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The Iconographic Origin and Development of the Buddhist Triad Format

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I. Introduction

At Sakyamuni Buddha's presence, the Buddhists believed that Sakyamuni was a being who embodied the Dharma (The truth) and Buddha. After Sakyamuni entered into Nirvana, the worship of Him had progressed in two directions. One is respecting the Dharma for being an essence of Buddha. The other is looking for Buddhas than historic Buddha, Sakyamuni. These two different directions developed two different types of the triad format of its own one. The former produced a format composed of a Buddha and two attendants, while the latter produced another format composed of three Mahayana Buddhas.

II. The Triad Format composed of a Buddha and two Attendants

As is known, at His deathbed Sakyamuni Buddha said, "After my death, the Dharma (the law) and the Vinaya (the Discipline), which I stated in my presence, will be your teachers. "His testament gave an emphasis to the absolute value of the Dharma which he attained. After his death, many disciples investigated what his eternal essence was all about and they concluded that the essence of Buddha is the Dharma itself. The religious view that emphasizes the value of the Dharma had affected the Buddhist icons, and triad format composed of a Buddha and two attendants was the most representative.

1. The Wheel of the Law and two flanking figures.



Pl. 1. Preaching Scene suggested
by a symbol. C. 100 – 80 BC

2. A Preaching Buddha with two Devas (Brahma: Indra)

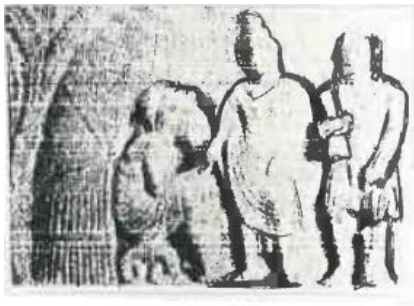


Pl. 2. Kaniska casket mid-2nd C. Gandhara



Pl. 3. Mathura Triad Form early 2nd C.

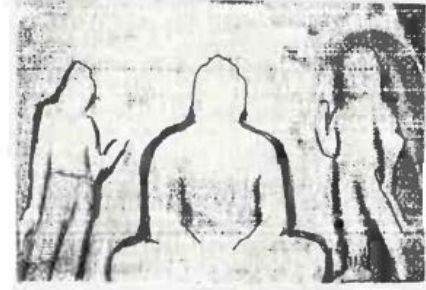
3. A Preaching Buddha with Vajrapani and Padma pani.



Pl. 4. The Buddha and Vajrapani
2nd C. Gandhara.



Pl. 5. Marthura Triad with
Inscription of the year 32 (AD 110)
From the Ahicchattra



Pl. 6. Triad with a
Bodhisattva and
a Vajrapan Binling-Si
Cave No. 169 China

4. A Preaching Buddha and two flanking Bodhisattvas in Gandhara: Maitreya – Avalokitesvara, Maitreya – Sakaya-Bodhisattva



Pl. 7. Triad Form. 3rd – 4th C
Gandhara

Pl. 8. Triad Form 3rd-4th
Gandhara

Pl. 9. Triad Form, 3rd-4th.,
Gandhara

5. A Buddha with two Bodhisattvas and two Devas (Brahma: Indra)



Pl. 10. 3rd-4th C, Gandhara

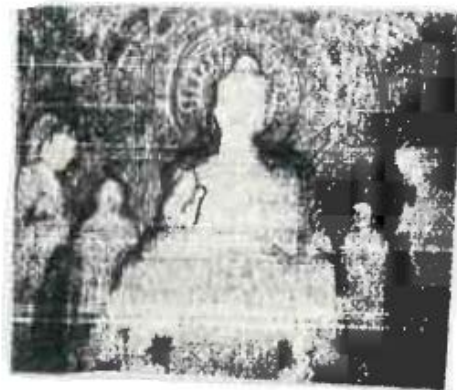


Pl. 11. 3rd-4th C. Gandhara

6. A Buddha with two Bodhisattvas and two monks



Pl. 12. 3rd-4th C. Gandhara.



Pl. 13. Binyangzhongdong of Longmen
Grottoes. 6th C. China.

7. A Buddha with two Bodhisattva, two monks, two strongmen *A Vajrapani in Gandhara – Two strongmen in China.

The triad format composed of a Buddha and two attendants the cult of the Dharma. However, in accordance with the prevalence of Mahayana Buddhism, the triad format has Mahayana Bodhisattvas as attendants. From these facts, we can assume that even in these diversified examples the respect for the Dharma which Sakyamuni stated remained constantly.

On the other hand, when Mahayana Buddhism was prevalent in China, many concepts of Mahayana Buddhas, such as Amitabha, Bhaisajyaguru – vaiduryaprabhasa (“Yao-shin”), appeared. Therefore, various kinds of the Buddha triad, such as the Sakya triad, the Amitabha triad, the “Yao-shih” triad, the Maitreya triad, and so were produced. Thereafter, the composition of the attendant Bothisattvas in accordance with each Mahayana Buddha became fixed.

