

Development of Buddhist art in South and Southeast Asia

The Buddha was a lover of nature and an appreciator of the artistic beauty. He allowed monks to paint floral motif (not men, women, or animal images) on the wall of the monastery donated by lay people. As the same time, He encouraged the devotees to pay homage to the four holy places, i.e. Lumbini, where he was born, Buddha Gaya, where he attained Buddhahood, Sarnath, where he gave the first sermon, and Kusinara, where he entered paranirvana. As a result, during and after the Buddha's *paranirvana*, Buddhist arts were flourished and developed all over India and its neighbor countries.¹ In this paper, I am going to discuss about the development of Buddhist Arts in South and Southeast Asia.

After the First Council of reciting and memorizing the Buddhist Canon, the Bhikshus and Bhikshunis sustained and propagated the Buddhist scriptures by oral transmission for several centuries, a time when much of northern India frequently faced with foreign invasion and political turbulence.² In the meantime, because of the desire to earn merit and to have religious visual guidance, the traditional lay Buddhists made the Buddha's image and symbols which created the impetus for the development of Buddhist art. This development can be viewed as the inevitable process that was initiated by the Asoka's dedication of making pillars, which were based on the *axis mundi* ideals in earliest Indian literature of the Rig Veda and made by the Indo-Persian artists after the collapsing of Alexander the Great's Persian empire, for the Buddhist holy sites during the third century BC. In fact, initially at these holy places, the historical Sakyamuni Buddha

¹ Ananda Gugure, *Buddhism: The Religion and Its Culture* (Thompson, Conn.: M. Seshachalami & Co., 1975), 104-107.

² Charles F. Chicarelli, *Buddhist Art: An Illustrated Introduction* (Chiang mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2004), 57.

was made and represented symbolically, such as by an empty throne, a stupa, a residence hall of worship, or a tree, with the most popular symbols continuing to be included even after the introduction of the Buddha in human form.³ Indeed, there was no tangible evidences survives today of any statues or portraits of the Buddha having been created in the course of his lifetime, or for approximately four hundred years after his demise, even though his doctrines and sangha were still flourished since his time.

In general, initiated by Asoka's building of inscriptive pillars, monasteries, and others, Indian Buddhist arts go through five phases due to indigenious and foreign influences: stupa architecture and its decorative motif; Greco-Roman art of Gandhara; Indo-Kushan art of Mathura; cave architecture of Western India; and later Buddhist Art of Bengal, including Burma.

As the first missionary religion in India and probably in the world, Buddhism develops arts and architectures as visual aids for propagation of the religious ideas. Hence, with little external influence, Buddhist arts, sculptures, and stupas at Bharut, Sanchi, Amaravati, and Nagarjunikona represent mainly indigenious artistic and stylistic developments. Having influences from the relic-worship culture, early Buddhist arts initiated with the construction of monasteries and stupas, which enshrined the Buddha's and his disciples' relics. By the time of rediscovery of Bharut stupa in 1873, all of its bricks had been removed; only valuable three columns remained, which represent the rich collection of sculpture, including rare value of carved figures of Yaksinis. Its decorative and remarkable bas-reliefs of floral motifs of Jataka stories and the Buddha's life scenes of Bodhi tree, his foot-prints, and the wheel (not his image) are depicted effectively and abstractively in medallions on the columns. Sanchi stupa carried many similar features to

³ Robert E. Fisher, *Buddhist Art and Architecture* (New York, NY: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1993), 29-43.

