

# A PREFACE TO MAHAYANA ICONOGRAPHY

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## I

Indian art, particularly iconography, is well-known as idealistic, that is, not realistic. Indian icons are not illustrative of realities or facts of nature. No species of flora or fauna finds exact representation or faithful reproduction in traditional Indian iconography. This is as true of Brahmanical/Hindu images as of Buddhist/Mahayana images.

This tradition is rooted in India's age old belief that the divine being or transcendental entity cannot be defined or described in man's limited vocabulary or in man's limited vision. In India seers of all creeds and schools consider the five senses as led by a sixth sense called "mind". Buddhist as well as Brahmanical saints find even the master sense too little to comprehend the Absolute so as to define or describe it in language or form. An illumined mind can comprehend the Absolute but may not express it. Gautama Buddha chose to be silent.

Krishna tells Arjuna :

But thou canst not see Me  
With this same eye of thine own;  
I give thee a supernatural eye :  
Behold My mystic power as God !

(Bhagavad Gita XI, 8. Eng. Tr. Edgerton)

Oldest Indian scriptures, the Vedic Samhitas, speak of many deities or divinities like Indra or Varuna but are not clear or categorical about RUPA, that is, the form of the deity. On the otherhand images or icons worshipped by the uncivilized or unenlightened people are positively decried. Perhaps these images were gaining popularity with the less advanced among the Vedic community. That is why in the later Vedic works, the Upanishads, we find the seers frequently referring to the Absolute as incomprehensible by the senses and that the likeness of the Absolute 'PRATIMA' was not to be found. Transcending all known expressions and forms the Brahman was known as Transcendental.

**Kena Upanishad** rules out the sense organs as instruments for comprehending the Brahman. Any material object like stone or wood may be noticed by the eye but the eye cannot notice the Brahman. "That which one sees not with the eye, that by which one sees the eye's seeings, know that indeed to be the Brahman, not this which men follow after here". (I : 6 Eng. Tr. Sri Aurobindo). **Katha Upanishad** elaborates further. "God has not set His body within the ken of seeing, neither does any man with the eye behold Him but to the heart and the mind and the super-mind He is manifest. Who know Him are immortals". (II : 3 : 9

Eng. Tr. Sri Aurobindo). **Svetasvatara Upanishad**, which inter alia speaks of manifested Brahman, lays down: "His form is not to be seen; no one sees him with the eye. Those who through heart and mind know Him as abiding in the heart become immortal". (IV : 20 Eng. Tr. Radhakrishnan). The term RUPA occurs in the Upanishads as in Vedic Samhitas while any concrete representation is decried. Even any visualization within self is not adequate. As **Katha Upanishad** (II ; 3 ; 5) says : "In the self one sees God as in the mirror but as in a dream in the world of the Fathers : and as in water one sees the surface of an object, so one sees Him in the world of the Gandharvas. But He is seen as light and shade in the heaven of the Spirit". (Eng. Tr. Sri Aurobindo).

It is now fairly established that the images in stone or wood censured in the Upanishads were infiltrations from the religion of the conquered Dravidian people. Phallic symbols and iconic forms of Siva Pasupati and Yogi from the Indus Valley made inroads into the religion and cult of the conquerors. Thus the sages who composed the Upanishads no doubt spoke only for the elites among the conquering community. Nevertheless Brahmanical images or icons were on the way when Gautama Buddha appeared.

**Bhagavad Gita**, whether composed before or after Gautama Buddha, is known to be a work of the Upanishad class. It preserves and projects the Upanishadic speculations about RUPA. Arjuna, after having a vision of the Cosmic Form, exclaims "O abode of the world. You are the imperishable, the manifest and the unmanifest, and that which is beyond both". (XI, 37 Eng. Tr. Vireswarananda).

## II

Buddhism begins with reservations and inhibitions about form but flowered into countless forms, THOUSAND BUDDHA!

Gautama Buddha came in a milieu when the quest for Brahman, Brahma-jijnasa, trod the path of dialectic tending to agnostic thought. The Absolute in such thought could be RUPA (form), ARUPA (formless) or both. Buddha rebelled against the Vedic rituals and sacrifices as did the seers teaching Sankhya and Vedanta. Buddha could not encourage the cult of image or icon; thus he deplored the tendency to adore the Master's Body.

