

Sri Lanka International Journal of Buddhist Studies (SIJBS)

Volume V (2019), ISSN- 20128878

**The Examination of the Cosmic Effect of *Yakṣas* and
Buddha Images in Buddhist Iconography**

Ranjana

Chief Editor: Iromi Ariyaratne



Sri Lanka International Buddhist Academy (SIBA)

Pallekele, Kandasale

The Examination of the Cosmic Effect of Yakṣas and Buddha Images in Buddhist Iconography

Ranjana

Abstract

This paper broadly explores the cosmological analysis of *Yakṣa* and Buddha images in Buddhist art. In Buddhist art, images and symbols are done in such a way that it conveys certain religious ideas, and are capable of representing the philosophy of Buddha and showing also the interconnection with the supernatural world, which at the same time gives a spiritual quality. Buddhist cosmology can be said to be most similar to or to resemble the multi-dimensional cosmology. The primary Buddhist symbols throughout all Buddhist countries are associated with biographical scenes preceding the Buddha's life. In the early phase the image of the Buddha was understood in a universal cosmological sense. This accords not only with ancient Indian concepts but also with the later philosophical ideas of the Buddha as conceived in Mahayana thought. The development of religious thought gave an additional dimension of meaning to the symbols used in the scenes of the Buddha biography. *Yakṣa* and *Yakshini* fill the early Buddhist monuments of *Bhārhut* and *Sānci* and the former serve as prototype for the first iconic representation of the Buddha and associated with cosmological effect. In this homogenous system of cosmological and universal concepts, many of the Buddhist symbols, having completely divergent origins, acquire a high degree of ideological unification. The physical encounter with Indian culture led to an awareness of the extent to which the use of sculptural forms and images has played an integral part in the religious life of the people. The purpose of this paper will be to trace the manifold connections and transformations that pertain to the cosmological characteristic and iconography and mythology of the *Yakṣa*.

Keywords: Biographical Scenes, Mahayana, Cosmological, Symbols,

Introduction

The overall focus of this paper is not specifically only on *Yakṣa* images, but it also deals with the cosmic effect of Buddha images, predominantly with reference to historical and doctrinal considerations, which disclose the contextual and ideological background of the cosmic effect of the Buddha image. Historically cosmology has had quite a broad scope, and is found in different religions (i.e. Vedic, Jainism, and Buddhism). Every religion addresses many questions related to space, time and the universal existence and its origin. However, Buddhist cosmology approaches these questions using philosophical method (e.g., dialectics) and this can be seen and analyzed through Buddha images and symbols. Thus the act of transcending both of cosmic space and cyclic time is formulated by a symbolism that is both cosmological and spatial. In the Buddhist *Sutta* (the scriptures containing the Buddhist sermons), a consistent Buddhist cosmology is presented with the final analysis and reconciliation of cosmological comments. In several *Suttas*, the Lord Buddha described other worlds and states of being, and one

Sutta described the origin and destruction of the universe, the *Agganna Sutta* of the *Dhiga Nikaya*. This *Sutta* was presented by two novices, *Bharadvaja* and *Vasettha*. Buddhist cosmology can explain the structure of the universe and focus on how all beings have relations with its existence. Being proficient in the study of cosmology will tell us why we are born and how to develop ourselves into a better life. The picture of the world presented in Buddhist cosmological descriptions cannot be described literally, with a literal description, or by any scientific experiment. This picture may be inconsistent with astronomical data that has been used up to the present day. However, it can be perceived by everyone through the means of meditation: the entire universe has been seen through the *Dibbayacakkhu* (the divine eyes) by the Lord Buddha and people who have trained the mind enough to perceive the existence of all worlds and their interrelatedness.

