

Significance of *Dīpamkara* and *Viśvantara* Jatakas as Depicted in Gandharan Bas-Relief Panels

GHANI-UR-RAHMAN AND SARFARAZ KHAN

Abstract

Gandhara art is composed of a very important, visual language, which tells us about many different aspects of Buddhism and Gandhara Civilization. Gandharan artists and craftsmen have effectively represented the historical life of the Buddha, while his previous lives have not been given that much importance. Several Jatakas have found a place in Gandhara art, among which Dīpamkara Jataka and Viśvantara Jataka are the most important ones. This paper, thusly, focuses on two Jatakas so that their depiction in Gandhara can be pondered.

Introduction

The roots of the word Gandhara are *gand*, meaning fragrance and *hara*, meaning land, therefore Gandhara literally means the “land of fragrance” (Ali and Qazi, 2008: 1; Siddiqui, 2011: 67). It also refers to Peshawar (the ancient Sanskrit *Puruṣapura*) and its surrounding areas, in geographical terms. Nevertheless, culturally Gandhara covered the territories along and around the Indus, Swat and Kabul river valleys, largely in the North-West Frontier Province of modern Pakistan. It is for this reason that Richard Salomon and others used the terms Gandhara proper for the former and Greater Gandhara for the later (Dietz, 2007: 49).

The Gandhara civilization, which flourished in the northwest region of Pakistan and Afghanistan from sixth century BCE to fifth century CE, left an everlasting imprint on the cultural milieu of the region. This is the area from which Buddhism was transmitted to China, Korea, and finally to Japan. Appropriately, the scholars Braavig and Liland have opined that Gandhara “was

never a region of isolation but a meeting place of the Orient and the Occident from remote antiquity” (Braavig and Liland, 2010: xviii; Siddiqui, 2011:65; Sehrai, 1991: 2; Schmidt, 1990: 1). The earliest reference to Gandhara is found in the sacred literature of the Indo-Aryans, the *Regveda*, a collection of hymns composed in the *Vedic* Sanskrit in the second millennium BCE (c. 1200 BC.) where *Kubha*, *Suastu* and *Gandhari* have been mentioned. In the *Vedic* texts (*Rgveda* and *Atharvaveda*), the *Gandharis* are among the northwestern tribes of people with a pure dialect of their own language.¹ One of their kings was connected with the Soma cult (Zwalf, 1996:15; Sarwar, 2001: 55; Dietz, 2007: 49; Ali and Qazi, 2008: 1; Siddiqui, 2011: 67).²

A number of factors, including successive waves of invasions from Central Asia, the rise of Islam, and the resurgence of Brahmanism, weakened the Buddhist tradition in the region. Finally, in the beginning of 2nd millennium CE (approximately 1200 CE), the Buddhist faith, its art, and the resultant civilization in the region known to the world as “Gandhara Civilization” had completely vanished (Rosenfield, 2006: 11; Ali and Qazi, 2008: 9).

Gandhara Art

According to Harold Hargreaves, there were two schools of art, which developed and flourished in ancient Indian, i.e., the art of the ancient school which may be best observed in the form of sculptures from the Bharhut *stupa*, from the railing of Bodh Gaya, the gateways to the *stupas* of Sanchi, on the facades of the rock-cut temples of Orissa and the pre-Kushan works of

¹The inhabitants of Gandhara spoke one of the regional dialects of Middle Indo-Aryan or Prakrit known as Gandhārī with Kharoshti script, which in turn was adapted from the Aramaic of Achaemenians, serving as the *lingua franca* of Persian Empire (Caroe 1958: 27; Sehrai 1982: 4; Braavig and Liland 2010: xviii; see also Dietz 2007: 51; Neelis 2011: 53).