that of Bharut, except its columns or the coping of the railing round of the stupa were not decorated with any bas-reliefs, and its four gateways are the pride of Indian art, which depicted the scenes of the Buddha's life and early Buddhist histories. The touch of austerity of Sanchi stupa is exact opposite with the exquisiteness of Bharut. The gateways hold scrolls of palm-leaf, where pictures of animals and Yaksinis are drawn. Indeed, Sanchi represents the vivid and complete picture of the genius and originality, skill, and aesthetic awareness of Buddhist arts of pre-Christian era. Amaravathi stupa, being constructed probably at the same time as Bharut and Sanchi, illustrated the spanned evolutions of Buddhist arts passing on from Theravada to Mahayana developments. For example, side by side with the means and symbols of Buddha in early Theravada tradition are the Buddha's human images of the Mahayana view. The railing and column contain exquisite specimens of the most cherishable relief sculpture, which had crowded pictures but realistic and life-like representation. The sculptor's facial expression of various characters is very details. If the Amaravati sculpture is delicate with crowded pictures, Nagarjunikoda offers earthly and spatially features of barest minimum figures in the panel, which depicted three episodes of Buddha's defeating Mara.⁴

By the time of the emergence of the Mahayana movement, the faithful stimulated the popular demand for the spiritual images of worship and gaining religious merit. Hence, probably the creation of Buddha's human form was initiated in the first century B.C to serve as a numinous vitality and even a magical miracle working power. This apparently occurred at two areas at the same time within northern India's Kushan Empire: Mathura, in the north-central India near Delhi; and Gandhara, a region in the northwest centering around the city of Taxila and including parts of nowadays Pakistan and

⁴ Gugure, Buddhism, 112-115.

Afghanistan.⁵ Drawing from pre-existing native art models such as yaksha and the stylistic treatments of stone narrative carving at the stupas in Sanchi and Bharhut, sculptors from Mathura certainly and typically create the first purely Indian portraits of the Buddha with massive yet realistically rendered physical characteristics and posed in traditional yoga postures. Another interesting feature of the artistic relief is that the attendants presumably may be identified as Indra and Brahma, who later are replaced by Bodhisattvas. Largely belonging to the Hellenistic and Roman cultural heritages, the Gandhara art had quite different origins from that of contemporary Mathura. In fact, Gandhara produced a unique, hybrid school of Buddhist art based on the harmonious blending of classical Greco-Roman stylistic conventions and Indian subject matter. For instance, ancient coins provided rich sources of facts and clues about the cultural aspects of Gandhara arts such as the oldest coins of the Gandhara-style likeness of the Buddha image on one side and the Kanishka I, ruler of the Kushan Empire, on another side issued about 100-123 AD. Also, the Greek stylistic Buddha images of European face, resembling the god Apollo, the heavy and thick fold robe, the Greek likeness of wavy hair of *ushnisha* protuberance atop the head, and the divine halo behind the head. The Mahayana doctrine including Bodhisattva concepts was largely and boldly expressed in Gandhara arts during this period.⁶ Evidently, the Mathura and Gandhara arts influenced each other in a way that bulky, toga-like robes on early Gandharan Buddhas evolved into a sheer garment draped over the left shoulder of the later statues.⁷ In short, the Gandhara Buddhist artistic school was created by Gandharan artisans who came from the territory of Roman influence in Western Asia. The Mathuran Buddhist artistic school

⁵ Chicarelli, 64.

⁶ Chicarelli, 65-71.

⁷ Chicarelli, 71.

focused on the making of Bodhisattva statues due to the Mahayana movement in the region.⁸ Mathuran images lost some of their early massiveness, maybe inspired by the athletic appearance regularly seen in Gandharan sculptures, which reached to its climax around the third century A.D. and faded away in the fifth century after the invasion of the White Hun. During the span of the early centuries of the first millennium A.D., Mahayana Buddhist movements and stylistic arts of Mathura and Gandhara spread to the southern region of the Andhra Empire, especially the Nagarjunakonda of Nagarjuna, one of the Mahayana founders, in the southern city of Amaravati, which operated a substantial maritime trading network that helped to carry Buddhist teachings and an abundance of artworks from this region to seaports across the south and southeast Asia. As a result, the imprint of Amaravati's Mathura and Gandhara arts created the flavor for the devotional artisans of Southeast Asian countries to follow. From 320 A.D. to the mid-seventh century of the Gupta period was the golden age of Indian civilization, which saw the well developed Mahayanist belief and artistic styles, alongside the Theravada movement and Hindu faith, employing from early Mathura prototypes. This period also signaled the declination of Buddhism due to the shifting patronage to Hinduism, the assimilation and absorption of Buddhism into Hinduism, and the assaulting of marauding tribes and Muslim.⁹ The classical Gupta Buddha image blends spiritual perfection, a dedicate sense of detached calm, and sublime humanity into an idealized vision of the great sage that would serve as the great model for the Southeast Asian artisans to follow.

