The Foundation of the Colossal Buddha Statues

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The Foundation of the Colossal Buddha Statues: The Eastern Buddha Statue

The Royal City and the Buddhist Sangharama

It is not clear when Buddhism started in Bamiyan. Around 305 B.C., Seleucus, who had succeeded the eastern area of the Empire of Alexander the Great ceded Afghanistan, the southeastern area of the Hindu Kush to the rising Maurya Dynasty of Chandraguputa and it was about 50 years later that his grandson, King Ashoka, sent a high Buddhist priest there to propagate Buddhism. That was just before the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom became independent (circa 250 B.C.) cutting the political bond with the Seleucid Dynasty. It is assumed that the people who accepted Buddhism were those who had been familiar with Persian culture since Achaemenian times and also had been deeply affected by Hellenistic culture. That is backed up by the bilingual rock edicts of King Priyadarsin (Ashoka) inscribed in Greek and Aramaic, which were discovered in Kandahar.

It became generally known through the excavations of the Buddhist sites that before long Buddhism gradually and quietly rooted in the northern and southern districts of the Hindu Kush and flourished at its most in the Kushan Dynasty of a nomad nation. It was also found that many Buddhist temples were built during the long period from the second century to the fourth century. In the north side district of the Hindu Kush, the nearest site to Bamiyan is the Buddhist site of Surkh Kotal discovered near the sanctuary for fire worship built by a king of the Kushan Dynasty. It was not assumed that the site was a Buddhist temple until finding “the turban of Boddhisattva” carved on one of the capitals. This might have been built in the third or fourth century. There is another rock cut temple in Haibak. This temple consists of five caves and one stupa cut out of rock. In the caves are the niches to place the seated Buddha statues, but now no Buddhas exist.

In the south side of the Hindu Kush, the monasteries at Kapisa, that is, Begram, Shotorak, and Paitava had been in action already. That would be in the second century to the fourth century. Judging from the clay images excavated, it is thought that the Buddhist site of Tepe Maranjjan in Kabul was built in the fourth and fifth centuries.

Those circumstances suggest that the creation of Buddha images and the building of Buddhist temples in Bamiyan started at the latest around the fifth century. Perhaps the period of establishing the royal city was not so far from that of building the first Sangharama in Bamiyan. According

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to Xian-zang, on the western side of Bamiyan valley exists the royal city “leaning on the mountains and cliffs” in the north and “extends as far as the valley” in the south. It would be built when the importance of the roads running through Bamiyan increased in economic and military importance.

The royal citadel of Shahr-i-Zohak located at the eastern entrance of the valley guards the east side of the kingdom and Shahr-i-Gorgora stands in the center of Bamiyan watching every corner of the valley as a whole. Surrounded by the high mountains, the holy Buddhist Sangharama and laic communities were divided by the river and the road.

The Great Image of Buddha as the Axis of Universe

In Bamiyan, before the colossal image of Buddha was cut on the rock cliff facing south, there had been a Sangharama built on the ground by “the former king of the country” as Xian zang described in his Buddhist Records of the Western World. Then the stupa was erected in front of the rock cliff and the cave Sangharamas were cut out in the cliff. In Haibak, Buddhist caves were also constructed in the same order. In most of the many neighborhood Buddhist temples, the stupas were still built not being separated from the monastery. Even in Bamiyan, Buddhist caves (F & G) with a small stupa placed in the center of the caves were discovered near the Eastern Colossal Buddha.

The colossal image of Buddha, to the contrary, is standing like the axis of the universe and many sanctuaries are arranged around it. It might be said that this decisive plan started in Bamiyan. The splendid idea of building the colossal image of Buddha above on the high mountain of 2,500 m as axis mundi connecting the earth and heaven must have some reasonable motives.

