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Buddhism and Sculpture

Buddhism in Every Step 30

Written by Venerable Master Hsing Yun
Translated by F. G. S. International Translation Center

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Translated from the Chinese by
F. G. S. International Translation Center

Edited and proofread by
Venerable Yi Chao, Louvenia Ortega, Michael Tran,
and John Gill

Cover design and book layout by
Mei-Chi Shih and Michael Tran

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Buddhism and Sculpture

Sculpting is a way of creating artwork from any material that can be sculpted into a three-dimensional form such as wood, rock, metal, clay, and plaster, as well as other materials. When sculpting, artists work with passion, care, and dedicated hearts to bring out the power in the spirit of their art. It is this dedication that makes sculpture that will be long-lasting and valuable.

Buddhism is known as “inner knowledge.” It is an elevation and purification of life that can be likened to sculpting the heart. The eighty-four thousand Dharma doors, just like the sharp knife of a sculptor, carve and sculpt to trim away the ignorance,

habitual tendency, and afflictions that have accumulated from our past lives. The Dharma is also like the sculptor's hands, pulling and kneading to form the compassion and wisdom of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. After the hardship of severe forging, hammering, and burning, from the sparks of the starter stone burst the illumination of one's life.

Buddhist sculpture expresses the grandeur of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. It maintains the tradition of devotion from the Buddha's time and possesses the Buddhist function of civilizing people. Moreover, Buddhist sculpture maintains the accomplishments of the people's wisdom, culture, and art, especially the creations of Buddhist artists, which contain their realization of the Dharma and their devotion to Buddhism. Such sculpture, when appreciated from the outside, expresses the purity, virtue, and beauty of life. When seen from inside of the work, it expresses the transcendent and respectable qualities of the artist. Therefore, sculpture becomes a convenient media for propagating the Dharma.

Development of Buddhist Sculpture

Buddhist sculpture began with the carving of

Buddhist imagery. According to the records in chapter 28 of the *The Gradual Discourses of the Buddha* [*Ekottarikagama Sutra*] and chapter 5 of the *Buddhist Records of the Western Regions* [Datang Xiyu Ji], during the Buddha's time, the Kausambi Kingdom's King Udayana used sandalwood to sculpt a five-foot tall image of the Buddha. This was the birth of Buddhist sculpture.

Large amounts of Buddhist sculpture have been discovered dating back to the time of King Asoka, of the Indian Maurayn Dynasty, who ruled five hundred years after Sakyamuni Buddha's Nirvana. King Asoka was so deeply moved by the Dharma that he ruled his country in accordance with it. He constructed stupas in every place that the Buddha taught the Dharma, as well as building many temples, caves, and stone columns inscribed with edicts. Aside from the great artistic value of these treasures, King Asoka's works make a significant contribution to substantiating the sutras, and to the study of the history of Buddhism.

During the reign of the Kusana Kingdom, King Kaniska was also very devoted to the Dharma and, much like King Asoka, he constructed his own temples and pagodas in the Gandhara area as well as

sculpting large amounts of statues and images. Due to a long period of exposure to Greek art and culture, the sculptures of King Kaniska reveal a heavy influence from Greek styles. This style, a combination of Indian and Greek sculptural techniques, is called the Gandhara style. During this same period, a style known as the Mathura style flourished mainly in the southern parts of India. Though influenced by the Gandhara style, the Mathura style shows a more prevalent native Indian influence. While the Gandhara style reveals an inward calm, the Mathura style is much more steady and powerful.

The Gupta Empire in the 4th century was considered the golden period of Indian art with the Ajanta Cave's work being the most impressive. During this time, India was attacked by barbarians, causing native and foreign cultures to clash against each other and India's art to mature. China's sculpture was highly accomplished before Buddhism was introduced to China. After Buddhism was introduced and integrated into Chinese culture, Chinese art and sculpture became enriched with greater and deeper beauty. This beautiful artistry can be seen in the carved pillars found in Buddhist temples, as well as in statues, caves, and other forms of Buddhist art. During this time, wood carvings, stonework, and clay

sculpture became the dominant mediums.

