

The Power of Bodhi: The Miraculous Mergence of the Four Begging Bowls by the Buddha Represented in Gandhara Sculpture

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Abstract

The present work discusses one of the many prodigies that happened in the life of the Buddha. The event under discussion is said to have happened immediately after the attainment of enlightenment. When the Buddha decided to eat after the forty-nine days emancipation, four begging bowls were presented by the guardians of the four directions. These four bowls were miraculously merged into one by the Buddha Śākyamuni. It was only after this that the Buddha could receive food from the passing merchants.

This work has been divided into three sections for a better apprehension: In the first section the event has been explained with the help of texts; the second section discusses a few selected sculptured narrative examples; and the third section has been incorporated to search for some symbolic meanings in the selected narrative sculptured examples.

Introduction

The historical Buddha of our times was born in Kapilavastu in 6th century B.C. The name of his father was Suddhodāna, who

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ruled the country. His mother's name was Māya. He enjoyed his life as a prince till the age of 29 years and then left in search of enlightenment so that he could find the answers of questions which worried him. He was worried about the cycle of innumerable lives full of suffering and wanted to know the truth and some way out of it. He wandered and meditated for six years and at last attained enlightenment (Bodhi). It was this point from where he was called Buddha instead of Siddhārta or *Śākyamuni*. The episode under discussion happened immediately after the attainment of Bodhi.

This work has been divided into three sections for a better apprehension: In the first section the event has been explained with the help of texts; the second section discusses a few selected sculptured narrative examples; and the third section has been incorporated to search for some symbolic meanings in the selected narrative sculptured examples.

1. The Story in the Text

After the attainment of Enlightenment, Gautama Buddha spent seven weeks pondering over and enjoying the great knowledge. What he had attained and perceived was beyond explanation. During this period of forty nine days, not only natural hurdles like rain and wind came and passed (during the days of rains and winds a *nāga* king, Mucilinda coiled his body around Śākyamuni and spread his hood to protect him), but also Mārā and his daughters came once again to keep the Buddha away from revealing what he had perceived. Every effort of Mārā failed to avert the Enlightened one.

On the seventh week, two merchants passing from there found that Śākyamuni had not eaten for forty-nine days. They offered honey and rice balls, but there was no bowl to receive the offering. The *lokapālas* (four guardian kings of the four cardinal points) appeared and offered a gold bowl which Śākyamuni did not accept because it was not fit for a monk. They offered a bowl with seven jewels, but Śākyamuni did not accept it either. Finally he was presented a stone bowl but one bowl by each of them. It would not be fair to accept one bowl and refuse the others so he decided to accept all the four and piling each of them on top of the other miraculously made them one. After he had eaten his meal, the bowl, it is said, was taken by the Brahma to the heaven and it was

enshrined there like his turban and hair at the time of his renunciation of the world.¹

“At the time for the alms-round the gods of the four quarters presented the seer with begging-bowls; Gautama, accepting the four, turned them into one for the sake of his dharma. Then at that time two merchants of a passing caravan, being instigated thereto by a friendly deity, joyfully did obeisance to the seer with exalted minds and were the first to give him alms.”²

2. Representation of the Episode in Gandhāra Sculpture

There are many reliefs depicting the scene of offering of the four bowls to the Buddha Śākyamuni. The composition mostly shows the Buddha seated centrally while the four great guardian kings (the four *lokapāla mahārājās* of the four cardinal points) two on each side. The scene is found in the following slightly different compositions:

1. The *lokapālas* are holding the bowls while Buddha Śākyamuni is shown empty handed; such example can be seen in Fig. Nos. 1, 2, and 3.
2. The four begging bowls are still held by the four *lokapāla* kings and in the same scene the Buddha has already taken and merged them together; Fig. Nos. 4 and 5 illustrate this mode of representation.

Besides these essential characters, there are always other heavenly beings represented in the background. They are mostly in the pose of adoration with joined hands towards the Buddha.

Here are presented a few examples which narrate the episode.

Sometimes *yāksās* are represented on the pillars enclosing the narrative scene. Such example can be seen in Fig. No.1.

