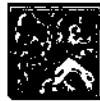


Elements of Buddhist Iconography

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Munshiram Manoharlal
Publishers Pvt. Ltd.

ISBN 81-215-0246-2

This edition 1998

Originally published in 1935 by
Harvard University Press, Cambridge

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Printed and published by
Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd.,
Post Box 5715, 54 Rani Jhansi Road, New Delhi 110 055.

FOREWORD

COOMARASWAMY'S *A New Approach to the Vedas*, Luzac and Company, 1933, *The Transformation of Nature in Art*, Harvard University Press, 1934, and the present volume, which is published under the auspices of the Harvard-Yenching Institute, are based on the following convictions, which have gradually been developing in his mind.

In the first place, Buddhist art in India — and that is practically equivalent to saying art in India — begins about the second century before Christ with a well-developed set of symbols in its iconography. It does not seem possible to completely separate Buddhism as religion and as art from the main current of Indian religion and art, or to think that these symbols suddenly developed as a new creation. Therefore Coomaraswamy proceeded to study from a new point of view the symbolism which pervades the whole early Vedic literature of India, trying to discover whether concepts expressed symbolically in the literature of the aniconic Vedic period may not have found their first iconographic expression in early Buddhist art.

In the second place, he noted many surprising similarities between passages in the mediaeval Christian theologians and mystics, such as St Thomas, Meister Eckhart, Ruysbroeck, and Böhme, and passages in the Vedic literature — similarities so striking that many sentences from the Christian writers might be taken as almost literal translations of Sanskrit sentences, or vice versa. The conviction developed in him that mystical theology the world over is the same, and that mediaeval Christian theology might be used as a tool to the better understanding of ancient Indian theology. This theory he proceeded to apply even to the Rig Veda, assuming, contrary to the general opinion, no complete break in thought between the Rig Veda and the Brahmanas and Upanishads. In many obscure and so-called "mystical" stanzas of the Rig Veda and Atharva Veda he finds the same concepts vaguely hinted at which are employed in a more developed form in Brahmanism and Buddhism.

The present study of the Tree of Life, the Earth-Lotus the Word-Wheel, the Lotus-Throne, and the Fiery Pillar tries to show that these symbols can be traced back beyond their first representation in Buddhist

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iconography through the aniconic period of the Brahmanical Vedas, even into the Rig Vedic period itself, and that they represent a universal Indian symbolism and set of theological concepts.

Objective linguistics is apparently near the end of its resources in dealing with the many remaining obscurities of Rig Vedic phraseology. This new metaphysical approach is welcome even though to the matter-of-fact linguist it may seem that ideas are not being built up on the basis of words but that words are being made to fit ideas.

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"Symbols cannot be studied apart from the references which they symbolise."

Ogden and Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*, p. 20

"To determine the import of names is the same as to determine the fundamental character of concepts."

Stcherbatsky, *Buddhist Logic*, I, p. 459

"I speak thus (in images) because of the frailty of the intelligence of the tender children of men." "But since thou takest thy stand upon the principles (*dharmesu*), how is it that thou dost not enunciate the First Principle (*tattvam*) explicitly?" "Because, although I refer to the First Principle, there is not any 'thing' in Intellect corresponding to the reference 'First Principle.'"

Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra, II, 112 and 114

"The picture is not in the colors . . . the Principle (*tattvam*) transcends the letter."

Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra, II, 118-119

Mirate la dottrina, che s'asconde, sotto il velame degli versi strani.

Dante, *Inferno*, IX, 61

PART I

TREE OF LIFE, EARTH-LOTUS, AND
WORD-WHEEL

“Die Menschheit . . . versucht sie, in die greifbare oder sonstwie wahrnehmbare Form zu bringen, wir könnten sage zu materialisen, was ungreifbar, nichtwahrnehmbar ist. Sie schafft Symbol, Schriftzeichen, Kultbild aus irdischen Stoff und schaut in ihnen und hinter ihnen das sonst unschaubare, unvorstellbare geistige und göttliche Geschehen.”

