

The Death and Resurrection of the Buddha

A striking feature of the earliest Buddhist iconography is the absence of the Buddha. Images, carved in stone, show a group of followers paying homage or listening to the teaching; but in the Buddha's place appears a Dhamma-wheel, a Bodhi tree, a pair of footprints, or just an empty seat. Only later do Buddha images appear, their resemblance to the god Apollo betraying their Greek influence.

The Buddha's absence in the early scenes is sometimes explained as a symbol of 'not-self' or 'emptiness'. According to this theory, the Greeks, who came into contact with Buddhism during their period occupying the North-West of India, were unused to this mode of thought, unable to relate to so abstract a symbol as an empty seat, and so they started making images.

But there is no particular reason to think that Greeks would have had any more difficulty with the doctrine of not-self than Indians. Indeed, there are several strands of Greek thought that might prepare one to accept not-self better than pre-Buddhist Brahmanism, with its overwhelming stress on a monistic conception of the 'Self'. When the Greek King Milinda questioned the monk Nagasena, not-self was a key issue; but Milinda had no more problems with it than many of the Buddha's contemporaries. Furthermore, if the empty seat was meant to express the Buddha's transcendence, to be later replaced by a more humanistic image, this would flow counter to the tides of history, which were steadily transforming the Buddha from a perfected human into a cosmic deity.

But for me, the last nail in the coffin of the 'empty Buddha' theory came when I saw two images from ancient Assyria. The first, dated about 1750 B.C., shows Hammurabi, King of Babylon, receiving the law from his god, Marduk. In a pose typical of contemporary iconography, Hammurabi stands face to face with his god, impassively assured as they gaze into each other's eyes. Hammurabi's right arm is raised to separate us, the observers, from the plane of communication as Marduk touches his arm with a rod and circle, signs of fertility and power. There is no question of humility or supplication. Underneath the image is a pillar, a distant prototype of King Asoka's, listing the god's judgements, reasonable and humane, perhaps the first code of law. But to our minds the most startling thing is the casual and very immediate, unquestioned presence of the god.

And how very different from the second image, just 500 years later. In the interim, Assyria had disintegrated into chaos and rebuilt itself in a radically new form, the first really violent and brutal regime known. About 1230 B.C., Tukulti-Ninurta, Tyrant of Assyria, had a stone altar built that marks the beginning of religion as we know it. Tukulti appears twice – first standing, then kneeling. This may be the first attempt to visually represent time and motion, itself a sign that change had become a key focus of concern. But never before had a king appeared in such a beggarly pose. And even more remarkable, the throne before which he grovels is empty. Empty! The god is gone. This vicious warlord is reduced to begging, to pleading – the first prayer. The empty throne also appears in other contemporary artwork, and was reported by the Greek historian Herodotus. It thus seems very likely that this symbol would have been familiar to the

Bactrian Greeks, who under Alexander the Great had conquered Babylon before pushing into India. In fact, the idea of representing the Buddha with an empty seat, far from being alien to Western thought, may well have originated through Greek or Babylonian influence. And the meaning of the empty seat is made crystal clear in contemporary writings.

‘My god has forsaken me and departed
My goddess has failed me and keeps at a distance
The good angel who walked beside me has disappeared.’

This disappearance of the gods, reflected in various ways throughout the ancient world, must rank as one of the most traumatic events in human history.

‘One who has no god, as he walks along the street
Headache envelops him like a garment.’

However one may choose to explain such an event, the analogy with Buddhism is obvious. The empty seat is not an expression of not-self, but of impermanence. It does not represent the Buddha’s transcendence, but his mortality. How devastating must the Buddha’s passing away have been to his followers! This was perhaps his greatest teaching – ‘Conditions decay. Strive diligently!’ But while the enlightened monks reflected sagely on impermanence, the great mass of devotees wept and wailed, tearing out their hair and lamenting. This trauma to the young and delicate religion, I feel, bears a curious resemblance to the trauma which the baby Siddhattha, only seven days old, must have felt with the death of his mother. And just as the Buddha later used that experience as a reflection on impermanence, so too the young religion seemed to bravely confront the loss of their Founder with the image of the empty seat. The very absence of the Buddha throws the emphasis squarely on the followers. It is we, they seem to cry, only we who must aspire to live out the teachings!

