

## The invisible Buddha<sup>1</sup>

How did the deification of the Buddha arise in later Buddhism? Firstly, it may be said that there were the unawakened followers who were unable to accept the death of the Buddha, whom they viewed just as we would today view the death of a great monastic, priest or teacher. In Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Caesar's wife warns him of impending danger, saying: "When beggars die, there are no comets seen; | The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes." (Act 2, Scene 2)

The pious Buddhists, more familiar with tradition than with the Dharma, speculated on the nature of buddhahood, and in due course viewed the Buddha as "living on" or was eternal in some way. Perhaps, when they worshipped at a stupa, especially one with a buddha relic or deemed to be a relic, they imagined that they were addressing the Buddha who was actually present therein. In other words, these were (are) symptoms of a protracted mourning.<sup>2</sup>

By the time of Asoka, as noted by French scholar, André Bareau, there were new generations of Buddhists who had never seen the Buddha. The invisibility of the Buddha who had passed away was like the invisibility of the gods. Unable to physically see the Buddha, these pious and imaginative Buddhists began to view him as a god – since he was invisible just like a god.<sup>3</sup>

This view was further complicated by the fact that they saw the Buddha as a sort of saviour. This was a time when the Bodhisattva idea of the Mahāyāna had not yet arisen. As such, the Buddha – in the minds of the religious – reverted, as it were, to the role of the Bodhisattva before Gotama was Buddha. In his penultimate life, he was Santusita, the Bodhisattva as a deva, a lordly god (*issara*), in Tusita heaven, looking down (*avaloketi*) in compassion upon the world.<sup>4</sup>

It is possible that such a view contributed to the rise of the Bodhisattva **Avalokiteśvara**, "the lord who looks down (in compassion upon the world)." He was originally depicted as a young prince (like Siddhattha) in ancient India, in the wake of the rise of Mahāyāna in the early centuries.

The historical Buddha had, as his two chief disciples, **Sāriputta** as his right-hand monk, and **Moggallāna**, his left-hand monk. We can still today see in the larger Theravada temples, the main Buddha image flanked by the two chief disciples. Furthermore, the Commentaries tell us stories of the child Siddhattha being born with the gods **Brahmā** (the high God) and **Indra** (the king of the gods) by his side.<sup>5</sup>

After Alexander the Great reached the northwest and nearly invaded India (327 BCE), he left behind a legacy of Greek culture. Some Greek gods converted to Buddhism. In an important

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<sup>1</sup> This Reflection is based on SD [49.8b](#) (12.3) The Buddha and divinity.

<sup>2</sup> See [SD 49.8b](#) (12.3.2.2).

<sup>3</sup> André Bareau, "The place of the Buddha Gautama in the Buddhist religion during the reign of Aśoka." In (ed) S Balasooriya et al, *Buddhist Studies in Honour of Walpols Rahula*, London, 1980:2.

<sup>4</sup> See [SD 49.3](#) (1.1.7.2).

<sup>5</sup> Brahma and Indra flanking the Buddha: <http://www.bulletinasiainstitute.org/abst/vol20/Pal.html>.

way, Greek art and imagination impressed the Buddhists of the times. Some of the most beautiful Buddha images are in the Greek style.<sup>6</sup>

By the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, we could see the Greek demi-god **Heracles** (Hercules) standing beside the Buddha, guarding him with his club.<sup>7</sup> Heracles came to be called **Vajrapāṇi**, the thunder-bolt bearer (like Zeus, the king of the Greek pantheon), often mentioned in the suttas, bearing a thunder-bolt of the Iron Age: molten iron.<sup>8</sup>

Where a fierce image of Heracles/Vajrapāṇi stands beside the Buddha as Dharma protector, we often see a gentle, almost feminine, figure bearing a lotus, an emblem of Brahmā. Or, perhaps, the popular idea of the Bodhisattva was given the form of Padmapāṇi.<sup>9</sup> Here, we see Brahmā transformed into **Padma,pāṇi**, “Lotus-in-hand,” the ancestor of Avalokiteśvara.

