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**The Image of the Buddha:
Shaping the Ethical, Social and Psychological Landscape**

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The sculpted image of the Buddha has been a primary factor in Buddhist practice and education for over 2000 years. It serves as the central symbol of Buddhism in every country where Buddhism has spread. The Buddha sitting in lotus posture, the most commonly displayed image, focuses attention on the practice of meditation as well as qualities of his teaching that include calmness, discipline and introspection. Most significantly, the likeness of the Buddha focuses attention on him as a human being, someone who discovered the path to relieve suffering in the world. The image represents two dimensions regarding tenets central to Buddhism; the extinction of suffering and the path to the extinction of suffering. This paper begins an exploration of how the Buddha image expresses these basic views as well as the social, psychological and ethical implications of Buddhism represented in a visually symbolic language.

Numerous aspects of Buddhist teaching are expressed through the nonverbal language of the three dimensional form of the Buddha statue. The tranquility expressed on his face represents extinction or freedom from suffering that is the state of enlightenment. His overall body posture simultaneously relaxed and held with complete attention, represents the practice of meditation that is utilized to attain this freedom. The juxtaposition of these two qualities, calm abiding and total absorption, is unique to the Buddha representing a balanced state. The posture shows how equanimity is achieved through a process that requires effort yet also provides rest and renewal (Fronsdal, 2006).

The smile of the Buddha reflects an inner state of contentment and knowing that signals friendliness to both self and other. It is not a smile of self satisfaction but rather, it is a smile that is with the universe, not against or despite it. Friendliness, in the representation of the Buddha, is a point of contact with the practitioner who offers devotion. Qualities of friendliness that are denoted in the demeanor of the whole representation include gentleness, kindness and presence. These are expressed in the relaxed muscle tone, the open posture and in the soft and rounded angles of the body and clothing.

The sculpted figure of the Buddha emphasizes teachings coming from the human experience as well as transmission from one human to another. The icon, as a representation of the Buddha, actually provides an opportunity for direct transmission or

darshan. Darshan is a Sanskrit word for meeting with the divine and describes transmission that is possible with sacred images as well as with a spiritual teacher or written teachings (Eck, 1981).

Symbolic forms become a potent means of communicating the dimension of Buddha wisdom they embody (Dzogchen Ponlop, 2006). While Buddha images are created to invoke a direct experience of the teachings, they also serve as a connection to a lineage of transmission beginning with the Buddha's original experience of enlightenment and the teachings he offered following his awakening. This lineage, being passed down through individual practitioners and teachers, is an unbroken line that is reinforced by the veneration of symbolic representations that unite the line to the source of the teachings.

The veneration of the image of the Buddha serves to focus individuals on shared values for the development of both the individual and society. It provides an opportunity for individuals to connect with the highest aspirations of humanity as well as the aspirations of their individual journey. In this way the image of the Buddha provides a vision of what is possible for each individual and humanity as a whole (Armstrong, 2001). As the image and a sense of Buddhism are increasingly accessible throughout the world the figure of the Buddha becomes an archetype of wisdom and compassion. In Jungian psychology archetypes are universal patterns repeatedly expressed through the human psyche and in cultural forms such as art and literature (Jung, 1964).

The Buddha image demonstrates that finding happiness, peace, clarity and wisdom are the fundamental inheritance of humanity. Sustained interest in the image across time and culture suggests that it represents the aspiration towards our greatest human capacity despite a history of suffering shared by mankind. As a symbol of hope it reminds us that the individual is the basis of all societal change and that one person has tremendous power to effect change in the world.

The Buddha image represents a nonviolent revolution in human consciousness that captures the imagination of each new generation that it touches. The juxtaposition of the Buddha as a young adult, with that of the depth of his teachings, provides a level of hope to young aspirants and those educating future generations. The sitting figure is one of contemplation versus action, perhaps the most difficult discipline for youth. Learning to harness one's energy is an important and challenging exercise in the maturation process.

