

# *A Culture of Compassion*

## **Buddhist heritage of South-East Asia**

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Gautama Siddhartha was one of humanity's wisest teachers. He lived in the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC in the northern plains of India. He taught a message of compassion and universal love. The message spread to all corners of Asia and shaped the culture of a continent. It continues till today, as one the great religions of the world, with millions of followers: Buddhism.

The philosophy of Buddhism, was accepted with open arms whenever it went. It is a philosophy which looks always beyond the material aims of life to the eternal. Early Theravada Buddhism traveled in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC to Sri Lanka and to other countries of South-east Asia. In the First millennium AD, Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism spread to Indonesia, Vietnam, Myanmar, China, Tibet, Korea and finally to Japan and the northern countries of Asia.

Since ancient times, great sea-faring ships carried trade goods between Indonesia, India and China. Archaeological remains in Indonesia have confirmed close interactions with India which existed over 2,000 years ago.

In the First Millennium, Chinese pilgrims traveled by sea and by land to the holy places of Buddhism in India. When they used the sea route, they spent much time in Indonesia, which had great ports. They have written considerably about the Indonesia of that time. Hinduism existed here in early times and Buddhism flourished from the 7<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Till today, the great epic of ethics the Ramayana is the most important cultural tradition of Indonesia. It may have arrived here by the 5<sup>th</sup> century. It is wonderful to see a Ramayana performance in Java, where the actors, the director, the narrator and all others are Muslim.

In the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, magnificent Buddhist monuments were constructed in Java. The **Borobudur Stupa** was built by the Sailendra kings in this period. It is one of the world's most magnificent Buddhist monuments. It is the tallest stupa standing in the world. There are many thousands of feet of very fine relief, which we see as we climb upwards and go around the stupa.

The bottom level presents the life of passions in the world: the ***Kamadhatu***. The next level presents the law of action and reward: the ***Karmadhatu***. Rising upwards, numerous reliefs depict the ***Rupadhatu***, the life and stories of the Buddha. He is the *Rupa*, the personification of the potential for enlightenment within us. Beyond that level, come the levels of the final truth, which is formless: ***Arupadhatu***. Here, there are no distractions of the illusory forms of *maya* and all that we see is the stupa. This is the final truth in all Buddhist thought, beyond all forms.

Climbing up to the summit of the stupa, the devotee leaves behind the *maya*, or illusions of the world, to come to the symbol of the formless eternal. He has left behind the noise and confusion of life: of Kama, Karma and finally even Rupa. This great stupa clearly enunciates Buddhist philosophy, where one aims to leave the world of forms to finally reach a level of comprehension of the formless eternal. We are reminded of the *Chitrasutra*, the oldest-known treatise on art-making, which was composed out of ongoing traditions in about the 5<sup>th</sup> century. It states that the best way to imagine the eternal is as formless, without shape, without touch, color, sound or smell. It also says that deities are created to help us relate to various concepts, while on our path towards the final truth.

The great stupa is planned as a *mandala*, which provides a graded path for the ascent towards the final truth. This is in the tradition of the *Yogatantra*, which was developed by Buddhist thinkers like Asanga, from the 4<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Mandalas began to appear in Buddhist art from the 5<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

Borobudur has two other beautiful Buddhist temples of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries: the Powon Temple and the Mendut Temple. The nearby city of Yogyakarta has many magnificent Buddhist and Hindu temples, which were made in the reign of the Sailendra Kings. These have the same high quality of art which is seen in the Borobudur Stupa. This region is one of the finest heritage zones of the world.

From the 13<sup>th</sup> to the mid 14<sup>th</sup> century, one of the great Buddhist centres of the world was at Sukhothai, in Thailand. Some of the most graceful Buddhist art was created here, in a style which is famous till today.

Monasteries of that period were perhaps made of wood and have not survived. What has continued and comes down to us is the art of the Buddha image, with all its elegance and beauty. In fact, since that time, Thailand has had a magnificent tradition of Theravada Buddhist images. The lines of the Sukhothai Buddha figures have a vivid life of their own. The surfaces are smooth and gently curving. The peaceful expressions are sublime.

King U Thong of Thailand founded a new capital in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century, at a location which is 85 km north of present-day Bangkok. It was named Ayutthaya, after the city of Ayodhya, the birth place of Rama, in India. In fact, the king of Thailand personifies ideal virtues, as depicted in the character of Rama. His good and moral actions are believed to create peace and prosperity in the country. Till today, Brahmin priests are required at the coronation of the Thai King, to instill the qualities of Vishnu and Shiva in him.

