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THE STORY OF RUPANANDA FROM BAMMIAN, AFGHANISTAN

As is well known, Afghanistan was an important centre of Buddhism and Buddhist art during the early centuries of the Christian era. Begram, Hadda, Bammiyan and several other sites have provided abundant material for the study of Buddhist religion and art from the Kushan times to C. seventh-eighth century. Of all the sites, Bammiyan offers the highest attraction. While the other Buddhist remains have very much crumbled and fallen into ruins, the rock-cut caves of Bammiyan have still retained in spite of long neglect, vicissitudes and human vandalism much of its old grandeur in the form of many interesting paintings and sculptures.

Bammiyan, being on the old silk route, was a meeting place of many peoples and cultures, and as such Bammiyan art shows a commingling of traditions, Indian, Sassanian and Chinese with the native or local styles.

The object of this paper is to offer a new interpretation or identification of a wall painting (Pl. 1) from Bammiyan, (occurring on the niche of the 55m. Buddha) which has been described by Benjamin Rowland as Bodhisattva Maitreya and his Sakti.¹

The main or central figure is seated on an elaborate throne inside a shrine with a domed top. His legs are crossed at the ankles (and not shown interlocked in *yoga*), while the hands are in *vitarkamudra* (the gesture of discussion or teaching). Except for a narrow scarf, he is nude from the waist, though for his lower garment he has an elaborate *dhoti* reaching his ankles. He seems, however, to be endowed with a necklace, and bracelets.

Beside this main figure, stands a female figure beneath a tree. Both these figures show great charm and grace, typical of the classical Gupta style. In describing the beauty of the female figure, Rowland says, "...she vaunts her provocative charms, beside the throne of the great soft-bodied Bodhisattva; entirely nude she bends graciously forward, stretching forth her flower-like hand from-beneath a tree that twists and writhes in a curiously twisting way, the contours of the trunk and the finger like branches suggesting the insinuating curves of the lady in its shade"².....



PLATE 1 (WALL PAINTING FROM BAMIIAN)

Rowland identifies the main figure as Bodhisattva Maitreya on the basis of the similarity of the sitting posture and hand gesture of the present figure with those of the countless Bodhisattvas (specially labelled as Bodhisattva Maitreya) in the cave-temple at Lungmen in China.³ Further, Rowland seems to have been led to this belief by his supposition that over the throne, there is a *stupa*, an attribute associated with the future Buddha (Maitreya) and not employed for the Bodhisattvas. Regarding the female figure Rowland does not explain his reasons for describing her as the Sakti of Maitreya.

Rowland's identification, which he calls, however, of a probable nature does not seem to be supported by facts. The main figure here is seated on a throne inside a shrine with a domed top. There is no *stupa* over the throne, as supposed by him. Further, this figure does not hold any other known attribute of Maitreya, such as a nectar vase or a Nagakesara flower. The gandhara or Kushan sculptures of Maitreya are found to hold a nectar jug, one of his distinguishing characteristics, which is missing in the present case.

As is being explained below, the present painting seems to illustrate the story of Buddha's teaching to Rupananda or Janapadakalyani on the impermanence of form of beauty, at Jetavana, the grove which was presented by prince Jeta in Sravasti for the use of Buddha and his community.

The story which occurs in the *Dharmapala-atthakatha*⁴ tells us that Janapadakalyani possessed great charm and she was very much conscious of it. Finding that her brother (Buddha himself), her husband (Nanda) and other kinsfolk have become monks and her mother has also become a nun, she joined the Buddhist community as a nun. This was, however, not out of her faith in the doctrine but of her love of the kinsfolk. Because she possessed great beauty, she came to be called Rupananda.

One day Buddha said, "Beauty of form is impermanent, involved in suffering, unreal, so likewise are sensation, perception, the aggregate of mental states, consciousness impermanent, involved in suffering."⁵ This led Rupananda to think that if she met Buddha face to face, he would find fault with her beauty. Therefore, she avoided seeing the Master face to face.