⁸ Chikyo Yamamoto, *Introduction to Buddhist Art* (New Delhi, India: Pradeep Kumar Goel For, 1990), 51-52.

⁹ Fisher, 54-55.

Besides the artistic development of the Buddha images, the notable among ancient India's artistic marvels are the hands carving rock temples from stone mountains, starting during Asoka reign, in the Barabar hills of Bihar excavated by Theravada Buddhists and later by Mahayanist with additional magnificent caves of Buddhas' and deities' statues during the Gupta period. A complex of twenty-eight caves excavated between the second century B.C. and the seventh century A.D. at Western Ghats, Ajanta, Nahapana, Junnar, Kanheri, Karle, and others are especially magnificent and remarkable for its vibrantly colored murals of *jataka* tales and other Buddhist themes, carved viharas (monk residence), chaityas (worship sancturies), and stupas.¹⁰

After the declined of Gupta dynasty and India dividing into numerous small states, Buddhism was sponsored sustained by the Pala-Sena dynasties at libraries and centers, especially the famous monastic university at Nalanda spanning from eight to twelve centuries. This artistic and stylistic period saw the complexity of the new artistic expressions of Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist beliefs, especially the Tantric Buddhism. The evolutionary trend of shifting from historical Sakyamuni Buddha to the transcendent Buddhas and Bodhisattvas reflected in artistic development indicated the significant doctrinal changes from original teachings to the mysticism, rituals, and faith in benevolent deities throughout the first millennium A.D. Particularly, after Hindus deified Sakyamuni Buddha in about fifth century and the royal patronage shifting in favor of Hinduism, Indian Buddhism lost the ground and virtually disappeared in thirteenth century after the succession of Muslim invasion that destroyed monasteries and killed the monks. While it was waning and would nearly disappear in its own birthplace, Buddhism

¹⁰ Chicarelli, 77-78. Yamamoto, 59-62.

evolved and grown across many other parts of Asia such as Sri Lanka and other Southeast Asian countries.

Situated near India, Sri Lanka had an intercourse with India since very ancient times. Particularly, after King Asoka sent his missionary delegations, including his own son and daughter Mahinda and Sanghamitra respectively, to the land in 250 B.C., Sri Lankan the king Devanampiya Tissa and all royal courts immediately embraced the religion enthusiastically. Alongside with the transmissions and establishments of monastic sangha, monastery, stupas, and monuments to the Buddha's teaching, a sapling Bodhi tree, symbolizing the enlightenment, was brought and planted within the king's garden in his capital, Anurahapura. Another venerated object is the Buddha Tooth, which is believed being smuggled out of India inside the hair of a Bramin princess around 300 A.D. It was put in a golden urn and received with great honor by king Meghawana. It has religious and political connotations due to its prevention of famine and making rain as well as its authority on the legitimization of the rights to the thrones throughout many centuries.¹¹ Thus, the artistic abstractions has been replaced by the actual tree, surrounding with the calm and inward-turning and serene of Buddha images portrayed in poses of meditation of the Theravadin solitary path of enlightenment, as well as the actual relic, the Buddha's Tooth. Throughout its history, Sri Lankan kings showed great supports of Buddhist schools, especially the Theravada, which played the most important role in compiling the Buddhist Canon into Pali language as well as the revivals of Theravadin school in Burma and Thailand. Following the famous examples at Sanchi and Amaravati, Sri Lankan stupa of Anuradhapura is the most distinctive monument, which