The Beginnings of the Yakṣa image in Buddhism

The *Yakṣa* is one of the most powerful images that has undergone change according to the historical evolution of Indian religion and society. The Indian non-Buddhist art that we have evidence of as the oldest Indian sculpture in the age of *Aśoka* and before the period of *Aśoka*, is chiefly concerned with the cult of nature-spirits, the earth goddess, the *Nāgā* or Serpent kings of the waters, and the *Yakṣa* kings who ruled the four quarters. The Vedic literature lays out a world of popular beliefs including the worship of *Yakṣa* and *Nāgā* as tutelary divinities or genii loci, and of feminine divinities, powers of fertility. Buddhist and Jaina texts contain many references to the cult or shrines of *Yakṣa* or *Nāgā*. In the Mahabharata, a yaksini is referred to as receiving a daily service and cult at Rajagrha, and another Yaksini shrine was "world-renowned." The city of Nandivardhana in Magadha seems to have been named after the tutelary *Yakṣa* Nandi and Vardha. The Mahvamsa, Chapter X, describes the cult of *Yakṣas* in Ceylon. *Yakṣas* are usually gentle; sometimes they act as familiars or guardian angels of individuals. The *Yakṣa* Kuvera (Vaisravana, Vaisramana), who is closely associated with Siva, and Regent of the North, thus one of the Four Great Kings, the Lokapalas, is a very powerful genius. The early Buddhist art at *Bhārhut* and *Sānci*, probably slightly later, reflects the prevalence of the animistic cults in placing low-relief figures of the *Yakṣa*, guardians of the four quarters, as protectors of the entrance gateways, besides the guardians of the quarters we find at *Sānci*, figures of beautiful *yakshini* or dryads, whose function may be partly protective, but is also in large degree honorary and decorative. The oldest Indian sculpture so far known appears to be the well-known 'Parkham statue' of the Mathura museum which bears, according to recent readings, an inscription referring to *Kunika Ajatasatru*, of the Saisunaga dynasty, who died in 618 B.C.E. closely related to the female figure perhaps a Yakshi, from Besnagar. Two statues found at Patna bear the names of other *Saisunaga* emperor, *Udayin* and *Nanda Vardhana*, both of the 5th century B.C.E.

Yakṣa images represent a being that is incorporated with cosmic and metaphysical concepts, and certain elements of Buddhist and *Yakṣa*-related iconography come to be linked in sculptural representations. The *Yakṣa* is expressed in terms of images drawn from nature. The first comprehensive analysis on the *Yaksha* was done by

Ananda Coomaraswamy, who traced the development of the cult of the *Yakṣa*. Ananda Coomaraswamy concluded that elements of the later anthropomorphic iconography already exist in the 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C.E. He gives an account on the basis of archaeological remains and literary evidence which prove that images of divinities and human beings both were depicted in relief and existed already in 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C.E. He pointed out examples in Buddhist art, the representation of Bodhisattvas in human form which is illustrated in *Jataka* with the symbolic indications of Gautama as *Bodhisattva* (Siddhartha) or as Buddha (Tathagata). According to him “craftsmen capable of producing the Parkham and Patna images, and the reliefs at *Bhārhut* and *Sānci* would have had no difficulty in representing Gautama in human form had they been required to do so.” A. Coomaraswamy demonstrates the antiquity of the imagery of *Yakṣa*, and sees them as origin of Buddha images that were later modelled on the same pattern as those of the *Yakṣa* images. The Buddhist artists were inspired by this art. He discusses the Aryan as well as the non-Aryan elements in the evolution of the iconography and religious history of the cult. The images of *Yakṣa*, *Yakshi*, *Nāgā*, and *Kubera* have been found in different parts of India belonging to the 3rd to 2nd century BCE, or perhaps even earlier if one takes into account the various terracotta figurines that occur as early as 400 B.C. They not only coexisted and flourished in Mathura, but also in other parts of India along with the many other religious sects. *Yakṣas* and *Nagas*, along with the worship of and offerings made to domestic household deities. *Yakṣas* and *Yakshi* fill the early Buddhist monuments of *Bhārhut* and *Sānci*, and the former serve as prototypes for the first iconic representations of the Buddha. It shows the popularity of *Yakṣa* worship and how it became part of figure representation in Buddhist and Jaina religious monuments.

Despite certain apparent conceptual contradictions between, on the one hand the ascetic ideals and metaphors associated with the world-renouncing Buddha and, on the other hand, the life supporting sensual *Yakṣa*, the use of such nature deities in Buddhist art represents a grounding of new religious ideas in current popular symbolism. *Yakṣa* and their attendant iconography were employed in the aniconic stage of Buddhist art, in which certain symbols were drawn from the life of the Buddha. Large statues of *Yakṣa* and *Yakshinis* are found at many places like Patna, Mathura. With *Yakṣas* as a prototype, it can be observed that the Bodhisattvas seem to have developed into two broad categories, either represented as free standing or seated figures carved in round, or in relief, that would have served as independent cult images, and as figures associated with the Buddha. The second are the *Yakṣa* that occurred either as guardian deities or as attendants to worshippers in early Buddhist art, are represented with a flower, cauri-bearers, or folded hands. Early depictions of the *Yakṣa*, such as the freestanding sculptures from Parkham, have a massive body, with turban and umbrella as a royal prince or hero. Among the earliest sculptures of this type are two *Yakṣas* from Patna, a *Yakṣi* from Besnagar, and the Didarganj. Because of the characteristic use of highly polished chunar sandstone in the Patna and Didarganj sculptures, they are thought to have been carved during the Mauryan period (322-183 B.C). The other categories of female *Yakshis*, depicted on the architectural sculpture, occur in various poses. The