Many impressive structures survive at Ayutthaya, which show the glorious Buddhist history of this site. Great Buddhist monasteries here were centres of philosophy, literature and the fine arts. Wat Maha That was set up as the holy centre of the capital city by the king Borom Rajathiraj I. This grand complex was also the home of the Supreme Buddhist Patriarch at the time.

In the architecture and Buddha statues at Ayutthaya, we see a continuation of earlier styles of the Sukhothai period. There are modifications as new forms were adopted, through the 417 years of the period of Ayutthaya.

The beautiful *Wat* (or temple) Rajburana at Ayutthaya was made in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The magnificent temples of Ayutthaya show that the preoccupation of the kings was with that which was beyond the material world. The temple has numerous depiction of Garuda, on whom Lord Vishnu rides, has been a royal symbol in Thailand, since early times. It might be mentioned here that there is a Garuda *dhwaja* (or royal standard) made in the Bharhut Buddhist stupa railings of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, in Central India. Garudas also feature prominently in the many Buddhist monasteries of the 11<sup>th</sup> -13<sup>th</sup> centuries, across Western Tibet, Ladakh, Spiti and Kinnaur.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, imposing *chedis*, or stupas, were created, on a former palace site. This was named Wat Phra Si Sanpet. Wat Chai Wattanaram was built in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It is another great sanctuary of peace. We are taken far from the ceaseless turmoil of the world outside: to the stillness of the Buddhahood, to be found deep inside us.

In 1767, Ayuthaya fell to the Burmese army. The city was sacked and burnt. The newly declared king Taksin established his capital at Bangkok, which became the seat of the Thai government in 1782. Since the 1780s numerous temples have been made and renovated in Bangkok. In Thailand, it is the divine responsibility of the king to maintain the Buddhist religion.

The Temple of the Reclining Buddha, the Wat Pho, is one of the Bangkok temples dating back to the 17th century. King Rama I expanded the temple when

Bangkok was established as the capital of Thailand. The centerpiece of the Wat Pho is the huge statue of the reclining Buddha, almost 50 meters in length.

The most famous of the Bangkok temples is the Temple of the Emerald Buddha or Wat Phra Kaew. The temple was built from 1782 to 1784 during the reign of King Rama I, to house the Emerald Buddha. This temple attracts the largest number of tourists in Bangkok. The interior walls of the great temple are covered with mural paintings, depicting scenes from the Ramayana. In fact, most Buddhist temples of Thailand are profusely painted with such scenes. Till today, the Ramayana, or Ramakien, is the great cultural tradition of Thailand. This epic of ethics is at the heart of the culture of this country, which is ruled by king Rama IX.

The murals of Thailand are very stylised and are closely related to the dance dramas of the land. The costumes, crowns and jewellery are typical of Thailand. The gentle expressions and graceful gestures are deeply rooted in the tradition of compassion which is found everywhere in the best of Buddhist art.

Thailand continues the gentle traditions of Buddhism. The lives of the people are permeated by the desire for the spiritual search. Till today, in the midst of the modern world, the spirit of compassion of the Buddha's message continues in this land.

Myanmar was a great crucible of Buddhist influences and art which came to it over the centuries. At the end of the first millennium, Myanmar had a deep and direct relationship with the centre of Buddhist philosophy, at Bodhgaya in India. In fact, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the king of Myanmar restored the Mahabodhi temple at Bodhgaya at his own expense. He also made replicas of the Mahabodhi temple at his own capital of Bagan.

Simultaneously, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, King Anawratha declared Theravada Buddhism to be the state religion. To proclaim his deep reverence, he made thousands of pagodas at Bagan, making it. One of the most glorious Buddhist

sites of Asia. Inside the pagodas are paintings and beautiful Buddhas, made from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, foreign invaders destroyed the Buddhist centres of the plains of India. Scholars and artists from India took refuge in the deeply religious sanctuary of Myanmar. The paintings on the walls of the pagodas of Bagan are some of the finest and gentlest paintings of the entire Buddhist tradition. The themes are those of the life of the Buddha and the Jataka stories of his previous lives. The paintings from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards that survive here show the transition to the styles of Theravada Buddhism.

