

## BUDDHIST ART IN NEPAL

All principal religious currents which stirred India also registered their ripples in Nepal. Historically, Buddhism was the first established religion which reached Nepal perhaps as early as the time of Asoka. The early form of Buddhism believed in worshipping the Buddha through symbols and regarded the *chaitya* or the *stupa* as an important cult object symbolising the Master. The immense popularity of *chaitya* - worship in Nepal is indeed a relic of the Hinayana stage and well-finished Lichchhavi *chaityas* of a pristine hemispherical form are found in hundreds scattered all over the length and breadth of the Kathmandu Valley. It must, however, be admitted that except for the earliest *stupas* at Patna Plate III,



ASOKAN STUPA, PATAN PLATE III

which are attributed to Asoka, no other monumental *stupas* of the pristine Hinayana form have yet been identified in Nepal. It is not unlikely that the older folk divinities like Yakshas and Nagas, which may have commanded popular worship in Nepal as they did in India, were assimilated in the Buddhist cult as acolytes or subordinate deities. The earliest image of the so-called Yaksna-Bodhisattva discovered in the valley and recently published is more likely to represent a Yaksha (presumably as an attendant of a Buddhist *chaitya*) than a Bodhisattva who at such an early age represented the Buddha himself.

In course of time Hinayana, which comprised of the Sravakayana and Pratyekabuddhayana and was a strict and rigorous system, gave place to the more humane Mahayana or Bodhisattvayana, symbolised by the compassion of Bodhisattva Padmapani who is believed to have refused *nirvana* until the entire mankind had attained deliverance. Mahayana soon swept Nepal with the result that the simple *chaitya* begins to be decorated with Buddhist images and we start getting images of the Buddha from *circa* fifth century and of the Bodhisattva from *circa* sixth century onwards. Then followed successively the Tantrayana and the Vajrayana, each ensuring further loosening of the rigours. This is no place to go into their metaphysics and philosophy which are indeed subtle and abtuse. Suffice it to say that to the solid base of the *vijnanavada* of the Yogachara school, which was an improvement on the *sunyavada* of the Madhyamikas, the Vajrayanists added a new element of *mahasuha* which marked the culmination of the liberalising process of Buddhist religion and philosophy. "Vajrayana introduced many innovations of a revolutionary character. It introduced, for instance, the theory of the five Dhyani Buddhas as embodiments of the five Skandhas or cosmic elements and formulated the theory of the Kulas or families of the five Dhyani Buddhas from which deities emerge according to need. It introduced the worship of the Prajna or Sakti in Buddhism for the first time and a host of other things including a large number of gods and goddesses, their Sadhanas for the purpose of visualisation, Mantras, Tantras, Yantras, Mudras, Mandalas, mystic realization, and psychic exercises of the most subtle character."