One may consider the change of Buddhist thought in the process of its propagation from east to west via Gandhara, Hadda, and Kapisa. However, why did the Buddhist priests of the school of Lokottaravadins belonging to the Little Vehicle “Hinayana” who had worshiped both the stupa and the images of Buddha hold the transcending motive for the construction of a colossal image of Buddha? It is difficult to find a decisive grounding in their canonical doctrine. Taking into consideration the huge cost of making the colossal image of Buddha, the strong political and economic motives of the patrons rather than religious ones cannot be negligible (Fig. 2.1).

When the stupa and the monasteries were built side by side, it is not a surprise that people were attracted to the visible Nirmanakaya, which represents the living (physical) Buddha much more than the abstract Dharmakaya. It is quite natural that longing for Nirmanakaya besides Sambhogakaya had been enhanced by the desire for transcendent existence. The desire for transcendent existence was accepted not only by the people but also by the reigning authority as a strong patron.

It might be to create an imago mundi, which involves the construction of a heaven-kissing colossal image of Buddha in Bamiyan that people coming here from all directions have never seen before. And at last, the patrons of Buddhism of Bamiyan came to think of carving the colossal Buddha statue in the center of the eastern steep and large cliff.

Many artisans came together from the southeastern areas such as devastated Gandhara and Hadda and also from northern areas such as Bactria to work on the big project, the new idea produced in this small valley. In Bamiyan, there is another valley called Foladi to the southwest of the royal city. It is said that Foladi means blacksmith. Probably the tools to cut the rock cliff and the caves were cast in this valley and supplied to the artisans. The forgers (smith) is “a unity of tinkers, musicians, physicians, and diviners” as Eliade said. These blacksmiths, who were the artists and artisans creating the idols, could thoroughly know the earth as well as their abilities and know which cliff to be chiseled at first. Unfortunately, no more than a few monasteries have been investigated fully in the valley of Foladi.

How Was the Colossal Buddha Statue Built?

I wonder how the artisans did the layout of the surface of the rock cliff standing sharply and perpendicularly. And I also wonder whether they designed
the surrounding rock caves and the passage-for-
pradaksina at the same time, and then the group 
making the colossal Buddha statue (artisans of 
exterior carving) and the group making the monas-
terries (artisans of interior carving) advanced to 
carve together in parallel with the speed of cutting 
of the Buddha statue. Judging from the shallow 
cutting of the trefoiled niche of the colossal Buddha 
and the thin wall between the passage leading to 
the upper caves and the niche of the colossal 
Buddha, it is not necessarily considered that they 
started cutting the colossal Buddha at first.

Fig. 2.1 Eastern Buddha statue
As the model of the colossal Buddha statue, it is assumed that they selected the image of the Buddha statues of Gandharan style having clear and transcendent appearance created near the area of Kapisa. The hair is waving and the garment covers both shoulders completely. The three paths (lines) that symbolize the omniscience of Buddha are clearly shown on the neck and the comparatively long legs are designed to be seen under the garment. The Buddha was represented as Tathagata. Being suitable to the colossal Buddha statue, the insteps were made strong to stand on the earth, with the thick coating of mud. The finishing of the Buddha statue was to cut the niche into trefoil.

Probably it might be after the completion of the colossal rock cutting Buddha statue that eight caves, from cave I to cave VIII, were cut around the feet of the statue. The architectural design of the vault of five caves (I, III, IV, V, VI) are different from each other. However, out of three caves (II, VII, VIII) cave II might have been cut later for another purpose. Cave VII and cave VIII were planned also as the sanctuaries, but compared with the other five caves which had been cut before those two, there is less finesse in their workmanship.

Making use of the passage-for-pradakshina that encircles the colossal Buddha, they started to cut the three-story sanctuary (when it was investigated by French archaeological group, in 1923 and 1924, it was given the alphabetical sign of D1, D, C1, and C2 to each story from the bottom layer to the upper one). The passage would be also utilized in case of cutting the colossal Buddha statue from inside. It is thought that they planned to cut out this circumambulatory passage (pradakshina path) upward to lead to above the head of the colossal statue, starting from the side of cave VIII, which is positioned at the western side of the niche wall immediately below the colossal Buddha statue, so that this passage would meet another passage behind the protuberance on Buddha’s head (ushunisa). The latter was also cut out to reach above the head of the statue passing through the eastern caves A and B.

