

The Scripture on the Production of Buddha Images

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The production and worship of Buddhist icons, whether images of buddhas such as Śākyamuni and Amitābha (Amituofo), or bodhisattvas such as Avalokiteśvara (Guanyin) and Maitreya (Mile), has been a central feature of Buddhist religious life throughout Asian history. Contrary to the views of some contemporary apologists who see the veneration of Buddhist icons as a degenerate practice proscribed by the canon or as a rueful display of “folk piety,” the worship of Buddhist icons was both countenanced by the scriptures and promoted by the priesthood. Indeed, one common goal of Buddhist ascetic and meditative discipline in China was to “see the Buddha” (*jianfo*), and the wide variety of Buddhist icons found throughout the continent rendered service to this goal.

It is similarly misleading to view Buddhist icons as primarily didactic—intended merely to symbolize the virtues of buddhahood or to nurture a sense of reverence toward the Buddha and his teachings. The completion of a painted or sculpted icon in Buddhist countries involves an elaborate “eye-opening ceremony” in which the pupils of the icon are “dotted” to the accompaniment of invocation rites and offerings. Such ritual consecrations are intended to transform an inanimate image into a living deity, and both textual and ethnographic sources indicate that icons thus empowered were treated as spiritual beings possessed of apotropaic powers, to be worshiped with regular offerings of incense, flowers, food, money, and other assorted valuables. Chinese Buddhist biographies and temple records are replete with tales of miraculous occurrences associated with such images; images were known to fly through the air, to sweat, to communicate in dreams, to prophesy, and so on.

The *Scripture on the Production of Buddha Images* (*Zuo fo xingxiang jing*) is a short text that actively encourages the dissemination of Buddhist icons by enumerating the marvelous rebirths that await those who produce them. Unfortunately, we know virtually nothing of the provenance of the *Scripture on the Production of Buddha Images*: there are no extant Sanskrit or Tibetan versions, and the identity of the translator was lost at an early date. Be that as it may, an examination of the

rather archaic language of the text, together with evidence provided by early Chinese Buddhist catalogues, suggest that the text was translated toward the end of the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220 C.E.) or shortly thereafter. This places the text among the earliest known Buddhist scriptures translated into Chinese.

The *Scripture on the Production of Buddha Images* can be loosely grouped together with a number of other short scriptures that detail the merit acquired through specific acts of piety. The importance placed on the ritual veneration of icons is immediately evident in the titles of many of these texts: *Scripture on Consecrating and Washing an Image of the Buddha* (Taishō daizōkyō [T] 695); *Scripture on the Merit Gained through Washing an Image of the Buddha* (T 697); *Scripture on the Merit Gained through the Construction of Stūpas* (T 699); *Scripture on the Merit Gained through Circumambulating a Buddha Stūpa to the Right* (T 700); and so on. There is, moreover, a later Mahāyāna version of the *Scripture on the Production of Buddha Images* that is considerably longer and more complex than the early text (the *Mahāyāna Scripture on the Merit Gained through the Production of Images* translated by Devaprajñā in 691 C.E. [T 694]).

The *Scripture on the Production of Buddha Images* is also significant in being the earliest extant work to associate the production of a Buddha image with King Udayana—the young protagonist of the scripture who is so enamored of the Buddha's beauty that he is moved to capture his likeness in a portrait. King Udayana was a historical figure who apparently ruled over the Indian kingdom of Vātsa from its capital at Kauśāmbī (present-day Kosam in the district of Allahābad, Uttar Pradesh) during the time of the Buddha. While Udayana is more renowned for his military and amorous exploits than for his religious devotion, a series of apocryphal Buddhist tales transformed Udayana into the pious Buddhist benefactor responsible for the creation of the first Buddha image.