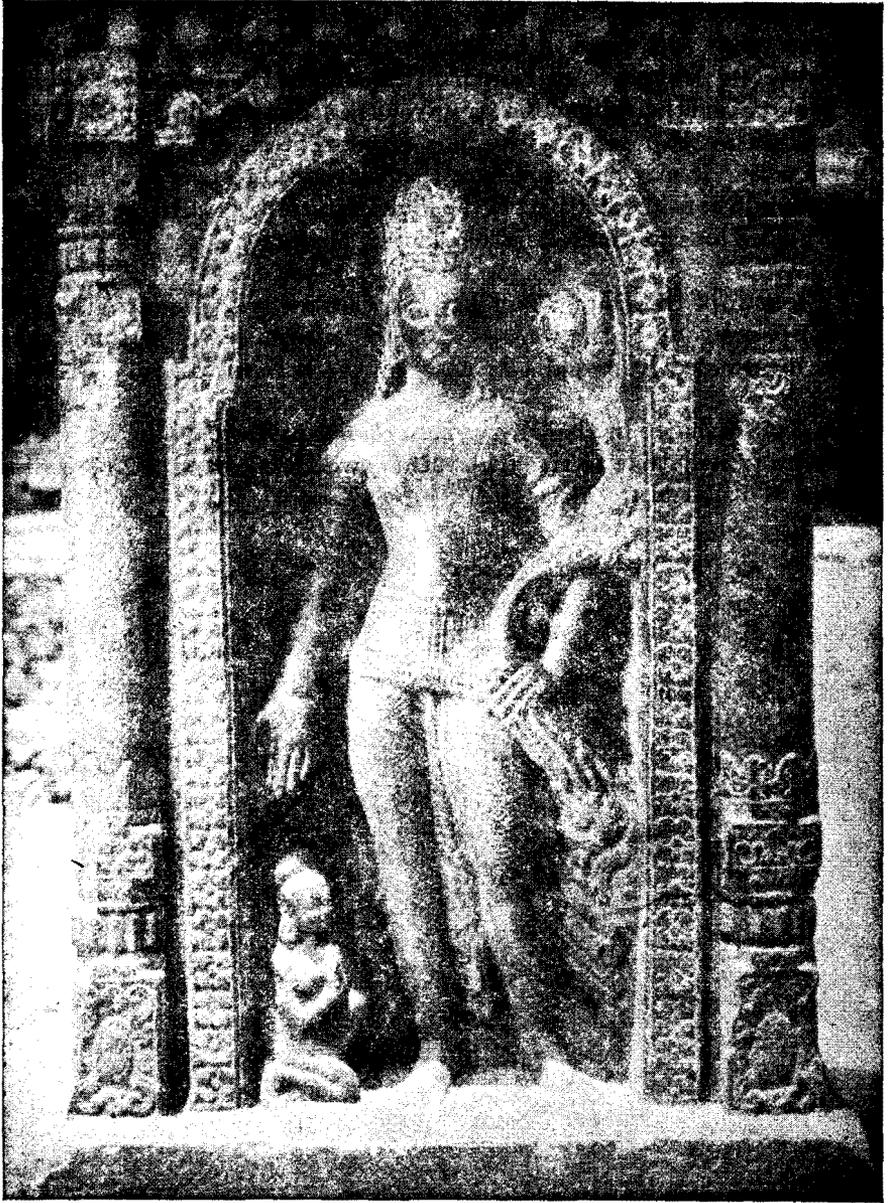
Vajrayana was indeed a catholic and eclectic system which combined the tenet and practices of the Buddhist Mantrayana as well as Tantric Saivism and included in its pruvieu the subtlest mystic experiences and philosophical speculations to the grossest rites and practices. Vajrayana also believed in psychic culture and the attainment of super-normal powers known as *siddhis*. Distinguished adopts in these were known as *Siddhas*, These spiritual attainments were often accompanied by esoteric rites and practices involving not only animal and human sacrifices and consumption of wine and meat but also indulgence in sexual orgies. Such permissiveness was often abused and exploited by the lesser adopts and the black sheep and led in course of time to the debasement of these exalted cults.

Whereas under the Mahayana the pantheon had been limited to the Buddhas and the Bodhisattvas and just a few goddesses like Tara and Bhrikuti, uner the new dispensation of Vajrayana there was a vast increase of the pantheon and a prominence was given to the female element called Sakti or Prajna. Under Vajrayana deification was carried to an excess and all conceivable objects and ideas, including even abstract and philosophical concepts, were anthropomorphised. Further, many fierce

divinities were introduced and the female deities were often represented in the *yab-yum* posture, i.e., in physical union with their consorts. Not being content with the five Kulesas or Dhyani Buddhas, Vajrayana conceived of the Adibuddha or Primordial Buddha as the progenitor of even the Kulesas and the Adibuddha was given the iconographic form of either Vajradhara or Vajrasattva, who was often represented with his Sakti in *yab-yum*. It may be noted here that cultural intercourse with Tibet also played a considerable part in the multiplication of the fierce divinities and the deities represented in the *yab-yum* posture.

The cult of the Dhyani Buddhas, who are assigned definite positions in the cosmogony of the *stupa* is quite popular in Nepal and may have been introduced from India as early as the seventh century A.D.