In the late era of the East Han Dynasty, there was a temple building that housed a bronze statue of the Buddha. This is considered one of the earliest forms of Buddhist sculpture in China. During the East Jin era, Buddha images were the main work of sculptors, and were very popular at the time. Venerable Master Daoan constructed a Sakyamuni Buddha statue that was over three and a half meters tall, while Zhi Huihu at Wujun Shaoling Temple built a similar Buddha statue made out of gold. Dai Mu and his son once constructed an Amitabha Buddha and two bodhisattvas for Qishan Yinlin Treasure Temple.

After the North and South Dynasty, Chinese sculpture began to evolve as Buddhism became more widespread. This period is characterized by the combination of traditional technique with foreign trends, as well as the dominance of stone as a medium. The rough and open style typical of Indian sculpture gradually emerged in China, bringing Chinese sculpture into a new era. This fusion of styles unfolded into the union of architecture, sculpture, and mural painting, which lead to new innovations in cave art.

One can see the progress of Buddhism in China based on the change of style in sculpture. For example, the tall, magnificent Buddhist statues in the caves of Yungang are very similar to the Indian Gandhara and Gupta styles. At the end of the Northern Wei Dynasty, due to the movement of the Han style and the impact of Buddhism in the people's daily lives, sculpture from this period and onward bore a more Chinese style to them. The Sui and Tang were considered the golden dynasties for art, combining foreign culture with Chinese traditions; their sculptures had many beautiful and proportional forms and peaceful expressions.

During the Tang Dynasty, statues entirely expressed the Chinese style of sculpture. Most of these masterpieces came from the period of Empress Wu Zetian; it was because of Empress Wu's great propagation of the sculpting of Buddhist statues that the era of Buddhist sculpture reached its climax. The period of Emperor Tang Xuanzong was considered to be another golden era for Chinese Buddhist statuary. Statues from this period appeared to be livelier in form with a more mature style that had never been seen before, making the artwork feel more complete. One of the most famous sculptors of Chinese history, Yang Huizhi, was born during this time period. His

most representative pieces include the arhat statues in Baoshou Temple at Jiangsu province and the thousand hands thousand eyes Avalokietesvara statue.

Examples of Buddhist Sculpture

Buddhist sculpture covers a wide range of forms, mainly consisting of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, arhats, guardians, and gods. Sculptures can also represent Buddhist stories from the sutras, depicting their characters and scenery. Cave sculpture is the most important form of Chinese sculpture, with many amazingly creative works completed inside caves. For example the Maiji Mountain Caves, located at an elevation of one hundred forty two feet, is known for the pagoda on top of the mountain and the temple at the foot of the mountain. The cave sculpture covers the entire mountain, containing more than a thousand grand Buddha statues, and has been well preserved throughout the Northern Wei, Sui, Tang, and Song Dynasties.

The Gansu Jingchuan province's southern cave was constructed in the early Wei Dynasty. Non-relief sculptures and relief sculptures filled the cave. The Longmen Caves have over 140,000 Buddha statues,

making it one of the most difficult and challenging sculpture projects ever conceived.

The sculpture technique of the Tang Dynasty affected Buddhist sculpture of the Japanese Asuka Period. The Vairocana Buddha statue is famous for representing the grandeur, and wisdom of the Buddha. The Vairocana Buddha is the largest statue in the cave, and is the most richly symbolic.

The Yungang Caves began construction around the 5th to 6th centuries. It is one of the three caves that are most treasured in Chinese Buddhist art. The Tanyao number five cave is the grandest ever constructed. Other caves are also well known and rich in decoration like the Gon province cave, Hebei's Mt. Nanxiang Hall, and the Henan Mt. Beixiang Hall. These magnificent structures contain stone columns, stone carved sutras, and other works of sculpture.

