

THE BUDDHA IMAGE AND IDOL WORSHIP

By Ven. K. Dhammananda Nayaka Thera

One day Ven. Ananda, the Buddha's personal attendant, asked the Buddha, "Ven. Sir, how many objects of reverence (*chetiyas*) are there, may it please you?" "There are three, Ananda" said the Buddha. "They are objects of reverence appertaining to the body of the Buddha (*Saririka*), objects of reverence appertaining to personal things used by the Buddha (*Paribhogika*) and objects of reverence reminiscent of the Buddha." Then Ven. Ananda asked: "Is it proper, Ven. Sir to construct an object of reverence (*chetiya*) while you are alive?" "No, not an object of reverence appertaining to the body which it is proper to erect after passing away of the Buddha. An object of reverence reminiscent of the Buddha has no physical basis; it is purely mental."

According to this statement of the Buddha it seems that although he did not give permission to erect the Buddha image while he was living but has allowed his followers to erect such images and objects of reverence (*chetiyas*) after passing away of the Buddha. Because of this injunction the followers of the Buddha started to erect the images and *chetiyas* only after the passing away of the Buddha. The bodily relics of the Buddha or the images in which were enshrined the relics of the Buddha belong to *Saririka Chetiyas*. The images and *chetiyas* that were erected enshrining the things used by the Buddha belong to *paribhogika chetiyas*. The images and *chetiyas* which were simply erected without enshrining any relics or an object belong to *uddesika chetiyas*. However, any of these images and *chetiyas* are worthy of offering and worthy of paying homage according to the Buddha.

Although Buddhists keep the Buddha images and pay their respects to the Buddha they are not idol worshippers. Idolatry generally means erecting images of unknown gods and goddesses in some theistic religions in various shapes and names for prayers, and asking them for guidance and protection and bestowing upon the supplicants, health, wealth, property and provision for various needs, and asking forgiveness of sins committed, even by thieves for their success in their dishonest work by believing that there is a divine power in the images.

The worshipping of the Buddha statue is quite a different thing. The Buddhists reverence for the statue of the Buddha as a memento of the greatest, wisest, most benevolent, compassionate and historical holy man who ever lived in this world. Everybody knows that this great man really lived in this world and has done a great service to mankind. The worship of the Buddha means paying

homage, veneration and devotion to him and not to the stone figure. The image is necessary to recall the Buddha in their mind, to remember his great qualities which swayed millions of people from generation to generation throughout the civilized world. To Buddhists it is a symbol which they find helpful to concentrate on, to have peace of mind, and to follow his examples and instructions. They feel in their mind the living presence of the master so that their act of worship may be vivid and significant. The serenity of the Buddha image influences and inspires them to observe the right path of conduct and thought.

An educated Buddhist never asks favours from the image nor asks forgiveness for sins done, but he tries to control his mind and make up his mind to follow him to get rid of worldly miseries and to find his salvation.

Those who criticize the Buddhists stating that Buddhists are idol worshippers are really misunderstanding what Buddhists do. If people can keep their parents' and grandparents' photos to cherish their memory and remember them; if people can keep the photos of kings, queens, prime ministers, great heroes, philosophers and poets; there is certainly no reason why Buddhists cannot keep their beloved master's photo or statue to remember him and respect him. What harm is there if people recite some verses praising the great qualities of their masters? If people can lay wreaths on the grave of their beloved ones and express their gratitude, why can't Buddhists too offer some flowers, joss-sticks, incense, etc. to their beloved teacher who has sacrificed his life for the sake of suffering humanity? People make statues of certain murderers of thousands of people, who, cruel and greedy for power, invaded poor countries, created untold miseries and snatched away properties, are being regarded as heroes and memorial services are conducted for them and flowers offered on their graves and tombs. But Buddhists pay their respects at the statue of this world honoured teacher who gave up worldly pleasures for the sake of enlightenment to show the path of salvation to others and conquered the world with love and wisdom.