The details of the Udayana legend were greatly embellished in later accounts. The fully developed narrative found in medieval Chinese sources runs roughly as follows: the Buddha once spent a summer retreat in heaven in order to preach to his deceased mother Māyā. One of his royal patrons, King Udayana, became distraught upon learning that he would not be able to see the Buddha during the Buddha's absence. He implored Mahā Maudgalyāyana, a disciple of the Buddha famed for his supernatural powers, to transport a piece of fine sandalwood along with thirty-two skilled artisans to Heaven so that they might carve an exact likeness of the Buddha. (Each of the artisans would be responsible for carving one of the thirty-two special marks of the Buddha.) In short order the artisans completed their task and the marvelous image was brought back to earth. When Śākyamuni later returned from his sojourn in heaven the image miraculously rose to greet him. The Buddha then paid homage to the image and prophesied its later importance in spreading the religion.

There are actually several versions of this story, one of which claims that the Udayana image would eventually make its way to China. Sure enough, a number of images of Indian origin were identified in China either as the original "Udayana

image" or as an equally sacred twin of the original. One fifth-century document claims that the original was brought to China in the first century C.E. by Han Emperor Ming's envoy Cai Yin along with the *Scripture in Forty-two Sections* (*Sishi'er zhang jing*). (See chapter 28 in this volume.) This legend, which links the image to the very first Buddhist missionaries in China, is but one of many that highlight the importance of icons in the transmission of Buddhism to East Asia. Another source claims that the famous Kuchean translator Kumārajīva had the Udayana image in his possession when he was brought to China in 401. Yet another contends that the image was procured in 505 at the behest of Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty, a ruler known for his profligate patronage of Buddhism.

In the meantime, the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang (596–664) visited Kauśāmbī on his journey through the Indian continent in the 630s. Xuanzang reports that the original image was still to be found at the site, and he goes on to say that while many tried to abscond with the image, no number of men were able to move it. Indeed, Xuanzang insists that all other images claiming to be the original sculpture made for Udayana are mere copies. Xuanzang himself had a sandalwood copy of the image in his possession (along with six other icons) when he returned to China in 645.

Images purporting to be the Udayana image became the source for popular tales attesting to the supernatural power of the icon, and one eminent monk, Zhuli (544–623), reportedly performed self-immolation before the image in part to protest its imminent removal from his temple in Jiangdu. In the Northern Song dynasty (960–1126) the Japanese Buddhist pilgrim Chōnen (938–1016) had a sandalwood copy made, which he brought back to Japan in 986. When a cavity in the rear of the image was opened for the first time in February 1954 it was found to contain a miniature set of internal organs fashioned out of silk, in addition to various valuable coins, crystals, scriptures, and historical documents relating to the history of the image. This magnificent piece of Chinese sculpture, enshrined at Seiryōji temple in Kyoto, served as the model for over a hundred replicas, thus propagating the Udayana legend in Japan. (Indeed, according to one Japanese account the sculpture brought to Japan by Chōnen was actually the original image made for Udayana—the replica commissioned by Chōnen traded places with the original just prior to Chōnen's departure!) The Seiryōji image is the only example of a Chinese Udayana image to survive to the present day.

The *Scripture on the Production of Buddha Images* was popular not only because of its connection to the famous Udayana image, but also because it was short—short texts were relatively easy to copy and thus to disseminate. At the Fengshan caves, for example, nine copies of the *Scripture on the Production of Buddha Images* dating to the Tang period have been found carved on stone. This cave site, located some seventy-five kilometers southwest of Beijing, was the center of an attempt, spanning the seventh to the twelfth centuries, to preserve the entire Buddhist canon on stone slabs. The slabs, of which some 14,620 are extant today, were then sealed in caves specially excavated for this purpose, or, as the caves filled

up, buried nearby. (Attempts to preserve the Buddhist canon in stone were typically motivated by the belief that the “end of the dharma” [*mofo*] was at hand.) The discovery of nine copies of the *Scripture on the Production of Buddha Images* at this site suggests that the text was particularly popular in medieval times: the only scriptures that warranted more copies at Fengshan were the *Heart Sūtra* (*Banruo boluomiduo xin jing*) and the *Diamond Sūtra* (*Jingang banruo boluomi jing*).

