

ARTS AND PERFORMING ARTS AS A MEDIUM OF WORSHIP IN THE BUDDHIST CULTURE

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Abstract

The beauty of forms (in architecture and sculpture), the harmony of colours and proportions (in paintings), the sounds (in music) and the movements (in dance and drama) which stimulate vision and understanding of universal law and order – have been used as mediums of worship in the Buddhist religion and culture since centuries. This paper deals with characteristics of Buddhist Arts and Performing Arts which are used as instrumental tools to contribute to the meditation process and experience in Buddhism. The paper explains how the Buddhist Fine Art productions – which is the world's richest and most varied system of visual support is a sequence of symbols to assist the meditative process of the mind-opening on the Unknown and the Infinite. This paper further analyses how musical parameters as well as parameters of movements through gestures, dance, drama, etc. directly assist in the meditative journey – using the medium of specifically devised musical compositional techniques, meant to arouse specific emotional states and mental visualizations. The purposeful use of the Arts/Performing Arts as instrumental tools was not meant only to impregnate the mind with the Transcendence & Esoteric Grandeur of The Buddha but essentially for introspection on the Fundamental Truths of life and on a universal Spiritual Reality.

Keywords: Buddhist Arts/Performing Arts, System of Allegorical Symbols, External Performance, Internal Performance, Meditative Visualization, Intuitive Insights

INTRODUCTION

The Buddhist religion and culture, despite having a founder who had not supported the making of images and preached a doctrine against material possessions, acquired the world's richest and most varied system of visual support (Fisher 1993, p. 10). The elaborate body of Buddhist Fine Art productions evolved from the earliest symbolic images of, for e.g. pillars, trees, thrones, wheels, animals and stupas. And these culminated finally into human images of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas. Therefore, one powerful medium of worship in the Buddhist Culture was the use of symbolism through the Arts. The basic philosophy behind the use of symbolism through sculpture, images, countless statues, paintings, objects or relics - is that their symbolisms make us realize that reality is not restricted to our senses. There is a vast array of relics, countless replicas of sacred objects along with images, paintings and structures which either recall past events or provides a setting for worship. These are indications of a system or sequence of symbols on which intelligent allegorical working and their correct use can open the mind on the unknown and the infinite.

The Buddhist Art form has peculiar characteristics which help towards investigation of Truth and principles of being, knowledge and conduct:

- A system of repetition of images for e.g. 10,000 Buddha images or 1 million small votive stupas within one place or a temple - which assists mentally into comprehending the Infiniteness of Truth, being so much beyond human grasp.
 - The role of repetitive artworks producing an elevating impact on the human mind, was perceived as essential since the human mind could be diverted away from the mundane world through the Buddhist art of highly idealized images which assists in elevating the mind into the sphere spiritual ideals.
 - The evolutionary process of the Buddhist Art from the aniconic to the esoteric and to the human imagery of The Buddha is also a process of understanding Reality & Truth from microcosm to macrocosm.
 - The mystical evolution from the transcendent heavenly images of The Buddha in the Mahayana Buddhist Art to the artistic illustrations & descriptions of the mental, intellectual qualities of the inner man in the Theravada Buddhist Art presents both schools of Buddhist thought as vehicles of the Subtle Elevating message of The Buddha.
 - Esoteric rituals use elements of Performing Arts as starting points on the path of spiritual discovery, with the belief that ritualistic gestures, chants, rhythm, melodies etc. could involve man closer into personal intuitive, meditative experiences for e.g.:
- a. The ritualistic 'Cham dance' constitutes a form of meditation dedicated to the gods.

b. The 'Chod' rituals interplay & interconnect two external and internal dimensional levels of the Performing Arts. Playing of instruments, chanting, mantra recitations, gestures, dance & drama are used as an external manifestation, of an internally performed meditative visualization, driven through specific devised music compositional techniques - with the objective to arouse appropriate emotional states and facilitate mental visualizations.