Furthermore, large rectangular spaces are provided at the right and the left lateral walls above the head of the Buddha statue. In those opened spaces, seats were provided for the royal families who attended the celebration of the newly made Buddha image and for the Pancavarsika held once every 5 years (the Buddhist service to do offering, from kings to peasants and shepherds, regardless whether male or female, rich or poor, noble or common), and scattering flowers (one of the most important Buddhist rituals) also might be done making use of these spaces. A wooden balustrade was built at the front and the holy cloth might be hung on it as the murals painted on both sides of the niche had shown us. In this sense, this rectangular space would be in use as a topos (gr., common place) leading to the sacred perpetual time, or to the transcendental time for ceremonies.

The Mural Paintings in Bamiyan: The Great Composition on the Ceiling of the Eastern Colossal Buddha

The Sun God on the Golden Chariot Soaring in Heaven

The finishing touch of the making of the Eastern Colossal Buddha statue that was called Sakya Buddha by Xiang zang was to paint the vault and the lateral walls of the Buddha niche. When they looked up at the statue, the vault that decorated the overhead of Sakya was necessary to be the symbol of transcendence and at the same time, to reflect the philosophy of the world entertained by the royalty and nobility who promoted the big project to found the colossal Buddha statue. The design of the great composition that decorates the vault of the statue was probably entrusted to the artisans who could give full play to a remarkable presentation of imago mundi. The artisans finished the unparalleled mural paintings being helped by gods.

In the center of the great composition the great sun, which shines the every corner of the world, was painted. The blaze of the sun was represented with saw teeth on the edge of the large disk at the back of the central deity. The sun could absorb everything as the symbol of omnipotent invincible
The traditional sun worship of the nomads and also Buddhist symbolism, which metaphorically compared the transcendence of Sakya to the sun, could both be represented here by the sun as the epiphany of supreme divinity. At the same time the artisans would be required to paint the image of the sun god doubled with the conception of the world that the royalty in this province required.

The sun god was painted with the figure who soars in heaven riding on the two-wheeled golden chariot pulled by four winged white horses. The sun god displays a nimbus and ribbons flying up from the both shoulders symmetrically, and wears a mantle, the skirt of which is waving in the wind, on a round-neck tunic, holding straight a rather slender spear in the right hand and also grasping the hilt of a sword hung from the waist belt in left hand. Two legs putting on boots would be painted beneath the solar disk, but the legs cannot be seen anymore, because that part of the painting came off. The hair is long enough to reach the shoulders and a round headdress can be seen, but the top part of it cannot be seen (Fig. 2.3).

The winged figure putting on boots, which can be seen scarcely on the wheel axle of the chariot will be a charioteer. The wheel is represented by a half circle with spokes. The divinity riding on a two-wheeled chariot has been painted in various styles in the Buddhist iconography from Bodh Gaya to Kizil and Dunhuang, but there is no example such as the sun god of Bamiyan, which was represented as the main theme by this independent great composition. There are some examples that show that four horses pulling a chariot are separated right and left symmetrically or that four horses make a pair. But the iconography that shows two pairs of horses separated into right and left and seeing each other, such as the white horses of Bamiyan, is a very rare example. Such difference in the details proves how creative the composition devised by the artists of Bamiyan was.

At both the right and left sides of the chariot on which the sun god is standing, two winged attendants are painted. The winged female attendant painted on the left side wears the Corinthian helmet with a feather and has a nimbus on her head and a shield in her left hand. It is impossible to be certain if she has something in her right hand or not. The attendant on the right side also wears a helmet, having a circular nimbus on his head and a bow in his left hand. He seems to be ready to fix an arrow to the bow. It is impossible
to judge whether the helmet was the one of Ales without a feather.