King Asoka of India erected a series of round, sculpted columns containing teachings of the Buddha at significant locations where he preached the Dharma. Columns were also erected at the Deer Park, as well as in Bactra, Lumbini, and Rajagrha.

The Deer Park is the place where the Buddha first

taught the Dharma after his enlightenment. Located within the grounds is a fifteen meter high stone column with a teaching on not disturbing the harmony between monks. On the top of the column are four interconnected stone lions standing at the center of a Dharma wheel facing outwards in each of the four directions. This arrangement is meant to symbolize the first time that Shakyamuni Buddha turned the wheel of the Dharma and preached with a voice as powerful as a lion's roar. Beneath the structure is an upside-down lotus, which appears delicate yet powerful. Venerable Xuan Zang described this as, "the nectar within the stone, crystal-clear and pure." This type of lion column was a great symbol of the Dharma during King Asoka's time, in addition to symbolizing the economic strength of his country. This wheel of law in the Sarnath Lion Capital, or Dharma Cakra adapted from the columns would later come to symbolize the Indian Republic after its independence from the British Empire.

Aside from depictions of various kinds of Buddhist iconography, another prominent type of Buddhist Sculpture is the creation of stone sutras. Stone sutras are sutra texts carved on the surface of stone. In China, Confucianism was the first to carve manuscripts into stone; other well known early stone

carvings include the Xiping stone-cut manuscripts from the Han Dynasty as well as the Kai Chan stone sutras from the Tang Dynasty. New caves were constructed during the Northern Wei period for the explicit purpose of preserving the Dharma by storing stone sutras. Stone sutras from the Northern Qi Dynasty are the oldest stone sutras which are still preserved today, while the largest known carvings are Hebei's Fangshan stone sutras. Examples of other styles of stone sutra carvings include:

1. *Sutra wall carvings*: during the Northern Qi Dynasty, Henan's Mt. Beixiang Hall had copies of the *Vimalakirti Sutra* [*Weimojie Jing*], the *Lion's Roar of Queen Srimala Sutra* [*Srimaladevismhanada Sutra*], the *Bei Sutra* [*Bei Jing*], and the *Sutra of Maitreya's Attainment of Buddhahood* [*Mi'le Chengfo Jing*], carved upon the walls. During the Sui Dynasty, the Henan Mt. Bao Dazhu cave was inscribed with the *Lion's Roar of Queen Srimala Sutra*; the *Lotus Sutra* [*Saddarmapudarika Sutra*], and the *Nirvana Sutra* [*Parinirvana Sutra*]. In the Song Dynasty, the walls of Henan's Kaifengfu Fan Pagodas were inscribed with the *Ten Wholesome Actions Sutra*

[Shishan Yedao Jing]. Additionally, Ji-
angsu Yunyan Temple contained walls with
the *Universal Gate Chapter* of the *Lotus
Sutra* carved within them. The
Six-Harmony Pagoda at Hangzhou, Zhe-
jiang province has the *Sutra of Forty-two
Sections* [*Sishier Zhang Jing*] carved inside
the pagoda. During the Tang Dynasty, the
Henan Longmen Mt. Xiang cave was in-
scribed with the *Nirvana Sutra*. The Hebei
Juyongguan Guo Street Pagoda has the
Yuan Dynasty's manuscript of the
*Ushinishavijaya Namgyalma Dharani Su-
tra* [*Foding Zunsheng Tuoluoni Jing*]
carved upon the walls in six different lan-
guages including Sanskrit, Chinese,
Mongolian, Arabic, Tibetan, and the West
Xia Dynasty language. This particular
engraving is important because it allows
scholars to compare the various texts and
languages, and therefore it is considered to
be of extreme historical value.

2. *Moyai Cliff engraved sutras*: some stone
sutras are carved on cliffs, like
Shandong's Mt. Tai Jingshiyu rock's large
font *Diamond Sutra* [*Vajracche-
dika-prajanparamita Sutra*]. It is unclear

who carved the sutra and when, though the carver is sometimes referred to as Tang Yong. The text has a total of more than nine hundred characters, each character created with a rich and wholesome quality, making it the most significant carving of its kind. During the Northern Qi period inside the Shandong Mt. Culai Buddha cave is part of the *Maha Prajnaparamita Sutra* [Perfection of Great Wisdom Sutra]. Preserved in the Shanxi Liao province's Wulaideng is the *Flower Adornment Sutra's* [Avatamsaka Sutra] *Accomplishment Chapter*.

