

Pain in stone¹

Although Buddha images, as a rule, represent the Buddha in some auspicious posture and gesture, there are at least three well known statues of the Buddha that seem to graphically represent him as an emaciated Bodhisattva.² These are the images found at Sikri,³ Jamalgarhi and very likely at Takht-i-Bahi, too.⁴

Buddhist art scholar, Robert L Brown, in his paper, “The Emaciated Gandhāran Buddha Images: Asceticism, health and the body,” argues that although most people think that these images depict the Bodhisattva at the height of his self-mortification, on closer examination of the details on these images, they actually represent the Buddha himself fasting during the 49 days following the great awakening (1997:106, 112).

Brown, however, fails to note perhaps the clearest evidence that it *is* the Buddha, not the Bodhisattva, who is represented in the Sikri and the Jamalgarhi images (and very likely in the Takht-i-Bahi image, too). There is a **halo** or aureole behind the image’s head. Brown graciously acknowledges his oversight in a personal communication to me in 2002. The Buddha as Bodhisattva, and even the arhats, are, as a rule, never depicted with a halo, which applies only to the depictions of the fully awakened Buddha.⁵

Historically, the Buddha, during the last few years of his quest and immediately after awakening (especially during the famous first 7 weeks), is an iconic emaciated figure⁶. If the “breathless” meditation episode of **the Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (M 36 §§21-25) depicts the Buddha as reaching the climax of human *mental* endurance, then the graphic depiction of the emaciated starving Bodhisattva represents the extreme of human *physical* endurance.

The Mahā Saccaka Sutta records the Buddha as giving these famous descriptions (echoed in the Mahā Sīha,nāda Sutta, M 12), thus:

“Because of eating so little,
my limbs became like the joints of vine stems or bamboo stems;
my backside became like a camel’s hoof; the projections of my spine stood out like corded beads;
my ribs jutted out like the crazy⁷ rafters of an old broken shed;
the gleam of my eyes sank deep down into their sockets,
looking like the gleam of water gone far down in a deep well;
my scalp shrivelled and withered like green bittergourd shrivels and withers in the wind and sun;

¹ This reflection is based on **Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (M 36), SD 49.4 (5).

² M 36,28.3 (SD 49.4).

³ See Fig 28 in SD 49.4.

⁴ **Jamalgarhi** was an ancient Gandhara site located 13 km from Mardan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in northern Pakistan. It was a Buddhist monastery from the 1st-5th cent CE, when Buddhism flourished there. **Takht-i-Bahi** was a Parthian archaeological site also in Mardan. It was at first a Zoroastrian complex but after the arrival of Buddhism was converted into a Buddhist monastic complex.

⁵ The halo (surrounding the head) and the aureola (surrounding the whole figure) have been widely used in Indian art, esp in Buddhist iconography where it has appeared since at least the 1st cent CE; the Kushan [Bimaran casket](#) in the British Museum is dated 60 CE (between 30 BCE and 200 CE).

⁶ M 36,28.3 (SD 49.4).

⁷ *Olugga*, collapsing and fallen down, dilapidated.

my belly skin touched my backbone so that when I thought I touched my belly,
I felt my backbone, and when I thought I touched my backbone, I felt my belly skin;
when I defaecated or urinated, I fell over on my face right there;
when I tried to ease my body by rubbing my limbs with my hands,
the hair, rotted at their roots, fell off from my body as I rubbed—*all because of eating so little*.
(M 36,28 = M 12,52-55 @ SD 49.1)

As the result of such prolonged self-mortification, the Bodhisattva's complexion variously turns black, brown, or sallow. The two Suttas present the Bodhisattva variously as taking only jujube fruit (*kola*), only bean, only sesame, only rice – taking only their pulverized (powdered) form, their various concoctions, and down to merely a fruit, a seed or a grain a day. Understandably, the Buddha declares that in the history human suffering of pain and physical endurance, “this is the utmost extreme, there is none beyond this!”⁸

Why is the depiction of the Bodhisattva's self-mortification so dramatic and given such a prominence in the suttas? It is to contrast against **sensual indulgence** – the other extreme of bodily experience—the abandonment to physical pleasure and sexuality. This worldly extreme is not depicted with such drama and detail as with that of his self-mortification.

This is understandable—for, such depictions would be construed (and rightly so) as pornography, and have the undesirable and wrong effects on us. For such lurid details would have no value as psychological reflections or spiritual meditations. But we do have hints of them, especially in the description of the 7 jewels of the wheel-turner or universal monarch—the world ruler that Gotama is prophesized to become if he does not renounce the world but live a home life.

