

BUDDHIST ART: ON THE NATURE OF PERCEPTION

When discussing the whole range of questions concerning traditions and innovations in contemporary Buddhist art, it seems useful to remember its origins. “When we are thinking about the origins of Buddhist art, we naturally turn to India, in whose land The Blessed One preached his teaching of the universal salvation from suffering”, wrote the orientalist scholar Yu. N. Roerich [Roerich, p. 10]. India is a country where were planted the fundamental principles of Buddhist artistic tradition which later determined its central symbolic core. Simultaneously the range of main images was formed, the main subjects were outlined, the major features of iconographical and artistic canons were identified. Later, while Buddhism was spreading to other countries, these images and subjects were transformed at many local territories, thanks to the various combinations of traditions and innovations; but these ancient central core remained, in one way or another, virtually always and everywhere. Even now it continues to a large extent, attracting attention of modern artists.

At the same time, early Indian Buddhism established preconditions for a specific nature of perceptions of Buddhist art. Talking about such characteristics, the Indian scholar Ananda Coomaraswamy noted: “We should look at Indian art from all points of view, possessing knowledge, piety, understanding of technique and naivete; combining the qualities of pandit (scholar, religious teacher), bhakti (zealous worshiper of deity), rasika (a person with a deep sense of beauty), acharya (a master skillful in his art) and alpabudhi jana (an ignorant person capable only of immediate perception)” [Coomaraswamy, p. 109]. The scholar is completely right: Buddhist art may be approached from different perspectives and, depending on this, differently perceive its creations. Such multi-level perception of subjects and images of Buddhist artistic tradition was also already forming during the first centuries of its existence.

To those gradations of perception outlined by Ananda Coomaraswamy, we can also add a significant demarcation line which sometimes develops into an impenetrable barrier. This line, or border, exists between the people immersed in the tradition, and those outside it. The difference between these two groups of recipients was keenly felt by the authors of first sacred texts. Some of these texts were intended for non-Buddhist audience; they were written mainly to help spreading the Dharma. The other texts, however, were intended for the internal consumption; they satisfied

the sangha's needs and were addressed to its members. Therefore, the texts which we may call "for internal use" and "for others" differed in their functions and objective [Lysenko, p. 107–108].

Similar division may be applied to the appreciation of the works of Buddhist art. For Buddhists themselves — i. e. for people rooted in the tradition — images and subjects of this art appeal to their inner experience and attune their psyche to the wave of spiritual liberation; moreover, these tuning is based on the conscious experience generated within, and not imposed from the outside. In this case, the images of Buddhist art, projected onto human perception, are addressed to vision, tactile sense, hearing and other "pillars of perception" which are involved, for example, in the meditative process.

Their function is predominantly soteriologic; their aim is to develop in an adept certain qualities, which would help him to ultimately reach the state of spiritual liberation, the Nirvana. In other words, in this case artistic images become a kind of visual models-representations of difficult to grasp processes and subjects, and help the adepts to reach the non-mundane psychological states.

For people standing outside the tradition, the situation with the perception of Buddhist art is very different — and these category of people include almost all Western scholars of Buddhist art.

This difference in perception of Buddhist images between Buddhists themselves and people outside the tradition was noticed at the beginning of the XX century by the German scholar A. Gruenwedel. He remarked that in Buddhist art, we "are dealing with the aesthetic phenomenon conditioned by the religious, contemplative quality of subjects and deeply connected to it; the European scientist calls it the understanding of the artistic meaning of the subject, while the pious Buddhist says: when the true believers come near the sacred images, the images come alive, the gods show themselves to the pious, while for the outsider, the images are dead and devoid of essence" [Gruenwedel, p. 10].

Hopefully, things are not that tragic, and it is possible to remedy the situation when the images, for some reason, remain "dead and devoid of essence" for those who study them. It is apparent that "understanding of the artistic meaning of the subject" alone is not enough, primarily because Buddhist art always existed only in the religious context, and in no other way.