²Need very brief explanation of the Soma cult – ritual and beverage

Mathura. In these pieces of art continuous progress can be seen, from the rude to refined sculptures of Sanchi (Hargreaves, 1930: 7). On the other hand, Gandhara, and its art, was open to foreign influence, especially from Persia and Greece, as Gandhara remained on the frontiers of empires except during the Kushan era. Though the art of Gandhara has been influenced by Hellenistic and Persian forms and ideas, it, nevertheless, was not totally divorced from the art of other Buddhist centers in ancient Indian. Both the Indian ancient schools of art and Buddhist art of Gandhara share the same ideological content, depicting the same Jatakas and the same episodes from the life of historical Buddha. Another commonality for both the schools of art is that the so-called aniconic representation of Buddha was displaced at the same time with anthropomorphic representations beginning at the advent of Christian era, especially under the Kushan emperors in Gandhara. Lars Fogelin opines about the origin of Buddha image and its subsequent spread to other parts: “The earliest Buddha images in India were sculpted in Gandhara and Mathura in the second and third centuries CE. From this location in the northwestern periphery of India, the tradition of Buddha images spread across other portions of India and beyond” (Krishan, 1964: 104; Schmidt, 1990: 3; Chauley, 1998: 59; Karlsson, 1999: 132-133; Dietz, 2007: 58; Neelis, 2011: 107-108 note no. 124; Fogelin, 2015: 155).³ The beginning of anthropomorphic representation of the Buddha image has been described by Jason Neelis as under:

Like bodily and textual relics, images materialize the presence of the Buddha in particular places. The earliest anthropomorphic images of the Buddha appear in Mathura, Gandhara and Swat in the first century CE after a long phase of symbolic representation. The “Image Cult” was promoted by monastic and lay patrons who labeled their gifts of sculptures to *stūpa* complexes,

³Domenico Faccenna, Carolyn Schmidt and many others accept the beginnings in late 1st century BCE in Swat (consultation with Schmidt 2018).

murals in Buddhist cave monasteries, as well as smaller or more rudimentary images, including petroglyphs, as “religious offerings” (*deyadharmā/devadharmā*) (Neelis 2011: 58).

It is well understood that Gandhara art is exclusively religious in nature, dominated by the Buddhist faith wherein the history and legends related to Buddhism and Buddha have been depicted (Hargreaves, 1930: 8; Ali and Qazi, 2008: 11; Fogelin, 2015: 155). The majority of scholars are of the opinion that Gandhara art has a strong connection with the origin of the Buddha image, aiming at the propagation of Buddhism and the teachings of the Buddha through sculptures executed in stone, stucco, terracotta and bronze and paintings displayed in many *stupas* and monasteries across the whole of Gandhara. Archaeological explorations in the Gandhara region have aptly proved that Gandharan art was primarily aimed at propagating the faith (Ali and Qazi, 2008: 11; Fogelin, 2015: 155). In the words of H. Hargreaves: “... but the greatest contribution to Indian art resulting from this union of Hellenistic genius and Buddhist piety is the figure of the Buddha” (Hargreaves, 1930: 8). It was the Gandharan artists who sculpted Buddha in the human form in contrast to Hinayana school of thought in which symbolic representation of the Buddha at pilgrimage sites was emphasized, e.g., Buddha’s birth at Lumbini with lotus flower, his enlightenment with the empty seat under his Bodhi tree, the great departure by his ride-less horse, first Sermon in the deer park at Sarnath by a deer with a Chakra, and his death or Mahaparinirvana by a *stupa* (Hargreaves, 1930: 8; Krishan, 1964: 104; Lopez Jr., 2005: 14; Ali and Qazi, 2008: 11; Fogelin, 2015: 28). This limited type of Buddhism prevailed throughout the Mauryan Period and even continued until circa 72 BCE during Andhra period. By the end of first century BCE, a new form of Buddhism known as Mahayana Buddhism, which transformed the symbolic iconography into one that incorporated the human

form of representation, emerged in Gandhara region (Krishan, 1964: 104; Ali and Qazi, 2008: 11-12).