Mathura artists depicted the shalabhanjika figures on the railing pillars and reliefs. In most of these specimens, the female figure is depicted in a graceful attitude, standing on a prostrate dwarf under a tree, with one hand clasping a branch, while the other is resting on the hip. Most of these figures are depicted with heavy girdle and the usual ornaments like an elaborate headdress and necklaces and anklets. Both the *Nāgā* and the *Yakṣas* were worshipped under similar conditions in the early historical Period, and both were depicted by the main religious movements.

Certain elements of Buddhist and *Yakṣa*-related iconography come to be linked in sculptural representations. For instance, on top of the north torana at *Sānci*, one can see a triad consisting of the central symbol of the Dharmacakra flanked by two *Yakṣas* carrying cauris. Both flowers and cauris are iconographic emblems associated with the *Yakṣa*. The flower links the *Yakṣa* with the domain of nature and fertility; the cauri is a symbol drawn from a vocabulary of social referents and has meaning particularly within the context of a political, courtly setting, in which king is being attended by his servants. By implication, the use of these cauri-bearing *Yakṣa* casts the Buddha in the role of a worldly monarch.

Nature cosmology effect of Yakṣas

In the earliest references, the *Yakṣas* is expressed in terms of images drawn from nature. *Yakṣa* and Buddha images are associated with nature and trees. These ancient *Yakṣas* may be seen to embody a nexus of natural principles and abstract metaphysical concepts, in other words, a nexus of the cosmic facets is featured in an important verse from the *Atharva veda*, with the *Yakṣa* being compared with a primeval cosmic tree. The tree of life, synonymous with all existence, all the worlds, all life, springs up, out or down into space from its root in the navel centre of the supreme being, *Varuna*, *Mahayakṣa*, *Asura*, *Brahman*, as he lies extended on the back of the waters, the possibilities of existence and the source of his abundance. *Varuna*, *Prajapati*, or *Brahman* manifesting as the moving spirit in the cosmic tree is called a *Yakṣa* (*Atharva veda*, 10,7,38). As a kind of “Microcosm”, trees may shelter stone altars dedicated to village fertility deities (often *Yakṣa*); they may be utilized as image or metaphor of the entire cosmos; or they may symbolize the absolute center of the world and support of the cosmos.

Cosmic effect of the Buddha image

Every particle of matter in the entire universe, seen and unseen, is accounted for in Buddhist cosmology. In the early phase the image of the Buddha was understood in a universe cosmological sense. These accords not only with ancient India concepts but also with the later philosophical ideas of the Buddha as conceived in Mahayana thought. This universalization implied also imperial authority, since the Buddha, being the spiritual ruler of the universe, was taken as a counterpart of world-ruler (*cakravartin*). The Buddha’s birth is compared to the triumphal rising of the sun, which lights the whole world. In the Pali texts the Buddha is “the kinsman of the sun”; he is also the “Eye of the world”, evoking the recurrent Brahmanic identification of the sun and cosmic eye, which “surveys the whole” and “sees all things” from its solar centre the whole circumference of the cosmic wheel is visible;

the Buddha, like the sun, see all things simultaneously. The Buddha was equated with the Brahmanic mahapurusa, the primordial man or personified cosmos, whose body identical with the world-body which originated from him.