Indeed, since its beginnings, Buddhist artistic tradition was intended to remind, support and enhance the eternal truths of one of the oldest teachings on the planet. It reflected Buddhist ideals pictorially and served in practice as a system of visual support of the religious doctrine. That's why it seems appropriate to examine the images, subjects, styles, canon and other topics which we generally relegate to the art history domain, also as a part of religious history, i. e. to complement the art

history with the religious historical approach — which is usually done, but for the purpose of this article, this thesis needs special emphasis.

Within this approach, one of the main lines of research focuses on the interpretation of the religious meanings of Buddhist images, subjects and compositions — all that forms a part of the visual canon. It prompts us to talk primarily about symbolic representations on which the teaching of Buddha relied to a great degree. Buddhist art probably used the symbols and emblems to designate complex concepts much more widely than the art of other religions. This means that the “proper” perception of Buddhist artistic tradition — especially for somebody outside this tradition — is often connected to the “deciphering” of the symbolic meanings of some images.

Arguably the most interesting of such representations are the earliest Indian symbols connected to the image of Buddha Shakyamuni, since they are particularly deeply embedded in the context of Buddhist art. It is well known that the first iconic antropomorphic images of the religious teacher appeared only at the beginning of common era, although opinions on this point differ [Karlsson]. The lack of iconic antropomorphic images is testified to by the known depictions on Bharhut stupas which are only partially preserved (II. cent. BCE), as well as Sanchi (II cent. BCE) and Amaravati (II cent. BCE) [Tyulyaev, p. 107–111]. This means that the artistic tradition of depiction what may be called the historic portrait of Buddha is separated almost by five hundred years from the time of his parinirvana (according to one of the versions, this happened in 476 BCE) [Lysenko, p. 145]. During this five hundred years, in India, Buddhism place of origin, both Buddha and the main events of his life which gradually began to be recognized as the defining event in the religious history, were depicted only symbolically [Ganevskaya, p. 13–15].

Instead of depicting the Teacher, artists showed objects which symbolised him and the main events of his life. In this way, the key event of Buddha's life, his awakening, was symbolized by an empty throne under the Bodhi tree, as well as by the tree itself; the wheel of dharma, dharmachakra, and deers, reminded of his first sermon given at the deer park at Varanasi; stupa reminded of mahaparinirvana and so on. Usually these symbols were placed at the centre of multfigured scenes which also depicted realistic images, such as people, animals and plants, as well as mythological figures, gods, divinities of all classes, zoomorphic monsters, etc.

All these early Buddhist images became so firmly embedded in the visual tradition, that they preserved even later, when the antropomorphic image of Buddha appeared and gained a foothold as a visual symbol of faith, which no longer needed to be identified. What meaning did these long-lasting Buddhist images transmitted?

Let us take as an example the connection of Buddha's images to a tree — that is, to the trees. Turning to the canonical texts, it becomes evident that all key moments of Buddha's life, from his birth to death,

were in one way or another marked by the “participation” of sacred trees, so that it is possible virtually to create a special “arborous” biography of the religious teacher. Indeed, the future Buddha was born in the Lumbini garden, while his mother was holding on a tree branch; he first experienced dhyana in early childhood, while sitting under the Jambul tree. After leaving his home, the prince lived in a mango grove for seven days.

On the eve of his spiritual awakening, he sat under the banyan tree, and here he received the milk rice which a woman brought as a gift to the tree's god. Before sinking into meditation, he was walking in the sal forest, and in the evening he sat under the ashvattha which appeared at the moment of his birth. After reaching inner enlightenment, he was sitting under ashvattha tree for seven more days, and then, for another seven days, under the nigrodha tree; after this he was sitting under the coils of Mucalinda snake, the symbolic double of the tree, and then, at last, under the rajayatana tree. Near the end of his wordly existence, he stopped in the Kakuttha grove, and then in the sal forest at Kushinagar — where, lying between two trees, he entered parinirvana. Lastly, the spread of Buddhism to Sri Lanka is connected with the branch of the Bodhi tree carried there; this branch is equivalent to the tree itself as a key symbol of Buddhism [Semeka, p. 122].