In the center of the upper part of the great composition are several white birds flying over the sky and on both sides of them the wind gods flying with scarf floating in both hands are painted. Their hair is waving. Beneath the wind gods is a pair of half-man and half-bird figures flying with a torch in their left hand. And on the right and left edges of the composition, a bank of clouds are painted. In the clouds, four faint round shapes can be distinguished.

There is no precedent for such a great composition even in the iconography of India and Gandhara. The representation of the planet painted on the vault of a rock cave at Dunhuang, and those of the 38th cave at Kizil and the 46th cave at Kumutra seem to be slightly similar but they are far beyond the magnificent one of Bamiyan.

It is of no doubt anymore that the sun god enveloped by the radiant disk is a doubled figure with Sakya as the dharma-cakravarti raja, which was metaphorically said to ride the cosmic chariot. If it was so, the number of the spokes of the chariot soaring in heaven necessarily had been 6 or twice of it 12 symbolizing the circulating time.

This composition consisting of multiple concepts cannot be made clear only by Buddhism. In Hair Khane pass descending to the lower land called Koh-i-Daman, the suburbs of Kabul, a temple of the sun god was discovered by Jean Carl, one of the members of French Archaeology Mission, in 1938 and the figure of Surya made of marble (sixth to seventh century) was excavated there. This figure of the sun god Surya suggests the close relationship with the iconography of the figure of Surya in India, and it, accompanied by the attendants Danda and Pinghara on both sides, is represented by the posture of squatting down on the chariot pulled by two horses managed by a charioteer (the wheels are not shown). The long hair and personal ornaments and costume show similarity to the sun god of Bamiyan, but from the iconographic point of view the composition is quite different from the great composition of Bamiyan, and it seems that there is radical difference between the significance that the great composition of Bamiyan transmits and that of the sun god Surya.

Relations with the World of Avesta

The great composition of Bamiyan, which places the sun god in the center must be studied taking the relationship with the Iranian world of Avesta into consideration, as Benjamin Rowland, Professor of Fine Arts at Harvard University pointed out (Rowland 1938), to get the key for elucidation. The hymn “Mihr Yasht” (Gershevitch 1967) in the sacred book of Zoroastrianism “Avesta” (edited in the fourth to sixth centuries) tells that “Mithra manages the golden chariot, the four horses which pull the chariot are all white, they eat the foods of heaven to be immortal, and they put gold hoofs on their fore-podiums and platinum hoofs on their hind-podiums.” It is natural that those horses soaring in heaven are winged. The composition of four horses that pull the chariot of the sun god Helios and the composition of two horses of the twin-god Dioscuri, which soar to the same direction face to face with each other, are common styles of Hellenism that have been conveyed by means of the coins of Bactria. And now in Bamiyan, the theological motif of Sassanian Iran was poured into this mold. As “Mihr Yasht” describes, the chariot is painted a yellow color indicating “the golden chariot.”

“Mihr Yasht” continues the hymn and sings, “The charioteer guiding the chariot is tall and good Asi” and thus the name of the charioteer is disclosed. About this charioteer it was impossible to distinguish anything except the legs putting on boots in the great composition of Bamiyan. Asi is the goddess of luck, one of the subordinate yazata who attends Mithra. According to the comparative mythologist George Dumezil, it is said that Asi was equivalent to Bagha of India, and was always attributed magico-religious sovereignty (Dumezil 1947).

The attendant who is seen on the left side of the sun god Mithra holding a shield in the left hand and wearing a breastplate has been compared to the figure of the goddess Pallas Athena for a long time. Even though there are some differences in the attribute or in the position of the shield, it is undoubted that this attendant is a copy of the figure of Athena, which had been already known by the Bactrian coin. In the gold
coin of King Huvishka of Kushan Dynasty, as Franz Gernet clearly pointed out in his excellent article “Bamiyan and the Mihr Yasht” (Grenet 1994), the name of the goddess Athena is engraved “Rishto.” Rishto is “Arstat which enlarges the world” said by “Yasht.” Arstat was the goddess of justice and one of the female yazatas who attend Mithra as well as Asi. This goddess who wears the Corinthian style helmet follows the iconography of the god Athena but the meaning of the iconography is drawn out of the theology of Avesta.