The first case implies a slow and laborious temporal process; in the second, the Buddha and Bodhisattvas can travel to other far-away worlds (such as pure land of the Buddha Amitabha) at the speed of light. The first case implies individual nirvana dominated by temporal metaphor, the second, a cosmic nirvana dominated spatial metaphor. The multi headed God or Bodhisattva, a commonplace in both Hindus and Buddhist iconography, expresses the emanation to the four directions from their point source of origin. The four heads of Brahma face the cardinal direction to represent the expansion of existence into space from its cosmogenetic centre. A similar concept is conveyed by the eleven-headed *Avalokitesvara* and the numerous other examples of multicephalous divinities that appear in the Brahmanism and Buddhist pantheons. The eleven headed *Avalokitesvara* is an aspect of compassion emanated to the eleven directions space. *Vajrasattva*, who represents Enlightenment innate within the person, has four heads facing the cardinal directions, he carries a five prong vajra and his *Stupa*-like crown which shows Buddhas emerging in the four directions. The Buddha *Mudrās* give meanings to the five fingers as well. Each finger, starting from the thumb, represents elements that surround us: sky, wind, fire, water, and earth. Humans can appeal to the deities by using any combination of finger poses. The “cosmic man” another possible origin of the tradition of the 32 marks, is the conception of the cosmic man, an idea that probably paralleled the rise of Indian mathematics. The *Lakkhaṇa-sutta* of the *Dīghanikāya*, a discourse devoted to explaining the causes and significance of the thirty-two bodily marks of the “great man”, was incorporated with cosmic effect. The trees associated with the previous Buddhas interrelated with nature cosmology. According to the *Mahāvamsa*, the branch of *trees* which are associated with all the Buddhas was planted in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) at the place where the sacred *Bodhi Tree* stands today in Anurādhapura. The branch of Kakusandha’s tree was brought by a nun called Rucānandā, Konagamana’s branch by Kantakānandā, and Kassapa’s by Sudhammā. The names of the trees which are associated with each of the Buddhas are: *Asvattha* with Gotama, Kakusandha and Koṇḍañña, *Sirīsa* with Dīpaṅkara; *Nāga* with Maṅgala, Sumana, Revata and Sobhita; *Ajjuna* with Anomadassī; *Mahāsona* with Paduma and Nārada; *Salala* with Padumuttara; *Nimba* with Sumedha; *Bamboo* with Sujātā; *Kakudha* with Piyadassī; *Campaka* with Atthadassī; *Bimbajāla* with Dhammadassī; *Kanikāra* with Siddhattha; *Asana* with Tissa; *Āmanḍā* with Phussa; *Pātālī* with Vipassī; *Puṇḍarīka* with Sikhī; *Sāla* with Vessabhū; *Udumbara* with Konāgama; *Banyan* with Kassapa.

The cosmological Buddha image of the historical Buddha is one of them. The icon’s imagery reflects two main objectives, i.e., to show Buddha’s lives (past and present) in a compendium, and the phenomenal world where he lived to fulfill his mission of savior from the endless cycle of reincarnation. The cosmological iconography can only be linked to the historical Buddha. It is more likely that the cosmological imagery was used to indicate a higher form of *Śākyamuni* and it is fitting that its

formation should take place at the end of centuries of devotion to the historical Buddha. The textual sources backing the cosmological iconography favour also a *Śākyamuni* identification. There is an theory that the cosmological Buddha iconography originated in Khotan and spread to the northern sites of the silk route. The *Khotanese* cosmological imagery may refer to the Buddha *Vairocana*. The imagery of the cosmological Buddha developed in *Khotan* seems to interpret visually the *Avatamsaka* Sutra's text; the imagery of the cosmological Buddha, especially in Chinese version, seems to derive from the sutra of cosmology. Finally, the identity of the cosmological Buddha should be considered in the frame of reference of the entire development of Buddha image-making. This iconography reflects a visual and doctrinal summary of preceding trends. The cosmological Buddha images were formed in Central Asia by adopting and adapting iconographic and visual motifs which were already use in late *Gandhāra* stelae. The complex cosmological imagery depicting this concept of oneness cannot be accepted as the product of the rising cult of Buddha *Vairocana*. The cosmological Buddha is, indeed, the highest celebration of the historical Buddha *Śākyamuni*, as an individual icon, at the summit of the development of exoteric Buddhism. The image of Buddha, painted or sculpted, bearing cosmological scenes on the robe the wear, are without doubt representations of *Śākyamuni* as the cosmological Buddha.

In the *Vajrayana* the identity of the Buddha and the Sun is explicit. The supreme Tathagata is termed the "Great Sun" (Mahavairocana), the supreme eye of all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The cosmological domain was predominant in Tantric Buddhism. The early Buddhist "genesis" (which is both cosmogenesis and psychogenesis) was also perceived to be a process emanation, yet this implies a degree of degradation, of falling into the flow of existence (samsara) where "everything is suffering". In Buddhist art, the artistic treatment of the human body is performed in such a way that it conveys certain religious ideas, that of the Buddha and also certain other principles, of arrangement and construction in architecture as well as in pictorial compositions capable of representing the Buddhist view of the terrestrial and supernatural world, which at the same time gives a spiritual quality. The doctrinal and geographic dimensions have revealed much in regards to the nature of artistic representation of Buddha. However, it is only through the culminations of both that the socio-cultural dimension can arise to have any effect on the significance and emergence of the anthropomorphic Buddha. The artists in the *Gandhāra* region fused Greek realism which had Hellenistic origins with the more naturalistic inspired Indian mysticism. In essence, the art created in the *Gandhāra* region during the Hellenistic period derived its *content* from Indian mysticism while the *form* was that of Greek realism. This true hybrid art form was the product of almost two centuries of interactions between Indo-Greek culture. Evidence of Indo-Greek interaction in *Gandhāra* can be proven through numismatic evidence. The anthropic principle, categorically evaluates human beings or intelligence. This principle standpoint is different from that of Buddhism by evaluating intelligence or human beings only, because Buddhism formulates a life-centric view. The perspective of life and the universe in Buddhism positions life at the center of everything. In Buddhism, since the universe and the