— Walter Andrae, *Die ionische Säule, Bauform oder Symbol?* 1933, p. 65.

THE iconography (*rūpa-bheda*) of Indian and Far Eastern art has been discussed hitherto almost exclusively with respect to the identification of the various hypostases as represented “anthropomorphically” in the later art. Here it is proposed to treat those fundamental elements of Buddhist symbolism which predominate in the earlier aniconic art, and are never dispensed with in the later imagery, though they are there subordinated to the “human” icon. In neither case is the symbol designed as though to function biologically: as symbol (*pratīka*) it expresses an idea, and is not the likeness of anything presented to the eye’s intrinsic faculty.¹ Nor is the aniconic image less or more the likeness of Him, First Principle, who is no thing, but whose image it is, than is the “human” form. To conceive of Him as a living Tree, or as a Lamb or Dove, is no less sound theology than to conceive of Him as Man, who is not merely *mānuṣya-laukika* but *sarva-laukika*, not merely *mānuṣa-raupya* but *viśva-raupya*, not human merely but of Universal Form.² Any purely anthropomorphic theology is to that extent specifically limited; but He takes on vegetative, theriomorphic, and geometrical forms and sounds just as much and just as little as he dons flesh.³ So the Bodhisattva vows that he will not be Utterly Extinguished until the last blade of grass shall have reached its goal.

What has been said above is to dispel the notion that in discussing symbolism we are leaving life behind us; on the contrary, it is precisely by means of symbols that *ars imitatur naturam in sua operatione*, all other “imitation” being idolatry. Before proceeding, it only remains to be said that if any particular stress seems to be laid on Buddhism, this is strictly speaking an accident. Buddhism in India represents a heterodox development, all that is metaphysically “correct” (*pramiti*) in its ontology and

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symbolism being derived from the primordial tradition; with the slight necessary transpositions, indeed, the greater part of what is said could be directly applied to the understanding of Christian art. In the following discussion, no ideas or opinions of my own are expressed, everything being taken directly, and often verbally, from Vedic or Buddhist sources.

It has often been remarked that in Pali texts there is no express tradition prohibiting the making of anthropomorphic images of the Tathāgata, originally "So-come" or "So-gone," later "Who has entered into the Suchness," which might account for the designation of the Buddha only by aniconic symbols in the early art.⁴ And this is essentially true; the representation by aniconic symbols is not in kind a Buddhist invention, but represents the survival of an older tradition,⁵ the anthropomorphic image becoming a psychological necessity only in *bhakti-vāda* offices. However, the *Kāliṅga-bodhi Jātaka* (J., IV, 228), in the Introduction, enunciates what amounts to such a prohibition, and may well have been the point of view current in Buddhist circles at a much earlier date than can be positively asserted for the Jātaka text. Here Ānanda desires to set up in the Jetavana a substitute for the Buddha, so that people may be able to make their offerings of wreaths and garlands at the door of the Gandhakuṭi, as *pūjanīyatthāna*, not only when the Buddha is in residence, but also when he is away preaching the Dharma elsewhere. The Buddha asks how many kinds of hallows (*cetiya*)⁶ there are. "Three," says Ānanda, with implied reference to contemporary non-Buddhist usage, "viz., those of the body (*sāṅgika*), those of association (*pāribhogaka*),⁷ and those prescribed (*uddesika*)." The Buddha rejects the use of bodily relics on the obvious ground that such relics can only be venerated after the Parinibbāṇa. He rejects the "prescribed" symbols also because such are "groundless and merely fanciful" (*avattukam manamattakam*), that is to say only artificially and by convention referable to the absent being for whom a substitute is desired; the terms as employed here in a derogatory sense can only mean "arbitrary." So "Only a Mahābodhi-rukkha, Great-Wisdom-tree, that has been associated with a Buddha is fit to be a *cetiya*, whether the Buddha be still living, or Absolutely Extinguished." This occurs also in the *Mahābodhivamsa*, PTS. ed. p. 59.