¹¹ Smarna Wickremeratne, *Buddha in Sri Lanka: remembered yesterdays* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), 108.

has the dominant bell-shaped *andas*, prominent *harmikas*, and tapered spires that set as the standard for later stupas built in Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia. Unlike the Salvationist beliefs and spectacular heavens of the Mahayana, the Theravadin artistic style, with the limited pantheon and emphasis upon direct action, is perfectly served by the clean, uncomplicated forms and geometric harmonies of the Sri Lankan stupas. Following the formula of the first Bodhi-tree shrine at Anuradhapura, Sri Lankan builders constructed pillared halls, open to the sky. Probably, the limited subjects-matter within the Theravada tradition caused creative artists produced semi-circular moonstones, which consisted of variety of animals, vine scrolls, lotus petals, and fanciful flowers and leaves and were placed at the foot of the steps leading into various building. The Buddha images revealed their Gupta and Amaravati sources that captured the sense of meditative serenity, focus energy, and utter simplicity.¹² Nearly all Sri Lankan seated statues of Buddha show him in the pose of meditation, hands resting together in his lap in dhyana mudra, legs folded right atop left in virasana posture and the stylized flame emanating from the ushnisha atop his head, adopted by Sri Lankan artists from the Nagapattinam in southern India.¹³

Situated south-west of Sri Lanka is an island country of Maldives. The first settlers of Maldivian were Dravidian people from Kerala in the Sangam period (300 BCE-300 CE). Probably, most of them were fishermen from southwest coast of the southern part of Indian Subcontinent and Sri Lanka's western shores. Asoka sent missionary monks to promulgate Buddhism on this island, and it became principal religion of the island's people until 12th century AD. Because of the ancient Maldivian

¹² Fisher, 67-71.

¹³ Chicarelli, 190.

kings' sponsorship of Buddhism, the first Maldivian writings and artistic achievements in the form of highly developed sculpture and architecture are from that period. In the Male museum, many local Buddhist archeological remains show the evidences of Mahayana and Vajrayana iconography even H.C.P. Bell, a British commissioner of the Ceylon Civil Service, asserted that the ancient Maldivians followed Theravada Buddhism.

Indian immigrations and its ideas were the major influences upon South-East Asia Culture (with the exception of the northern half of Vietnam, which came under active Chinese colonization) shaping cultural expression, from art, mythology and written language to religion, mathematics, and science. The Mahayana and Vajrayana initially were popular in South-East Asia mainland from second to seventh century. Lately and ultimately, Theravada dominated most of the region. Generally, South-East Asian Buddhist arts evolved in three different stages. First, the introductory period lasted about five hundred years, from the second to seventh century, and was important for the acceptance and growth of the religion (evidently the close derivatives of Indian models onto the earliest indigenous Buddhist arts before eighth century) and the setting of the area's political boundaries. Second, from the eighth to tenth century, we see the rising of the powerful Shailendra in central Java (which produced Asia's greatest Buddhist monuments of Borobudur), the emerging of Hindu Khmer kingdoms (but often supportive of Buddhism) controlling the southern mainland of Funan and Zhenla, the Dvaravati kingdom of the Mon people in Theravada tradition by seventh century, the great kingdom at Pagan in Burma. By the beginning of the first millennium, Buddhism has been firmly established in the areas of the Mon people of Thailand and Burma nowadays and the greatest success of Java region as well as the finest achievements in

Cambodia. Third, from the tenth to the fifteenth century, the decline of Cambodia power, the waning of Javanese influence, the end of Cham independence, the weakening of the earlier Dvaravati, and the prominent emerging of Thais. From the fifteenth century to modern time, although most South-East Asian countries could retain their viable Buddhist cultures, their relative lack of political strength in the face of Western colonization limited the artistic developments.¹⁴

