

## Depictions of *Buddha's* Life in Indian Art: Selected Sculptures from the National Museum, New Delhi

**Ms. Ashu Saini<sup>1,2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar

Indian Institute of Heritage, Noida, Uttar Pradesh.

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor (Part-Time)

College of Art, Tilak Marg, New Delhi.

### Introduction

The teachings, life, and spiritual path of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, are reflected in the rich and varied history of Buddhist art in India. These representations have been crucial in illuminating the life of the Buddha over the ages, offering followers a visual story and a tool for introspection. The Buddha's life events are shown in Indian art in a variety of ways, including sculptures, frescoes, and reliefs. In addition to portraying historical events, the episodes offer spiritual lessons that encourage reflection on the journey towards enlightenment. Particularly following the life of Siddhartha Gautama, often known as the Buddha, who lived from the fifth to the fourth century BCE, Buddhism has had a major influence on Indian art. A rich legacy of artistic expression influenced by Buddhist philosophy, teachings, and iconography emerged as Buddhism spread throughout India and beyond. An outline of the ways in which Buddhism has influenced Indian art is provided below:

Anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha were avoided in the early Buddhist art period (c. 3rd century BCE), when the focus was on the teachings of the Buddha rather than his physical appearance. Symbols connected to the Buddha were employed in place of a picture of him. The stupa, was a building with domes that was used for meditation and relic enshrinement. The stupa, the focal point of early Buddhist art and architecture, represented the presence of the Buddha. The Bodhi Tree, Often portrayed in carvings, represents the Buddha's enlightenment. The Buddha's footprints, serve as symbolic depictions of his enlightenment and travels. A representation of the Buddha's teachings and the road to enlightenment is the Wheel of Dharma, also known as the Dharmachakra.

After the anthropomorphic representation, sculpture representations of the Buddha increased as Buddhism spread and developed. Sculptures of Buddha first appeared in Indian art at this time, especially after the first century CE. Sculptors started making human representations of the Buddha after being influenced by Greco-Roman and Central Asian traditions, particularly in the Gandhara region.

Among the essential features of Buddha sculptures are the Buddha is shown in a variety of positions, each of which represents a distinct teaching or a time in his life like Dhyana Mudrā<sup>[1]</sup>, Abhya Mudrā<sup>[2]</sup>, Bhumisparsha Mudrā<sup>[3]</sup>, Dharmachakra pravartan Mudrā<sup>[4]</sup> etc. Some major episodes of Buddha's life are described below.

### **Siddhartha Gautama's Birth**

The Buddha's birth is one of the most important moments of his life. In Lumbini, his mother, Queen Māya, is said to have given birth to him in a grove. This scenario is frequently depicted as a miraculous occurrence in Indian art. The birth of the Buddha is not depicted directly in early Buddhist art; instead, it is signified. For instance, the lotus, a symbol of enlightenment and purity, is used in the Stupa at Sanchi to portray the Royal birth. In later depictions, devas<sup>[5]</sup> celebrate the occasion as the queen stands cradling the baby Buddha. Ancient Indian art and sculpture, especially in the Gandhara and Mathura districts, which thrived under the Kushan Empire (c. 1st to 3rd centuries CE), feature the Birth of Siddhartha as a major motif. The art of the Kushan period, which was a period of cultural interchange, combines elements of Indian, Persian, and Hellenistic art. Because it depicts the early life of the Buddha—a motif that would be vital to the dissemination of Buddhist teachings throughout Asia—the birth of Siddhartha in Kushan art is significant.