In the absence of specific definition, it may be assumed that the class of "associated" symbols included also such other aniconic representations as the wheel (*cakra*), feet (*pāduka*), *trīśūla* ("nandi-pada"), and/or other geo-

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metrical, vegetative, or even theriomorphic forms actually met with in early Buddhist art. It is true that, like the tree, these symbols had older than Buddhist application, and one could imagine objections made accordingly — had not Sujātā indeed mistaken the Bodhisattva for a *rukkhadevatā*? But where no objection had been made to the tree, none could have been logically raised in connection with the other symbols. These in fact came into use in connection with the setting up of local *cetiya*s as objects of reverence, as substitutes for pilgrimage to the original sites, the different symbols serving, as is well known, to differentiate between the several Events. The wheel, for example, had special reference to the first preaching in Benares. At the same time, the use of such symbols, with their inherent metaphysical implications, must have contributed to the early definition of the mythical Buddhology. It is perhaps because the Jātaka passages do not yet take account of Four Events, but only of the most important, the Great Awakening — a recent event from the Hīnayāna point of view — that the Buddha is made to say that a Buddha can *only* be represented rightly by a Great-Wisdom-tree.

By *uddesika*, “prescribed,” corresponding to *vyakta*, “manifest,” in the Brahmanical classifications of icons, we should expect that anthropomorphic images were indicated, and this is confirmed in the *Khuddakapāṭha-Atthakathā* (PTS. ed., 1915, p. 222), where *uddissaka-cetiyaṃ* is explained by *buddha-paṭimā*, “an image of the Buddha.” Notwithstanding that a use of anthropomorphic images of any kind must have been rare in the Buddha’s lifetime, it is clear that the Commentators understood that the Buddha’s own position was definitely iconoclastic. It is true that the Buddha image, with its non-human *lakkhaṇas*, can no more than other Indian images be thought of as the likeness of a man, nevertheless the objection made must have depended on the generally human appearance of such images, this appearance being inappropriate to him who was “not a man.” We ought perhaps rather to say that it was in this way that the ancient custom of using predominantly aniconic imagery was thus explained and justified. The attitude of those who actually made use of anthropomorphic images is defined in the *Divyāvadāna*, Ch. XXVI, where it is explained that those who look at earthen images (*mṛnmayā-pratikṛti*) “do not honor the clay as such, but without regard thereof, honor the deathless principles referred to (*amara-samjñā*) in the earthen images.” The rendering of *uddesika* as “pre-

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scribed" is supported by the expressed *yathāsamdiṣṭam* in the *Divyāvadāna* passage cited below.

The Buddha is represented as dealing again with the same problem in later life, and now (*Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, V, 8 and 12 = *Dīgha Nikāya* II, 140–143), in view of his approaching death, he declares that after the Total Extinction there are four places proper to be visited by the community, and these "places which should stir deep feeling" (*saṃvejanīyāni thānāni*, cf. *pūjanīyatthāna* cited above) are those at which the four crises of the Buddha's life had been passed. With respect to the edification resulting from such visits, we are told that at the sight of the *thūpa* of the Rāja Cakkavatti "the hearts of many shall be made calm and glad."

Later traditions represent the Buddha himself as having not merely sanctioned but actually instituted the use of anthropomorphic images. Thus, according to the *Divyāvadāna*, p. 547, Rudrāyaṇa (sc. Udāyana) desires a means of making offerings to the Buddha when he is absent; the Blessed One said "Have an image of the Tathāgata drawn on canvas, and make your offering thereto" (*tathāgata-pratimām paṭe likhāpayitvā*, etc.). Rudrāyaṇa calls his painters (*cittakarā*). They say that they cannot grasp the Blessed One's exemplum (*na śaknuvanti bhagavato nimittam udgrahītum*). The Blessed One says that is because they are affected by lassitude (*kheda*, equivalent to *śīthilasamādhī* in *Mālavikāgnimitra*, II, 2), but "bring me a piece of canvas" (*api tu paṭakam ānaya*). Then the Blessed One projected his similitude upon it (*tatra . . . chāyā utsṛṣṭā*), and said "complete it with colors" (*raṅgaiḥ pūrayata*), adding that certain texts are to be written (*likhitavyāni*) below. And so "everything was by them depicted according to prescription" (*yathāsamdiṣṭam sarvaṃ abhikhitam*).