The images are the language of the sub-conscious. If therefore, the image of the enlightened one often created within one's mind the embodiment of man perfected, it deeply penetrates into his sub-conscious mind and, if sufficiently strong, acts as an automatic brake against impulses. The recollection of the Buddha produces joy, invigorates the mind and lifts up man from states of restlessness, tension and frustration. Thus in the worship of the Buddha there is no prayer but a meditation. Therefore it is not idol worship, but "ideal" worship. Thus Buddhists find fresh strength and build a shrine of their own lives, cleansing their hearts till they are worthy to bear the image in the innermost sanctuary of love. Buddhists kneel before the image to humble themselves and

pay their respects to what that image represents. They try to gain inspiration from his noble personality and to try to emulate him. Buddhists see the Buddha image, not as a dead idol of wood or clay, but as something vibrant to those who understand and are purified in thought, word and deed.

The images Buddhists see of the Buddha are symbolic representations of his great qualities. It is therefore, not unnatural that their respect should express itself in some of the finest and most beautiful art and sculpture the world has ever seen.

Those who can make up their mind to control the senses without an image as an object can certainly do so without any hindrance. If Buddhists really wish to behold the Buddha in all the majestic beauty of his ideal presence they must seek his teaching. It is in their practice of his teaching that they can draw close to him and feel the wonderful radiance of his undying wisdom and compassion.

World Opinions on Buddha Image

Mr. Kaiserling, a philosopher said, "I know nothing more grand in this world than the figure of the Buddha; it is an absolutely perfect embodiment of spirituality in the visible domain."

Pandit Nehru said: "His eyes are closed, but some power of the spirit look out of them and a vital energy fills the frame. The ages rolled by and Buddha seems not so far away from the struggle but, calm-eyed, to face it, and to see in life ever greater opportunities for growth and advancement."

General Ian Hamilton, bequeathing an image of the Buddha, found by him in the ruin of Mandalay Temple, to Sir Winston Churchill said, "When you are worried, just look at this reposeful attitude and smile at your worries." Anatol France said "when I set my eyes on the image of the Buddha, I felt, here, if anywhere is God walking on earth."

"When I was in jail, I used to think of this statue, and it was a source of tremendous inspiration to me," said Pandit Nehru.

Mr. P. D. Ouspensky said: "I do not know of any work in Christian art which stands on the same level as the Buddha with the SAPPHIRE EYES, that is to say I know of no work which expresses in itself so completely the idea of Christianity as the face of this Buddha expresses the idea of Buddhism. To understand this face is to understand Buddhism. There is no need to read large volumes on Buddhism, or to walk with professors or learned Bhikkus, one must

come here, stand before the Buddha let the gaze on those blue eyes penetrate one's soul and one will understand what Buddhism is.”

Hazarat Inayat Khan, the author of the “Sufi Message” said: “To a Buddhist the statue of Buddha speaks of spiritual liberation. Why should it be regarded as being any worse if the Buddhists have the statue of their inspirer before them, whose very image elevates their soul toward the highest ideals, and the life of renunciation and self-denial that their Teacher led. Buddha's image, as a symbol, inspires not only his devotees but every thoughtful mind; for it shows balance, quietude, peace, the absorption within, purity of character, beauty of personality, gentleness, tenderness, a restful attitude and perfect wisdom.”

The recollection of the Buddha produces joy, invigorates the mind and lifts up man from states of restlessness, tension and frustration. One of the intentions of meditation on Buddha is to create devotion, confidence in the Buddha by realizing his greatness.

Many religionists worship the founders of their religions not in veneration to their masters but because of fear of punishment or expecting some material rewards. This selfish idea of worshipping is foreign to Buddhists. They do pay homage to the Buddha not because of fear of him or expecting any material gain from him, but as a mark of respect to their Master, and to show their gratitude as he has shown the path for their salvation.

Therefore it is advisable to have a Buddha image in each and every Buddhist house and pay homage to this noble Teacher. When there is any trouble or difficulty, go to the image of the Buddha; give him due respect and meditate for a while and try to think “how this great holy man solved his problems without having any difficulty and could overcome his worries and miseries. This is the real way to practise Buddhism. This is the real way to honour our Master. This is the real way to correct ourselves by following this great Teacher. One cannot expect peace, happiness and Salvation to come down from heaven to this earth simply by worshipping the Buddha.

It must be our endeavor not merely to worship the earthly remains of the Buddha, but to understand the spirit of the Buddha, and translate it in our own actions to the best extent possible. It is the only way to save this troubled world. In spite of the tremendous advantages of science and technology we are scared, anxious and despairing. The answer to this is contained in the teaching of the Buddha.

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