This is shown by the Dhvaka Bana *chaltya* palaeographically and artistically assignable to the 7th century, which is carved with standing figures of Padmapani Plate IV,



DHVAKA BAHA CHAITYA, KATHMANDU PLATE IV

Buddha (is he Maitreya?). Vajrapani and Buddha in the lower portion and four identical Buddha images seated in *dhyanasana*, of obviously representing four Dhyani Buddhas, the fifth one being left unrepresented. A similar contemporary *chaitya* from Gahiti,

Thamel, shows four figures of Buddha seated respectively in *dhyana*, *abhaya*, *varada* and *bhusparsa-mudras*, confirming that these represent Dhyani Buddhas. A pair of Lichchhvi chaityas from the Alko hici, Ikachhe Tol, Patan, displays in the four niches Dhyani Buddhas seated respectively in the *varada*, *abhaya dhyana* and *vykhyanamudras*, the latter depicted in one case in the *prelamba-padasana*.

The cult of the Adibuddha, which is equally popular in Nepal, grew in the Buddhist monasteries of eastern India not earlier than the tenth century. According to the *Svayambu-Purana*, Adibuddha first manifested himself in Nepal in the form of a flame of fire and Manjusri erected a temple over it. This temple is identified as the Svayambhu-chaitya which is the most celebrated Buddhist monument in Nepal. According to a variant local tradition, *Svayambu* is the self-born or the Adibuddha who manifested himself in the form of a lotus.

Since the five Dhyani Buddhas played a primary role in the formulation of the Buddhist pantheon, we may define their characteristics indicating the deities which emanate from each.

The progenitor of the *dvesha* family is Dhyani-Buddha Ak hobhya, who is blue in colour, exhibits *bhusparsa-mudra* and presides over the eastern direction. His Sakti is Lochana, his Bodhisattva is Vajrapani, his cognizance is *vajra* and a pair of elephants constitutes his vehicles. Heruka, Haygiva, Yamari, Chandaroshana and Buddhakapala are the principal gods, while Mahachina-Tara, Janguli, Ekajata, Prajnaparamita, Mahamantaneshini, Mahapratyangira and Nairtama are the principal goddesses emanating from him.

The *maha* family is presided over by Vairchana who holds *dharmachakra-mudra* and is white in colour. His Sakti is Vajradhatvi's vari and his Bodhisattva is Samantabhadra. He is assigned a place in the centre of the *stupa* and is often shown between the east and south. Among deities owing their origin to him may be mentioned Marichi, Ushnishavijaya, Sinit petra, Aparajita, Mahasahasrapramardini, Vajravahni, Kshitigarbha and Maitreya.

The *raga* family originates from Amitabha who is red in colour, shows the *dhyana-mudra* and presides over the western direction. His cognizance is lotus and *vahana* is a pair of peacocks. His Sakti is Pandara and his Bodhisattva is Padmapani. Prominent deities of this family include Lokesvara, Saptasatika, Haygiva, Chandraprabha, Jalini Prabha, Kurukulla, Bhrikuti and Mahasitavati.

The originator of the *chintamani* family is Ratnasambhava who is of yellow colour, holds the *varada-mudra* and presides over the south. His Sakti is Mamaki, his Bodhisattva is Ratnapani, while a pair of lions constitutes his vehicle. Prominent deities emanating from him include Jambhala, Uchchushma-Jambhala, Gaganaganja, Jnanaketu, Khagarbha, Pratibhanakuta, Maha-pratisara, Vasudhara and the twelve Paramitas.

The *samaya* family is presided over by Amoghasiddhi who is of green colour and exhibits *abhaya-mudra*. He presides over the north direction, his cognizance being *visvavajra* and vehicle a pair of Garudas. His Sakti is Tara, while his Bodhisattva is Visvapani. Principal deities of this family are Vishkambhin, Vighnantaka, Khadiravani-Tara, Dhanada-Tara, Parnasabari, Mahamayuri, Vajrasrinhala and the twelve Dharinis.