3. *Stele sutras*: sometimes sutras are carved onto both sides of individual stele. These kinds of stele sutras are usually very numerous, and stored inside a stone room. The most well-known set is Hebei's Fangshan stone sutras. Between the years 605-616 AD Venerable Jingwan of Youzhou Zhiquan Temple began engraving sutras on stone due to the Northern Zhou and Northern Qi Dynasty's abolishment of Buddhism. Venerable Jingwan, fearing that Buddhism would disappear, vowed to

carve what he called the “Stone Canon.” The products of his efforts are preserved within Hebei Fangshan Yunju Temple. The Stone Canon took a total of 480 years to complete, the first of its kind in history, and the most complete. Not only can Jingwan’s Stone Canon be used to correct errors in future editions of the sutras, but it is also valuable data for the history of calligraphy and art.

Besides the ones in China, stone sutras can also be found in Korea and Japan. Korea is known for the stone *Flower Adornment Sutra* in the Huaeomsa Temple located on the slopes of Jiri-san, in Masan-myeon, Gurye County, in the province of Jeollanam-do. Japan’s Uchi Kawasurugake Cliff engraved *Nirvana Sutra* is the oldest of its kind. In Fukuoka, there is a stone-engraved *Amitabha Sutra* [*Amituo Jing*], which was an imitation of China’s Hubei Xiangyang Longxing Temple’s stone sutra. This version of the *Amitabha Sutra* is known for containing twenty one additional characters than the other versions. According to some it was transmitted to Japan in the Song Dynasty and therefore it is treated as a national treasure.

The sutra pillar is a kind of Buddhist stone sculpture within which stone sutras are stored and also serve as valuable memories of the propagation of the Dharma. While the sutras are typically engraved upon the main body of the pillar, the top of the structure as well as the base are decorated with images of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, flowers, and clouds. Similar sutra buildings in India are mostly engraved around the walls of Buddhist buildings. Steles are erected in front of pagodas and depict heavenly maidens, Dharma wheels, people, and animals.

China's sutra pillars were popular from the Tang Dynasty to the Liao and Song Dynasties. One purpose of these pillars was for devotees to acquire merit such as the *Dharani Sutra* [Tuo Luo Ni Jing] pillar. These pillars were also sometimes used to commemorate certain venerables. These sutra pillars are commonly known as tomb pillars. Examples of significant sutra pillars include:

1. *Hebei Zhaozhou Dharani Sutra pillars*: located inside the Hebei province and built during the North Song period, this sutra pillar was built by stacking stones eighteen meters high. It was the tallest sutra building at the time. The engraved Buddhist characters,

animals, flowers, and other stylistic elements displayed the high accomplishments in design during the Song Dynasty.

2. *Yunnan Kunming's Ksitigarba Bodhisattva Sutra pillar*: built during the Dali Dynasty, this sutra building has seven layers. Engraved within the first layer are four vajra guardians, and the Sanskrit text. Other layers were carved with images of the Buddha. The craftsmanship in each layer is very detailed and delicate. It serves as an important resource for those who wish to research into the minority culture and sculptural technique of Yunnan.

In Korea, during the 11th century, in order to protect themselves from intruders, the people made a vow and carved the *Great Canon* []—also known as the Korei Canon. Later it was destroyed by the Mongolians, but in the year 1251 it was reconstructed with a total of 6,529 chapters and 81,258 plates. It is now kept in the Dharma Treasure Temple or 'Hainsa'. In 1871 AD The King of Laos gathered 2,400 monks for a conference to compile the sutras for the fifth time. Once completed, the approved canon was carved onto 729 sheets of marble in the Pali language.