Fig. Nos. 6 and 7 represent the Buddha Śākyamuni on his seat with his right hand raised in *abhāyamudra*, holding the begging bowl in his left hand. The four *lokapāla* kings are presenting four bowls while there are other gods present in the background. Vajrapāni is also present behind him with his *vajra*. The tree branches above symbolise the Bodhi tree. Another example, which

1 See Kurita, Isao, *Gandhāra Art*, 2003, (Part 2 The Search for Enlightenment).

2 Aśvaghoṣa, *Buddhacarita or Acts of the Buddha*, Part II, translated by Johnston, E.H., London; reprinted in Delhi (Motilal Banarsidass), 1995, p. 216.

is damaged (Fig. No. 7) is almost similar to Fig. No. 6, but here the damaged arm indicates that the hand was raised in *abhāyamudra* while in the left hand he held a begging bowl. In the background, besides other gods, Vajrapāni can be recognised with a damaged *vajra*.

Fig. Nos. 8 and 9 are two other identical examples in which *lokapāla* kings, gods and Vajrapāni are present in the scene.

In Fig. No. 3, the only thing which could not be noticed in the previous examples is the presence of three flowers on the front face of the seat. This might be the representation of three jewels (*triratna*): the Buddha, the doctrine (*dharma*) and the order of monks (*sāṅgha*).

Fig. No. 10 is an example which needs to be discussed separately. It has not been taken separately because of any different artistic or aesthetic importance, but the aspect that needs to be highlighted is the fact that the shape and space availability of the architectural piece has played its role in the execution of the scene. The individuals behind the four *mahārājas* have been represented kneeling not because they had to be kneeling, but because they could not be depicted standing. Thus it is the space which has decided how to depict the individuals? The space could have been left empty but it is the characteristic of the Indian art that all the space available is used by the artist. Although it seems that it was the space availability and not the preplanning of the artist to depict the figures, in that manner it still does not seem strange or ridiculous. There are many instances when the individuals adore the Buddha either with joined hands or even kneeling.

In Fig. No.11 the scene has been represented twice. On the left part of the plate the Buddha is shown seated on a lotus flower receiving the begging bowls while on the right part the seated Buddha is receiving the begging bowls and displaying *abhāyamudra*. The most important representation in this scene is the presence of a table on which a begging bowl can be seen.

The representation of the table in the same manner can be observed in the examples Fig. Nos.12, 13 and 14 included in this work for the explanation of the episode of the invitation of the Śrīgupta to the Buddha and his disciples. The provenance of only

one example, Fig. No. 14, is known which comes from Jamālgarhi. It indicates that all the four examples might be from the same place; a more profound study can lead to the existence of local workshops which worked according to the basic set principles while executing the sculpture. They certainly added elements from the local culture as can be seen through the above examples.

3 Iconographic Symbolism of the Episode

The Four Lokapāla Mahārājas

According to the Hinduism and the Buddhism, there exist four guarding deities of the four cardinal directions (*lokapālas*) of space those are: Kubera (north), Yama (south), Indra (east), and Varuna (west).³ In Hindu-Buddhist philosophy, numbers mostly have a symbolic denotation of designating the space. And when the space is carved out to the sacred art and monument it becomes transcendental. The universe is a chaos and erecting a sacred place or monument is like carving out a cosmos out of that chaos.

The four deities and their act of guarding the four cardinal points of the universe symbolise the desire of having protection and a kind of cosmos although invisible.

In the story of the Buddha Śākyamuni, we find several Hindu deities in a subservient position to him as the four deities of four directions have been shown in the service of Śākyamuni. There are other examples such as: at the time of the birth of the Buddha, Brahma and Indra were present to receive him; and at the time of his escape or great departure he was helped by the Hindu gods.

This shows the desire of the artist, his patron or monks to make it more effective as an instrument of propagation in a society where it was difficult to negate as a whole the Brahmanic *dharma*. The way out was found in the manner that the already existing deities were also accepted but they were made to revere their lord and communicate to them that now they should follow the *dharma* founded by the Great Master because even their deities were unaware of the good law founded by the Master as they were rejoicing it.

3 Corinna Wessels-Mevissen, *The Gods of the Directions in Ancient India. Origin and Early Development in Art and Literature (until c. 1000 A.D.)*, Berlin: Dietrich Reimer 2001, article on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guardians_of_the_directions.