Fig 1. Birth of Siddhartha

Accession No 68.169,

2<sup>nd</sup> Century,

Kushan Period, Gandhara,

Schist, National Museum, New Delhi

The piece from a monument's base symbolizes the birth of the Siddhartha, who emerges from the Queen Māya's right side as she is standing cross-legged and clutching sāla tree limb in the Lumbini Garden. Lord Brahmā stands behind Indra as he accepts the newborn on a piece of cloth. Above it, a celestial figure is celebrating this momentous occasion. A fly whisk is standing with the chauri in her hands on the fragment's side pilaster. This piece has some minor side damage. Indian imagery and Greco-Roman elements are frequently combined in Kushan art from places like Gandhara. For example, in this relief depicting Queen Māya standing in an elegant position with calm expressions could represent the birth of Buddha. The realistic depiction of human beings and flowing draperies are clear examples of Greek art's influence. In contrast, the birth is portrayed more symbolically in more native Indian traditions, including the Mathura school, which emphasizes the event's divine aspect and uses few human characters. The message conveyed by these sculptures was that Siddhartha's birth was a significant spiritual event that was accompanied by signs and wonders that hinted to his eventual enlightenment. Instead of using literal depictions, the birth of Siddhartha is frequently shown using symbolic imagery. As a representation of his heavenly birth, this scene frequently features

the astounding imagery of Siddhartha emerging from her side. The event's spiritual importance is emphasized more than its tangible features.

### **The *Mahābhinishkramana* or Renunciation**

One of the key moments in the life of Siddhartha Gautama, who would go on to become the Buddha, was the Mahābhinishkramana<sup>[6]</sup>. It commemorates the time when, as a young prince, Siddhartha gave up his life as a prince and his material possessions in pursuit of enlightenment and the truth. The intellectual and spiritual significance of the Buddha's choice to abandon his opulent existence is reflected in the way this story is portrayed in art from the Satavahana period (c. 1st century BCE to 2nd century CE). This is an important turning point in Buddhist art is Siddhartha's choice to abandon his royal life, wife, and kid in order to pursue enlightenment. This occasion called the Great Renunciation represents the Buddha's rejection of materialistic attachments.

Fig 2. The Great Departure of Siddhartha

Accession No 67.183,

2<sup>nd</sup> Century BCE,

Satvahana, Pitalkhora, Maharashtra

Sandstone, National Museum, New Delhi

Buddhism's supporters, the Satavahanas, made substantial contributions to the production of sculptures, stupas, and narrative reliefs that depicted the life of the Buddha. This time period's renunciation scene is especially significant because it highlights Buddha's choice to forgo material cravings in favor of spiritual awakening. During the Satavahana period, the episodes of the Buddha's life were frequently depicted in narrative reliefs on stupas and pillars. The Great Renunciation could be depicted as a series of pictures in which Siddhartha enters the palace and then rides out the gates, perhaps with Channa, his charioteer. These early representations emphasize movement and the notion of Siddhartha's freedom from the material world. In Satavahana art, the Great Renunciation symbolizes a larger philosophical concept of letting go of material cravings and earthly attachments, rather than just Siddhartha abandoning his palace. His decision to forgo the luxuries of his life as a prince in favor of the difficulties of ascetic practices and meditation serves as a metaphor for this. The search of ultimate knowledge and enlightenment, which Buddha attained via his spiritual quest, is symbolized by the renunciation.

The historical Buddha rejection of his opulent residence and his stealthy departure in the middle of the night to start his protracted and difficult quest for enlightenment are depicted in "The Great Departure." The story of Prince Siddhartha's departure from his father's palace and his quest for enlightenment is told in this sculpture. This episode is frequently shown with Siddhartha riding away from his family on a horse after leaving the palace. The prince riding into the jungle is depicted in sculpture at Satavahana signifying his pursuit of spiritual enlightenment.

## First Sermon at Deer Park (*Dharma-Chakra-Pravartana*)

One of the most important moments in Siddhartha Gautama's life was the First Sermon of the Buddha at the Deer Park, also referred to as the Dhamma-chakra-pravartana. It commemorates the day he became enlightened and started teaching his first five students the Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths. Throughout Buddhist history, notably in Bengal and Bihar during the Pala period (8th to 12th century CE), this episode, a crucial point in the Buddha's quest to disseminate his teachings—was portrayed in a variety of artistic mediums.