According to the Mahavamsa, compiled by a Sri Lankan monk Mahanama in the fifth century A.D, King Asoka sent a Buddhist missionary of two monks Sona and Uttara to Suvarnabhuni (“Golden Land”) of Southeast Asia in the third B.C. century. It is general believed that Suvarnabhuni was an ancient civilization located in what now constitutes lower Burma, around or near the Mon city of Thaton. Although its proximity to eastern India, Burma (or Myanmar) has historically been associated more with the Sout-East Asian culture; it shared a Mon heritage with Thailand and was strongly influenced by Sri Lankan Theravada. The first appearance of distinct Burmese style and the oldest Buddhist structural remains coincide with the Pagan period (1044-1287). In spite of the Mahayana influence from the adjacent Pala kingdom, the dedication of Burmese grandest temple, the Ananda, in 1105 could be viewed in chronological and artistic terms as the first indication of the shift to the ultimate triumph of Theravada. Based on the notion of making merit by creating duplicate Buddha images in Theravada system, the sheer number of identical Buddha images inside countless niches and painted upon temple walls became an integral features of Burmese art. With the urna between downcast eyes, the stylized garment hanging over the left shoulder, the flame-toppedd ushnisha, and the down touching earth gesture of victory over the Mara of the Buddha

¹⁴ Fisher, 167-169.

appearing, the *bhumisparshamudra*, during the Pagan period became the most Burmese unique artistic feature. In the fourteenth century, the Buddha adorned with jewels and an elaborate crown was another popular version in Burmese art. With a square, stepped base, bell-shaped body and towering spire, the Burmese stupa is a distinctive, multi-tiered combination of both Indian and Sri Lanka styles. Among the many variations of the stupa across Asia, the Burmese remains one of the most artistically successful, subordinating the parts into a coherent whole that unified the original form while retaining the dignified majesty of its purpose.¹⁵

There are two distinctive periods in Thai Buddhist arts. First, the Mon or Dvaravati period was from the fifth century to tenth century, when the Khmer invaded and dominated the area. Second, the formation of the Thai state at its early capital of Sukhothai was after two hundred years of Khmer occupation and the migrating peoples from south China. The most ancient Buddhist artifacts surviving from the Mon period in Thailand are statues in Indian Amaravati style. By about the eighth century, Mon artists designed apparently patterned after prototypes from Indian Gupta style of human likeness of the Buddha statues.¹⁶ Among the favorite Dvaravati subjects was the Buddha statues of Enlightenment in His *bhumisparshamudra* pose. A second distinctive Dvaravati type was the standing Buddha appearing in *vitarkamudra* pose. Another distinctive and the most popular Dvaravati stone image was a wheel, imitating from Asoka wheel-topped pillars.¹⁷ Influenced by the Srivijaya, a powerful maritime kingdom with its capital near Palembang in Sumatra, from the seventh to thirteenth century, the Mon embraced all Buddhist schools' philosophies, cultures, and arts. By the tenth century, most of the Mon

¹⁵ Fisher, 183-186.

¹⁶ Chicarelli, 229-230.

¹⁷ Fisher, 175-178.