#### **Yaksha - Bodhisattva**

The earliest image hitherto found in Nepal is the sandstone torso of a Yaksha - Bodhisattva Plate V,



Yaksha Bodhisattva,  
National Museum,  
Kathmandu Plate V.

which has only recently been brought to notice. Although the head, hands (except for some fingers of the left hand) and feet of the figure are missing, its stylistic affinity with the figures of early Indian Yakshas and Mathura Bodhisattvas leaves no doubt that it belongs to the same genre. The sculpture is fully carved in the round, though it is more sensitively modelled in the front than at the back. It stands in *samabhanga* and shows a sturdy build with broad shoulders, heaving chest, strong thighs and not too flabby a belly. It dons an *ekamsika uttariya* on the left shoulder, the gathered folds of the *uttariya* being held in the clenched left hand of which only the thumb and traces of some fingers have survived. The stance of the figure and the treatment of the *uttariya* and its folds, partly held in the left fist kept akimbo, are identical with the early Buddha—Bodhisattva images of the Mathura School. The rendering of the lower garment, however, differs from the said Mathura type in detail and is shown as almost diaphanous, though the double-wound waist-band is again akin to the Bodhisattva figure from Maholi (Mathura). The modelling of the back is sketchy and follows the earlier tradition of the Yaksha figures. In fact the peculiar rendering of the buttocks, and the treatment of the *kachchha* of the *dhoti* and the looped and tasselled ends of the *kantha-hara* at the back are strongly reminiscent of the figure of Manibhadra Yaksha from Pawaya.<sup>2</sup>

Since our figure wears a *kantha-hara* and a *sakachchha dhoti*, it is more likely to represent a Yaksha than a Buddha-Bodhisattva. But as already indicated, it imbibes certain stylistic mannerisms of the early Bodhisattva type of Mathura and in some respects improves thereon by making the upper part of the body less stocky and more proportionate and by delineating the lower garment as practically diaphanous. Besides being the earliest known sculpture from Nepal, this figure is thus remarkable for providing a link between the early Yaksha and Bodhisattva types and is assignable to *circa* first century A.D.

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1. *Ancient Nepal*, No.4, pp. 37-39 pl.V.
  2. *Saga of Indian Sculpture* (Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan, Bombay, 1957) pl.4.(b).

## BUDDHA

The earliest Buddha images hitherto found in the Kathmandu Valley are the standing figures of Buddha from Chabel and Bangemura, which are both parts of the city of Kathmandu. While the former Plate VI,



BUDDHA FROM CHABEL PLATE VI

is made of greyish stone and has both hands mutilated and the *prabhavali* missing, the latter Plate VII,



#### BUDDHA FROM BANGEMURA, KATHMANDU PLATE VII

is made of dark grey limetstone and is excellently preserved with its oval *prabhavali* and two flanking figures of seated devotees with hands in *anjalimudra*. Both are sculpted in the fifth century Gupta style of India and are heavily influenced by the Sarnath school in respect of the sensitive modelling, the posture of standing with the weight of the body borne on the right leg and the left leg slightly advanced and the diaphanous treatment of the drapery revealing the anatomy, particularly the two knee-joints, the bulging shoulder and the chest and the line of depression at the waist. The Bangamura figure, which is well-preserved, shows the right hand of Buddha stretched in *varada* and the left hand half-stretched holding the gathered ends of the *sanghati*. A comparison of the two figures

shows that the hands of the Chabel Buddha, in spite of their poor preservation, were held identically. The Chabel figure shows a more sensitive modelling and greater affinity with the Sarnath type, and is closely comparable with the standing Buddha figure from Sarnath Museum (DGA NEG. No. 189/63). The Bangamura Buddha, however, shows a distinctive oval *prabhavali*, decorated with a design of minute triangular petals at the edges and is notable also for introducing the kneeling devotees at the flanks. This figure also shows a pair of holes on each side of the head similar to those found on the Tilaganga image of Vishnu Vikranta dated in year 389 (A.D. 467) of king Manadeva.

