

This reading assignment includes [Jataka Tales](#).

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THE IMAGE OF THE BUDDHA

The early Buddhists revered Sakyamuni as a mortal teacher who attained enlightenment and finally *Nirvana* – the release of the spirit from its incarnations. This consummation could for them be expressed visually only by abstract forms, such as that of the stupa. There was no means by which his person could be represented. 'For him who (like the sun) has set, there is no longer anything with which he can be compared', declares one of the earliest Buddhist texts. But a religion with the steadily growing popular appeal of Buddhism called for icons as visual aids to doctrine, and stupa gateways were carved with reliefs illustrating his life as early as the late second or early first century BC. A fine example from the stupa at Bharhut in north-central



6.14 King Prasenajit visits the Buddha, detail of a relief from the Bharhut stupa, early 2nd century BCE. Red sandstone. 18 7/8 ins (47.9cm) high. Freer Gallery of Art. Smithsonian Institution. Washington DC.

India depicts the visit paid to the Buddha by a king (6,14). It is a strange mixture of the conceptual and the naturalistic, for while some figures are taller than the columns of buildings by which they stand, elsewhere a remarkable degree of illusionistic skill in carving is displayed – as in the two oxen which trot forwards drawing the royal chariot on the right and are shown head on; and in the hind-quarters of a horse passing through a *chaitya*-arch gateway on the left and, above, a mahout trying to prevent his elephant from pulling down the branch of a mango tree. Altogether a surprising amount of descriptive detail is given. Yet the Buddha himself is represented only symbolically, by a wheel above his flower-strewn throne. The wheel, which had been associated in west Asia with the solar disc, the supreme deity and knowledge, acquired in India additional significance as the multiple symbol of birth, maturity and death and of the great cosmic revolutions in the unending cycle of reincarnations. It also had a more specific Buddhist meaning as the *Dharma-chakra*, the Wheel of the Law (or Doctrine) set in motion when the newly enlightened Buddha preached his first sermon, which, like the wheel of the sun, illuminated all quarters of the earth, giving spiritual light to all beings. In other

early relief carvings the Buddha's ineffable presence is indicated by a horse he rode when he made the great renunciation and left his father's house, or by the Bodhi Tree beneath which he meditated, or by his footprints or simply by an empty seat as in the example illustrated here (6,14). The same symbol is later found in Byzantine and Early Christian art (7,3). Emphasis was placed not on the person of the Buddha Sakyamuni but on his teachings which included the accounts he gave of previous incarnations through which he rose to the potentiality of Buddhahood—each one a kind of parable.

A momentous change came about with a new school of Buddhist thought called by its adherents the *Mahayana* or Great Vehicle (of Salvation) to distinguish it from the earlier form which they dismissed as *Hinayana* or Small Vehicle, later to be named by its followers as *Theravada*, the way of the ancients. Early Buddhism had been a literally 'atheistic' philosophy derived from the Buddha's teaching and especially his final injunction that his disciples should work out their own salvation for themselves. It encouraged withdrawal and the contemplative life of a monastery. The *Mahayana*, however, conceived the Buddha not as a mortal teacher

whose precepts and example were to be followed, but as a god who had existed eternally, like Brahma, without beginning or end. In this form Buddhism became more easily reconcilable with other religious beliefs both in India and, as we shall see, China and Japan. From a transcendental viewpoint, the historical Buddha came to be seen as an illusion in an illusory world; this paradoxically permitted him to be represented by images, for all images are illusory too. At a lower intellectual level the *Mahayana* opened the door to the worship of a Buddhist pantheon of deities visualized anthropomorphically like, and sometimes together with, the deities of other religions. Most important among them were the Bodhisattvas or Buddhas-in-the-making, who, for the salvation of humanity, renounced the *Nirvana* they were capable of attaining.



6,15 Above Gold coin of Kanishka showing the Buddha, late 1st to early 2nd century CE. Formerly Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Seth K. Sweetser Fund).

An image of the Buddha in human form appears on coins issued by Kanishka I, a follower of the *Mahayana*, who, probably in CE 78, became ruler of the Kushan empire, which extended from the Aral Sea through Afghanistan and south-eastwards as far as Benares on the Ganges (6,15). This tiny figure incorporates many of the distinguishing features of later Buddha images, for instance the *ushnisha*, a cranial protuberance indicating superior spiritual knowledge, earlobes greatly elongated by the heavy jewelry he had worn in his gilded youth as a prince, right hand raised in a gesture of reassurance or benediction, a monastic robe, and haloes of sanctity behind his head and body. There must surely have been precedents for these features, either in sculpture or painting. But none of the early surviving Buddhas can be more than approximately dated. They are in two distinct styles, one developed at Gandhara in the north (around Peshawar in present-day Pakistan), the other at the southern extremity of the Kushan empire at Mathura (some 90 miles, 140km, south of Delhi).