Such close connection between Buddha and trees is hardly an accident. Since ancient times, trees played substantial role in Indian system of symbolic classifications which determined the structure of various Indian religious beliefs. Indeed, in Vedic India they didn't built temples — instead, ritual spaces or small sanctuaries with the tree in the center, served as the places of worship. Ashvattha, banyan, margosa and other trees surrounded by platform or hedge, or the trees with low altar stands, are considered the first temples in the history of Indian religious life. Tree worshipping ceremonies and rituals still remain an important part of many calendar holidays. In short, trees with their deep and manifold symbolic meanings could not but appear in Buddha's biography.

Buddha's image is most closely connected with the ashvattha tree (*sansk.* ashvattha, *Ficus religiosa*). In pre-Buddhist ancient Indian tradition, from which Buddhism drew many images and symbols, ashvattha was considered the world tree, i. e. the universal symbolic complex. A lot is written about the world tree; its symbolism, applicable both to the cosmos and human beings, is virtually inexhaustible. It remains to this day one of the most polysemic symbols in its perception, understanding and scholarly analysis.

What is interesting about ashvattha for our purposes? First and foremost, it marked the center of the world — not a geographical but a sacred concept, highly important for the mythological mentality of Indians, as well as of any other people. World tree was a symbol of absolute reality.

Arguably, no other ancient symbol expressed so fully and comprehensively an idea of harmony between the cosmic universum, the macrocosm — and the microcosm of human soul.

The tree apparently entered Buddha's biography as a result of inevitable mythologisation of his image. We are talking about the persistent mythological archetype of the, so to say, "culture hero", which, as a matrix, shaped the existent biography of Buddha and made it remarkably resilient, preserving it for centuries to come. It was natural for ancient India with its mythological thinking. For such thinking, the reality phenomena, people or facts acquired true status only if they corresponded to the mythological model of the world, with a certain sacred precedence.

Such mythological culture hero straddles the line between the sacred and the secular, he possesses extraordinary abilities and reason, he provides for people cultural and natural goods, he relates to the human community and takes care to arrange the world for human beings, by completing heroic deeds. This heroics imply protecting people and the world in general from the chaos embodying forces, struggling with them and eliminating them as hindrances for normal peaceful life. In short, by his efforts and suffering, the hero radically improves ontological status of the world, which becomes the essential part of his deeds. Finally, he makes an attempt to conquer death. This is, broadly speaking, the mythological scheme in which Buddha's biography fits. But in his teaching, it is filled with the new content and becomes a very convincing illustration of Buddhist ideas.

Obviously, Buddha could not find spiritual awakening anywhere else but at the symbolic center of the universe marked by the world tree, since it is the locus of three cosmic zones where all opposites unite, the experience of duality is destroyed, the phenomenal world is surpassed and, as a result, it becomes possible to experience the perfect unity with the world. The tree is a semantically succinct image of the pivot point, which symbolises the path from the movement to the repose, from the profane time to the sacred eternity.

Ancient symbolism of world centre with a tree growing in it encompasses various ideas; for mythological, and later for religious consciousness it is the only place where an act of creation could happen in mythic times, an act of creation which echoed in the Buddha's act of spiritual attainment. The polysemic symbolism of the world centre played in Indian culture on many different layers; in Buddhism these ideas were received new semantics and were attributed to the image of the religious founder. Moreover, Buddhist literature and symbolics which developed ancient Indian traditions, later often connected Buddha to the world tree and the wish tree: the arboreal theme for centuries was interwoven with his image, although it was perceived and interpreted differently in different ages and in different countries.

In this connection, it is of note that the pots in which the Bodhi tree grows is one of the most widespread motives in the Buddhist visual art of India. Kālinga-Bodhi jataka (No. 479) tells how Ananda, wishing to plant the Bodhi tree at the gates of Jetavana, dug a hole, placed inside the pot filled with soil and water, and planted a seed. It immediately sprouted forth the high trunk with five branches looking to the four cardinal directions and upward.

