the hero leaves the ordinary world and circumstances behind to face great challenges and achieve something extraordinary, ending with the hero's return to the society where they share the gift or knowledge obtained from the quest with everyone ultimately changing the society itself (Campbell, 2008, pp. 1-40). Therefore, in popular culture a hero is a person who underwent transformation and gained knowledge to transform the world for the better, giving them the authority to lead and inspire the masses

Siddhartha Gautam became a superior man by looking within himself and defeating the temptations of lust, fear, and social duty, to become an enlightened person; rather than through conquest, war, or violence (Armstrong, 2008, pp. 82-84). After attaining enlightenment, he returned to society and shared his knowledge: the tool he used to save the people, thus completing the cycle of the hero's journey. As he attained enlightenment under a Bodhi tree he became Buddha the hero of knowledge, wisdom, peace, and enlightenment (Armstrong, 2008, p. 73). However, the true heroic act occurred when he decided not to lose himself in the extraordinary world of isolated bliss, but to come back into the ordinary world and teach everyone how to find their way out of suffering and into freedom. This choice is his return to society with the boon of knowledge to make it better for everyone, completing his hero's journey.

As Buddha returned to society and started to share his knowledge, his influence grew rapidly among the "Demos" (Fishwick, 1985, p. 19). Demos or the "common people" (p. 19) as the audience of popular culture rather than the people who influenced the hero during their quest and life. According to Fishwick, for a person or even an idea to become an icon of popular culture they must matter to everyday people from every stratum of the society and not just the scholars of culture, and history. As popular culture is defined by its reach: it belongs to the mass, therefore the demos provide the energy to keep an icon; be it a person or an idea, alive in a culture (pp. 19-30). In Fishwick's framework a figure becomes popular only when they can resonate with the needs and hopes of the general population. Thus, without the support of demos the hero remains an obscure curiosity confined to a point in history rather than a hero who transcends the boundaries of time and space.

In the ancient times, the people who lived around the time of Gautam Buddha saw his teachings to realize their own spiritual potential and elevate their consciousness to attain salvation. This broke the mainstream belief of life, death, and rebirth where salvation was many lives away, but Buddha's teachings promised nirvana within one lifetime. This challenge to the long-held beliefs around the nature of life also challenged the dominant idea of caste hierarchy as



Buddha's teachings opened a path for spiritual knowledge through self-reflection to everyone instead of the upper-caste being the custodians of spirituality even salvation (Ambedkar, 2011). Consequently, such a revolutionary thought gained immense popularity among the people in ancient times, and it continues to influence people today too.

The popularity of Buddha during and after his life among the general people thus gave rise to the opportunities for the creation of different stories regarding his life and deeds. Some of the "the brave and bold stories" (Fishwick, 1986, p. 155) or "Mythos" (p. 155) talking about Buddha's bravery, like his encounters with demons, while others displaying his wit and wisdom began to flourish in the society. Such myths gradually further attracted people towards Buddha and his teachings.

Contrary to popular belief myths are not necessarily false stories, they are also embellished narratives of the legendary achievements of historical figures such as Gautam Buddha. "The essence of every culture is mythos—brave and bold stories that explain how things came to be, and why we are as we are" (Fishwick, 1985, p. 155). It is natural human behavior to craft and tell stories about figures that are popular with the masses. This creation of myths by communities that retell the greatness of their heroes is a process that allows the heroes to resonate with the masses and make the lessons they impart more palatable (pp. 155-194). Mythos thus adds a layer of magic and wonders to the life and lessons of popular figures, and thus in popular culture are considered a powerful tool because myths are the stories that inspire the general populace.

There are countless mythological stories related to the life and achievements of Buddha. From him showing his martial potential in his early teens, to him subduing dangerous vagrants, there is no shortage of stories that recount the many encounters of Buddha. One of the more famous myths surrounding Buddha is about his victory over the demon Mara, who sent visions of material achievements, military victories, beautiful temptresses, during the final phase of his penance, to foil it and prevent him from achieving enlightenment (Armstrong, 2008, pp. 82-84). But Siddhartha persisted and refused to give in to the temptations of material world, thus completing his mission and becoming Gautam Buddha after achieving enlightenment. Such myths about Siddhartha both before and after his enlightenment elevated his stature among common people and further solidified him as a cultural Hero, who changed the entire world.

The mythos or stories about Buddha were communicated among people of different culture. Such communication, eventually codified the myths, legends, and philosophy of Buddha, preserving them for the generation to come becoming the pillar "Logos" (Fishwick, 1985, p. 103). For a message to survive across cultures and still have a meaningful significance to these cultures it needs a logical structure, and Logos is the pillar that gives the mythos surrounding a hero that structure. Logos is essentially the process of turning ideas into formal structures, such as oral traditions, writing, philosophy, and organized institutions using language (pp. 103-130). In Fishwick's view, logos is what allows the core of an idea to remain intact throughout the process of cultural transmission and hold its meaning in different cultural contexts.