In summary, Buddhist art of Gandhara is the result of local artists' devotion, the charisma of the Buddha's personality, and contacts and interactions with Greeks, Romans, Persians and Central Asians. In contrast to ancient schools of art at Sanchi and Bharhut, etc., wherein Jatakas are very popular, Gandhara art translated Buddhist Mahayana canonical text images into stone, stucco, terracotta, clay and bronze, which paved the way for expansion of Buddhism into Central Asia and the Far East along the "Silk Road" (in actually multiple routes) through pilgrimage and trade.⁴ Apart from the artists' devotion, there is the probability that they may have been guided by iconographic authority, as four great events from the life of the Buddha have been depicted repeatedly at a numbers of *stupa sites* (Hargreaves, 1930: Karlsson, 1999: 134; Ali and Qazi, 2008: 13).

Keeping in view the above developments and transformations in Buddhism, especially in Gandharan Buddhism, and, subsequently, in its art, it is appropriate to say that the Buddhist art of Gandhara was mainly focused around the Buddha, particularly the life of historic Buddha with a special emphasis on Jatakas or "birth stories," miracles of the historic Buddha, images of the future Buddha and the primary episodes from his birth to death (Burgess, 1901: 162; Karlsson, 1999: 134).

⁴ Artists in Gandhara used schist, which is easily available in the hills in different colours throughout Gandhara.

Jatakas

Jatakas are among the most popular stories in all of Buddhist literature.⁵ They are based on the accounts of the virtuous deeds and achievements of the historic Buddha in his previous lives as a Bodhisattva (in animal as well as human form), which ultimately led to his enlightenment. These *Jatakas* had been recounted by the historical Buddha, himself, to his disciples, as he had the full memory of the past (Lopez Jr., 2001: 67, 259; Appleton, 2007: 109). Nevertheless, the historic Buddha is not the only Buddha for there have been or will be many others. Buddhist canonical literature mentions that there had been Buddhas before the Historic Buddha and that there will also be more in future (Bronkhorst 2011/1946: 232).

As stated above, Jataka is a Pali term meaning birth story. Buddhist literature of the Theravada Canon mentioned more than five hundred Jataka stories, i.e. variously 550, 540 and 555. Out of these more than five hundred pre-birth stories, so far only *Dīpamkara*, *Śyama*, *Viśvantara*, *Amara*, *Maitryakanyaka*, *Śibi*, *Verya Bala*, *Mucch Maliha*, *Maha Mahaga*, *Sandanta*, *Chandakinara*, *Ksantivadin Jatakas* have been recorded in the Gandhara region (Humphreys, 2005/1997/1984: 100; Ali and Qazi, 2008: 26). Among these Jatakas, *Dīpamkara* and *Viśvantara* received more attention in Gandhara art because these deeds qualified Sidhartha (Śakyamuni) to become a Buddha.

Dīpamkara-Jātaka: According to Buddhist religious texts, becoming a Buddha is a difficult task, involving a long, heroic and virtuous way of life full of sacrifices. There were no exemptions from these acts for Sakyamuni. Buddha told to his disciples approximately five hundred and

⁵ The difference between Jatakas and Avadanas is that that Jatakas are exclusively related to the Buddha while in avadanas in addition to the Buddha, tales related to Buddha's disciples or any being professing faith of the Buddha (Zhu 2007: 382).