communities had been absorbed into the Khmer Empire, which its capital located at Lopburi, a northern part of Thailand nowadays.¹⁸ After two hundred years of Khmer domination, an independent Thai kingdom was established at Sukhothai around 1240 and lasted until 1438. Two specific Buddha specific images of seating and walking represented a unique Sukhothai style, which was influenced by the Sri Lankan styles, in the thirteenth century. The seated Buddha images in the maravijaya pose first seen in Dvaravati and later assumed a more distinctive Thai manner with greater stylization of the hands and proportion of the body and the addition of the flame ushnisha on the top of the head. The making of Buddha walking image showed the delicacy and grace of the dance rather than the typical walking style of most of Buddha images throughout Asian arts. The later sculpture of Thailand favored bronze over stone, which tended to repeat the Sukhothai model with local variation to increase delicacy and greater stylization. During Burmese wars, nearly all Thai architectures had been damaged except some of the reconstructed stupas which indicated the stylistic direction of later Thai-art. After the Burmese attacking Ayudhya in 1767, Thai Buddhist artists focused more on decorative element of delicate surface patterns and added Chinese artistic influences when Thai kings moved their capital to Bangkok. The greatest losses had been Thai colorful and illuminated manuscripts before the eighteenth century, which were different from that of Indian models in size, construction, and being folded accordion-style instead of keeping as separate leaves.¹⁹

Funan (nowadays Cambodia) was one of the earliest Indianized kingdoms in South-East Asia around the first A.D. century; in the sixth century it was absorbed into its

¹⁸ Chicarelli, 231-232.

¹⁹ Fisher, 178-182.

northern neighbors, the Khmer Empire, which embraced the teachings and artistic expressions of both Hinduism and Buddhism. Among the oldest and pre-Anngkorian sculpture is the seventh-century sandstone statue of Buddha found at Preah Theat, which resembled the Indian Gupta statuary. During the reign of Jayavarman II (802-850), a theocratic cult of the king as devaraja, an omnipotent “god-king,” was the result of close relationship between Khmer royalty and their Brahmin priests. Along the Angkor City, Suryavarman II (1113-1150) erected the grandest monument of architectural masterpiece, Angkor Wat, which is an enormous Hindu temple city surrounded by a broad moat and covers roughly two square kilometers,²⁰ and it expresses the concept of the divine/ human king as the focus of the universe. Its shrines became elaborate arrangements of walls, moats and bridges surrounding a raised platform with five towers to correspond to the five peaks of Meru and dominated by a single sanctuary, housing cult images of deified ancestors linking further the rulers and his family with the divine. Next to the Angkor Wat is Jayavarman VII’s greatest Buddhist structure, the Bayon and the focus point of the enormous Angkor Thom complex, which followed closely the earlier Khmer practice with its pyramidal towers, walls of relief carvings and cosmological orientation with the deep rooted central pillars, equaling to the height of its spire, and rising into the sky. Located a few hundred meters from the Bayon is the next monument, the Preah Palilay, which favored the Buddha-king and grand cosmological vision over episodes from the life of the Buddha. In the outskirts of Angkor is the next monument, the Neak Pean, which has a small group of tanks and is a miniature version of the mythical Himalayan Lake Anavatapta (with its channels representing the healing waters of the four great rivers) and a simplified model of Buddhist cosmology. Later Cambodian architecture represents the

²⁰ Chicarelli, 211-213.

last stage in the process whereby sculpture gradually assumed great role. By the time of Jayavarman VII, Khmer sculpture monopolized the building that it adorned and turned massive towers, walls and terraces into a network of sculptural programming and relief carving. The most fascinating sculptures are the portraits of Jayavarman VII, whose images imitated the sitting and typical Khmer fashion with the crossed legs and based upon the Buddha Muchalinda. His images carry much of the humanness of a benevolent ruler, yet are infused with the transcendent spirit and compassion of his patron deity, Lokeshvara. With the end of Jayavarman's rule Cambodia declined in political power and the absence of imperial patronage effectively ended the era of great Khmer art, even Theravada Buddhism gradually assumed the dominant role in the region.²¹