Furthermore, as Fishwick argues that Logos gives an idea a stable form through which it can be preserved and communicated across time and cultures (1985, pp. 103–130). This stability comes from the codification and institutionalization of ideas shared by a figure of importance like Gautam Buddha. In the case of Buddhism: the institution rooted in Buddha's teachings, the process of codification of his teachings began with oral recitation and gradually developed into written scriptures, commentaries, and organized monastic traditions.

Early Buddhist councils helped collect and preserve these teachings, while monasteries, teachers, and systems of Buddhist education carried them from one generation to another a tradition that started "just after the Buddha's passing away (c. 404 bce), by a communal recitation council" where "Ananda, the Buddha's faithful attendant monk, recited the Suttas" (Harvey, 2013, p. 88). This is a process that is still going on as the influence of Buddhism is continually spreading in the contemporary world too. The codification of Buddha's teaching and the subsequent translations into different languages further allowed Buddhism to enter new cultural environments without losing its central philosophical ideas. Hence, Logos gave Buddha's teachings an organized and lasting form that allowed them to survive and spread throughout the world and changed Buddhism into an institution from a loosely held wandering band of Buddha's disciples.

As spoken and written word, as art, or as Logos, the myths about Gautam Buddha and the codification of his teachings, they spread throughout the world through trade routes like silk road. Especially because "Buddhism was attached neither to community nor to locality, neither to shrine nor to hearth, but resided in the hearts of its adherents" (Gombrich, 2009, pp. 27-28). They spread far and wide to places like East and Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and even to some parts of ancient Greece and Scandinavia. Where they transcended the boundaries of culture, language, and belief systems (Foltz, 2010, pp. 37-58). Such cross-cultural communication further enabled the institutionalization of Buddha as well as his teachings elaborating the role of logos in the dissemination of information about a Hero and their journey.

Additionally, in the contemporary world the logos or the way the stories about Buddha and his teachings are transmitted have also evolved taking the form of movies, animation, and comic such as the popular movie *Little Buddha*, documentaries like *The Buddha* by PBS, and *The Buddha: Genius Of The Ancient World* by BBC, animated movies like the *Legend of Buddha*, a manga series *Buddha* by Japanese author Osamu Tezuka, and even the popular Novel *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hess which is heavily influenced by the life and teachings of Buddha and is set in the time when Buddha was still alive. Thus, through logos the mythos of Gautam Buddha has been translated, and transformed into different mediums; from manuscripts in different languages, to extensively researched dissertations and books, to movies and animations. This shows how the influence of a hero transcends not only boundaries in space and culture but also in time and technology.

Furthermore, the "logos- Greek for the word or form that expresses thoughts" (Fishwick, 1985, p. 103), also helped in the establishment of a foundation for apotheosis that propelled Buddha



to godhood. Thus, bringing us to the pillar Theos. “Theos: meaning god in Greek” (p. 81), and according to Fishwick it represents the spiritual, divine, and sacred dimension that anchors our culture, and tradition. It signifies our desire to venerate something or someone that we see as standing above the limitations of life. From gods of the ancient world to legendary heroes and mystics, it is a source of inspiration that guides us to transcend our own limitations. Fishwick argues that popular culture is not merely superficial or secular entertainment, but that it has traditional religious impulses present in our veneration of figures that have made significant contribution to our culture or in other words our cultural heroes who changed the society for the better (Fishwick, 1985, pp. 81-102). This impulse is observed in our tendency to elevate our heroes into godhood through a process called apotheosis.

Apotheosis describes the process through which a respected historical figure is elevated beyond ordinary human history and ordinary human existence and given a sacred or transcendent cultural presence. This process can be called apotheosis. A process where figures who have achieved something of cultural significance begin to represent ideas and values greater than their individual life and expand into the reach of myths, legends, and even religion; through stories, rituals, institutions, and repeated acts of reverence (Campbell, 2008, pp. 127-148). Thus, the pillar Theos through apotheosis describes a process of elevating cultural Heroes, that gives sacred meaning and permanence to popular figures, their achievements, and their teachings, allowing that figure to remain a source of guidance and inspiration across generations.

As Buddha became a godlike figure, he was further stabilized as an important character in human history. The institutionalization of Buddhism as a spiritual and religious tradition elevated him from a spiritual teacher and a philosopher to someone akin to a prophet and even a god. The myths surrounding him gave him supernatural powers and abilities reserved for gods. People who followed Buddha’s teachings themselves developed and practiced codified rituals. All these aspects of cultural elevation of a figure of importance slowly evolved Buddha from a historical figure to a religious one, one who was on par with any other god from any other religious tradition.

