Extreme Practices:
Shakyamuni and other Ascetics in Buddhist Art

This lecture attempts to reconcile the relationship, if any, between two images found in the art of Asia but separated by significant time periods and geographical locations. One, which was developed in China but has been preserved primarily in Japan, features an exhausted and emaciated Buddha Shakyamuni as he descends to civilization after years of physical and spiritual discipline in a remote mountainous location. The other, which predates the East Asian images by nearly one-thousand years, and also features the psycho-physical effects of such austerities, is found in Pakistani sculptures, some life-size, dating from the third and fourth century, which show a skeletal and weary Buddha, often seated on a grass mat, a traditional Indic symbol of renunciation. The Chinese and Japanese images have long been associated with the Chan or Zen tradition, particularly in Japan where paintings of this theme were used in certain ceremonies. No similar explanations have been adduced for the earlier Pakistani works.

Neither image can be traced to any of the texts detailing the biography of the Historical Buddha. Moreover, the emphasis on extreme physical practices that is illustrated in the images appears to contradict the traditional, and textual, premise that the Historical Buddha had rejected both such austerities, and an overemphasis on worldly pleasures, in his articulation of a Middle Way as the proper Buddhist path. While there are no texts that help to explain the initial development of this imagery, and its somewhat surprising re-emergence in China in the tenth century, an intriguing visual lineage has been preserved. This includes both the early Pakistani sculptures and related pieces in Central Asia and China that date from the fourth to the sixth century, and representations of bodhisattvas as ascetics that were produced in South and Southeast Asia from the sixth to the eighth. Although neither type of imagery appears anywhere in Asia after the tenth century, they are replaced by new exemplars, often individuals such as Chan/Zen monks or the mahasiddhas of early esoteric traditions, both of whom are characterized by their unorthodox, and at time austere, spiritual practices, and socially transgressive behaviors. The developments of these role models, and the re-emergence of the theme of the Buddha practicing austerities, provide interesting insights into the development of Buddhist thought in the period from the eighth to the twelfth centuries.

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