fifty Jatakas where Sidhartha was incarnated as a bird, some type of animal and human being, as a god and other divine creatures, all demonstrative of the great perfection of generosity, patience, vigor and wisdom required (Hargreaves, 1930: 20; Lamotte, 1988: 335; Harvey, 2013: 15). There had already been Buddhas in different world ages. One of them was the Buddha Dīpamkara, as seen figures one through five. During the times of the existence of the Buddha Dīpamkara, there existed too, the Buddha of our times in one of his previous lives as a Brahmana ascetic named Sumedha, (Megha in Mahavastu and Sumati in *Divyavadana*). Dīpamkara is one of the twenty-four Buddhas before the historic Buddha Shakyamuni. One of the Jatakas describes the visit of Dīpamkara to a certain city called Dīpāvati (Paduma according to Beal) and the news of his arrival, which reached to the young ascetic named Sumedha (Beal, 1873: 385). It is held that these events happened a 'hundered thousand eons and four incalculable periods ago' when historic Buddha Gotama Sidhartha was an ascetic named Sumedha and able to meet the previous Buddha Dīpamkara (Dīpaṃkara of Sanskrit). As recounted, on the arrival of the news, the young, pious ascetic decided to pay his respects to the great teacher by spending a certain sum of money, which he had won through the display of Vedic knowledge (Beal, 1873: 385-386). He hastened to the town to purchase flowers to pay homage to the Buddha but unfortunately could not find even a single flower because all of the flowers had already been purchased by the king who was also a faithful devotee of the Buddha⁶. Sumati was in difficult position but he found a maiden named Gopā (Bhadra according

⁶ The king's reverence has been mentioned by S. Beal as: "Now Satrunjaya Raja, hearing that Dīpamkara was coming to his dominions, even to the city of Padma, surrounded by clouds of followers, was filled with joy, and ordered forthwith all the roads to be swept, watered, and garnished, even like the fairy city of the Gandharvas. Then the King Satrunjaya published an edict to all within and without the city for a distance of twelve *yojanas*, to the effect that whatever persons there were within such distance, none whatever should purchase for themselves

to Beal), carrying water jar with seven blue lotus flowers. She also had come to pay homage to the Buddha (Beal, 1873: 391). Sumedha, after some efforts, purchased five of the blue lotus flowers with all of the money he had (five hundred gold pieces). As a part of this bargain, he had to make a promise to the girl that she would be his wife in a future lifetime (Beal, 1873: 391-393). She is considered to be Yaśodharā, the wife of the Bodhisattva of our times, in one of her previous lives.

When the Buddha Dīpāmkara arrived in the city, **the king and many others welcomed him by tossing flowers in the direction of the Buddha that“... instead of falling to the earth, formed a canopy over the head of Dīpamkara,** which moved with him as he went and remained as he rested (Beal, 1873: 393).” At the same time, Sumedha also tossed the blue lotus flowers in the direction of the Buddha Dīpāmkara with the vow that: “If in future time I shall become Buddha, and teach the Law just as this Buddha, and receive the reverence of all men in like manner, then let these flowers remain in mid-air, the leaves hanging downwards and the flowers standing upwards, crowning the canopy that shades the head of Buddha, and moves as he moves, and rests as he rests” (Beal, 1873: 393-394).

Next, he demonstrated extreme homage to the Buddha Dīpamkara by untying his hair and spreading it on the muddy ground for the Buddha to walk on like a carpet. The Buddha Dīpamkara predicted that Sumedha would achieve Buddhahood in an eternal, future lifetime (Beal, 1873: 394-395). The youth next ascended up into the air where he again kneeled out of

flowers or perfume; but in whatever places such were to be bought, that they should be reserved for the King as offerings to Dīpamkara Buddha. Then Satrunjaya Raja, accompanied by the four kinds of military escort, in great display, went forth out of the city to meet that Dīpamkara Buddha” (Beal 1873: 385).

reverence to Buddha Dīpamkara (Hargreaves, 1930: 19-20; Ali and Qazi, 2008: 28; Zhu, 2007: 211-212; Harvey, 2013: 15).