The peculiar characteristics of Buddhist Art and Performing Art help to lead man from the Visible to the Invisible Felt Intuited Inner Forces.

SYSTEM OF REMINDERS CONSIDERED AUSPICIOUS

One characteristic in Buddhist Art is that there is a system of reminders which is considered auspicious. Buddhist Art form rests on a system of reminders which makes use of repetition of images (Fisher 1993, p. 9). In fact, the repetition of images was considered especially auspicious for e.g. a temple containing one thousand separate statues, cave shrines with relief carving of ten thousand Buddhas or dedications of a million small votive stupas. This system of repetitive artworks assists indirectly in the study of the nature of existence. They provide visual support and visual strength which help in the investigation of truths and principles of being, knowledge or conduct.

SYSTEM OF REMINDERS FOR REINFORCEMENT & ELEVATION

Another characteristic of Buddhist Art is that it has the role of a Reminder which contributes to the Reinforcement of one's Faith and to the Elevation of one's Self. Buddhist Art serves to remind, to support and to reinforce the eternal truths of religion. The developing style of the Buddhists' Fine Arts remains closely connected to the historical development and changing trends of the Buddhist religion. The ultimate goal of Buddhism which is the transcendence of the illusory world and the attainment of Nirvana gave the basic direction to the philosophy behind the artistic style adopted by the Buddhist artworks. Thus it is an art of highly idealized images, infinitely finer and that which will be much above those which are mundane in appearance - hence their inherent source of power for reinforcement and instrumentation towards an elevated thought-power. This system of reminders also includes a variety of structures such as buildings for worship and for images. The structures are also in the form of objects of worship like stupas, countless statues, paintings and replicas of events and places of importance.

Therefore the ultimate objective of Buddhist artworks is to help in trying to comprehend the mystical message behind Buddhism. The immediate intuition of truths is believed to transcend ordinary understanding, when coming into close contemplation and close interaction with Buddhist artworks.

EVOLUTION FROM THE ANICONIC TO THE ESOTERIC & TO HUMAN IMAGERY OF THE BUDDHA

There is still another characteristic of Buddhist Art which is its evolution from the aniconic imagery of the Buddha to the esoteric imagery of the Buddha and finally to the human image of the Buddha (Fisher 1993, p.41). The human image of the Buddha does not occur during the early centuries of Buddhist art. This was due to an early preference at that time for aniconic imagery. Aniconic imagery is the substitution of an emblem or symbol in the place of the primary figure, for e.g. early Christians substituted the cross for an image of the Christ. So, at the beginning of Buddhist Art, the Buddha was represented symbolically by an empty throne, or a stupa or a tree. Then with time came the beginnings of esoteric Buddhist imagery. There was for e. g. creation of colossal images which illustrated a transcendent view of the Buddha. Then, there is also Buddha multiplying his forms which represented his superhuman powers. The Buddha in multiplying forms also illustrated one aspect of a greater force i.e. manifestation of a supreme Buddha of cosmic dimensions.

There is also an image which remained the primary source for subsequent figures of the Buddha throughout Asia, that is, the Indian Buddha image (Fisher 1993, p. 46). The Indian Buddha image offers a representation of the yogi in his state of meditation, transcendent in his mental powers - yet very much part of this world, with his earthy, massive form rendered in rough, unpolished sandstone.

The two schools of Buddhism - the Mahayana and the Theravada each one has their own characteristics, in terms of Art, which developed as per each one's specificity in their philosophy.

THE TRANSCENDENT MAHAYANA & THE ESOTERIC THERAVADA ARTISTIC IMAGERY

The transcendent images in the Mahayana art presented a Buddha further removed from the earthly realm and closer to the heavenly sphere, the ultimate source of all meaning. There were illustrations of elaborate often extravagant celestial palaces with numerous attendants and flying figures, hence generating an atmosphere of heavenly splendour.