The 7 jewels of the wheel-turner, described in such texts as **the Mahā Sudassana Sutta** (D 17), are the wheel jewel, the elephant jewel, the horse jewel, the gem-jewel, the woman jewel, the steward jewel, and the commander jewel⁹—that is, the regalia and hallmarks of the wheel-turner or universal monarch.

The qualities of **the “woman jewel”** (*itthī, ratana*) are sensually described in **the Bāla Paṇḍita Sutta** (M 129): she is beautiful, comely and graceful, of the best complexion, neither too tall nor too short, neither too thin nor too fat, neither too dark nor too fair, surpassing human beauty, though not reaching the beauty of the gods. Her touch is soft like a tuft of cotton-wool or of kapok (silk-cotton). To the wheel-turner, when it is cool, her limbs are warm; when it is warm, her limbs are cool. Her body exudes the fragrance of sandalwood, and her mouth has the scent of lotuses. She rises before the king and retires after him. She is eager to serve, agreeable in conduct, and sweet in speech. Even in thought, she is never unfaithful to the king, how then could she be unfaithful in body?¹⁰

The classic depiction of sensual and sexual pleasures is found in a non-Buddhist secular work, **the Kāma Sūtra** (the discourse on sensuality), compiled probably around the Buddha's time or just after (400-200 BCE), and in its present form is attributed to Vātsyāyana (2nd century CE). Although

⁸ M 32,30.1 (SD 49.4).

⁹ Respectively, *cakka, ratana, hatthi, ratana, assa, ratana, maṇi, ratana, itthī, ratana, gaha. pati, ratana, and pariṇāyaka, ratana.*

¹⁰ M 129,39/3:174 f @ [SD 2.22](#).

it is popularly perceived as a “sex manual,” only 20% of it actually describes sexual pleasure, while the majority of it discusses philosophy of love, the nature of desire, how it is triggered and sustained, when it is good or bad. In short, it is a secular manual on worldly pleasure.

There is also an early Buddhist text called **the Kāma Sutta** (Sn 4.1), which is the very first sutta in the Aṭṭhaka, vagga, one of the oldest of Buddhist texts. Unlike the Kāma Sūtra, the Buddha’s Kāma Sutta warns against the dangers that attend the quest for sensual pleasures.

The short sutta of 6 verses (Sn 766-771) opens by saying, “If it prospers a mortal to desire sensual pleasure, | surely he is joyful hearted in gaining what he wishes” (Sn 766).¹¹ The phrase “joyful hearted” (*pītimano*)¹² is given in the simple present, reflecting a natural truth, something that would always be the case.

However, sensuality always fusses over what it likes, what it does not like, and is caught up with running *after* what is thought to be pleasurable, and running *from* what is thought to be not. Moreover, sensual pleasure only works with a right sense-object: it is object-based. Without the object in just the right settings, we would not be satisfied. In fact, even with the perfect sensual object, we are only momentarily satiated. When it decreases or ends, we miss it and want more (Sn 767). If we are truly satisfied, we would not want it any more.

The historical Buddha, during his great awakening, is the lone, brave, skeletal figure of the Mahā Saccaka Sutta (§36,28). However, other than the 3 sculptured images mentioned, there are no other images of the Buddha (or Bodhisattva) depicted in such an austere and grotesque manner. In fact, the Buddhist art, the Buddha is always represented with great beauty or glory. To some extent, we do see hints of sensuality, on account of the influence of Greek iconography, the most famous of which are the Gandhara buddha images.¹³

The purpose of such a buddha image is not a historical representation but an image or icon of meditative symmetry and inner peace. The Buddha image is an aid in focusing our minds in compassion and inner peace. Above all, it is a representation of the greatest human struggle of all: the conquest of suffering and liberation of self, that within humanity itself, not outside, lies divinity and beyond.

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

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¹¹ Sn 4.2/766-771/151 @ SD 91.11.

¹² M 1:37, 3:86; S 1.181; A 3:21, 5:3; Sn 766; Nm 3; J 3:411; Vbh 227.

¹³ For a brief guide to Buddha iconography, esp that of Thailand, see Piyasilo, *The Origin and Meaning of the Image of the Buddha*, Petaling Jaya (Malaysia), 1988a. For technical details, see Ency Bsm: Iconography 5:499-504); Iconometry (5:504-508); Image, Buddha (5:516-534). See also Routledge Ency of Bsm: Art, Buddhist (45-50), Art, Buddhist presence in (52-54).