According to the version of this legend preserved by Hsüan-tsang (Beal, *Life*, p. 91) it was an image of sandal-wood rather than a painting that was made for Udāyana; a skilled imager was transported to the Trayastrimśas heaven by Maudgalyāyana, and after contemplating there the appearance and features of the Buddha, who was preaching the Law to his mother, the artist was brought back to earth and carved the figure in his likeness. This image, which Hsüan-tsang identified with one that he saw at Kauśambī, was nevertheless as he mentions elsewhere (*Si-yu-ki*, Beal, *Records . . .*, II, p. 322) borne through the air (we may interpret, "transferred as a mental image in the mind of a sculptor") to Khotān, and there became the arche-

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type of innumerable later copies, which are regarded as possessing a similitude of univocation, so that we find at Long Men a statue called "Udāyana's" (Chavannes, *Mission archéologique . . .*, pp. 391-2). There is also the tradition of still another image, made in gold after the Buddha's final departure, and it is with reference to an image in this "succession" that an inscription of about 665 at Long Men (Chavannes, *loc. cit.*, p. 362), remarks "Si l'influence et le modèle ne disparurent pas, c'est grâce à celà" where the thought expressed is tantamount to this, that the image is still his whose image it is. With respect to such traditional representations it is also said in an inscription of 641 (Chavannes, *loc. cit.*, p. 340-1) "Le K'i-chö est devant nos yeux; Na-kie peut être représentée," that is, "when we look at these statues, it is just as if we saw the Buddha himself on Vulture Peak, or his likeness in the cave at Nāgarahāra" (where he left his "shadow" (cf. *chāyā utsrṣṭā* in the *Divyāvadāna* passage cited above). As the Long Men inscription of 543 (Chavannes, *loc. cit.*) reminds us, "they cut the stone of price in imitation of his supernatural person." In the absence of the past manifestation in a human body (as Śākyamuni) and before the future manifestation (of Maitreya) the Wayfarer resorts to a means of access to the transcendental principles from which all manifestations proceed. The image merely as such is of no value; all depends on what he does who looks at it; what is expected of him is an act of contemplation such that when he sees before him the characteristic lineaments, it is for him as though the whole person of the Buddha were present; he journeys in the spirit to the transcendent gathering on Vulture Peak (*Saddharma Puṇḍarīka*, Ch. XV). Aesthetic and religious experience are here indivisible; rising to the level of reference intended, "his heart is broadened with a mighty understanding" (inscription of 641, Chavannes, p. 340). Cf. Mus, *Le Buddha paré . . .*, BEFEO., 1928, pp. 248-9. The experience of those who beheld the likeness of Buddha is further described at length in the *Divyāvadāna*, Ch. XXVI, in connection with Māra's exhibition of the Buddha's similitude.

