

## **From restrained to over-ornate imagery**

### **What forms of expression are right for the teachings of Buddha?**

#### **Preliminary remarks**

There are four aspects to be considered when examining the use of images in Buddhism. 1. There are no commandments or prohibitions in the strict sense of the word. A ban on images is therefore unknown. 2. Many religious practices have no intrinsic worth, but acquire this in a particular context. This is also true of the use made of religious symbols and images. 3. There is a difference between the profound, authentic teachings of Buddha and popular Buddhism. 4. The earlier and the later periods of Buddhism have different forms of expression.

#### **Buddha and images of Buddha**

The earliest images of Buddha appear in the 2nd century of our era in the Mathura region of northern India, and at about the same time, but independently, in the Gandhara region. Before that there are only non-figural representations. Life-size and larger-than-life likenesses soon became popular, leading to a kind of “mass production” for use in the home or when travelling. In time it was taken for granted that practically all Buddhist schools would display images of Buddha.

#### **Buddha images: not a representation of reality**

The Buddhist belief is that a Buddha awakes by his own efforts from existential sleep and is therefore a being “sui generis”, who cannot (ultimately) be comprehended through the capacities for perception and thought. Therefore no image can give expression to the essence of a Buddha. Freely to renounce images altogether is the direct consequence.

#### **Buddha images: aids on the spiritual path**

The conflict between the most profound existential truths and the individual’s limited capacity to grasp them gives rise to an urgent need for what can be experienced through the senses – for a closer connection between the person, life and teachings of Buddha and everyday life. Many reliefs depicting Buddha at different stages of his life and engaged in various significant actions would be an effective pedagogical tool of both instruction and inspiration. Then again, images and statues can be used as objects of meditation.

#### **From renouncing images to image worship**

Differentiation in the content of Buddhist teaching requires a similar differentiation of visual representations. Tibetan Buddhism’s comprehensive knowledge of mental factors and psychological qualities is also expressed in its iconography. The Zen arts specifically address aspects of aesthetics. In the context of popular Buddhism, on the other hand, Buddha is “deified”, and is the concrete object of naïve worship and invocation. In the wider sphere of Buddhist sympathies (in restaurants, the health and wellness sector, advertising, furniture stores, for example) statues and images of Buddha may have a purely commercial and decorative character.

Conclusion: after numerous transformations in Buddhist ideas and practice, restraint in imagery is often replaced by over-ornateness, the renouncing of images by a naïve image worship.