The Dīpamkara Jataka as Depicted in Art: This Jātaka story has been widely sculptured in Gandhāra (Figs. 01 through 05) and, according to Isao Kurita, it is hardly found in central India. The first example represents the most referred relief for this story (Fig. 01). On the far left Gopā standing inside the city gate with flowers in her hands while Sumedha, represented in the right, is negotiating to obtain the flowers. The next figure is again Sumedha, tossing flowers toward the Buddha Dīpamkara with flowers in his right hand while Sumedha again represented with his hair spread out on the ground in a prostrate posture. The fourth time Sumedha has been represented in the same scene. Up in the air within a radiating roundel, he is shown with hands joined in *anjali mudra*, the gesture of respect. In this same relief, Dīpamkara has been shown in monastic robe with wavy folds.

Viśvāntara-Jātaka

In the course of his penultimate existence, Buddha Śākyamuni was born as prince Viśvāntara, son of king Śivi.⁷ In this second-to-last incarnation before his birth as the Bodhisattva Siddhārtha, he was famous for his charity and generosity, and his miraculous white elephant, which attracted rain whenever desired (Foucher, 1915/2005: 25; Hargreaves, 1930: 21; Rivett and Killick, 2014: 3). Out of his generosity, prince Viśvāntara gave his white elephant in charity to another king (king of Kalinga) whose country had suffered badly from famine due to a

⁷ For antepenultimate existence, see Mark Rivett and Steve Killick as they are of the opinion that his penultimate life being spent in a heaven realm (Rivett and Killick 2014: 3).

prolonged drought.⁸ His father punished him for his act of generosity on the complaint of his step-mother and other inhabitants of the state by exiling him to the jungle. He left for the jungle in his chariot in the company of his faithful wife, Madrī, and his two children. While on his way to jungle, prince Viśvantara gave his chariot along with his horse, then his children (a daughter and a son) and, in the end, his wife, Madrī (Maddī in Pali) to a strange Brahman in a supreme act of charity (Foucher, 1915/2005: 25, 27; Hargreaves, 1930: 21-22; Gombrich, 1985: 428; Ali and Qazi, 2008: 30; Rivett and Killick, 2014: 3). This high form of generosity has been described by Etienne Lamotte as: “In Varṣapura (Shāhbāzgarhī), Viśvantara had given, to an insatiable Brāhmin, his white elephant, kingdom, caparison, wife and children” (Lamotte, 1988: 334).

According to Buddhist traditions, these events were premeditated to test his attitude towards worldly affairs. The gods who were testing his charity were pleased and after some time reunited the family in the court of the king (Foucher, 1915/2005: 25; Hargreaves, 1930: 21-22; Alam, 1998: 18; Ali and Qazi, 2008: 30; Rivett and Killick, 2014: 3-4). As recounted in the Buddhist texts, the Bodhisattva acquired the ten perfections in the course of his innumerable lives before his last life as a Buddha. It was this task, that in his life as Prince Viśvāntara, he acquired perfection in charity or alms giving.

The Viśvāntara Jataka as Depicted in Art: The Viśvāntara story was also widely known in Gandhāra (Figs. 06 through 08). This story is exemplified in the first example where the Bodhisattva is depicted to the front of an elephant wearing a royal robe with a *ushnisha* or topknot on his head and holding an ewer in his hand (Fig. 06). A Brahman with a long staff in his

⁸ He has been named variously such as *Sudana*, (of noble charity), *Sudanta* (of pure white teeth) or *Sudamta* (self-controlled) (Dani 1964: 3).

left hand is positioned to the right of the prince. The Bodhisattva is likely to be pouring water on the right hand of the Brahman to perform the local tradition of donating something. Another figure alongside the palm tree has been depicted in the mode of disagreement.