Sculpting of one's Heart

As can be seen in the many examples of Buddhist sculpture mentioned above, a tremendous amount of time and effort goes into each work of art, as the sculptors continue to push against the boundaries of their own strength and resources. Only the very highest of religious devotion can stimulate one's inner strength in this fashion. Appropriately, there is an old saying that goes, "three bows per carve" while a sculptor is working on a statue of the Buddha. Through the process of creating art, the sculptors are also purifying their minds. Therefore, it can be said that the sculptor is also sculpting his heart.

Studying Buddhism is the much the same as sculpting. When the Buddha reached enlightenment under the bodhi tree, he sighed in wonderment, "Marvelous! Marvelous! Every sentient being originally has the same wisdom and merit as the Tathagatha."

The *Flower Adornment Sutra* says, "To understand the mind of all Buddhas of the past, present, and future, one should contemplate that all dharmas originate from the mind." All sentient beings have

Buddha nature – it is merely obscured by greed, hatred, and ignorance. However, only we sculpt ourselves and discover the original nature of the Buddha.

For example, by using the five precepts, ten wholesome conducts, four means of embracing virtues, and the six perfections to sculpt ourselves into the Buddha’s “thirty-two marks of excellence and hundred dignities,” we can contemplate thus:

When sculpting the hands, make the vow, “I vow to keep my hands downward and to comfort the minds of all.” Become a man of compassion. When sculpting the face, make the wish, “I wish all sentient beings to have the dignified appearance of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva.” When sculpting the eyes of the bodhisattva, try to feel that you are “observing sentient beings with compassionate eyes.” When sculpting a pair of ears, reflect upon Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva’s ears, always willing to listen with righteousness, attentiveness, and wholesomeness, looking for sentient beings that are suffering and rescue them from sorrow. When sculpting a pair of feet, make the wish, “I wish that all sentient beings had ‘magical feet’ that takes them to the stage of everything to be as good as one’s wish. This will allow them to fly or go without hindrance and prac-

tice Buddhism while creating works of art. When sculpting a mouth, wish that sentient beings can properly comfort and encourage others with good words, and be willing to propagate the Dharma throughout the world. When sculpting a body, wish that all sentient beings have proper demeanor and diligence to serve others, and pay homage to the Triple Gem. Sculpting a heart that is connected to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, one vows that all sentient beings' hearts are filled with compassion, willing to give, to forgive, to cherish, to accept, to be nimble with quick reflexes, to treat others with a pure heart, to judge properly and peacefully. This means that when the mind is truly pure, it is unwavering. Therefore, everything is seen to be pure. From there, the pure mind expands outward from the personal to the universal. When the heart is pure this land is pure regardless of what happens. One has completed and satisfied his life with such a heart.

Buddhism expanded the field of what sculpture was capable of, but sculpting also expressed the essence of Buddhism. Each complements the other, and fills a splendid page in the book of human religion, history, culture, and education. People can appreciate the beauty of art through Buddhist sculpture, and have their religious conviction and devotion in-

spired. Wholesome thoughts grow in people's minds as they relate to Buddhist sculpture through their hearts. It is through fields like sculpture, as well as others, that Buddhism is allowed to continue and gain influence.

The *Flower Adornment Sutra* says, "The heart is like a painter who can paint all kinds of colors." In a Buddhist context, sculpting sculpts a kind heart – it carves out ignorance, the ill temperament of past lives, and annoyances while elevating one's moral characteristics. The true meaning of sculpting is to construct a purified society and a happy, healthy life.

The beauty of all sculpture lies in not only the quality of the workmanship or its value as art, but also in what it has to communicate to others. The greatness of Buddhist sculpture, statues of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and gods, as well as other Buddhist art and the sutra themselves, is that they silently communicate the Dharma, and have been doing so for several thousand years. These works of art are steady, calm, and dignified. They contain within them limitless compassion and the strength of many vows to imperceptibly elevate the personalities of others while purifying their minds and hearts.