The final line of the *Scripture on the Production of Buddha Images* refers to rebirth in Amitābha’s pure land—a “Mahāyāna” theme that is quite incongruous in this otherwise “Hīnayāna” scripture. The fact that Amitābha’s paradise is not mentioned elsewhere in the text despite its concern with auspicious rebirths suggests that this line is a later interpolation. The only significant difference between the early text translated here and the later version (T 693) translated in the Eastern Jin (317–420) is that the prose portion of the Eastern Jin text is followed by a set of verses that recapitulate the content of the scripture.

This translation of the *Zuo fo xingxiang jing* is based on the text found in the *Taishō daizōkyō* (T 692:16.788a–c), consulting the parallel but somewhat less obtuse translation done in the Eastern Jin (*Zaoli xingxiang fubao jing*, T 693:16.788c–790a).

Further Reading

For a full account of the various sources bearing upon the Udayana image, see especially Martha L. Carter, *The Mystery of the Udayana Buddha*, supplemento n. 64 agli *Annali*—vol. 50, fasc. 3 (Napoli: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1990); and Alexander Soper, *Literary Evidence for Early Buddhist Art in China* (Ascona, Switzerland: Artibus Asiae, 1959). On Xuanzang’s encounter with the image, see Samuel Beal, *Si-yu Ki, Buddhist Records of the Western World* (London, 1884), vol. 1, pp. 235–36. On Zhuli’s self-immolation before the image, see Koichi Shinohara, “Dynastic Politics and Miraculous Images: The Example of Zhuli (544–623) of the Changles temple in Yangzhou” (forthcoming in a volume edited by Richard Davis). On the Seiryōji image, see Gregory Henderson and Leon Hurvitz, “The Buddha of Seiryōji: New Finds and New Theory,” *Artibus Asiae* 19 (1956): 5–55.

The Scripture on the Production of Buddha Images

The Buddha arrived in the country of Kauśāmbī, where there was a grove belonging to Kausika. At that time the king, named Udayana, was fourteen years old. When he heard of the Buddha’s arrival, the king ordered his ministers and attendants to prepare his carriage. The king then went to welcome the Buddha.

Seeing the Buddha from a distance the king's heart leapt with joy. The king immediately alighted from his carriage and proceeded on foot, taking leave of his ministers, attendants, and those who carry his parasol. The king then greeted the Buddha, touching his forehead to the Buddha's feet and circling him three times. Then, kneeling with palms joined respectfully together, he addressed the Buddha saying: "In the heavens above and on earth below there are none who compare to the Buddha. The face, eyes, and body of the Buddha now shine forth magnificently, and I never weary for a moment of gazing upon the Buddha. The Buddha is presently the teacher of all those in the heavens above and the earth below, and many are those who revere the Buddha's compassion."

The Buddha, remaining silent, did not respond.

The king addressed the Buddha further saying: "When people perform virtuous acts they gain good fortune, but where does this lead them? I dread no longer being able to look upon the Buddha after the Buddha is gone. I want to produce an image of the Buddha to venerate and bequeath to later generations. What sorts of good fortune will I obtain thereby? I ask that the Buddha take compassion upon me and explain this matter, as I earnestly desire to understand."

The Buddha said: "Young king, your question is excellent indeed. Listen to what I say, and having heard it, take it to heart." The king said: "Yes, I am ready to receive this teaching."

The Buddha said to the king: "I will teach you of the good fortune to be gained by one who produces an image of the Buddha." The king said: "I am grateful."

The Buddha said: "A person of this world who produces an image of the Buddha will, in a later life, have clear eyes and a handsome appearance; his body, hands, and feet will always be excellent. One born in heaven will also be exceptional among the gods in his purity, with exquisite eyes and countenance. Such is the fortune obtained by one who produces an image of the Buddha.