The Buddha in sitting meditation is said to represent a mountain (Sogyal, 1994), rooted in the earth yet pointing toward heaven. This posture is grounded and centered, qualities that reflect stability and strength. The gesture of touching the earth, one of the most common depictions of the Buddha, reinforces the reality of his enlightenment. Seeking the earth as confirmation, the Buddha unites the principles of heaven and earth by grounding his experience in the world.

The sitting figure of the Buddha represents his experience at various times in his life including the time of enlightenment, his time in meditation or in interaction with others. Hand mudras provide information as to these activities and are designed to communicate important teachings. Two significant teachings of charity and protection, express fundamental offerings available as the result of his realization. The mudra of charity, with his palm open and down, reflects infinite generosity available to others. The mudra of protection, with his palm open and up, reflects the fearlessness he discovered that is freely offered to others. The mudra of equanimity, with the Buddha's hands stacked openly in his lap, emphasizes the experience of peace and invites viewers to somatically experience what the Buddha taught by emulating this practice in meditation.

Other dimensions of the Buddha's teachings are expressed with various symbolic representations and his figure in other postures. It is significant to note that images of the Buddha standing or walking place him as an active agent in the world. In the depiction of the Buddha lying on his side at the end of his life, he is portrayed meeting death with the same equanimity with which he met life. This final teaching, addressing the impermanence of existence, is paired with the message to his followers to strive well with mindfulness (U Ko Lay, 1998).

All depictions of the Buddha express confidence in the human capacity for realization. His image serves to remind us of the complete knowing inherent in each one of us (Campbell, 1974). Confusion regarding the source of this knowing is evident when the Buddha image is worshipped instead of being understood as a symbolic representation of the profound realization he brought into the world. This worship reinforces the human tendency to project our highest capacity onto a God with super human qualities. This only reinforces the false belief that realization is unattainable and not within ourselves.

Spiritual disciplines are particularly prone to the phenomena of positive transference or projection as seen in idol worship and theistic traditions. Buddhism is not immune and must commit to exploring how the image of the Buddha may be misunderstood as a figure to worship instead of emulate. This danger exists within Buddhist culture where veneration can transmute into worship and mask the inspirational and educational purpose of the image. Leaders in the field need to take responsibility for communicating the intent of the Buddha image and bring the fundamental teachings of the Buddha beyond the monastery and university.

The common phenomena of projection on the Buddha statue may be the primary factor most responsible for the mistaken understanding of the Buddha's teachings. His original followers were concerned about this confusion and insisted on symbolic representations that were devoid of his figure. While this thinking persisted for several hundred years the practice of representing the teachings of Buddhism in the form of its original founder eventually became the norm.

The strong movement to depict the Buddha in a three dimensional form may be understood as an interest in appreciating, understanding and relaying the teachings. The

Buddha statue evokes the sense of presence of another being in the imagination of the viewer. This *imagined presence* offers the individual an opportunity to experience kindness, generosity, reassurance and wisdom *as if* these offerings were coming from a living person. This other person, the Buddha, represents the opportunity to receive these offerings in their most pure form. In this way the image provides the opportunity to be experienced as an actual emanation of teachings that are eternally alive. Here imagined presence, emphasized by the power of a three dimensional object to create the sense of another being, can be understood to be a vital factor in the phenomena of darshan or direct transmission.

The task of holding the paradoxical interplay of actual and imagined reality is on the viewer and those responsible for clarifying the interpenetrating principles of body, speech and mind. Body is represented in the form of a material statue and the ephemeral expression of an artistic rendering may be understood as a dimension of speech (Easwaran, 1985). In the image of the Buddha the vehicles of body and speech communicate qualities of mind that are beyond conceptual expression.