The Four Bowls

Presenting the four bowls by the four deities to the Buddha was a symbolic devotion of the devotees who made the four quarters devoted to him. It means that the four deities of the four directions were always present to guard the Buddha and when he was in need of a bowl they hastened to present him all the four.

It was a symbolic devotion of the deities to the one who would preach a doctrine to show the way of salvation not only to humans but to the gods as well. The Buddha would have procured a bowl very easily for himself as he has been projected in the text and depicted in the art⁴ as someone who had miraculous powers, but the artist wants to project the devotion of all the *devas* to him.

The need for a bowl and being without one, before the deities could have procured him, is a symbolic message for the followers that how they should not be desirous of worldly objects. One should keep only the objects essential for life and negate the others and thus liberate one's self from the attachments.

There are several objects presented in the Gandhāra sculpture which symbolise one or the other event of the life of the Buddha. For example, the Bodhi tree symbolises the event of the attainment of the Bodhi, the wheel symbolises the first sermon delivered by the Buddha in the Deer park (Sarnāth), the coffin symbolises the death and the bowl symbolises the way of life of the Buddha and so of monks.

Merging of the Bowls

Merging the four bowls miraculously and making them one was to keep the hearts of all the deities. He did not want to accept one and reject the other three. Thus a message has been conveyed to his followers, and later the followers orally and through art to the general public, that when accepting the needed thing i.e. food, one should be grateful to the giver and accept whatever is presented.

4 See Aśvaghoṣa, *Buddhacarita or Acts of the Buddha*, 1995. In Gandhara art there are several examples of Buddha's miraculous powers, e.g. taking steps at the time of his birth, Miracles at Śrāvastī, subjugating the intoxicating elephant, subjugating the serpents etc.

The Presence of *Yāksas* and other Heavenly Beings

The offering of the four begging bowls by the heavenly beings and the presence of the other heavenly beings and *yāksas* indicate and propagate the idea that revering and serving the Buddha bear a great merit. If the heavenly beings were ever ready to serve the Buddha and accumulate merits, it becomes more important for humans to do so. The later Buddhists who were responsible for writing down the text, already changed with the passage of time, and sculptors were in need of the patronage of more and more people to sustain the order. It seems to be this desire, which was also responsible for the different modes of narration.

Conclusion

The Gandhara Sculpture, side by side the literary sources, has communicated to us very effectively whatever prodigies happened or were performed by the Buddha and which resulted in mass conversions. Gandhara art in general and narrative stone sculptures in particular have played an active role in propagating the doctrine of the Buddhism.

This work has shown how the narrative stone sculpture has not only worked for the propagation of the religion, but is an important tool for us to recognise and analyse the social and religious background of the time and place where it was carved out.

One of the important points with which I would like to conclude from the above discussion is that the stone sculpture narrates the story in the Hindu set up as there are present *lokapālas* to help the Buddha; and that the Indian artist has always taken full use of space availability. They have carved out the important story and then put other personalities for detail if space was still available; otherwise the story is represented in its briefest form.

The last three figures have been taken from another episode for the purpose of comparison. It is very important to note these different elements in the art on the basis of which we can reconstruct a more reliable history.

More researches on this art on the line of above mentioned points of discussion, different elements and characteristics present

in the narrative art can help us establishing chronology and detailed history of the time.



Figure No.1: Presentation of the Four Begging Bowls, Grey Schist, H. 27.3 cm, W. 28.2 cm, D. 7.7 cm, Provenance unknown, The British Museum, (Zwalf, W., *A Catalogue*, 1996, Fig. No. 189)



Figure No.2: Presentation of the Four Begging Bowls Depicted on a Stupa Drum Panel, Grey Schist, H. 16.2 cm, W. 41.9 cm, D. 8.4 cm,

Provenance unknown, The British Museum, (Zwalf, W., *A Catalogue*, 1996, Fig. No. 190)



Figure No.3: Presentation of the Four Begging Bowls, Grey Schist, H. 33 cm, From Sikri, Lahore Museum, © Mr. M. Taeda, (Kurita, Isao, *Gandhara Art*, 2003, Fig. No. 237)