Earth are the environment for sentient beings, they are constructed by the common karma of the sentient beings themselves. These diverse cultural interactions owe much of their credit to the Silk Road transmission of culture. The Silk Road is a term used to describe a large trade network that connected Eastern and Western Asia with the Mediterranean regions and Europe. Only in Mahayana Buddhism is the Buddha represented in human form. Interestingly, the shift to Mahayana Buddhism shares parallels between its more theistic Greek counterparts. It was at this point in time that the concept of salvation was introduced through the creation of the bodhisattva. The concept of bodhisattva implies salvation through delivering oneself and others from a life of suffering through adoption of this ideal.

References

- Coomaraswamy, A.K., *Elements of Buddhist Iconography*, Munshiram Manoharlal publishers: New Delhi.
- Coomaraswamy, K. Ananda, (1927) *The Origin of the Buddha Image*, Art Bulletin 9, no. 4 : 287-328 :(s.l.)
- Coomaraswamy. Ananada, (1956) *Introduction to Indian art*, Theosophical publishing house: Adyar.
- Coomaraswamy. Ananada, *The dance of Shiva-14 Indian essays*, The Sunwise Turn: 51 East New York.
- Eliade, Mircea, (1991) *Images and symbols: studies in Religious symbolism*, Princeton University press: USA.
- Faure, Bernard. (2009) *Unmasking Buddhism*, Wiley- Blackwell publishers:(s.l.)
- Fergusson, James, (1876) *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, John Murray: Albemarle Street, London.
- Foucher, A, (1972) *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art*, Indological Book House: (s.l.)
- Grunwedel, Albert, (1901) *Buddhist Art in India*, Bernard Quaritch: London.
- Howard, Angele Falco, (1981) *The Imagery of the cosmological Buddha*, (s.n.):(s.l.)
- Huntington, S.L, (1990) *Early Buddhist art and the theory of aniconism*, Art Journal, vol 49 no.4, winter: (s.l.)
- Karlsson, Klemens, (2000) *Face to face with the Absent Buddha: The formation of Buddhist Aniconic Art*, Elanders Gotab : Stockholm.

- Karunaratne, T.B, (1969) *The Buddhist Wheel Symbol*, Buddhist Publication Society: Kandy, Sri Lanka.
- Lakkhana Sutta, (2011) *The Discourse on the Marks* | D 30/3:142-179, Theme: The 32 marks of the great man, Translated by Piya Tan ©2007.
- Mittal, Kewal. Krishan. (1993) *Buddhist Art and Thought*, Harman publishing house: Delhi.
- Moore, Albert.C, (1977) *Iconography of Religion: An Introduction*, Fortress press: Philadelphia.
- Parimao, Ratan.(1982) *Life of Buddha in Indian Sculpture*, kanak publication: New Delhi.
- Priyadarshan, S, (2011) *The Buddhist symbols*, Arise publishers and distributors, Darya ganj: New Delhi.
- Ridley, Michael. (1983) *Buddhism*, Heritage Publishers: New Delhi.
- Robert Decaroli, (2015) *Image problem: The origin and development of the Buddha image in Early South Asia*, 32, university of Washington press: (s.l.)
- Saibaba, V.V.S. (2005) *Historical Perspective of Theravada Buddhist Devotionalism*, (s.n.) : Delhi.
- Simpson, William, (1996) *The Buddhist Praying-Wheel*, Aryan Books International: Delhi.
- Singh, Anand, (2014) *Buddhism at Sarnath*, Primus books: (s.l.)
- Snellgrove, David.L, (1978) *The Image of The Buddha*, vikas publishing house: New Delhi.
- Snodgrass, Adrian, (1992) *A symbolism of the stupa*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers: (s.l.)
- Snodgrass, Adrian, (1985) *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, SEAP publication: (s.l.)