

# **Note on Sri Lankan Buddha Image: Its Independent Origin and Evolution**

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## **Introduction**

The origin and evolution of the Buddha image is always on dispute among scholars. India is mostly accredited for its evidence evolved in Gandhāra (Foucher, 1917), and Mathurā (Coomaraswamy, 1927), during the Kushan reign. Scholars of Sri Lankan Art have sustained three assumptions: 1) an Indian prototype (Paranavitana, 1959), imported from India (Schroeder, 1990) made by Indian artisans (Coomaraswamy, 1914), based on the preceding theories. Only a few scholars assumed of its independent origin (Rahula, 1956; Devendra, 1957). The two-way cross-pollination and the artistic transactions between India and Sri Lanka have been hardly investigated. Thus, this study aims to examine the facts and evidence rendering the independent origin of Sri Lankan Buddha image.

## **Research Problem**

The present study expects to address the research question: “How does the Sri Lankan Buddha image differ from its Indian prototype?” The developed hypothesis for this study is thus, “The Sri Lankan Buddha image displays iconographic characteristics different and distinct from the Indian prototypes suggesting an independent origin.”

## **Objectives of the Study**

The present study aims to examine:

- The Sri Lankan Buddha image displays different and distinct iconographic characteristics advocating an independent origin.
- The iconographic differences resulted from the improvements, or refinements made to the Indian prototypes.
- Any similarities between Indian and Sri Lankan Buddha images could be explained as a result of two-way cross-pollination rather than borrowing from India.

## Theoretical Consideration and Empirical Evidence

The present study mainly consulted and applied both Eastern and Western perspectives of art from different dimensions. This study mainly bestows with Meister Eckhart's theory of *Relationship between Aesthetics and Human Life* (Eckhart, 1956.), and R.G. Collingwood's theory of *Religion Vs Art* (Collingwood, 1938). Eckhart insists that art is religion and religion is art.<sup>1</sup> He believes that the image in the object and that in the artist's mind are the same. Whereas the artist attempts to represent the religious values through the image, the follower sees the religion through the same image. Collingwood's emphasis is that the religious values and practices are obvious, though the images are hidden and unseen in tombs. He exemplifies from Egyptian sculptures, and Roman portraiture (Collingwood, 1938). Both these theories are equally important to the present study in reviewing the scholarly stipulations. Eckhart's theory of mind image is equally stressed in *Sukranītisāra*, a leading Indian text on law, order, and society. Accordingly, the artist should first accomplish the visual-formulation of the image; only an expert of the subject can visualize the image. (*Sk.* Ch. IV, p.70-1). The particular standpoint attests that concept is formed in the mind cognition of the craftsman.

Additionally, the theories relating to *influential* or *inspirational* was taken into consideration when analyzing the cultural and geographical inter-relationship in art since the tradition of image making in each religion has its own roots and processes reflecting numerous factors: cultural and geographical inter-relationships, inspirations, influences, and well-developed native craftsmanship. The particular cultural distinctions always inspire the neighboring traditions *vice versa* thereby evolving distinctive styles, traditions, techniques, and skills that may never coincide with its predecessor (Van Dyke, 1887).

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<sup>1</sup> Meister Eckhart constantly explained the undeniable nature of Art and Religion in his Sermons. Though he speaks from the point of view of the Catholic religion, it equally applies to western as well as eastern concepts of art. Ananda Coomaraswamy compares the similarity between these two concepts from the quotations of *Bṛihadāraṇyaka Upanisad*, 1, 2, 3 and *Taitriya Upanisad* 1, 3. See *Meister Eckhart*, Vol. I & II. (1956). Ed. Franz Pfeiffer. Trans. C de B. Evans. London: John M. Watkins. P. 366-9: Coomaraswamy, Ananda. (1934). "The Theory of Art in Asia," *Transformation of Nature in Art*. New York: Dover Publications.

## **Primary Sources of Data /Empirical Evidence**

Sri Lanka has a wide variety of original primary sources relevant to the study in question. The Pāli chronicles, *Dīpavaṃsa*, *Mahāvaṃsa*, and the Pāli commentaries on the *Tripitaka* are significant in this respect. Equally consulted sources were the *vaṃsa*-literature (*Bodhivaṃsa*, *Thūpavaṃsa* and *Dhātuvavaṃsa*) describing the sacred *Bodhi Tree*, the *stūpas* and the relics. Also studied within this category were the Brāhmi and later rock inscriptions of Sri Lanka and in India such as those at Nāgārjunakoṇḍa and Bodh Gayā, as published in the *Epigraphia Zeylanica* and *Epigraphia Indica*.

## **Methodology**

This study primarily followed the historical research methodology in that literature survey and a field study were performed. The literature survey included library surveys, map studies, archival and museum studies consulting primary sources and scholarly studies. Field study was performed to seek any iconographic evidence to identify and analyze the Buddha images belonging to relevant periods. These visits enabled the exploration of distinct iconographic elements of Sri Lankan Buddha images which were not previously examined by scholars.