Figure No.4: Presentation of the Four Begging Bowls, Grey Schist, H. 24 cm, Provenance unknown, Private Collection Japan, (Kurita, Isao, *Gandhara Art*, 2003, Fig. No. 241)



Figure No.5: Presentation of the Four Begging Bowls, Grey Schist, H. 28 cm, From Swat, Private Collection Japan, (Kurita, Isao, *Gandhara Art*, 2003, Fig. No. 625)



Figure No.6: Presentation of the Four Begging Bowls to Śākyamuni by the Four Great Kings (*mahārājas*) of the Four Quarters of the Universe, Green Schist, H. 24 cm, W. 26 cm, Provenance unknown, Lahore Museum, (Kurita, Isao, *Gandhara Art*, 2003, Fig. No. 239)



Figure No.7: Presentation of the Four Begging Bowls, Grey Schist, H. 23 cm, W. 25 cm, Provenance unknown, Lahore Museum, (Kurita, Isao, *Gandhara Art*, 2003, Fig. No. 240)



Figure No.8: Presentation of the Four Begging Bowls, Grey Schist, H. 31.7 cm, W. 34.6 cm, D. 6.1 cm, From Swat or Buner, The British Museum, (Zwalf, W., *A Catalogue*, 1996, Fig. No. 191)



Figure No.9: Presentation of the Four Begging Bowls, Grey schist, H. 14.9 cm, W. 35.6 cm, D. 9.2 cm, Provenance unknown, The British Museum, (Zwalf, W., *A Catalogue*, 1996, Fig. No. 192)

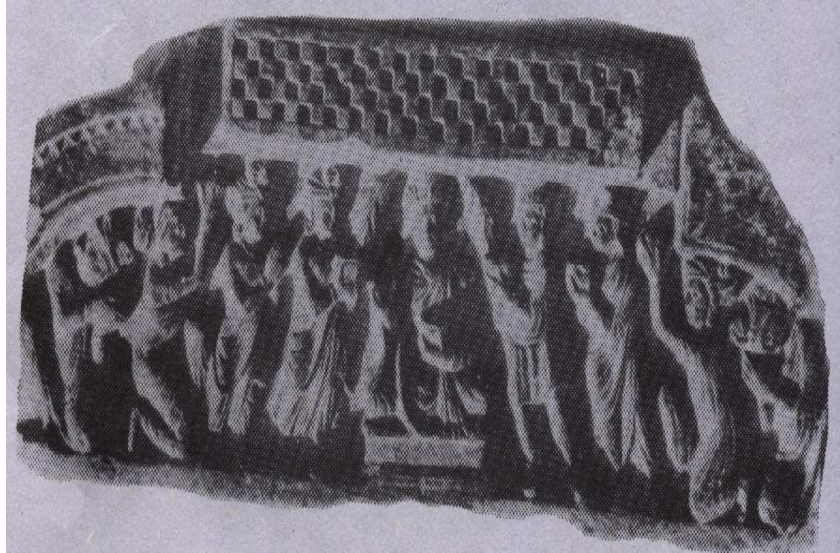


Figure No.10: Presentation of the Four Begging Bowls, Schist Stone, H. 8 cm, L. 20 cm, Provenance unknown, Peshawar Museum, (Sehrai, F., *The Buddha's Life Story*, 1988, Fig. No. 33)



Figure No.11: Presentation of the Four Begging Bowls, Grey Schist, H. 24.5 cm, W. 84 cm, Provenance unknown, Private Collection Japan, (Kurita, Isao, *Gandhara Art*, 2003, Fig. No. P2-VI)



Figure No.12: Buddha and his Disciples on meal invited by Śrigupta, Grey Schist, H. 25 cm, Provenance unknown, Private Collection Pakistan, (Kurita, Isao, *Gandhara Art*, 2003, Fig. No. 379)



Figure No.13: Buddha Invited by Śrīgupta, Grey Schist, H. 12.5 cm, Provenance unknown, Calcutta Museum, G. 173, (Kurita, Isao, *Gandhara Art*, 2003, Fig. No. 380)



Figure No.14: Buddha invited by Śrīgupta, Stone, 18x 37.2x5.8 cm, Jamalgarhi, Calcutta Museum, G 153/ A23515, (Sharma, R.C., *Gandhara Sculpture*, 1987, Fig. No. 26)