Conclusion

It is an undeniable fact that the activities of the historic Buddha were undertaken in Gangetic India and that his faith was transferred to North-Western Pakistan through trade and political patronage. In order to make North-Western Pakistan and Eastern sectors of Afghanistan, especially Gandhara, a holy land for the followers of the faith, several legends from the former lives of the Buddha were adapted and localized. The Buddhist missionaries delved into the rich repertory of Jatakas and claimed that these legends happened in the holy land of Gandhara. In this way, each locality or specific towns were loaded with their own legends, which were commemorated by the erection of a *stupa*. Thusly, the setting for a number of Jatakas has been fixed in Greater Gandhara at various places such as Dīpamkara at Nagarahara (Jalalabad), Viśvantara at Shahbaz-gaṛha (Varusha), Śibi and Śyama Jatakas happened at Pushkalavati (Shah-dherai and Charsadda), ṛṣi Ekaśṛṅga at Shāh-kot, and Kaṣāntivādin at Manglawar (Lamotte, 1988: 333-334).

But still as compare to Indian schools we find fewer *Jatakas* in Gandhara as the focus was on the historical life here than on his previous lives. The main reason could be the appearance of Buddha image that made it possible to widely carve the historical life of the Buddha in stone. And thus, we see the focus on the Buddha life story.

The two Jataka, focused in this paper, have been sculptured widely in Gandhāra stone art, showing the artists'/ craftsmen's desire to communicate the message that the Buddha of our times was a predestined being as it had already been decided in one of his remote previous lives that he, in the course of his innumerable lives, will achieve perfection through different good deeds and become a Buddha. This artistic tradition was also used as means of spreading the words of Buddha Śākyamuni himself, who very frequently called himself a *Tathāgata*.⁹ It is the Jātakas that seem to be responsible for the evolution of the prodigious tale of the Dream of Māyā and the Birth of Śākyamuni. The most important significance of the two stories is that, Dīpamkara Jataka, if not the beginning of previous lives, is at least the beginning of the innumerable lives of the resolve (Bodhi) and Viśvāntara was the successful end of those previous lives or nearing to the goal of Bodhi. It was this symbolic importance that the Gandharan artist focused mostly these two amongst the Jataka stories in stone besides narrating the historical life story of Lord Buddha.

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⁹ The noun was generally used by Buddha Śākyamuni in referring to himself or to other Buddhas. It can apply to any Arahant. Etymologically it means either *tathā -āgata*= thus come or *tathā-gata*=thus gone, it seems to indicate that 'he who stands before you' is not like other beings. See introduction to *The Long Discourses of the Buddha, Dīgha Nikāya*, translated by Maurice Walshe, Boston, Wisdom Publications, 1987.

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DĪPAMKARA JATAKA



Figure 01. Zhu, Tianshu. (2007) Dipamkara Jataka. Gandhara (Pakistan?). Ca. third-fourth centuries. Stone. British Museum, London. Photographed by John Huntington, courtesy of the Huntington Archive (0020962).



Figure 02. Source: Excavation. 1909-10 A. D. Provenance: Sahri Bahlol Period: 2nd-3rd Century A.D. Ihsan Ali and Qazi 2008.



Figure 03. Acc. No: PM_02719 Source: Major C. B Rawlinson. C.I.E Provenance: Sahri Bahlol Period: 2nd-3rd Century A.D. Ihsan Ali and Qazi 2008.



Figure 04. Acc. No: PM_02718 Source: Purchased; D.G Archaeology, 1903 Provenance: India Period: 2nd-3rd Century A.D



Figure 05. Acc. No: PM_02720 Source. Excavation 1907-08 A. D. F. C Provenance: Takht-i-Bahi Period: 2nd-3rd Century A.D.

VIŚVANTARA JATAKA



Figure 06. Acc. No: PM_02717 Source. Excavation 1909-10 A. D Provenance: Sahri Bahlol
Period: 2nd-3rd century

Figure 07. Acc. No: PM_03076 Source: Excavation 1909-10 A. D Provenance: Sahri Bahlol
Period: 2nd-3rd Century A.D

Figure 08. Acc. No: PM_03072, 3077 Source: Excavation 1909-10 AD Provenance: Sahri Bahlol
Period: 2nd-3rd Century AD.