Artistically, though not geographically, Gandhara was some way to the west of India. This central Asian frontier region had been opened up to Greek influence in the Hellenistic period, when it formed part of the kingdom of Bactria, ruled over by a succession of Greeks, including the bottle-nosed Euthydemus (5,13). By the time it had become part of

the Kushan empire it was separated from the Mediterranean world by the Parthians (see p. 143), but this did not interrupt the flow of works of art and, almost certainly, of artists as well from Rome's eastern provinces. The result was an art owing as much or more to Rome as to India, an interbreeding of two deeply antipathetic ideals. Yet it was from this strange artistic cross-fertilization that the first great Buddha images were to come, some of the most serene and spiritual of all works of art. To express the idea of divinity in human form Gandharan sculptors turned to statues of Greek and Roman gods, as artists were to do some two centuries later when Christians demanded visual images of Christ (see p. 273). The haloes placed behind the heads of both the Buddha and Christ probably share a common origin (see p. 277). But the sculptors of Gandhara derived more than iconographical devices from the West.

One of the earliest Gandharan Buddhas is also among the most Classical, in a European sense (6,161). Drapery hanging in loose folds, but indicating the form and movement of the body beneath, is like that on contemporary statues of deified Roman emperors or, more appropriately, of the Muses, who brought to humanity the purifying power of poetry and divine wisdom (5,54; 5,76). The pose has an enlivening twist typical of Late Antique sculpture and the head recalls a Greek Apollo. Wavy hair conceals the *ushnisha*, and only the *urna*, a tuft of hair between the brows, and elongated earlobes, remain as distinguishing marks of the Buddha. For the elevated but gentle expression of a heart at peace so eloquently conveyed by this noble figure there was, however, no precedent in the



6,16 Standing Buddha from Hoti-Mardan, 1st to 2nd century CE. Formerly Guides' Mess, Hoti-Mardan, Pakistan (present location unknown)

art of the West. In another, probably later, Buddha head (6,17) Greek symmetry, balance and repose are again combined with the peculiarly sensual spirituality of

India to create a sublime image of Eastern serenity, an Orientalized Apollo. The meeting of East and West in the art of Gandhara brought forth a new type of human beauty, which was to haunt not only the Indian image of the Buddha but also, and perhaps more strongly, the Chinese.



6,18 Seated Buddha from Katra, Mathura, India, 2nd century CE. Sandstone, 27 1/4ins (69.2cm) high. Government Museum, Mathura.

In contrast, the Mathura Buddha images are purely Indian, as exemplified by an imposing high relief in the red sandstone of the region (6,18). Here the Buddha, or rather, as the inscription reveals, Sakyamuni before he achieved enlightenment, sits in the cross-legged yoga posture beneath the Bodhi Tree. Royal status is indicated by the lion throne and the two attendants with fly-whisks, spiritual power by the heavenly beings hovering above and by the distinguishing marks on his body, including wheels incised on the palm of his hand and the soles of his feet. The torso with distended skin has the same somewhat pneumatic quality of the *yakshis* at Sanchi (6,5) or even of the very much earlier Indus Valley statuettes (2,19). The same may be said of the very different – extremely virile and forceful, monumental despite its small size – standing figure identified by an inscription as Maitreya, the Buddha of the future, wearing the jewelry normal on Bodhisattvas and with his virility clearly indicated beneath his clinging garment (6,19).



6, 17 Head of Buddha from Gandhara, 3rd century CE. Lime composition, 16 1/10" high. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

6,19 Maitreya from Ramnagar (Ahicchatra), India, 2nd century CE. Red sandstone, 26ins (66cm) high. National Museum of India, New Delhi

Images of this type influenced the sculptors of Gandhara. They appear, for instance, on a Gandharan frieze (6,20) surrounded by figures which would not look out of place on a Roman sarcophagus of about the same date – one man appears to be wearing a toga and another, Classically posed beside him, is in a state of stark nudity rare in Indian art even in the most uninhibited erotic scenes. But the sculptor had evident difficulty with the Indian yoga pose, for which the arts of the West provided no model. (The folded legs look like a bolster beneath the torso and the upturned right foot has been transformed into a swirl.) The frieze depicts the Buddha's birth, his meditation under the Bodhi Tree and, in the part illustrated here, his first sermon in the Deer Park (symbolized by the wheel between the two deer on the throne) and his death, with the last disciple meditating in front of the bed. Difference in scale indicates relative importance. The Buddha on the Mathura relief also is much larger than his attendants: they are no more than shadowy presences beside the living teacher, who bends forwards slightly with a compassionate expression on his face, as if to address the spectator. On the Gandhara frieze, the small subsidiary figures are



full of vitality and jostling movement, while the Buddha is withdrawn in static detached monumentality, like a heroic-scale statue surrounded by living worshippers. He is represented as a god, far removed from the joys and sorrows of humanity, as he was to be in later Buddhist art.