Following the imaginative example of the Greeks, the ancient Buddhists went on to convert more local deities and demons. They were given Buddhist names and roles, and very often they look just like their old selves, which help in attracting worshippers from the old religions, too.

One of the best known conversions (the opponents might charge “plagiarism”) is that of the 6-syllable mantra, **Om maṇi padme hūm**. This best known of Mahayana mantras came from the 6-syllable Siva mantra – Om Namaḥ Śivāya – of Saivite Hinduism.<sup>10</sup> Then, there is the hymn of the 1000 names of Siva – Śiva Sahaśranāma Stotra – and we have its parallel: the imposing 1000-armed 1000-eyed Avalokiteśvara.<sup>11</sup> This happened around the late 4<sup>th</sup> century or early 5<sup>th</sup> century CE in India.

Now, the Mahayana sometimes depicted the Buddha as being fierce and angry. This influence, again came from the Saivite deities. This was a clever religious strategy to ride the wake of a very popular religion – by converting their deities. In fact, this conversion of local deities and demons also happened in Tibet on a national scale.

When Buddhism reached China, more transformations and additions were made to Buddhism. Avalokiteśvara became a woman. One development was especially in keeping with the spirit of the Buddha’s teaching of compassion. In premodern China, the Confucian teaching of the three-fold submissions (*sāncóng* 三從) compelled a woman to show deference to her father when she is young, to her husband when she is married, and to her son after her husband has died.

Women who refused to be cowed into being virtual baby machines, prostitutes and slaves, opted for a celibate life, forming sororities centred around Guanyin worship.<sup>12</sup> Here, we see a positive social tool that Buddhism provides to uplift the social position of women in a male-dominated society.

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<sup>6</sup> Gandhara Buddha image: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greco-Buddhist\\_art](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greco-Buddhist_art).

<sup>7</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vajrapani#/media/File:Buddha-Vajrapani-Herakles.JPG>.

<sup>8</sup> On Vajrapāṇi (Sanskrit, *Vajrapāṇi*), see [SD 21.3](#) (4.2).

<sup>9</sup> See Lokesh Chandra, “[The origin of Avalokiteśvara](#),” *Indologica Taurinensia* 13 1985-1986:189 f.

<sup>10</sup> See A Studholme, *The Origins of the Om Mani Padme Hum*, New York, 2002: ch 4 esp p65.

<sup>11</sup> See Studholme 2002:52-57.

<sup>12</sup> Barbara E Reed, “The gender symbolism of Kuan-yin Bodhisattva,” in José Ignacio Cabezón (ed), *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*. New York, 1992:159-180 (ch 7).

One of the strangest developments in the history of religions was found in Chinese Buddhism. This is the transformation of “Maitreya Buddha” into a pot-bellied figure of a jolly Chinese businessman. This “Laughing Buddha” or Budai was based on the figure of an eccentric but good-natured Chan monk called Qìcǐ 契此 of the Later Liang Dynasty (10<sup>th</sup> century). This figure, in due course, was depicted carrying a large sack (of prosperity) and then with happy children all over him (signifying fertility and longevity). This was a veritable Chinese Buddhist Santa Claus!<sup>13</sup>

All these are features of popular Buddhism, which keeps us in this world of the 8 winds of gain and loss, fame and obscurity, praise and blame, and happiness and sorrow.<sup>14</sup> These winds kick up so much dust so as to make the Buddha invisible. To be a true Buddhist, then, is to work to keep these opposing winds down, and the air calm and clear, to see the Bodhi tree and the radiant Buddha sitting under it.

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

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<sup>13</sup> On the Laughing Buddha, see [SD 36.10](#) (4.1.2).

<sup>14</sup> See Reflection, “[The 8 winds of life](#),” R67a, 2008.