Fig 3. Buddha in Preaching Pose (*Dharmachakrapravartan Mudrā*)

Accession No 60.1513,

11<sup>th</sup> -12<sup>th</sup> Centuries CE,

Pala Period, Eastern India

Slate stone, National Museum, New Delhi

The Buddha is seen in this sculpture wearing a ubhayansik sanghati<sup>[7]</sup>. His hair is depicted in a pattern that is virtually chevron, and the crown is adorned with a large ushnish<sup>[8]</sup>. The forehead is where the urna<sup>[9]</sup> is located. His first sermon in the Sarnath deer park is symbolized by the two deer beneath the lotus pedestal. It looks like the figure is thinner and slightly flat. The basic robe covers both shoulders. The Pala dynasty was renowned for its extensive contributions to Buddhist art, especially in the areas of painting and sculpture, which highlighted the richness of Buddhist iconography and doctrinal depth. Scenes from the First Sermon at the Deer Park are among the many intricate and symbolic representations of Buddha's life and teachings that were produced during the Pala period. The Deer Park (Sarnath), the location of this discourse, is frequently shown metaphorically in the background during the Pala period. It could be depicted as a natural setting, with trees and animals standing in for the calm, peaceful setting that contrasted with the material cravings that the Buddha had given up. One important symbol connected to this speech is the Wheel of Dharma. It frequently takes center stage in the artwork, signifying the Buddha's teachings and the everlasting cycle of suffering (samsara) that they seek to end. The wheel can occasionally be seen as a stand-alone sign or as a component of the Buddha's hand motion.

Elegant, exquisitely detailed portrayals are a hallmark of the Pala sculptures. Sculptors of this era typically emphasize complex face expressions and elegant poses. A common characteristic of Buddha's face is his idealized, placid countenance, which reflects his enlightenment. Respect, metamorphosis, and spiritual openness are all expressed in the disciples' facial expressions. The wheel of Dharma, the Dhyana Mudra, and the serene, contemplative presence of Buddha are symbolic representations of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, which were taught in this sermon but are not necessarily depicted directly in the artwork. Buddha's teachings are universally applicable and have the capacity to alter those who seek enlightenment, as demonstrated by the symbolic act of teaching in the tranquil setting of the

Deer Park. During this time, the Buddha's teachings were disseminated throughout the Indian subcontinent and beyond with the use of intricate sculptures and colorful characteristics.

## **The Great Demise of Buddha (*Mahāparinirvāṇa*)**

The Buddha reached *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, or the total cessation of suffering and freedom from the cycle of birth and death, at the end of his life, which is known as the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, or the Great Demise of the Buddha. One of the most important moments in the Buddha's life, this occasion is also a profound metaphor for Buddhism's pinnacle of spiritual accomplishment. In order to convey the historical and spiritual significance of the Buddha's death, this pivotal event was portrayed in sculpture, reliefs, and paintings during the Gandhara period (1st to 5th century CE).

Fig 4. The Great Demise of Buddha (*Mahāparinirvāṇa*)

Accession No 68.182,

2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE,

Gandhara Period,

Schist, National Museum, New Delhi

The scene of *Mahāparinirvāṇa* is frequently portrayed in narrative reliefs, with the Buddha reclining on his right side, signifying his ultimate resting place. His body is depicted in a placid and tranquil position, signifying the serenity and harmony of his journey toward enlightenment. Buddha's ultimate release from suffering is symbolized by his usually tranquil and placid face. His hands are frequently positioned in resting positions, with one lying on his torso and the other on the ground, suggesting that his death was a calm and natural one. The Buddha is surrounded by his students, including Ananda and other disciples, who are shown in different positions of meditation, devotion, or mourning. His followers' figures highlight both their acceptance of his teachings as timeless and their profound sadness at his demise. The serene passage from life to death is further emphasized by the frequent use of natural elements like trees and mountains in the background of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* scenario. In several Gandharan depictions, the Buddha's death is witnessed by celestial creatures (*devas*) or other divine figures, signifying the event's cosmic significance. In addition to depicting a historical event, the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* subject in Gandhara also taught a spiritual message.