6,20 Details of relief from Gandhara showing the First Sermon in the Deer Park and the Death of the Buddha, Kushan, late 2nd to early 3rd century CE. Dark gray-blue slate, 26 3/8ins (67cm) high. Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC.

of the religious art of the world (6,21). The superb technical accomplishment of the carving may perhaps derive from Gandharan practice, but has been further refined by an exquisite precision of detail and by a sensuously subtle definition of form unlike anything in the West.



6.21 Teaching Buddha from Sarnath, Gupta, 5th century CE. Sandstone, 5ft 2ins (1.58m) high. Sarnath Museum.

Gandharan sculptors had represented the Buddha as an anthropomorphic god, almost as in the West. In the Gupta statue he appears as a divine essence, pure spirit purged of all earthly matter, light without heat. Such a figure seems to be a product of the meditation it was intended to stimulate, transcending the senses among which Indians include the intellect. Essential symbols from earlier representations of the subject have been assimilated and subjected to the general effect – the heavenly beings, the wheel, the deer (sadly damaged) and the disciples. The Buddha's exquisitely expressive hands, in one of the *mudras* or gestures which constitute an esoteric sign language, turn the Wheel of Doctrine, the *Dharmacakra*. Yet the statue derives its silencing religious aura, the spiritual potency of non-violence, as much from its form as from its symbolism. Otherworldly serenity is suggested by perfect symmetrical equilibrium and is the combination of the simplest and most self-contained of geometrical figures. The great circles of the halo are echoed in the lines which indicate the creases of the neck, the waist and the drapery beneath the legs. Two triangles intersect, one enclosing the body from the crown of the head to the knees, the other expanding along the lines of the narrow-waisted, broad-shouldered torso to the heavenly beings who hover on the edge of the halo. The head is oval, an allusion maybe to the Indian idea of the egg-shaped cosmos, and the sharply cut lines of eyebrows and eyelids repeat its curves. It is a mark of the sculptor's genius that so severely abstract a configuration could be fused so apparently naturally and effortlessly with an image of such gentle humanity, one which is supernatural without being in any way unnatural.

Like many Indian statues, the figure is under life-size. In pursuing an inner spiritual reality, a pursuit which immunized them from the Western obsession with naturalism and the lifelike, Indian sculptors often, and

The arts of both Gandhara and Mathura contributed to the formation of what is generally called the 'Classical' style in Indian art. It reached maturity in the three-century-long Gupta period named after Chandra Gupta I, who was crowned king of kings in the old Mauryan capital of Pataliputra in CE 320. A high relief of the Buddha preaching his first sermon is among the finest examples of this style and, indeed,

perhaps most effectively, worked on a small scale, though they occasionally went to the opposite colossal extreme. They also evolved a canon of bodily proportions designed to give heroic stature even to small-scale figures, but based on mathematical ratios and thus more closely akin to that of ancient Egypt than to that derived from visual appearances in Classical Greece. (The distance between the chin and the top of the forehead provided the module, multiplied nine times for a full-length figure.) Careful observance of this intellectually conceived canon did not, however, preclude sensuous handling when the subject – matter demanded it – to indicate, for instance, the nature of a Bodhisattva. Physical beauty attracted the eye but also disposed the mind to meditate beyond the range of the senses and the intellect. A red sandstone torso, probably later than the Gupta period but maintaining the same high standard of technical accomplishment, illustrates the extreme sensitivity with which the velvet-soft but firm flesh of a lithe athletic youth could be rendered, bulging slightly above the belt and set off by sharply cut jewelry and the scarf of antelope skin (6,22). Here again, as at Sanchi (6,5), full-blooded life and provocatively swaying movement are suggested by the *tribhanga* pose. A relief at Ajanta of the Naga king – the serpent deity who had come to be regarded by Buddhists as a protector – seated in the pose of royal ease with his two wives, is rendered with still greater naturalism (6,23).

6,22 Torso of Bodhisattva from Sanchi, post-Gupta (?), 5th century CE. Sandstone, 34 1/4 ins (87cm) high. Victoria & Albert Museum, London.



6,23 Nagaraja and his wives, Ajanta (cave 19), late 5th century CE.