But this early commitment was not to last long. Inevitably, there was a longing for some more tangible manifestation of the Buddha’s presence, and the slow drift towards the deification of the Buddha began. This trend suffered from no shortage of precedents. Jesus is merely the most familiar of a whole genre of gods who, starting their career as kings, teachers, or prophets, died as ordinary mortals, only to be gradually resurrected by their distraught followers in a glorified, transcendent, immortal form. Naturally enough, too, the followers would be eager to see in this transformation a promise of their own immortality. A vestige of this tendency can be discerned even today in the idiom: ‘Don’t speak ill of the dead.’ This taboo is a hangover from that most stubborn of superstitions, the fear of the dead, which harks back to a time before the origin of the abstract concept ‘death’. But notice the result. Upon dying, the dark side disappears from the public domain; it is only acceptable to speak of the bright. Usually the dead are soon forgotten, and so the process does not go very far. But for the exceptional individuals – the heroes, the sages, the leaders – their memories are kept alive in monuments, in stories, in institutions, and ideas. Some of the older stories may preserve traces of the dark side of the heroes- here think of the Jahweh of the Old Testament, or the Greek myths – but as time passes the dark traces will fade and vanish; that is, from the acceptable, communally authorized versions. But the dark side still lurks unapprehended in the cellar, and so even the most exalted of theistic or transcendentalist conceptions can never escape the

problem of evil. Psychologically, then, the progressive ascription of non-human, transcendental qualities to the dead can be seen as a denial of reality, a drift from the sober acceptance of mortality to insistence on an irrational, unfalsifiable mysticism. Mere humanity is marginalized as metaphysics takes centre stage. The history of this process in Buddhism has been told elsewhere in detail. Here I simply wish to round out my story.

The move towards the resurrection of the Buddha can be discerned in early doctrinal developments. The Sarvastivada school, for example, held that all dhammas, past, present, and future, exist. Wherever did they get such an odd idea? An attempt to answer this question on purely doctrinal grounds will surely miss the point. Sarvastivada was a large, popular religion, and this doctrine catered to the followers' desire to fill the gap left by the Buddha's disappearance. If all dhammas 'exist', how could the Buddha have died? This tendency found popular expression in the monk Upagupta, renowned among the early Sarvastivada as a 'second Buddha', skilled in means, who was later to become one of Buddhism's mysterious long-lived arahants. His chief function was to sustain the Sasana by halting impermanence; and his image is still worshipped in some Theravada countries today, eating his meal while looking over his shoulder to stop the sun in its course.

It was during the same general time-frame that Buddha images started to appear. Now what does a Buddha image signify? If I were asked that, I would answer that their beauty and grace remind us of the Buddha and his teachings, encouraging us to emulate them. And, no doubt, many Buddhists would say something similar. But we should be careful about reading such ideas back in time. It was very widely believed throughout the ancient world that an image did not just symbolize the god; it *was* the god. Through the supposed power of resemblance, idols were felt to possess a miraculous, magical power to actually manifest the divine. And so from ancient times until today, religions have been full of stories of statues or images which were supposed to occasion miracles of all sorts. And Buddhism is no exception. Buddhist countries today abound in amulets and images used purely as magic totems. I would suggest that this was probably the main motivation behind the invention of the Buddha image.

The Greek influence on the early Buddha image is unmistakable. But don't let the Greeks' reputation for rationality fool you – idol worship, divination, and magic were rife through the Hellenic world. Apollo's image, for example, was universally believed to manifest the god's presence as a source of oracular inspiration. Apollo's influence can be traced, not just in the Buddha image, but elsewhere in the emerging Buddha legend, too. You may be familiar with the image of the Bodhisatta's mother holding a tree branch as she gives birth. This detail is not found in the earliest account of the Bodhisatta's birth, recorded in the suttas, but it is found in the legend of Leto giving birth to Apollo and Artemis.

So the Buddha image would have been used, then as now, primarily as a magic totem, a physical incarnation of the Buddha's essence to be invoked as a source of blessings, of protection, of gain. For the early schools of Buddhism, such as the Theravada and the Sarvastivada, this transcendentalist tendency was held somewhat in check, at least in the official doctrines. But in due course new discourses were written giving full licence for the deification of the Buddha. The 'Lotus of the True Dharma', which some believe to have been derived from a Sarvastivada text, proclaimed straight out that Buddhas remain

forever and their Parinibbana is a illusion. They manifest their true 'dharma-body' for all time, of which their fleshly bodies are but a pale imitation. The Buddhas thus became as ever-present in the new Mahayana doctrine as the Buddha image was ever-present in the home or the temple.

But even this, it seems, was too abstract, and the need was felt for a real, live, flesh-and-blood immortal Buddha. And so the Buddha known as Amitabha (Infinite Light) or Amitayu (Infinite Life) made his appearance in two Mahayana sutras. He was apparently another import from the West, starting life as a sun-god in Persia, the home of monotheism, before donning Buddhist robes. He is obviously a hedonist, though of the enlightened and compassionate variety, presiding over a 'Pure Land' of gentle hills, soft music, flowers, and pure streams, where all one's wishes are immediately satisfied. The entry price to his heaven, apparently, is merely to think with longing of Amitabha on one's deathbed. Once reborn in his realm, after a virtual eternity of bliss, one is guaranteed entrance to Nibbana. So now the followers would not have to be content with just the teachings. The Buddha will always be there to pray to. For Buddhists, just as for Tukulti-Ninurta, the departure of the god was merely a forerunner to his resurrection in glory. And the doctrine of impermanence demonstrated its own inexorability by quietly fading away.