The depiction of the Buddha's *Mahāparinirvāṇa* in Gandharan art provides a profound visual narrative of the Buddha's ultimate journey into *parinirvana*. Gandhara sculptures emphasize the Buddha's teachings' timeless nature as well as the peacefulness of his death through placid and symbolic depictions. These depictions have a strong sense of spiritual transcendence and human compassion because of the realistic human shapes used and the Greek creative

inspirations. In addition to their aesthetic value, these pieces of art are important because they illustrate the Buddha's central ideas about the transience of existence and ultimate freedom from suffering.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a profound interaction between spiritual symbolism, creative invention, and cultural influence in the representation of Buddha's life in Indian art from the Gandhara, Satavahana and Pala periods. Each era made a distinct contribution to how the major events in the Buddha's life were portrayed, providing insight into how Buddhist teachings were understood and expressed across time.

**Gandhara Period:** Greco-Roman styles had a significant effect on art throughout the Gandhara period, which was a time of great prosperity under the Kushan Empire. Buddha's life events were shown using a combination of symbolism and realism, emphasizing calm poses and minute human expressions. The Buddha's divinity and humanity were depicted through the use of Greek-inspired draperies and realistic facial expressions at the First Sermon, the Mahāparinirvāṇa (Great Demise), and other significant events. Buddhist teachings were disseminated throughout Central Asia and beyond through the art of Gandhara, which combined Hellenistic elements with Buddhist imagery.

**Satavahana Period:** During this time, early Buddhist art focused on symbolic depictions of the life of the Buddha, particularly in southern India. Reliefs representing the Great Renunciation and other events in the life of the Buddha were frequently seen on stupas and pillars. This period's sculptures show a more symbolic and abstract approach to Buddhist iconography, emphasizing spiritual essence over meticulous realism. The Satavahanas employed art to convey Buddhist principles, emphasizing spiritual development and introspection over the accurate depiction of events.

**Pala Period:** During this time, there was a move toward more Indianized representations, with a focus on theological expression and spiritual symbolism. Subtle spiritual themes were the main subject of the Pala sculptures and writings, which frequently emphasized the Buddha's peaceful enlightenment and the teaching cycle he left behind. For instance, the serene manner of Buddha's demise and his ultimate release from samsara were portrayed with profound respect and profound symbolic meaning in the Mahāparinirvāṇa sequences. By using a sophisticated and complex visual vocabulary, Pala art helped to preserve and spread Buddhism's philosophical and religious teachings.

The three main spiritual lessons of Buddhism—the transience of life, the way to enlightenment, and the triumph of suffering—were expressed in Indian art across all three eras. The overall goal of these visual representations was the same, despite differences in regional influences and artistic styles: to convey the Buddha's teachings and his life-changing experience. In addition to documenting the historical events of the Buddha's life, these works of art also functioned as spiritual contemplation aids, assisting followers in connecting with the Buddha's deep insight and the universal truths of the Dharma.

## References

- Buswell, R.E. Encyclopedia of Buddhism Vol. 1-2. USA: Macmillan Reference, 2004.
  - Dehejia, V. (ed.) The Unseen Presence: Buddha and Sanchi. Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1996.
  - Dhavalikar, M.K. Satvahana Art. New Delhi: Sharma Publishing, 2004.
  - Mitra, D. Buddhist Monuments. Kolkata: Sahitya Sansad, 1980.
- 

[1] Gesture of Meditation

[2] Gesture of fearlessness

[3] Earth touching Mudra

[4] Turning of the wheel

[5] celestial creatures

[6] Great Renunciation

[7] Drapery covered by his both the shoulders

[8] A topknot on the head

[9] A mark on the forehead