

NOTES & TOPICS

Book Review

SANGS-RGYAS STONG

- An Introduction to Mahayana Iconography

By Nirmal C. Sinha

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Gangtok, India, Price Rs. 150/-**

That the Buddhist art and Buddhist tenets go together needs hardly any elaboration and is conspicuous through its various modes of creation of such artistic objects as painting, sculpture or icons. It is more so in the case of Mahayanic art forms as developed and practised in Tibet, Mongolia and trans-Himalayas. What is however, not so well known or usually go unnoticed is the fact that these art forms together with their basic concepts had also travelled to the north along with Buddhism from India. The principles underlying these art forms totally differ from those of the Western mode of expression essentially representational in character and based on mass, volume, dimension etc. treated against perspective view of things and objects. On the other hand the art forms practised and developed in India and the countries of South East Asia, China, Japan, Central Asia and Trans-Himalayas professing both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism have been based on linear decorative compositions on a single plane in total disregard of the perspective view. This applies with the icons both Brahmanic and Buddhist where the same linear-decorative principles predominate rather than the anatomical preciseness of the Greek models be it depicted in Buddha Rupa, forms of gods and goddesses or symbolic representation of men, animal, floral or other motifs or any other natural phenomenon.

Buddhist art or for that matter the Mahayanic art due to its strict adherence to scriptural injunctions and intricate doctrinaire preoccupations defy any direct understanding by a common observer. It is with a view to facilitate such understanding that the Sikkim Research Institute of Tibetology has come out with its latest publication 'Sangs-rgyas Stong, (Sahasra Buddha) sub-titled 'An Introduction to Mahayana Iconography' -- a handy exposition of the secrets of Mahayana Buddhist icons, lucidly narrated by Prof. Nirmal C. Sinha, the Director of the Institute and formally released by Mr. T.V. Rajeswar, the Governor of Sikkim and the President, Sikkim Research Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok. The author in his preface has stated the objective of the publication thus: "A book on Mahayana iconography simple for the beginner and lucid for the general reader is not an easy task. The task is made doubly difficult when it is desired that the book should be acceptable to the specialist". That both these purposes have been amply served is clearly manifest on the pages of the book. In fact and as stated by the author, he followed the advice of a specialist of Stella Kramrisch's standing according to whom "the best exposition of Mahayana icons was to present or project the believer's point of view". The author had accepted the assignment "with due humility keeping in mind the advice" of a leading authority as Madame Stella Kramrisch and drawing upon his "on-the-spot knowledge of Mahayana monasteries" in Himalayas, Trans-Himalayas and Baikals. Himself a distinguished historian and an authority on Northern Buddhism, the author's treatment of the

subject testifies to his insight and his claim of direct access to the mysteries of the Mahayana pantheon as depicted through art forms.

It is indeed a fascinating study to know about the proliferation of Buddha Rupa into thousand (Sahasra) through the meditative visions of the devotees or through the believers' eyes, about the symbols (Pratika) and their significance, the emergence of three levels of Buddha Rupa (Trikaya) and above all the overriding principles of 'Dharma' encompassing all animate being through which one gets a glimpse-- a rare acquaintance with a world at once shrouded in mystery but profoundly inspired with a sense far exceeding the mundane estimates of our life.

If we consider the circumstances of Buddhism's entry into Tibet, we would find that its impact was that of a distant echo-- much of it had an appeal towards mystery so that the search was more inwardly. Naturally, the result was partly fantasy, partly deep meditational trance-- further resulting into vision of images and emergence of numerous forms with numerous variations depending on the individual attainment of the devotees.

In this context, Buddha Rupa also becomes symbolic in the eyes of the believers. Buddha is not 'Rupa Kaya' (mundane form or 'Sharira'). He is an 'embody' (of the Absolute-- 'Shunya' or Void) rather than a 'body' (of impurities). However for the sake of comprehension of our senses we need to pass through the stages and travel gradually from transient to transcendent. Hence, is the emergence of Buddha Rupa in three levels (Trikaya). Nirmana kaya (assumed body) Manusha Buddha or Bodhisattvas, who appear in human form to alleviate sufferings of sentient beings; Shambhoga kaya (the body of bliss) super humans capable of blessing the devotees in personal manner; Dharmakaya (the cosmic body) the incomprehensible Absolute beyond all limits of time, form, cause and effect cycle-- the void or 'Shunyata'.

This is the conceptual framework under which the artist who is also a devotee and belongs to the Sangha has to visualise the technique, forms and colours suitable for depicting the imagery. The process is therefore, one of complex appreciative perception achieved through meditative practices. The artist in this case is himself a believer and a visionary with a third eye.

The author who knows his job as well as the land of Sahasra Buddha well, we have a lucidly compressed account of Mahayana iconography though as an introduction and would look forward to a more comprehensive history of the subject comprising a much wider perspective of its occurrence over the past centuries.

However, the author's occasional turn towards emotionally arousing episodes from the Gita, Upanishad or even the Tantra could only reveal his deep sense of commitment and belongingness to the high order that gave rise to such splendid fruition of a spiritual culture hidden for long behind a mysterious world of existence. Mr. T.V. Rajeswar, the Governor and the President SRIT in his well written foreword has rightly commended the author in the following words: "His knowledge of Buddhism and Buddhist Doctrine is encyclopaedic".

Last but not least, the beautifully produced book became all the more revealing with highly ornamental canonical line drawings of Lama Karjam Atsen and the colour plates reproduced from the Thankas that gave much more to it than a mere collection of printed matter between the covers.