"The place in which one who produces an image of the Buddha is born is devoid of defilement; the bodies of those born there are flawless. After death he will attain birth in the seventh Brahmā Heaven. Moreover, surpassing all the other gods, his handsome appearance and beauty will be without peer, and he will be honored by all the gods. Such is the fortune obtained by one who produces an image of the Buddha.

"One who produces an image of the Buddha will be born to a noble family, with resources far surpassing those of people in this world. He will not be born a child to a poor or destitute family in a later life. Such is the fortune obtained by one who produces an image of the Buddha.

"The body of one who produces an image of the Buddha will, in a later life, always be the color of reddish gold, handsome without peer.

"One who produces an image of the Buddha will most certainly be born to

a wealthy family, with money and precious jewels beyond reckoning. He will always be loved by his parents, siblings, and relatives. Such is the fortune obtained by one who produces an image of the Buddha.

"One who produces an image of the Buddha will be born in India (Jambudvīpa), either to the family of an emperor or a prince, or born a child to a family of great virtue. Such is the fortune obtained by one who produces an image of the Buddha.

"One who produces an image of the Buddha will, in a later life, become an emperor. He will be the most honored and celebrated among all the monarchs, the one in whom all other monarchs take refuge and pay homage. Such is the fortune obtained by one who produces an image of the Buddha.

"One who produces an image of the Buddha will, in a later life, become a wheel-turning king, able to ascend to Heaven and return at will. He will accomplish whatever he sets out to do. Such is the fortune obtained by one who produces an image of the Buddha.

"One who produces an image of the Buddha will, in a later life, be born in the seventh Brahmā Heaven. His life will span a single aeon and his wisdom will be without equal. One who produces an image of the Buddha will never again be born in one of the evil destinies after death. He will always guard his chastity, and his thoughts will always be on his desire to follow the Buddhist path. Such is the fortune obtained by one who produces an image of the Buddha.

"One who produces an image of the Buddha will, in a later life, always honor the Buddha and revere the scriptures. He will continually make offerings to the relics of the Buddha of variegated silk, fine flowers, exquisite incense, lamps, and all the precious jewels and rare objects of the world. Afterward for innumerable aeons he will practice the path to nirvāṇa. Those who aspire to present precious jewels to the Buddha are not common men; they have all practiced the Buddhist path in previous lives. Such is the fortune obtained by one who produces an image of the Buddha.

"One who produces an image of the Buddha will, in a later life, attain such wealth that there never will come a time when it will be exhausted; nor can such wealth be calculated. It is, perhaps, possible to measure the water in all the rivers and oceans of the four quarters by measuring it out by the gallon. But the wealth attained by one who produces an image of the Buddha exceeds the amount of water in the rivers and oceans of the four quarters by a factor of ten. In his future life he will be honored and protected by all. One who produces an image of the Buddha can be likened to one who, during a down-pour, has a fine shelter—he has nothing to fear.

"One who produces an image of the Buddha will, after death, never again be born in one of the evil destinies, be it hell, the animal realm, or the realm of hungry ghosts. One who sees an image of the Buddha and, with a pious heart, joins palms together and takes refuge in the Buddha's stūpa or his relics, will not, at death, reenter the realms of hell, animals, or hungry ghosts for one

hundred aeons. Rather, at death he will be born in heaven, and, when his long life in heaven is complete, he will once again descend into the world as the child of a wealthy family, with immeasurable precious jewels and rare objects. Afterward he will certainly attain the path of Buddhist nirvāṇa."

The Buddha told the king: "To produce an image of the Buddha is a worthy deed, and the good fortune obtained thereby is, without exaggeration, such as I have explained." The king was pleased and bowed before the Buddha, touching his forehead to the Buddha's feet. The king and all his ministers then bowed to the Buddha and took their leave. At the end of their long lives they were all reborn in the land of Amitābha Buddha.