In **Samyutta Nikaya**, also **Majjhima Nikaya**, is related the story of disciple Vakkali who in his deathbed was most eager to see Buddha in person. Buddha came to him and said "O Vakkali why you crave to have look at this body of impure matter. Vakkali one who perceives Dhamma perceives me. One who perceives me perceives Dhamma". In the same Nikayas, Buddha is on record thus "One who perceives Pratityasamutpada, perceives Dharma; one who perceives Dharma, perceives Pratityasamutpada". In short Buddha said that his Teachings were important and not his Kaya (body). It was an injunction against adoration of the Master's image, that is, Buddha Rupa.

Five centuries later sage Nagasena told the Greek king Menander "Who perceives Dharma perceives Bhagavan (Buddha) for Dharma was preached by Bhagavan". Further "Bhagavan can be pointed out in the body of his Dharma for the Dharma was preached by Bhagavan". The Dharmakaya was to be visualised and not the physical body of Buddha who passed away long ago. It was obvious that Buddha Rupa (image of Buddha) was not unknown and worship of such image was not uncommon.

Relics enshrined in Stupa were worshipped after the passing away of the Master. Worship of stupa was an ancient pre-Buddhist custom and the Master had approved of such adoration of his relics after Mahaparinirvana. These stupas came to be decorated with 'sacred symbols' like Asvatha tree or Dharmachakra and 'sacred animals' like elephant, horse, bull or lion. When events of the Master's life came to be depicted by Maurya and Sunga artists, Buddha Rupa in relief and in round was not far off.

In the first century of Christian era Buddha's Rupakaya was popular with the common people who took refuge in Buddha while only the intellectually advanced like Maharaj Milinda would be taught by sages like Nagasena how to visualize Buddha's Dharmakaya through Dharma. A common believer in first century A.D. could have been Hinayana and not necessarily Mahayana. Buddha Rupa in Theravada countries like Sri Lanka or Thailand bears full testimony down to our time. Buddhaghosa the great Theravada saint-scholar of fifth century A.D. describes in **Visuddhimagga** the Two Bodies thus :

"That Bhagava, who is possessed of a beautiful rupakaya, adorned with eighty minor signs and thirty-two major signs of a great man, and possessed of a dhammakaya purified in every way and glorified by sila, samadhi, ....full of splendour and virtue, incomparable and fully awakened". (Eng. Tr. Nalinaksha Dutt).

Rupakaya in Hinayana/Theravada tradition referred to the reality, that is, the historical Buddha, a human being. Yet this Hinayana tradition was not altogether free from the religious bias of attributing super-human powers and signs extraordinary to Gautama Buddha. The Buddha Rupa in Theravada countries has never been completely realistic. "A beautiful Rupakaya, adorned with 80 minor and 32 major signs" could not inspire a grossly realistic form. In the homeland of Buddhism in the four centuries prior to Buddhaghosa sculptors of different regions—Amaravati, Mathura, Gandhara—produced different styles of Buddha Rupa. Gandhara, under influence of Hellenistic aesthetics, tended to be most realistic and least idealistic ; Gandhara style failed to spread all over Jambudvipa.

Mahayana iconography along with Mahayana doctrine was firmly established all over the country except some places in south and east in Buddhaghosa's time. In the seventh century A.D. Buddhism made its entry into Tibet with a multi-splendoured iconography depicting a multi-splendoured pantheon. The images were not from the imagination of the artists ; the images were from the vision—the meditation—of the saint-scholars, all mystics.

In Mahayana, Rupakaya came to be designated Nirmanakaya and an intermediate Body designated Sambhogakaya emerged. The Trikaya are: Dharmakaya or Cosmic Body which is Absolute Reality; Sambhogakaya or Body of Bliss which in a personal manner blesses the believers; and Nirmanakaya or Mundane Body which appears on earth to teach Dharma. Dharmakaya cannot be adequately depicted and is generally depicted by a skull; for a believer's comprehension Gautama Buddha after Mahaparinirvana or Adi Buddha like Amitabha may be cited. Sambhogakaya is depicted by a divine Bodhisattva like Avalokitesvara or Manjusri. Nirmanakaya or Manusha Buddha is depicted by Gautama Buddha while on earth; Nagarjuna, Padmasambhava, Atisa or a Guru is more often cited as Manusha Buddha, and Gautama Buddha less often since he is in Dharmakaya.

This is a brief and insufficient account of the figures featuring in Trikaya which formed the theme of Mahayana iconography in Tibet and Mongolia. A separate notice of the doctrine of Three Bodies and the diverse forms of the multiple deities will follow.

This notice may be concluded with a quote from **Vajrachhedika** that Dharma and not Rupa is to be visualised.

Those who by my form did see me,  
And those who followed me by voice,  
Wrong the efforts they engaged in,  
Me those people will not see.