At Yangon, the capital of Myanmar, is the grand Shwedagon Pagoda, almost a hundred meters high. It is the most sacred pagoda in Myanmar and is believed to enshrine the relics of the past four Buddhas. We are reminded that it is only in recent times that the focus of Buddhist worship has come entirely on the last Buddha Gautama Siddhartha. In past times, all Buddhist traditions revered either four or seven Buddhas. These are also depicted in the Buddhist art of early times.

Myanmar is a deeply religious country. Thousands of temples and monasteries are made across the land. These are the traditional places not only for worship but also for education here. The country has almost 500,000 monks and nuns of the Theravada Buddhist tradition.

Cambodia is another land which has a great history of sacred art and monuments. While the kings primarily worshipped Hindu deities, much Buddhist art was also created. The Hindu and Buddhist sculptures of Cambodia, from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, are unrivalled for their sheer beauty and excellence.

In the early 12<sup>th</sup> century, King Suryavarman II created one of the greatest Hindu temples of all time, the Angkor Wat. It was dedicated to Vishnu and was later also used for Buddhist worship. The temple has magnificent relief carved

everywhere. The open corridor of the first story has more than a kilometer and a half of such narrative relief, over 6 feet high.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, King Jayavarman VII built the greatest Buddhist complex in Cambodia, at his capital Angkor Thom. The face towers of Angkor Thom have become a universally-recognized symbol for Angkor. The faces look in the four directions, symbolizing the universal benevolence of the Bodhisattva Lokeshvara. The Bayon, at the centre of Angkor Thom, is the king's own sacred temple-mountain. It is one of the most magnificent monuments of Buddhism.

South and Central Vietnam have many Hindu and some Buddhist temples. These were made between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. A Buddhist monastery complex was built at Dong Duong in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. It must have been a most impressive centre of Buddhist worship in its time.

The archaeological museum at Danang, in Central Vietnam, has numerous sculptures, which show a glorious history of art. The figures are graceful and the expressions are sublime. As everywhere in South East Asia, the preoccupation of the people was with that which was beyond the material world. This art takes us on a great journey within ourselves. To find the fount of peace and stillness which is inside each of us.

In the centre of the peninsula of South-East Asia, is the country of Laos. The people here are deeply religious and Theravada Buddhism is the basis of their culture. Monks are deeply venerated and there are almost 5,000 temples. Most men in Laos live for some part of their lives in the monasteries, to imbibe Buddhist ethics and a compassionate vision of the world.

Laos is a sacred land, where ancient traditions, such as the daily giving of alms to monks, continue till today. Monks are those who have renounced the material comforts and other attractions of the world. Society believes it to be its

responsibility to look after the well-being of these renouncers, who have given up the ways of the world.

In the capital city of Vientiane stands the grand Wat Ongtue. It houses a colossal Buddha image, which weighs 10 tonnes. As in the tradition of Laos, the great temple is also an educational institution. Young men come here to gain knowledge of the arts and sciences, as well as of the science of life.

The golden That Luang Stupa is a national symbol of Laos. It was originally built in 1566 and was restored in 1953. The stupa is 45 meters high and is believed to contain a holy relic of the Buddha.

The town of Luang Prabang is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Wat Visounarath, originally made in 1512, is the oldest standing temple in Luang Prabang. The art of the temple is exquisite and the interior preserves an atmosphere of great serenity and dignity. Wat Xiengthong was built around 1560 and is a classic example of the graceful architectural style of Luang Prabang.

The Wat Mai, or “New Monastery” was originally made in 1796. It was given the present name after its restoration in 1821. Its walls are covered with wonderful painted reliefs, of scenes from daily life and from the Jatakas.

Buddhism has a great vision of the eternal harmony of the world. This faith, with its message of compassion, spread far and wide and shaped the culture of a continent. A culture of peace and gentleness which continues, even in the midst of the materialistic world of today.

by Benoy K Behl

### **About the author**

The author Benoy K Behl is a film-maker, art-historian and photographer who is known for his tireless and prolific output of work over the past 29 years. He has taken over 34,000 photographs of Asian monuments and art heritage, made a

hundred documentaries on art history, his exhibitions have been warmly received in 24 countries around the world and he holds the Limca Book Record for having travelled to all corners of India.

The vastness of Behl's documentation presents a wide and new perspective in understanding the art of India and Asia. He has been invited to lecture by most of the important universities and museums around the world, who have departments of Asian art. His book on 'The Ajanta Caves' is published by Thames & Hudson, London and Harry N. Abrams, New York.