Ten centuries (111 B.C – 938 A.D) under Chinese colonization and its influence, Vietnamese Buddhist arts blended together with Confucianism and Daoism. Later, after the annexing of Champa kingdom in the nineteenth century, Vietnamese Buddhist art inherited the Champa Hindu style, which was similar to the Indianized states in Malaya, Indonesia, and Khmer empire in term of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural background. Due to the Cham's interaction with the Indian and Sri Lankan Buddhist missionaries before sixth century, the Cham artistic style and iconography are similar to that of Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka between the third to seventh centuries. Being influenced by Chinese Mahayana school of Pure Land, the Vietnamese Ly dynasty (1009-1224) saw growing popularity of worshipping Amitabha Buddha, holding a wish-fulfilling jewel in one hand and a salvific gesture in other hand, among the devotees hopeful of being reborn in his celestial Pure Land in next life. A representative figure for compassion is the twelve or thousand arms Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, who is worshiped independently. The

²¹ Fisher, 187-194.

“Laughing Buddha,” or “Budai” is revered in Mahayana cultures as an incarnation of Maitreya Bodhisattva with his images of a fat monk, perpetually smiling face, and the hemp sack that held in his worldly possessions. Inside the Theravada temples, the likeness of Sakyamuni Buddha posed in the numerous asana and mudra configurations that recall the principal events in his life. In the Mahayana temples, various images of Buddha, Bodhisattva, deities, and venerable monks were put on the altar together. Vietnam has absorbed and harmonized a remarkable assortment of religious and aesthetic influences, yet the core teachings of Buddhism continue to flourish in the country’s spiritual belief and artistic expression.²²

Historically, seafaring traders and explores from India had been visiting Java and Sumatra since the fourth century (according to some Sanskrit inscriptions discovered on the western reaches of this region), bringing with them their Buddhist and Hindu beliefs and artistic styles. Many small and independent states were scattered about the Malay Peninsula, and they were absorbed into the Indianized maritime kingdom, Srivijaya, that dominated the Straits of Malacca and much of its surrounding regions from the seventh to thirteenth centuries.²³ This kingdom had maintained its contact with the kingdoms in northeastern India, ensuring an active Mahayana presence. By late eighth century, the relationship with Pala Empire in India provided the sources for the Vajrayana schools, which produced two hundred and forty shrines of Chandi Sewu, one of the largest and complex mandala plan and Vairochana’s dedication. All important Buddhist monuments of the first millennium are located in central Java.²⁴ The most significant Indianized influences on the island is Borobudur, the largest Buddhist and a global wonder

²² Chicarelli, 253-255.

²³ Fisher, 205.

²⁴ Fisher, 196.

monument in the world, which was consensually designed and built by the Sailendra dynasty of Central Java in the eighth to ninth centuries. The Mount Meru or “World Mountain” with a central stupa at the peak, the center of the universe, is the idea of man-made mountain of shrines, carved rock walls. Beginning at the lowest level represents the realm of desire and hell states. Above it are a series of five terraces and stone wall corridors sculpted with bas-relief narrations of Buddha’s biography. The top-most portion comprises three circular terraces supporting seventy-two small stupas that surround a large central stupa. Each small stupa was built as a latticework grille of stone with a consistent series of perforations. Conforming to Vajrayana configurations, the Buddha statues on the lower four balustrades depict four of the transcendent Buddhas: Akshobhya in the east; Ratnasambhava in the south; Amoghasidhi in the north; and Amitabha in the west. Each of the seventy-two small stupas on the top terraces contained a seated Buddha in the characteristic pose of Vairocana of turning the wheel of law residing at the center of the cosmos.²⁵ By the eleventh century, the political center shifted to the eastern end of the island because of the decline of the Srivijaya kingdom. Most temples of this period were Hindu, but the remaining images, especially in bronze were dedicated to Buddhist worship. By the end of the fifteenth century, Islam controlled the island to end the Buddhist and Hindu activities, except the Bali.