The attendant on the right side who wears a helmet and makes a pair with Athena = Arstat will be the attendant Vanainti Uparatat = “the excellent power to gain victory,” who makes a pair with the god Sraosa = Mithra in “Yasna” the act of worship. This is the goddess who is represented by the figure of the goddess of victory Nike but engraved by the name of “Vanindo” on the coin of Huvishka of the Kushan Dynasty. The reason why all of the three goddesses, Asi, Athena = Arstat and Nike = Vanainti are winged would be to give them the same evaluation as the goddess of victory Nike and to show these figures as archangels who are worthy of the subordinate divinities of Mithra (Grenet 1994).

The standing figure of the central god Mithra was probably produced from the idea of polyvalent iconography that places the image of the Hellenistic figure Helios on the base and puts the Sassanian iconography of Mithra on it, and furthermore puts the iconography of the traditional god of Sogdiana over it. The bust of Mithra seen in the mark of the seal of Sassan Dynasty, which the British Museum possesses, tells clearly how deeply the image of the sun god of Bamiyan depends upon the presentation of the iconography in Iran. It can be said that either of the images is painted with the iconography that exactly fits the hymn of “Mihr Yasht” that tells of “a warrior who is excellent in martial arts, holding a long spear with a sharp head.” Above the head of the god Mithra, four or five white birds are flying in the sky spreading their wings. They are Hamsa (geese), which tells of the circulation of seasons. Hamsa indicate circulating seasons and also it is thought that they symbolize the moon itself as the sacred missionary birds of the moon god. We discovered the image of the moon god, which was pulled by Hamsa, on the wall of a small Buddhist cave in Bamiyan (cave M) situated to the east of the colossal Buddha statue. The flying deities with something like a scarf floating in both hands on the right and left side of Hamsa will be the wind gods Vata seen in “Mihr Yasht.” The hymn tells that “the wind smashes a devil, attending Mithra” and also “the wind blows off the spear thrown by the enemy of Mithra.” It was the wind god who plays a role as a herald of the sun god Mithra who soars at full speed. Avesta tells that the wind god always leads as the metamorphoses of the god Verethraguna (Dumezil 1947). I am thinking that the wind gods in pair reveal, in secret, the dualistic feature of Avestan theology.

Half-human and half-bird figures situated on the right and left sides so as to surround the solar disk together with the wind gods are Kimnara. In Buddhist texts, Kimnara is regarded as “the god of music” and also “the god of incense” but Kimnara in Bamiyan wear a cap hanging long narrow ribbon and hold a burning torch in the left hand and something like an incense burner with a handle in the right hand. As “Mihr Yasht” says that “fire is flying in front of Mithra,” Kimnara is probably presented here with an Iranian costume in style as “the torch holder” (dadophoros).

Furthermore, the banks of swelling cloud are seen on both edges of the composition, and if the two disks positioned two by two symmetrically in the cloud could be taken as the stars, it is concluded that the six elements, the sun, the moon, the stars, the clouds, the wind, and fire exist in this great composition. Then, it might be said that those are exactly the symbolic representations of six attending divinities Amesa Spentas being projected images of the unique god of Zoroastrian theology, Ahura Mazda.

The Double Image of Mithra and Dharma-Cakravarti Raja

The god Mithra who soars at dawn in the blue sky, managing a two-wheel chariot over the mountains
Hara (might be the Hindu Kush), will be a symbol of the religious cosmology of the people who founded the colossal Buddha statue in the middle of the eastern cliff of Bamiyan. At the same time it is thought that Mithra was accepted, being doubled with the image of Sakya as the dharma-cakravarti raja turning the law-wheel, by the people who were looking for the basic ground of recovery of Buddhism in Bamiyan, which had been newly opened as an important trading base and for Buddhism taking the place of declining Gandhara. For the royalty and nobility, the double image of the sun god and the dharma-cakravarti raja must have been a welcome ideal.

