

Aliens and UFOs in Buddhism

And on the pedestal these words appear:
“My name is OZYMANDIAS, King of Kings.”
Look on my works ye Mighty, and despair!
No thing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that Colossal Wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away. (Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1818)

In 2001, the Taliban of Afghanistan obliterated what remained of the Buddha statues of Bamiyan, about 230 km (143 mi) northwest of Kabul. There were two images, one (37 m = 121 ft) built in 507, and bigger one (55 m = 180 ft) in 554, probably by the Kushans, and were the largest examples of standing Buddha carvings in the world.

In the 11th century, when Mahmud of Ghazni attacked Afghanistan (and west India), he tried but failed to destroy the images. He ended only looting the Buddhist monasteries there. Even in the 17th century, Nader Shah, the ruler of Iran, using cannons, could not destroy the statues. But in 2001, the Taliban, using dynamite, anti-aircraft guns and artillery, successfully demolished the Buddha images. The demolition efforts began on 2 March and was completed only after a few weeks.

The question now is: Who really destroyed these precious world-heritage Buddha images? In Buddhism, we try never to blame any people, much less a single person, for wrongs done. They are the result of many causes and conditions. Who made and supplied them with those powerful weapons? Why were they so determined to destroy the images which would have been lucrative tourist attractions that would enrich the region? Why were the images built in the first place?

About a year after the bombing, I was invited to attend a Friendship Day inter-faith forum in one of prestigious Singapore schools. It was attended by some 800 international students. The Muslim speaker spoke first and understandably was apologetic, stating that such violence was against the spirit of Islam. The Hindu speaker, too, spoke of non-violence and tolerance. (The Christian speaker sadly missed the forum, I was told, as he could not find his way there.)

In my turn, I said that we need to look at the incident as a bigger picture. The Buddha images have been put together from the elements, and have to return to them sooner or later. For practising Buddhists, Buddha images represent inner peace and impermanence. Everything in this world, no matter how beautiful or good, must perish. The Taliban only sped up the process.

The historians and art lovers mourned the loss; the informed Buddhists celebrated impermanence.

A Taliban official was reported on a Islamic website as saying that the destruction of the statues was carried out after a single Swedish monuments expert proposed to restore the statues' heads. When the Afghani council suggested that the funds be used to feed the children instead, he refused. The frustrated Taliban reacted by destroying the images.

Is it better to maintain an ancient statue or to feed hungry children? Any thinking Buddhist would know the right choice. The point is that we could have preserved both: the rich past and the living present of the country.

According to the UNICEF 2007 report on “The State of the World’s Children,” 10.9 million children under five die in developing countries each year. An FAO 2009 news release states that 1.02 billion people do not have enough to eat -- more than the total populations of the USA, Canada and the European Union.

Now let us look at a modern “Bamiyan Buddha.” Many people are impressed by the “flying saucer” stupa of the Dhammakaya movement in Thailand. The dome is covered by 300,000 Buddha images. These images and the dome surface were built from silicon bronze, normally used in submarine’s propeller for strength, and covered with titanium and gold. The structure is said to be able to last for 1000 years. The cost: 30,000 million baht (about USD930 million or SGD1,270 million).

I wonder how many of the world hungry, or the poor and hungry of Thailand herself, all these wealth and technology could feed?

I feel deeply saddened and alienated as I write this, reflecting on how the religious can so cavalierly use structures and words simply in the rhetorical name of “world peace” and “love for mankind,” oblivious of the true realities, or ignoring them. It is more meaningful to reflect on the impermanence of the Bamiyan Buddhas and the hungry Afghan children, and do something about it. Or, if you like, you could investigate why the Turkish marauders invaded 11th century India in the first place: there were many golden UFOs then, too.

As Viktor Frankl, the famous neurologist who survived the Holocaust said, “Ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for.”

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

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