On the other hand, the Theravada Buddhist art favoured solitary images - emphasizing the meditative, ascetic qualities associated with that tradition. The Buddha was also distinguished by special attributes such as the cranial protuberance ('ushnisha') which symbolizes superior mental powers (Fisher 1993, p. 13). There were also lotus and wheel marks upon the soles of the feet of Lord Buddha. In Theravada Buddhist art there is emphasis on higher mental achievements which call for tranquillity and physical control. There is also emphasis through Buddhist Art on goals of yoga. These resulted in Buddhist images in relaxed poses and of great transcendent presence, hence further emphasizing a youthfulness that denied the demands of time, such as old age.

Behind this evolutionary process of Buddhist Fine Arts from the aniconic imagery of the Buddha to the esoteric imagery of the Buddhist attributes, and then finally to the human image of the Buddha - lies the Most Subtle Elevating message of Buddhist Art which is analogous to the mystical experience of a mystic and which words cannot explain. This deepest subtle message can be pondered upon, through artistic descriptions and illustrations of the intrinsic human virtues or Truth which the Buddha Himself embodies.

So far, I have shown how the Buddhist Fine Artworks through sculpture, painting, etc. - assist in trying to comprehend the mystical message of Lord Buddha and help to undergo mystical / meditative experiences. Now, through a few examples of the Performing Arts, I will explain how rituals, music, dance and drama help to build mystical experience in Buddhism, as well as bring us close to immediate intuition of truths believed to transcend ordinary understanding.

FUNCTION OF THE PERFORMING ARTS AS STARTING POINTS ON THE PATH OF SPIRITUAL DISCOVERY

Esoteric Buddhism aimed at bridging the gap between the phenomenal world of the senses and the higher, absolute world without form (Fisher 1993, p.17). The esoteric ritual has been founded on the belief that material images or sensory experiences from Buddhist Fine Arts i.e. sculpture, painting, architecture, etc. could do no more than point out the way. There was the belief that True awareness came through intuitive insight and therefore remained a personal individual experience, which can be helped by secret, mysterious rituals. Hence such practices as meditation, yoga, chanting of (mantras) and the use of gestures ('mudras') were linked to the phenomenal world. And they functioned as starting points along the path towards understanding (following the Mahayana belief) that the ultimate Buddha-nature resides within all beings, awaiting for discovery. These often mystical ritual practices could hasten progress towards enlightenment and embraced both the celestial domain and the phenomenal world. The worshipper often needed a personal mentor (i.e. a 'guru') to interpret the connections between the two i.e. allegorical meanings between the mystical ritual and Enlightenment itself.

The ritualistic dance called 'Cham' performed in Buddhist monasteries finds its origin in the older form of shamanic ceremonial dance in Tibet. The 'Cham' dance is performed by monks, nuns and villagers in monasteries throughout Buddhist cultures of Central Asia. This energetic masked and costumed dance is associated with Tibetan Buddhism. It is performed during Buddhist festivals and accompanied by music played by monks. This dance is a visual presentation of the conquest of good over evil. The good forces of religion overcome the evil powers. This dance constitutes a form of meditation in itself and is danced as an offering to gods.

THE INTERPLAY & INTER-CONNECTING BOND BETWEEN OUTER & INNER PERFORMANCE

There are musical and performance aspects of 'Chod' rituals which are practiced and performed by Tibetan Buddhists today. Research points out that the melodies and rhythms in the 'Chod' song-poetry and performance enhance the meditation process that help the ritual practitioner in experiencing transformative insights. 'Chod' song-poems use several compositional techniques such as tone painting, melodic phrasing, sequences and rhythmic ostinato. In fact, they are not used as a secondary aesthetic element or mere accompaniment to written poetry - but as a primary conduit for the participant's development of specific emotional states and visualizations that can lead to meditative insights and thus intensify meditative experiences.