Nepal is a landlocked country in South Asia. Kirant ethnicity people were the first people to settle in Nepal and ruled Nepal for about 2,500 years. From the time of the Buddha to Chalukaya dynasty in late of 11th century, Buddhism was patronized and flourished mostly by the royal families, but the later kings to nowadays government were

²⁵ Chicarelli, 205-209.

more favor to Hinduism. Because Nepal is the Buddha's birthplace, Buddhist impacts prevail every where in this country. Tibetan and Far East Buddhism were great benefit from Nepalese Buddhism in art and sculptor. Ranjana or Newars script was used to write Mahayana Buddhist texts. Nagarjuna, the great Madhyamika master, and many other great practitioners visited, lived, and taught in Nepal. Stone inscriptions and colophons provide clear evidence that a strong lineage of Mahasanghika Bhiksunis existed in the seventh century. Besides Vajrayana school, Theravada school also flourished. Also, the rediscovery of Lumbini, the birthplace of Buddha, occurred in this era with contributions from among others, General Khadga Sumsher Rana. The Great Stupa of Swayambhunath stands on a hill to the west of Kathmandu. Its name means "The self created, Self-existent Buddha." The myth of its origin is also the myth of the valley's origin. It tells the story of the primordial Buddha's enlightenment and the spread of Buddhism in Nepal. This most sacred site has always been the most important power place for local Buddhists and for pilgrims from all over the world. It is considered to be the most powerful shrine in the Himalayas.²⁶

A landlocked nation in South Asia, the Kingdom of Bhutan, the "Land of the Thunder Dragon", located at the eastern end of the Himalaya Mountains. Its early history is unclear, because most of the records were destroyed after fire burned the ancient capital, Punakha, in 1827. Bhutanese Buddhism received great influence from Mahayana Tibetan tradition starting from Padma Sambhava in 747 A.D, but its practices are little different from that of Tibetan ones. Its people follow mostly the Drukpa sub-sect of the Kargyupa school, one of the four major school of Tibetan Buddhism. Except Gelugpa

²⁶ <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhistworld/nepal-txt.htm>

monks, all other schools' practitioners include monks and laypeople. Buddhism intertwines deeply with every aspect of Bhutanese culture. Bhutanese art is similar to the art of Tibet. Both are based on Vajrayana Buddhism. The thirteen traditional arts are: Paper Making, stonework, blacksmithing, clay arts, painting, bronze casting, wood, slate, and stone carving, woodturning, weaving, silver and goldsmith, Can and Bamboo Work, and needlework.

Buddhism came to ancient Bangladesh right after the Buddha's nirvana. A legendary treatise "Bodhisattva Avadan Kalpalata" mentions the Buddha visiting in region. For more than 2000 years, Buddhism has a great impact on every aspects of Bengali life. On the Sanchi Stupa's pillar of Asoka had the names of two Bengali disciples. Also, on the Nagarjunikonda's stone inscription, dated in fourth century B.C, had the word "Banga". During the Gupta dynasty (280-550 A.D), a period of remarkable excellence in religion, philosophy, literature, poetry, sculpture and paintings as Fa Hien observed, Buddhism and Hinduism coexisted harmoniously. Dharmapala (770-810 A.D), the 2nd Pala emperor, was the founder of 'Prajnaparamita Sutra' of Buddhism and constructed 50 monasteries, including the famous Vikramshila Vihara, Sompuri Vihara, and others that flourished as Buddhist learning center as well as secular arts and sciences. For example, Sompuri Mahavihara is described as the biggest monument south of the Himalayas. Its architecture is a model for many monasteries in South East Asia such as the monumental Borobudhur Temple of Java in Indonesia. Many Buddhist magnificent arts and architectures are still preserved to today. Buddhist monks were credited for creating Bengali language from the Prakrit and Apabrahmsa language.

In conclusion, after the five phases of stupa architecture and its decorative motif, the Greco-Roman art of Gandhara, Indo-Kushan art of Mathura, Cave architecture of Western India, and later Buddhist Art of Bengal, Buddhist arts spread widely and influentially to other South and Southeast Asian countries. These stylistic arts have given the great impacts on the religious and secular life of people in those related areas for more than two millenniums.

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