

## What the Buddha really looks like

The beautiful Buddha image we often see today with a full head of wavy hair, an angelic face, a toga-like robe with flowing pleats, and of course the halo, are the legacy of Indo-Greek Buddhist art of north-western India, which was in turn the result of Alexander the Great's campaigns in north-western India (4<sup>th</sup> century BCE). The Buddha in no way ever looked like such an image, nor any other image we see around today, certainly not like the 71-metre Leshan Buddha from China (said to be the biggest in the world) who will be in public gaze for Vesak this year (2010).

So how did the Buddha image arise? One very likely source of the ancient Buddha image is the Graeco-Bactrian kingdom (250 BCE-130 BCE), located in modern-day Afghanistan, from which Hellenistic culture diffused into the Indian subcontinent with the establishment of the Indo-Greek kingdom (180-10 BCE).

Under the Indo-Greeks, and then the Kushans, the interaction of Greek and Buddhist culture flourished in the area of Gandhara (today's northern Pakistan), before spreading into India, influencing the art of Mathura (about 150 km south of modern Delhi), and then the art of the Gupta empire, which was to extend to the rest of South-east Asia. Graeco-Buddhist art influences spread northward into Central Asia, shaping the art of the Tarim Basin, and then the art of East Asia.

Greek influences on Indian Buddhist art and Buddhist art in general are seen in the wavy hair, symmetrical angelic face, the gentle flowing pleated robes and Apollo-like torso. The Mathura school of Indian Buddhist art, on the other hand, produced a similar Buddha image but with a shaven head (more true to reality, but with less aesthetic appeal). The image failed to catch on, and the tonsure was covered with whorled hair, reflecting one of the lesser marks of the "superman."<sup>1</sup>

How did the Buddha really look like? We can know this for certain from the early Indian suttas. From the Vinaya and the Suttas, we are often given the clear impression that the Buddha looked very much like any other bona fide monk. Just as the Buddha made the Vinaya rules, he kept to them, too: "As I say, so I do; as I do, so I say."<sup>2</sup> In other words, the Buddha kept his head shaven, and wore rag-ropes just like any other good monk. Furthermore, there is clear evidence that on many occasions not everyone is able at once recognize the Buddha on seeing him.

Let me quote two very famous historical cases. The first case is recorded in **the Samannaphala Sutta** (Digha 2), which recounts how Ajātasattu (the king who killed his own father, Bimbisara) had to ask his physician Jīvaka which of numerous monks in the assembly before him was the Buddha. Jivaka had to point out the Buddha to the king (that the Buddha was the one sitting against the pillar facing the east) (D 2.11/1:50).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See **The Body in Buddhism** = SD 29.6a (7.2): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/29.6a-The-body-in-Buddhism-piya.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Digha 2:224, 229, 3:135; Majjhima 1:108, 109; Aṅguttara 2:24; It 122; Sutta-nipara 357 (Nigrodha,kappa); Jataka 326/3:89.

<sup>3</sup> Samannaphala Sutta: see <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/8.10-Samannaphala-S-d2-piya.pdf>

The second case is that of a monk's inability to recognize the Buddha, recorded in **the Dhatu Vibhanga Sutta** (Majjhima 140). The monk Pukkusati, on his journey to meet the Buddha, spends the night en route, in a potter's hut. The Buddha decides to meet him there, but Pukkusati cannot recognize him -- that is, until midway in the Buddha's teaching to him! At the end of the discourse, he apologizes and acknowledges the Buddha as his teacher.<sup>4</sup>

The Introduction to the Kalinga Bodhi Jataka (J 4:228) records the Buddha as rejecting the use of any bodily relics and dismissing even memorial forms (objects representing him) as "groundless and fanciful," as they are arbitrary. He allowed only the use of **the Bodhi tree** to represent him. A similar prohibition is alluded to in chapter 48 of the Sarvastivāda Vinaya (see AK Coomaraswamy, *Elements of Buddhist Iconography*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1935:63 n4).

When we bow before a Buddha image, it is wise for us to recollect the Buddha's virtues, as it would help us collect and calm our minds. With our minds calmed, it becomes clearer so that we understand ourselves better. A strong mind can solve any problem.

Buddha images and Buddhist images should not be treated as fetishes (magical objects). They have no power of their own, except for what we attribute to them. Or better whenever we bow before one another, we should visualize the Buddha image; for, this reminds us of our potential for self-awakening.

## Revisioning Buddhism 17

[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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<sup>4</sup> Dhatu Vibhanga Sutta: see <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/4.17-Dhatuvibhanga-S-m140-piya.pdf>