It was by the far-sightedness of Joseph Hackin, who investigated the Buddhist sites of Bamiyan on a full scale for the first time, that he characterized the Buddhist arts of Bamiyan as Irano-Buddhist arts. In 1969 we discovered two long narrow ribbons flying upward from both shoulders of the sun god in the composition to reinforce his opinion.

In the extraordinarily important document (Da Tang Xi Yu Ji), Xuan Zang (Hiang tsang) refers to “celestial deva, showing signs or omen to indicate good fortune or evil according to the amount of the merchants’ donation.” This “celestial deva” should be the god of contract Mithra, I assume, who “is always awake and watches over” from the head of the colossal Buddha statue. Mithra was the god of truth and faith, and also the god who guarantees contracts and punishes persons who disobey the oath. For people who are engaged in trade, the sign of luck brought by the god who guarantees credit must be very important to their life.

Mithra was also the god that as “the owner of a large pasture, brings good harvest, flock of livestock, and posterity and lives”. It seems that Mithra could merge with Buddhism quite well because of its multilateral aspects as the old Aryan god.

The Dramatic Scene Painted on Both Side of the Wall

On the eastern and western wall beneath the great composition, the sitting images of Buddha and Boddhisattvas, and the scene of the royal family procession led by a priest in profile are painted, facing the laterals of the Buddha statue. Being separated from the royal procession, Boddhisattvas situated on both sides of the sitting Buddha, which wears a garment in a way leaving the right shoulder and breast bare, are painted in images sitting in the air outside of the balustrade to divide the space into two, one for saints and another for laics. Buddha does not wear a ribbon but the Boddhsattvas wear it. Each Boddhsattva wears a shawl that has two parts cut out mountain-shape, and has a sacred cloth in hand. Hackin called the unique Boddhisattva who wears a headdress and a ratnavali (necklace) “the bejeweled Buddha,” and according to Paul Mus, he concluded that this was one of the peculiar representations of Buddhist paintings of Bamiyan.

Rowland took the Buddha and the Boddhisattvas as the representation of seven past Buddhas and he regarded them as the representation of “Sambhoga-Kaya” (image of Buddha that has the perfect benevolence) developed by the thoughts of the Mahasanghika (Rowland 1938).

The royals bearing the nimbus might be regarded as the saints. Most of the royal families painted on the eastern wall have nimbus and ribbons on their shoulders but any of the royal families painted on the western wall do not have them. This might indicate the differences in rank order among them. The worship procession of royal families is led by a priest from right to left, facing to the wall.

The person just behind the priest will be the king of Bamiyan who wears a characteristic crown, a round-neck tunic and a Sassanin cross band, holding a sacred ribbon in his right hand. Someone wears the Central Asian nomad clothes with the one-side-turned-down neck opened to the right, which are seen quite often in Toharistan. They are attending the ceremony for worship respectively having a sacred object, flower, and a ring (khwarnah) in their hands. The royals, nobles, and benefactors who pushed forward the building of the colossal Buddha statue and now attend the ceremony to commemorate the completion of the project, perhaps took their seats at the balustrades provided just under the mural painting on both side walls.

They who dressed pompously must have ascended to the balustrades on the occasion of
“pancavarsika” held every 5 years. The donation or charity, that is “dana” in Sanscrit, to be done in pancavarsika was one of the very important moral deeds for the worshipers of the Buddhism. And dana, gorgeous dana by the king would be, as Emile Benveniste explicated in his wonderful book (Benveniste 1969), the religious and social demonstrative activity. In that sense, I think that the mural paintings of the vault of the Eastern Colossal Buddha were painted to represent as an unforgettable moment, the national monumental festival that was held periodically in the form of a politico-religious assembly rather than to represent the sublime Buddhist world of Sakya Tathagata.

These masterpieces of the mural paintings of the Eastern Colossal Buddha completely disappeared in 2001.

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