The example of ashvattha tree — as well as other trees — show that early Buddhist symbols originated as archaic and archetypal mythological images. Here we need to clarify the meaning of the concept of “myth”. For the majority of our contemporaries, myth is a figment of imagination and a phantasy, those which cannot exist and never existed — therefore we oppose myth and reality. However, for a so to say mythological men the situation was quite the opposite. Myth was a most actual reality, a sacred history, precisely what the humans needed. It preserved memory not of human deeds, singular and non-regular, but of the deeds of gods and heroes, of those primieval deeds and primieval events which happened at the very beginnings of times. People just needed to imitate them in order to preserve the world in harmony and in balance.

That’s why the myth is not so much a text or a tale, but also a specific way to perceive, experience and interpret the world; a cohesive system of representation. During the time when Buddha was developing and preaching his teaching, the world-view was just like this; that’s why early Indian Buddhist images were almost all borrowed from mythology.

Semantically rich and energy dense, they preserved, in a condensed form, extraordinarily deep and wide spiritual knowledge — which hopefully I managed to show using the image of ashvattha tree as an example. It could not be otherwise, because Buddhist art, since its original birth, was already based on the well developed centuries-old Indian mythopoetic tradition with a specific range of images and subjects. Fundamental spiritual ideas, imprinted into such mythological images, undoubtedly possess deep psychological meaning — presumably, it is not mere chance that Buddhism actively borrowed and used them in its teaching, changing their semantics and imbuing them with new Buddhist content, but, at the same time, preserving some previous meanings and associations.

Moreover, such images preserve their relevance for centuries, carrying till our days their cultural-creative energy. This was noted by P. Volkova based on the study of Western European art: “Myth is always relevant precisely because it represents universal human values of pain and joy. Often opposing concepts, including instructive and pedagogical” [Volkova, p. 39].

That’s why it may prove useful, while interpreting Buddhist visual system, to turn to Indian sources: it allows to disclose an underlying mythological basis of these images, which is most often preserved in various local

traditions and which shines through many innovations. Moreover, being the innermost creation of our psyche, these archaic images sometimes “germinate” in modern people and become reflected in their art, bringing together distant connections and tying deep ancient symbolism to modern aesthetics.

A vivid example of this fact can be seen in the works of Saint-Petersburg artist of Buryat origins, Elena Konstantinovna Zonkhoeva. Being a member of the Union of Artists of Russia, she is famous as a virtuoso master of batik and textile painting, although she also works with other materials, creating painting, tapestries and appliques; her designs are also used in mosaics and stained glass works. The artist’s decorative works are present in collections of Hermitage, State Museum of the History of Religion, Russian Ethnographical museum, as well as in many foreign collections.

In 2009, The State Museum of the History of Religion featured an exhibition titled “The Buddhist Cosmos”, where the works of E. K. Zonkhoeva easily blended with the museum exhibits which showed traditional Buddhist artistic tradition, helping the visitors to deeper appreciate it. This was not the first attempt to combine secular works of art with Buddhist ritual objects. Earlier, in 1993, E. K. Zonkhoeva took part in an exhibition “Buddhism. Nature. Human Being” and in 1994 — in an exhibition “White Month” dedicated to the Eastern New Year [Hizhnyak, p. 87–101].

Thoroughly familiar with canonic visual images of Buddhism, E. K. Zonkhoeva gives them new tone not only by using modern stylistic techniques. Her works display a certain experience of personal “inner reality”, her individual perception and understanding of color and numeric symbolism of Buddhist images, of fundamental concepts of light and dark, sky and earth, natural elements and directions.

Curiously, the works of E. K. Zonkhoeva lack antropomorphical figures, just like early Indian Buddhist tradition. The artist, for whom creative process is akin to meditation, often turns to mythological images and ancient symbols which can push people towards understanding the deeper meaning of being. An important place among these symbols is occupied by an image of world tree, existing in different versions: “The Tree of Worship” seems to revive ancient tree cult (pl. 12, 13); “Tree of Life” reminds of the finitude of worldly existence, opening into eternity (pl. 14); “The Peaches of Immortality” celebrates miraculous fruits which ripen once every three hundred thousand years in the western country of Sivanma goddess — according to the Chinese myth adopted by Mongols and Buryats. This range of images also includes meditative landscapes with trees, emotionally and psychologically intense.