Our present concern is, however, primarily with the aniconic representations, and first of all with the symbolic representation by means of the Tree. That the ancient symbol of the Tree of Life, *vrkṣa* (= *rukkha*), *vanaspati*, *akṣaya-vaṭa*, or *eka aśvatthu* of the Vedas and Upaniṣads, should thus have been chosen to represent the Buddha is highly significant; for as we

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have already indicated, every traditional symbol necessarily carries with it its original values, even when used or intended to be used in a more restricted sense. In order to appreciate the full content of Buddhist symbolism we must accordingly take into account the fundamental implications of the symbols employed; in fact only a knowledge of the symbols in their total significance will suffice for an understanding of their values as they are employed in connection with the developed Buddhology. To sum up, then, the pre-Buddhist and some possibly later references: ⁸ the Tree of Life, synonymous with all existence, all the worlds, all life, springs up, out, or down into space ⁹ from its root in the navel centre of the Supreme Being, Varuṇa, Mahāyakṣa, Asura, Brahman, as he lies extended on the back of the Waters, the possibilities of existence and the source of his abundance. That Tree is his procession (*utkrama*, *prasaraṇa*, *pravṛtti*) in a likeness (*mūrta*), the emanation of his fiery-energy (*tejas*) as light, the spiration of his breath (*prāṇa*); he is its wise, indestructible mover (*revivā*).¹⁰

The "Lord of the Forest" (*vanaspati*) is already in the Vedas a familiar symbol of the supreme deity in his manifested aspect. There may be cited, for example, *Rg Veda*, I, 24, 7, "King Varuṇa as pure act lifted up in the Unground the summit (*stūpam*) of the Tree"; I, 164, 20-21, "Two Fairwings (*suparnāḥ*, birds, angels) in conjoint amity rest in the one same Tree; one eats the tasty fig (*pippalam*), the other looketh on and does not eat . . . there those Fairwings sing incessantly their part of lasting-life"; Varuṇa, Prajāpati, or Brahman manifesting as the moving spirit in the cosmic Tree is called a Yakṣa, cf. *Atharva Veda*, X, 7, 38, "A great Yakṣa proceeding in a seething on the back of the waters, in whom abide whatever Angels be, as branches of the Tree that are round about its trunk," and *Kena Up.*, 15-26, "What Yakṣa is this? . . . Brahman."

The description of the World-tree in the *Maitri Up.*, VI, 1-4, VII, 11, and VI, 35, may be quoted at length:

"There are verily two forms of Brahman, with and without likeness (*mūrta*, *amūrta*). Now the That which is in a likeness is contingent (*asatya*); the That which is imageless is essential (*satya*) Brahman, light. That Light is the light of the Supernal-Sun. He verily becomes with OM as Self. He assumed a Trinity, for the OM has three factors, and it is by these that 'the whole world is woven, warp and woof, on Him.' As it has been said, 'beholding that the Supernal-Sun is OM, unify therewith thyself.' . . .

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The threefold Brahman has his root above, His branches are space, air, fire, water, earth, and the rest. This is called the Single Fig-tree (*eka aśvattha*); and therein inheres the fiery-energy (*tejas*) that is the Supernal-Sun . . . the One Awakener (*eka sambodhayitr*). . . . This, verily, is the intrinsic form of space in the vacuity of the inward man (*antarbhūtasya khe*); that is the supreme fiery-energy (*tejas*), determined as the Trinity of Fire, Supernal-Sun, and Spirit . . . the Imperishable-Word, OM. And by that Imperishable-Word, the fiery-energy awakens (*udbudhyati*), springs up, and expands; that is verily an everlasting basis (*ālamba*) for the vision of Brahman. In the spiration it has its place in the dark-heat that emanates light, proceeding upwards as is the way of smoke when the wind blows, as a branching forth in the firmament, stem after stem . . . all-pervading as contemplative vision. . . . He who is yonder, yonder Person in the Supernal-Sun, I my-Self am He."