From the dharma should one see the Buddhas,  
For the dharma-bodies are the guides.  
Yet dharma's true nature should not be discerned,  
Nor can it, either, be discerned.

(Eng. Tr. Edward Conze)



AVALOKITESVARA CHATURBHUJA

(1)

न तु मां वाक्यसे द्रष्टुमनेनैव स्वचक्षुषा ।  
दिव्यं दृष्ट्वा मि तै चक्षुः पश्य मे योगमैश्वरम् ॥

(2) श्रीमद् भगवद्गीता XI.५.8

यच्चक्षुषा न पश्यति येन चक्षुषि पश्यति ।  
तद्वेव ब्रह्म त्वं विद्धि नेदं यद्विद्वमुपासते ॥

(3) केनोपनिषद् I.6

न संदृशे तिष्ठति रूपमस्य न चक्षुषा पश्यति कश्चनैनम् ।  
हृदा मनीषा मनसामिक्षुप्तौ य स्तद्विदुरमृतास्ते भवन्ति ॥

(4) कठोपनिषद् II, 3, 9

नैनमुर्ध्वं न तिर्यञ्चं न मध्ये परिजग्रमत् ।

न तस्य प्रतिमा अस्ति यस्य नाम महद्व्यबाः ॥

(5) श्वेताश्वतरोपनिषद् IV.19

न संदृशे तिष्ठति रूपमस्य न चक्षुषा पश्यति कश्चनैनम् ।  
हृदा हृदिष्ठं मनसा व एनमेवं विदुरमृतास्ते भवन्ति ॥

(6) श्वेताश्वतरोपनिषद् IV. 20

यथाऽऽदर्शे तथात्मनि यथा स्वप्ने तथा पितृलोके ।  
यथाप्सु परिव द्रष्टृशे तथा गन्धर्वलोके द्वाया तपथोरिव ब्रह्मलोके ॥

(7) कठोपनिषद् II : 3 : 5

कस्माच्च ते न न मेरन्महात्मन् गरीयसे ब्रह्मणोऽप्यादिकर्त्रे ।  
अनन्त देवेश जगन्निवास त्वमन्नरं सदसत्तत्परं यत् ॥

श्रीमद् भगवद्गीता XI, 37

(8)

रूपं रूपं प्रतिरूपा बभूव ।

इन्द्रो मायाभिः पुरुरूप इयते ॥

ऋग्वेद VI. 47. 18

(9) अलम् वक्कलि किम् ते प्तिकाएन द्विट्ठेन । वो खो वक्कलि  
धम्मं पस्सति सो मं पस्सति । वो मं पस्सति सो धम्मं पस्सति ।

संयुत/ मज्झिमनिकाय  
यो पटिच्चसमुप्पादं पस्सति<sup>(10)</sup> सो धम्मं पस्सति यो धम्मं  
पस्सति सो पटिच्चसमुप्पादं पस्सति ।

(11) संयुत/ मज्झिमनिकाय  
यो धम्मं पस्सति सो भगवन्तं पस्सति, धम्मं हि  
महाराज भगवता देसितो ति ।

(12) मिलिन्दपञ्च  
धम्मकायेन पन खो महाराज सक्का भगवा निदस्सेतुम्, धम्मो  
हि महाराज भगवता देसितो ति ।

(13) मिलिन्दपञ्च  
यो पि सो भगवा असीति अनुव्यञ्जनपटिमण्डित-द्धान्तिसमहा-  
पुरिसलकरवण- विचित्र-रूपकायो सब्बाकारपरिसुद्धसिलकरव-  
न्दादि-गुणरतनसमिद्धा-धम्मकायो यसमहत्त-पुञ्जमहत्त....  
..... अपटिपुग्गलो अरहं सम्मासम्बुद्धो ।

(14) विशुद्धिमग्ग  
यो मे पस्सति सद्धमं<sup>(14)</sup> सो मं पस्सति वक्कलि ।  
अपस्समानो सद्धमं मम् पस्से पि न पस्सति ॥

(15) सद्धम्म-संग्रह  
ये मां रूपेण चाद्वाहुर्ये मां घोषेण चान्वयुः।  
मिथ्याप्रहाणप्रसूता न मां द्रक्ष्यन्ति ते जनाः॥

धर्मतो बुद्धा द्रष्टव्या धर्मकाया हि नायकाः।  
धर्मता च न विजेया न सा शक्या विजानितुम्॥  
वज्रच्छेदिका प्रजापारमिता