## **Key Findings**

### **1. The Phase Of Anionic or Non-Human Representations of the Buddha**

The evidence traced from the Indus valley civilization proves that the portrayal of human figure was known to India over several millennia prior to the phase of Buddhist art. In Buddhist sites, the Buddha was depicted symbolically with the Bodhi tree, the footprint, the wheel of Dharma, the flame of fire, the parasol, and the lotus etc. Significantly, this phase of aniconic representation of the Buddha is totally absent in Sri Lanka except a few examples of *footprint* carved in monolithic stones which were supposedly used as decorative elements.

### **2. Evolution of the Buddha Image as an Object of Worship**

The image of the Buddha in Gandhāra and Mathurā became popular as an object of worship, or an act of merit making with the introduction of Mahayana Buddhism. Thus, it was made with certain iconographic elements portraying the divine or supra- mundane aspects. All these supra- mundane qualities are absent in the early Sri Lankan Buddha images.

### 3. Origin and Development of Buddhist Art in Sri Lanka

As evident in chronicles, Mauryan technicians accompanied Saṅghamittā on her way to Sri Lanka would perhaps introduce certain characteristics to Sri Lankan Buddhist architecture as seen in stūpas, and monastic complexes (*Mahāvihāra*, *Cetiyaṭṭhāra*). Yet, the Buddha image was unknown to Mauryan Buddhism.

On the contrary, Sri Lankan chronicles provide evidence about making the Buddha images that were either placed in the monastic complexes or deposited in the stūpa relic chambers. The two main instances are;

- Moving the “Great stone image of the Buddha” (*ūrusilā patimā*) of King Devānampiyatissa (247 BCE-207 BCE) by the king Jetṭhatissa I (323 CE-333 CE) to the Pācīnatissapabbata Vihāra, and its transfer to the Abhayagiri Vihāra by the king Mahāsena (334 CE-361CE).
- Placing of a seated Buddha image by the king Duṭṭhagāmaṇī (101 BCE-77 BCE) in the relic chamber of Mahātūpa.

Wall paintings in the relic chambers of the stūpas at Mahiyangana, Demaḷa Mahā Sāya, and Tivaṅka Image House, Polonnaruwa, testify to the practice of illustrating scenes of the Buddha's life ‘here and there’ on the interior walls of the stūpa, and painting all the images (of the Buddha) in wrought gold. This again is a Sri Lankan innovation. Significantly, none of such evidence resembles to early Indian Buddha images.

### 4. Epigraphic Evidence Supporting the Sri Lankan Contribution Towards the Evolution of Buddhist Art in the Indian Sub-Continents

There are two important references;

- A Prākṛit inscription datable to the 2nd-3rd centuries CE at Nāgārjunaśrīrāma describes that they had established Sinhala monastery with Sri Lankan architectural elements i.e. cetiyaṭṭhāra and

bodhighara, which was donated in credit of their service to promote Buddhism in various parts of the Indian subcontinent, and in China.

- Ratuboka inscription of Indonesia praises the Abhayagiriya vihāra for its eminent and well disciplined monks (*Jinas*).

Sri Lankan Buddhist works were also translated into Chinese as Cie-tao-lung (Vimuttimagga) and Shan-jian-lu-piposha (Vinaya commentary). These are some references to look for Sri Lankan influence on art and architecture in Asian region vice versa.

## 5. Iconographic Evolution of the Sri Lankan Buddha Image

The iconographic characteristics between Sri Lankan and Indian Buddha images reveal that they are entirely opposed to each other. The distinctive characteristics of Sri Lankan Buddha images would perhaps coincided with the contemporary native artistic influence.

## Conclusion

Following conclusions were obtained;

- The Buddha image in India originated under the influence of Kushans in Gandhāra and Mathurā with distinctive characteristics. None of those were influential in making the Sri Lankan Buddha images.
- The iconographic characteristics employed in the two traditions are distinct to each other. Whereas the images in Gandhāra display elements of Graeco-Bactrian deities, those of Mathurā demonstrate the characteristics traceable from native cult images of *yakṣas*. Buddhist sites at Amarāvati and Nāgārjunakoṇḍa apply the Buddha image in reliefs or motifs on the exterior walls of the stūpa dorm (*garbha*) as a decorative element, prior to the making of image as a free standing sculpture. None of these characteristics are evident in the Sri Lankan Buddha images

- While India evolved the Buddha image from the aniconic symbols to that of the icon, this stage is skipped in Sri Lanka.

Thus, the overall conclusion of the present research is that: “The Sri Lankan Buddha image displays iconographic characteristics different and distinct from those of India suggesting an independent origin unrelated to either the Graeco-Roman model of Gandhāra or the yakṣa type in Mathurā, or those of Amarāvati and Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, all of which influenced the development of Indian Buddha image.”

The following study areas are recommended for further examination:

- The chronological sequence of the Sri Lankan Buddhist sculptures with an attempt to date early Buddha images with greater certainty;
- A detailed study of the Sri Lankan śilpa texts that describe the iconography and iconometry of the images, in order to examine the typical techniques that involved in establishing a distinctive tradition of Buddha image.
- An in-depth study of socio-cultural and political relations between ancient Sri Lanka and India evaluating the international role of the Sri Lankan Saṅgha.

**Keywords:** Buddha Image; Gandhāra; Iconographic; Kushans; Mathurā; Sri Lankan

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