Learning how to more deliberately shape the communication of Buddhist principles to meet the needs of individuals across historical context and culture includes the presentation of sacred iconography. Understanding the recent proliferation and also destruction of the form of the Buddha will help us understand the sociological and psychological currents underlying these phenomena. For this purpose I will briefly touch on these trends including the proliferation of Buddha images across the landscape of Southeast Asia and in North America.

In the book, *Buddha in the Landscape*, John Hoskin documents the large number of Buddha statues being constructed throughout Thailand (Standen & Hoskin, 1998). In a nation where the vast majority of the population is Buddhist the drive behind this phenomenon has deep cultural and religious roots. The lay expression of devotion tied to the Buddha image is an opportunity for individuals to experience a heart connection to the teachings and bring these into the world. In Angkor Wat this is poignantly expressed where one observes altars maintained on a daily basis at every site where the form of a Buddha once existed. One can speculate that this proliferation and devotion is tied to an interest in maintaining cherished values in the face of rapid change and global insecurity.

In the west we see the Buddha popularized on T-shirts, by rock bands, in “hip” restaurants and in “chic” home décor. While much of this may be regarded as a fad, it nevertheless demonstrates a growing societal longing for what the Buddha represents in an increasingly fragmented and frightening world. A small but growing number of temples, meditation halls and stupas represent a more substantial development of Buddhism in the west. While lay practice in the west places more emphasis on meditation than devotion, increasing relationship to the Buddha image appears to be a signifier for a growing aspiration to realize Buddha nature and bring its benefits to the greater whole.

The misunderstanding of Buddhist teachings by non Buddhists may be partly due to the misperception of Buddha as a God to worship. The destruction of the Bamiyan stone carvings of the Buddha in Afghanistan is a recent example of this. It is improbable that the fundamentalist subculture responsible for this destruction would necessarily understand the intent of megalithic imagery to represent sacred teachings and not a God. The challenge for Buddhists faced with the painful loss of these magnificent historical depictions is to understand and accept the inherent emptiness of both the figure and its destruction (Suzuki, 1970).

The image of the Buddha, like all perceived phenomena, challenges us to grapple with the interplay of absolute and relative perspectives. Paradoxically, as a sacred icon, it is specifically designed to elicit contemplation that cuts through categorization. It is our task to understand both its timeless meaning and the changing impact of the Buddha image on society and the individual. Symbols, like words, shift in their meaning and timely relevance. The ethical challenge is to promote a relationship to Buddhist iconography that embraces both reverence and non-attachment.

Artists and Buddhist practitioners have a responsibility in presenting the iconography of Buddhism to larger audiences. Offering these images at institutions of study and practice is an opportunity to further the education of Buddhist principles. Public audiences may benefit and learn from qualities of the Buddha image that are aesthetic, cultural, historic and inspirational. Subtle aspects of Buddhist teachings may be transmitted from the original intent of sculptors to imbue statues with qualities of the Buddha. For the artists of Southeast Asia these have been translated as tranquility, kindness and enlightenment (Standen & Hoskin, 1998).

The power of the Buddha statue can be understood in highlighting the ceremonial practice of bringing a statue to life as practiced in various countries of Asia. The final task of the artist is to enliven the figure by painting the eyes. This ritualized practice demonstrates how the lineage is essentially revitalized each time it is characterized and celebrated symbolically. Learning to see through the eyes of each generation and the changing needs of society offers us the opportunity to practice as the Buddha and freshly adjust our approach to our audience. This can mean emphasizing or deemphasizing the importance of the Buddha figure in our roles as educators and practitioners.

In conclusion, further investigation of the Buddha image as a religious, social and psychological phenomenon is recommended to deepen our understanding of the role of visual imagery in relaying Buddhist teachings. The intent of this paper is to make explicit what is implicitly experienced in the presence of Buddhist iconography. In my own experience, being in this presence in the temples of Southeast Asia, has significantly contributed to my insight and devotion. It is my hope that this brief exploration will spark a cross-cultural and inter-religious dialogue to further awareness and benefit sentient beings everywhere.

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