Here the World-tree becomes a "Burning Bush," in an imagery closely related to that by which in several Vedic texts Agni is spoken of as a cosmic pillar, supporting all existences. Almost all of this is valid Buddhology, if only we substitute "Buddha" for "Brahman," remember the large part played by the concept of the Fiery-Energy (*tejas*) even in canonical texts, and take account of the early iconography as well as of the literature. Especially noteworthy is the designation of the "Single Fig-tree" as the World-form of the "One Awakener" (*eka sambodhayitr*) and "enduring basis of the vision of Brahman" (*brahma-dhīyālamba*); for just so also is the Buddha's Fig-tree (*aśvattha*) constantly spoken of as the "Great Awakening" (*mahā-sambodhi*); being the chosen symbol of the Buddha's unseen essence, it is an enduring basis for the vision of Buddha; it might have been called in Pali *Tathāgata-jhānālamba*, cf. the terms *ārambaṇa*, *āvaraṇa*, *upadarśana*, used of the Tathāgata's various manifestations, *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka*, text, p. 318, and *ālamba* = *viśaya-grahaṇa*, Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośa*, I, 34, and II, 34, b-d. The *Mahā Sukhāvātī-Vyūha*, 32, in fact, merely paraphrases the words of the *Maitri Up.* cited above, when it is said that "All those beings that are constant in never turning away from the vision of that Bodhi-tree are by the same token constant in never losing sight of the supreme and perfect Awakening" (*tasya bodhi-vṛkṣasya . . . yad uta anuttarāyāḥ samyak-sambodheḥ*). In the *Maitri Up.* text the expression *udbudhyati*, "awakens," applied to the Tree, is significant, and

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like the designation *uṣarbudh*, "awakened at dawn," which in the *R̥g Veda* is commonly applied to Agni, recalls him who is typically *buddha*, the "Wake."¹¹ As for the Fiery-Energy (*tejas*), this is the element of fire present as an unseen energy in all existences, but preëminently manifested by Arhats or the Buddha, e. g. in the case of the "Double Miracle," the "Conversion of Kassapa," or when (*Samyutta Nikāya*, I, 144) the Buddha takes his seat in the firmament immediately above Brahmā. In *Theragāthā*, 1095, where *arahatta* is clearly synonymous with Buddhahood, the *ugge-tejo*, "sharp fiery-energy," is the flaming sword of Understanding (*paññā* = *prajñā*) whereby Māra is defeated. In *Dhammapada*, 387, the Buddha "glows with fiery-energy," *tapati tejasā*.¹²

Amongst the late Āndhra reliefs from Amarāvati may be seen numerous remarkable representations of the Buddha as a fiery pillar, with wheel-marked feet, supported by a lotus, and with a *trīsūla* "head" (Figs. 4-10);¹³ these have been almost completely ignored by students of Buddhist iconography.¹⁴ Remembering, however, (1) that Agni is born of the Waters, or more directly from the Earth as it rests upon the Waters, hence specifically from a lotus (*puṣkara*), *R̥g Veda*, VI, 16, 13, and (2) is frequently spoken of as the pillar that supports all existences, e. g. *R̥g Veda*, I, 59, 1-2, and IV, 13, 5, it is clear that the Buddhist fiery pillars represent the survival of a purely Vedic formula in which Agni is represented as the axis of the Universe, extending as a pillar between Earth and Heaven.¹⁵

No less remarkable than the fiery pillars of Amarāvati is the unique representation of a Buddha in the form of a *kalpa-vṛkṣa* or "wishing-tree" at Sāñcī (Fig. 1).¹⁶ This Tree of Life is like the fiery pillars at Amarāvati as to its head and wheel-marked feet, but its trunk is built up of superimposed lotus palmettes,¹⁷ and bears laterally by way of fruits pearl garlands and other jewels suspended from pegs such as are elsewhere spoken of as *nāga-danta*. It may be remarked that only perhaps a century later (*Mahā Sukhāvati-vyūha*, 16, and again, *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka*, V, 29-33) the seekers after Buddhahood are compared to small and great herbs, and small and great trees, and that Sukhāvati is said to be crowded with jewelled trees made of precious metals and gems, presumably representing various degrees of enlightenment. The jewel-tree of Sāñcī corresponds directly to the Bodhi-tree of Amitâyus, Tathāgata, described in the *Mahā Sukhāvati-vyūha*, 31: "A thousand *yojanas* in height . . . it is always in leaf, always in flower,