Once having heard the nuns praise her brother, i.e. the Buddha, in extravagant phrases, she (Rupananda) made up her mind to go with the other nuns to listen to his instructions without letting herself being seen by Buddha

Buddha, however, come to know through his spiritual vision that Rupananda would come to pay respects to him and thought that it would be good to her if he curbed her pride in her beauty.

When Rupananda came and sat behind the nuns, Buddha created a phantom of a young woman as beautiful as the full moon. Seeing this, Rupananda considered her own beauty as of no consequence. Buddha then transformed the woman into a middle-aged person and through stages ultimately to an old, decrepit woman who had enough sufferings and died in misery. Rupananda's heart became filled with disgust and she could realise the impermanence of her own beauty and 'her mind sprang forth to meditation.'

Buddha said to her, 'Nanda, think not, there is reality in this body. . . It is a city of bones, plastered with flesh and blood, where lodge old age and death and pride and deceit. 6

The present painting does not depict all the details of the story. We do not find in the picture the phantom of any beautiful woman Buddha created to curb the pride of Rupananda, nor do we find here the nuns behind whom, Rupananda took her seat in the congregation. Art is suggestive and it is an accepted fact that the artist need not follow in his work all the details of a story. In conformity to this, the artist of Bamiyan seems to have been selective. To make the point clear the Jetavana in Sravasti, where the Buddha preached the law of impermanence of beauty to Rupananda is suggested by a tree beneath which Rupananda (whom Rowland describes as Bodhisattva Maitreya's Sakti without sufficient reasons) stands. That this female figure probably represents Rupananda is, can be inferred also from the exquisite beauty invested in it by the artist.

Further, the story that Rupananda, who was conscious of her beauty and avoided the Master seeing face to face has been very skilfully depicted, by the artist as he has shown her not in front of Buddha but by his side beneath a tree.

Again, there is hardly any doubt that the main figure is of Buddha, with elongated ears and short hair characteristic of Buddha figures. The only deviations seem to be the ornaments on his body. But it is well known that the concept of crowned and jewelled Buddha, many examples of which we find in the early medieval period, were perhaps taking shape from now, i.e., c. seventh century to which the present painting can be attributed on stylistic grounds.

From the preceding, it is clear that there is no plausibility in Rowland's suggested identification of the present scene as one of Maitreya and

his Sakti on the other hand, when one considers the details of this painting against the background of the Rupananda story, one feels inclined to hold that the scene depicts Buddha's instructions to Rupananda on the impermanence of the beauty of form.

Though Mahayana Buddhism with Tantrik elements including the worship of female principles developed in different parts of India and Afghanistan, since Asanga's time, i.e., 2nd-3rd century A.D., still Hinayana Buddhism held its sway for a considerable time. The art of Ajanta Bamiyan and of Central Asia till the seventh-eight century was predominantly of Hinayana inspiration. Hence, there is nothing surprising in finding Hinayana stories depicted in Bamiyan as late as the sixth-seventh century. That Bamiyan was an important stronghold of Hinayana Buddhism during the period in question is evident also from the account of the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang.

Before we conclude, it may be mentioned that not many representations of the Rupananda story are found. In addition to the present one, there is a fragmentary Amaravati sculpture showing this story as identified by Sivaramamurti. ⁷

FOOT NOTES

1. Benjamin Rowland, *Wall - paintings of India, Central Asia and Ceylon* (Boston 1938), pp. 67-69, pl. 13; *Marg* (Bombay, 1971), Vol. xxiv, pp. 36 ff, fig. 13.
2. Benjamin Rowland, *Marg* (Bombay, 1971), Vol. xxiv, pp. 36 and 37.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Dhammapada-atthakatha*, translated by Burlingame (*Indian Buddhist Legends*), Harvard Oriental Series, Vol.II, pp. 336-339.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. C. Sivaramamurti, *Amaravati Sculptures in the Madras Government Museum* (Madras, 1956), p. 200, pl. xxxi b.