In general, the Korean triad format was influenced by China’s. The Korean triads were usually produced during the Three Kingdoms period (Koguryo, Paekche, and Old Silla) and the Unified Silla period.

III. The Triad Format composed of three Buddhas.

As mentioned above, after the death of Sakyamuni who won His disciples’ and the Buddhists’ absolute worship, the worship of Him progressed along two directions. One of them, the pursuit of other Buddhas than the historic Buddha, Sakyamuni, brought into being the cult of Buddha. At the age of Mahayana Buddhism the cult of Buddha was widespread. Finally, this cult brought into being the religious belief that there may be many Buddhas other than the historic Buddha, Sakyamuni.

The cult of the past Buddha is the belief that before the Advent of Sakyamuni there were other Buddhas who also attained Buddhahood other than Sakyamuni. This belief suggests that after the death of Sakyamuni other Buddhas can exist. Therefore, people believed that not only in the past but also in the future other Buddhas than Sakyamuni would exist. That is, there are many Buddhas who stand for the three periods: the past, the present and the future. Among them, Dipamkara, Sakyamuni and Maitreya are representative of the three period Buddhas. In India a few examples of the three period Buddhas composed of them are found in Gandhara.

1. The Three Period Buddhas composed of Dipamkara (the past) Sakyamuni (the present) and Maitreya (the future)



Pl. 14. Three Period Buddhas

Gandhara from Shotorak

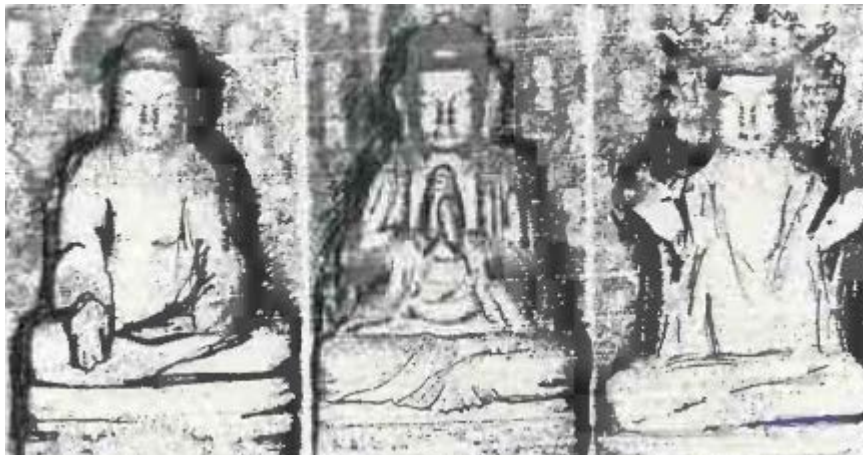
2. Three Mahayana Buddhas composed of three of Four Direction Buddhas.

Aksobaya or Bhaisajyaguru “Yao-shih” (the east), Amitaba (the west), Sakyamuni (the south), Maitraya (the north) ex 1. “Amita”, “Yao-shih” and “Duo-bao” (Prabhutaratna), 2. “Shijia”, “Yao-shih” and “Amita”.

3. Trikaya Buddhas composed of Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya and Nirmanakaya

In the Indian Mahayana Buddhism, the Buddhists considered Buddha in three aspects. This is the doctrine of the Trikaya. After Chinese became widespread, the Trikaya Buddhas were considered as the combination of Dharmakaya (the embodiment of truth), Sambhogakaya (Reward body) and Nirmanakaya (the incarnation of Buddha). Dharmakaya is regarded as Vairocana, Sambhogakaya as Amitabha, and Nirmanakaya as Sakyamuni.

As we examined briefly Sakyamuni is a historic and personal Buddha and Amitabha is an ideal and universal Buddha who is free from the restrictions of time and space. Vairocana, the most central Buddha of the Trikaya Buddhas, is the embodiment of truth. Since His death, Sakyamuni stated the importance of the Dharma, and the Dharma was hence respected as the essence of Buddha. So it concluded that by bestowing a personal character on the Dharma itself, the Dharma was embodied in a Buddha image.



Pl. 15. Trikaya Buddhas Sakyamuni Amitabha Vairocana 18th C. Hwoamsa, Korea.

IV. Conclusion

This study of the beginning and the development of the Buddhist triad format again confirm the fact that religious devotion is an important motive to invent new icons and that a new icon reflects a new religious belief. The cult of the Dharma and the cult of Buddha both brought into being two types of the triad format. Since then the Dharma and Buddha both have been regarded as important factors of Buddhism. The devotion to both developed into various religious beliefs in various nations, areas and times.

I have tried to find out the origin of the Buddhist triad format in this report, and I think this study can occupy an important place in the first step of studying Korean Buddhist art. On the bases of this study, I will further my research about the various appearances of the Korean Buddhist triad formats and the religious beliefs which are reflected in these formats.