A poorly preserved and defaced standing Buddha image found from the ruins of a Buddhist Vihara near Buddha Nilakanth appears to be of the same style and date as the two figures discussed above.

The only early inscribed Buddha image in a limestone relief from Chapatol, patan showing the Buddha seated (*probably in bhūsparsa-mudra*), flanked on each side by a Bodhisattva carrying *chamara* and *padma* and wearing unusually tall *kiritamukuta*. Artistically the relief is not of much significance, but the inscription, assignable to the late sixth century A.D. is historically important for its reference to a *gandha-kuti* (Buddhist shrine) and a *bhikshuni-sangha*.

In the next stage the Buddha figures stand in graceful *abhanga* with their right hand stretched in the *varadamudra* and the left hand raised shoulder high, holding the gathered ends of the *sanghati*. To circa 7th century are assignable two such standing Buddha images carved in two out of the four niches of the *sarvato-bhadra* (prismatic) *chaitya* at Dhvaka Baha, Kathmandu, one showing Mathura type of drapery and the other the wet drapery of Sarnath, but both revealing the *katisutra* with its knot and the looped scarf-ends. A cognate limestone figure of standing Buddha is known from a private collection at Law Form, Ramshah Path, Kathmandu, Plate VIII,



**BUDDHA FORM LAW FORM, KATHMANDU PLATE VIII**

which is closer to Sarnath than any other sculpture from Nepal not only in respect of the treatment of drapery but also of refined modelling and delineation of facial features and meditative expression. The Dhvaka Baha figures, on the other hand, have a Nepali physiogromical set and lack the luminous quality of the Ramshah

Path Buddha. (It may be mentioned here that the figures in the remaining two niches of the Dhvaka Baha *chaitya* represent Vajrapani and Padmapani, while the four smaller niches on the *medhi* of its crowning *stupa* show identical Buddha figures seated in *dhyanasana*, representing the beginning of the concept of the five Dhyani-buddhas.)

Another *sarvatobhadra* image kept in the *hiti* at Nag Bahal, Patan, shows standing figures of Padmapani, Maitreya, Vajrapani and Buddha, the last being a replica of the Dhvaka Baha Buddha donning the Sarnath drapery. That these figures are at least half a century later than those of Dhavaka Baha is indicated by their developed modelling and iconographical features and the fact that all of them have flame-fringed oval nimbus and *prabhavali*. A loose Buddha figure of black limestone in the Nag Bahal shrine nearby also pertains to a comparable date and style with its body type and drapery derived from Sarnath and its largish ovoid head from Mathura.

There is a battered and defaced *sarvatobhadra* stele in a dried-up *hiti* at Kasai Tol, Patan, which is practically a replica of the Nag Bahal stele discussed above. The conventionalised treatment of figures including that of the Buddha and the presence of bead-and-flame borders for both the nimbus and the *prabhavali* would indicate a ninth century date for it.

There is a prismatic late Lichchhavi *chaitya* in the Tha Bahal at Thamel, carved with standing figures of the Buddha wearing Mathura type of drapery on all the four sides of its lower portion. Two of them hold the right hand in the *varada* and the remaining two hold the same hand in the *abhaya* pose. But no two figures are alike and a variety is introduced by the divergent way in which the gathered ends of the *sanghati* are held in the left hand, which is either raised shoulder-high or stretched down in the *danda-hasta*. The drapery at the neck is, however, oddly depicted in all the figures which are stylistically assignable to the ninth century A.D.

The next stage in the evolution of the Buddha image is marked by the 11' high standing Buddha from Swayambhunatha Plate IX,



BUDDHA FROM SWAYAMBHUNATHA PLATE IX

which follows the iconographical type of the Buddha figure on the Nag Bahal stele derived from the Sarnath model, but its facial features and modelling as also its developed flame-fringed oval nimbus and *prabhavali* approximate the style of the early Pala Buddha figures of eastern India. The Buddha image lying half-buried on the Aryaghat resembles the Svyambhunatha image

with this difference that its head is large and ovoid. These two Buddha figures are stylistically attributable to circa A.D. 900.