In terms of semantics and energy, E. K. Zonkhoeva’s image of world tree seems concordant with the image of Bodhi tree in the first centuries

of Buddhist artistic tradition. Shown as if from cosmos, it towers at the line of double reality, visible and invisible worlds, forming strong axis of the world. Within it, cosmical and life rhythms originate and grow, as if pulsing under the illusory layers of the flowing stream of time. The tree connects mysterious darkness of the underworld with the shining peaks of the Absolute, conveying the idea of the ascent of human spirit to the divine light and drawing it into the infinity of time and space. It reminds of the important concept of "centre of the world" where humans can reunite with reality.

It is here that being manifests itself as pure light, and humans come to know being, joining in this light. Light, the essence of divinity, is inseparably connected in Buddhism to the idea of spiritual perfection. The light which Gautama saw in the moment of awakening, symbolized the state of Buddha, liberated from all conditionality. This light does not belong to the natural world; it is a part of inner mystical experience. It is usually described as lucid and pure, with no trace of shadows, devoid of all attributes and differences: this is precisely how E. K. Zonkhoeva depicted it, dissolving the top of her world tree in it.

Thus, an ancient image revived by the modern artist, embodies magisterial Buddhist ideas: the tension of the opposition between Sansara and Nirvana, and their interconnection without which life is inconceivable; the circle of transition from darkness into light, to the rebirth in a new incarnation.

Naturally, the connection between the Bodhi tree in E. K. Zonkhoeva and in early Indian tradition is not external, but deeply internal; it is rather a reverberation of deep meanings, even though for some it may seem non-obvious or even disputable. But in both cases the tree image embodies the image of the world in all its elusive variability, and the modern artist emphasizes this variability of the ancient symbol by the rich symphony of colors.

This example shows the specific nature of perception of the images of Buddhist art. As any ritualised art, or "the art of the identity aesthetics", it was always oriented towards the actualization of canon, which not only reflected high aesthetic standards, but was also supported by religious principles. However, canon was never reduced simply to quantitative measures and artistic instructions, although it presupposed their existence. First and foremost, it implied a particular aesthetic consciousness which, according to A. F. Losev, "possesses an autotelic contemplative value": this is why every Buddhist image always includes elements which function beyond purely artistic imagery.

Coming back to the words of Ananda Coomaraswamy cited at the beginning of this article, and paraphrasing them, we may say that Buddhist images, like the world tree, absorb both the wisdom of pandits, the knowledge

of acharyas, and the works of artists. They satisfy both the self-abnegating love of the bhakti, and the aesthetic feelings of the rasika. They also answer the expectations of naive common faith.

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Yekaterinburg

THE SEARCH FOR “NEW IDENTITY” IN THE IMAGES OF CONTEMPORARY BUDDHIST ART AND IN THE WORKS OF A. G. RAKHMETOV, THE MASTER OF THANGKA PAINTING

It is well known that the concept of art in the Buddhist teaching differs considerably from the art theory developed both in the tradition of Chinese texts, and in the Western theory and history of art. Within



12.

Е. К. Зонхоева
Мировое древо
 Атлас, роспись. 2009 г.
 Центр бурятской культуры «Ая-Ганга»

E. K. Zonkhoeva
World tree
 Satin, painting. 2009
 Center of Buryat culture «Aya-Ganga»



13.

Е. К. Зонхоева
Древо поклонения
 Шелк, роспись, диптих. 1997 г.
 Частная коллекция

E. K. Zonkhoeva
Worship tree
 Silk, painting, diptych. 1997
 Private collection



14.

Е. К. Зонхоева
Древо жизни
 Шелк, роспись. 2009 г.
 Частная коллекция

E. K. Zonkhoeva
Tree of Life
 Silk, painting. 2009
 Private collection