The 'Chod' is a highly coordinated performance which consists of its Outer and the Inner dimensions/levels. At the outer or external level, the 'Chod' ritual involves the practitioner in several performance tasks, for example - chanting, singing pitched melodies and performing 'mantra' utterances; he is to play also on instruments like the thighbone trumpet, the ringing of the Tibetan bell with the struck beats of the 'damaru'. There are other sub-rituals, such as dances and gestures. At the inner, internal level during the 'Chod' practice, one works towards reducing attachment to one's body and material possessions. The final goal of the practice is attainment of enlightenment. So, there are clear strong links between the internal performance of meditative visualizations and the external performance of the liturgical song-poetry, music, dances and gestures within the Chod rituals. Tibetan Buddhist music has a metaphysical dimension. Each instrument of the monastery orchestra, as well as the drawn-out tones of chant is believed to represent an externalized form of the 'mantras' or sounds inherent in the human body - and accessible otherwise only through steadfast meditation (Snellgrove, 1998). For the monks, such music is a basic aid to devotion and prayer. Musical parameters as well as movements through dance directly assist in the meditative journey and this is a perfect example of the purposeful use of the Performing

Arts as an aid to meditative visualization. "Meditation is thus within the domain of performance. It is a method of focussing consciousness to turn ideas into truths, knowledge into experience and experiences into forms of action" (Sellers, 2001).

Most of the arts, performing arts and rituals were inspired by three schools of Buddhism. It remains difficult to attribute each work to a particular sect or a specific sutra, but some awareness of the beliefs of the major schools of (Chinese) Buddhism is helpful in understanding the wide range of Fine arts and Performing arts that fall under the umbrella of Buddhist Art and Performing art - both as spiritual practice as well as meditative tool.

CONCLUSION

There is an underlying philosophy of the Arts and Performing Arts as a medium of worship in the Buddhist culture at large. An aesthetic attitude is recognised in the Buddhist culture, to remove three factors of the destruction of nature - craving, hate and delusion. The Arts/Performing Arts i.e. dance, music, painting, sculpture....are considered pure as they are aesthetic by nature; and this Purity tallies with the Ten Transcendental States as according to Buddhism. The Arts and Performing Arts constitute a meditative process which is considered to be self-minded for one's personal growth. Therefore the Arts and Performing Arts become mediums through which one can be self-transformed to the spiritual state. When involved in painting, music, dance, drama, etc. - one raises awareness of the individual self. Hence when one is engaged to the driving forces of the Arts and Performing Arts, no room for attachment is possible - this is what leads to Inner Enjoyment. Ultimately, involvement in the Arts and Performing Arts as per the Buddhist path -is Meditation itself, which means that the mind itself becomes meditation.

The deepest message through Buddhist Arts and Performing Arts becomes analogous to the mystical experience of a mystic - which words cannot express. This Divine Depth can be pondered upon, through Buddhist artistic descriptions, illustrations, musical and movement expressions of the intrinsic human virtues or Truth as embodied by the Lord Buddha. The Arts and Performing Arts in the Buddhist culture demonstrate fully that True Beauty will emerge and be seen, as we grasp the underlying Truth and as we see the Inner Beauty which the Outer Form is seeking to reveal. There is an established system or code of artworks in Buddhism which inspire towards discoveries and progress. Therefore their symbolical significance lies in the fact that Buddhist Arts and Performing Arts contribute to reveal the secrets of the subconscious and supra-conscious mind. Hence they contribute to the unveiling of the deep-rooted parts of action, and opens the mind on the Unknown and the Infinite. The symbolism behind the elaborate and rich body of Buddhist Fine & Performing Art is an Expression of Mystical Symbols - whereby the search of man into their symbolism represents man's effort to decode and master a destiny which is out of his reach because of darkness which surrounds him. The works of art represent or symbolise therefore an outer and visible sign on earth of an inner and spiritual reality and some fundamental Truth of life. They represent an appearance on earth, of that which is rooted in an inner cause. The Buddhist works of art form an outer effect of an inner livingness, hence they seem to veil certain mysterious forces.

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