The Pala style of seated as well as standing Buddha figures representing the Master in the *varada*, *abhaya*, *vyakhyana* and *bhumisparsa-mudras* and wearing the Sarnath type of wet drapery became stereotyped in Nepal and continued to be made here in limited quantity till circa 7th. century. These are found in or around the Buddhist *chaityas* and *viharas* and a fair number of them may be seen at such Buddhist establishments as the Svayambhunatha and the Mahabodhi Temple at Patan.

It is indeed easy to recognize the Buddha figures when they are represented as standing, but it is difficult to distinguish seated Buddha images from those of the Dhyani Buddhas which are indeed more popular in Nepal.

Sculptural representations of the life-scenes of the Buddha are relatively fewer in Nepal. Two sculptures of circa 9th century representing life-scenes, however, are remarkable for their elegant modelling and narrative vivacity. One of them from Yangal hiti, Kathmandu, now in the National Museum, Kathmandu, is a fragment of the scene of Mara's temptation, showing two charming daughters of Mara standing in seductive poses and trying to tempt the Master (portion broken off), with Mara's host comprising ferocious goblins, demons and *yakshas* including a skeletal figure resembling Chamunda, a buffalo-headed demon and Ganesa wielding axe, gesticulating and launching assaults on the Buddha. The other from Deopatan now in the National Museum



#### NATIVITY SCENE FROM DEOPATAN PLATE X

Kathmandu Plate X represents the scene of Nativity and shows Mayadevi standing in a graceful *tribhanga* holding a branch of the tree which has bent down and quickened to her touch with the infant Buddha standing on a lotus against an oval *prabhavali*, represented on her right flank. The newly born Buddha is being bathed by a pair of flying celestial

devotees with water mixed with lotus blossoms from upturned vases. While the first sculpture is reminiscent of the same scene depicted in Cave 25 at Ajanta and is suggestive of contacts with the art of Deccan, the other, with its supple modelling and mellifluous contours is inspired by the classical art traditions of Mathura and Magadha. Some representations are known also of the descent of the Buddha from the Trayastrimsa heaven, flanked by Brahma and Indra, the latter holding umbrella over the Master's head. These also date from the later Lichchhavi times.

### *Dhyani Buddhas*

The Dhyani Buddhas are invariably represented dressed like the Buddha and seated in *padmasana* or *vajraparyankasana* on a lotus with their hands held in one of the five *mudras* (associated with the Buddha), often carrying also a bowl in the lap. Normally such seated figures should be identified with the Dhyani Buddhas who are indeed very popular in Nepal and are placed in the specified directions of a *chaitya* or *stupa*. Thus Akshobhya with *bhumisparsa-mudra* is assigned a place in the east, Ratnasambhava with the *varada-mudra* in the west and Amogasiddhi with the *abhaya-mudra* in the north. The place of Vairochana with the *dharmachakra* or *vyakhyana-mudra* being in the centre of the *chaitya*, he is generally not represented at all, but may sometimes be shown in the south-east between Akshobhya and Ratnasambhava. It is indeed easy enough to spot the Dhyani Buddhas when they are shown with their respective *vahanas* or cognizance marks, viz. *vajra* for Akshobhya, *ratna* for Ratnasambhava, lotus for Amitabha, *chakra* for Vairochana and *visvavajra* for Amogasiddhi. The last Dhyani Buddha is also distinguished by the canopy of serpent hoods under which he is often shown as seated.

Images of the five Dhyani Buddhas are very popular in Nepal and are found placed around the *chaityas* and *stupas* in the appropriate directions. The lower tiers of the larger *chaityas* and *stupas* also accommodate images of the Buddhisattvas relating to the respective Dhyani Buddhas, as seen on a late Malla *chaitya* behind the Rudravarna-*mahavihara* at Patan. Plate XI,



CHAITYA BEHIND RUDRAVARNA  
MAHAVIHARA, PATAN. PLATE XI

Since the concept of the Dhyani Buddhas gained popularity after the seventh century, their images found in Nepal are generally later and gain greater vogue under *vajrayana*.