As discussed above apotheosis in popular culture is the process, or tendency humans have to push our greatest heroes, teachers, and achievers from the realm of history to the realm of divinity. Theos as a pillar of popular culture therefore understands the search for the sacred within the mundane, when a figure becomes popular with the masses, those figures are seen as a projection of the distant divinity held within the true nature of reality into the realm of the common where the divinity becomes real in the form of the heroes we are inspired by.

It has become common knowledge that, when Siddhartha Gautam attained enlightenment to become Buddha, it is believed that he was able to veer inside the true nature of reality and embody it in the flesh. This tale made him a tangible symbol of divinity among common people. Hence, it is easy to understand his rise to become God-like human who walked among humans and preached ways to understand true nature of divinity to everyone. Making divinity accessible to everyone in the process. He became an eternal presence that people could turn to



for hope and spiritual guidance, in this manner his teachings also took on a religious aspect, which isn't a negative as the religion surrounding Buddha has managed to be a symbol of divine achievement, liberation, and self-fulfillment to many people around the world.

Consequently, the six pillars of popular culture discussed above make concrete the seventh pillar. The contribution Ethnos, Heroes, Demos, Mythos, Logos, and Theos combined turn Buddha into an icon. An Eikon is "a tangible symbol of intangible belief" (Fishwick, 1985, p. 131), where Buddha today is an icon who represents peace, self-realization and enlightenment. An icon is a representation of an idea that summarizes it in a glance and allows instant recognition.

Often, icons are visual in nature as visual communication can often communicate a lot of information and make them relatable to the masses. "The word is once again Greek—meaning image, picture, or representations that are external expressions of internal convictions. Icons (to use the English spelling) objectify deep mythic structures of reality, expressing the eternal in terms of the temporary—everyday things that make every day meaningful" (p. 131). Thus, icons are more than just images, they are visual shorthand, we don't have to read books or listen to sermons to understand them. The icons represent the ideas in their completeness, and with clarity independently without the need for external references (pp. 131-154).

Looking at the contemporary image of Gautam Buddha, it instantly portrays the ideas propounded by Buddha and everything he ever stood for. A majority of people will immediately associate the image of Buddha with concepts like peace, enlightenment, self-fulfillment, ascension from limitations, etcetera. Even if someone has not studied the life, and philosophy of Buddha, his images immediately summarize the major ideas discussed in all the books, research works, and discussions emanating in the general psyche about Buddha (McMahan, 2008, pp. 3-26). Such is the power of an Eikon that transcends the parameters of simple image and stands for an idea in completion as we have seen in the case of Gautam Buddha.

Thus, we find that Marshall Fishwick's seven pillars of popular culture help explain how Siddhartha Gautam developed from a historical figure, a prince, and a spiritual teacher, into a global cultural icon. His cultural roots initially shaped his spiritual journey, while his enlightenment and the subsequent return to society established him as a cultural Hero who changed the entire society through his gifts. His teachings then gained popularity among ordinary people from all backgrounds and not just his ardent followers and disciples. Similarly, the stories surrounding him uplifted him into the realm of gods, while the religious and philosophical texts established Buddhism as an institution. Trade routes carried his image across different cultures and generations in antiquity, and so does the modern media today. Together, these processes transformed Buddha into an icon of peace, wisdom, enlightenment, and self-realization.

This new image that combines the many images of Buddha together; of a prince, a monk, a sage, a philosopher, a spiritual teacher, and a god, simultaneously transcends any singular image of or idea about the Buddha. Hence the new Icon that appears can be seen as the popular



image of Lord Buddha. Therefore, we have discovered that the popular image of Buddha that is present in the contemporary world can be easily understood by using Marshall Fishwick's seven pillars of popular culture.

Furthermore, we can also discover that Fishwick's seven pillars can also be used to understand how other religious and historical figures become icons of popular culture expanding its scope as a powerful analytical tool in cultural, historical, and literary studies. Figures such as Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, Jesus Christ, Prophet Muhammad, Confucius, other spiritual teachers, saintly figures from different religions, political figures, and even academics like Socrates, Plato, Einstein, and Darwin, often transcend their original religious, historical, spiritual, academic, and cultural settings through stories, teachings, institutions, rituals, images, and modern media. Ultimately through this process, they are remembered not only as religious leaders or historical personalities, but also as symbols of human ideas, ideals, and values that people can recognize across cultures. Therefore, Fishwick's framework can be applied more broadly to examine how the images of historical, cultural, religious, political, and even academic figures are created, communicated, and transformed into lasting icons of popular culture.

**Transparency Statement:** The author confirms that this study has been conducted with honesty and in full adherence to ethical guidelines.

**Funding:** The study received no external funding.

**Conflict of Interest:** The author declares there is no conflict of interest.



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