

Formative Principles

Buddhist art, particularly in sculpture and painting, faces the paradoxical task of attempting to capture in visible form a reality that is basically non-visible. It must transcend manifest forms and yet preserve them and even fill them with deeper meaning. This is rendered more difficult by the fact that the phenomenal world--even though it represents and manifests the Absolute--is itself regarded as lacking substance and all its forms are viewed as being ultimately without substance. However, the peculiar nature of form itself comes to the aid of Buddhist art at this point. Form as visible image in the world of phenomena serves as a means for defining something otherwise undefined and undefinable. Form aims at differentiation and clear determination but--particularly in East Asian eyes--must have qualities which enable it to rise to a level beyond all distinctions. It has to include something from the infinite as part of its finite presence, allow itself to be embraced by the metaphysical ground and yet to remain "open" to that ground, i.e., avoid turning into shackles and operating as something that limits rather than defines and thereby remains bound to the shallow realm of existence.

Form, particularly in religious art, has to go beyond itself in the very act of attaining its highest fulfillment. In essence and meaning, form arises from formlessness and returns to it. It returns to that undetermined state, to that emptiness, which is the ground of all forms. The best works of Buddhist art have met this challenge by employing particularly purified and spiritualized forms in order to achieve that radical transcendence so characteristic of Buddhism. They manage to transform that "Emptiness" into manifestations which are experienced visually, and bestow religious efficacy on them without, however, going too far in tying these manifestations to the phenomenal or crossing the fine line between the sacred and the profane--a danger to which all "realistic" or "humanist" religious art succumbs only too readily.

Buddhist art has pursued two paths to create such forms: the path of the sacred art of the early and high medieval ages and that of later Zen art. We will first look at the fundamental formative principles underlying sacred art, particularly sculpture and painting, i.e., the abstracting, symbolic, and decorative principles.

These are true principles since they constitute the basis of all individual formative processes. All three are linked intimately with each other and all are sustained by the strong powers of visionary experiences.

The Abstracting Principle

All Buddhist art is subject to the dialectic of the opposing processes of spiritualization and sensualization. It has not only to follow both but at the same time rise above them. Buddhist art can never be completely successful in this endeavor because, as art, it must pursue the sensualization of its objects. Yet in this pursuit a basic tenet of Mahâyâna Buddhism--that of the non-duality of nirvâna and samsâra--does not require complete attainment of sensualization, because Mahâyâna acknowledges the phenomenal aspect in both its relative and transcendental absolute value. Still, wherever this art attempts to show absolute transcendence in the Buddha figures, it reaches a degree of abstraction, i.e., of denaturalization and desensualization, not attained by any other religious art except that employing only pure symbols. It is characteristic of Mahâyâna art that it refrains from employing pure symbols. Rather, and in accordance with Mahâyâna teachings, it enters into the phenomenal world and--like any religious spirit resisting the radical denial of images and doing so by its own impulses--relies on human images and personifications. But Buddhist art does not create divine figures by means of an idealizing and heroicizing intensification of the beautiful human body. It neither aims at perfect representations of the body's manifestations nor does it attempt to ascetically overcome and negate the living organic body. Rather, Buddhist art imparts to its sacred figures a truly impersonal, supra-real generality without, however, negating their near-human personalities and soulful qualities. This shows clearly that the Mahâyâna world view is not dualistic.

That this view is also removed from pantheistic immanent beliefs, is shown with equal clarity by Mahâyâna art. This art does not simply show given phenomena or indicate spiritualized reality in its simple unreflected presence, nor does it make the divine visible in it. Nor does this art attempt to intensify any given phenomenon and to elevate the spirit immanent in it to the level of noble manifestation; rather, it always allows us to sense "the other side," but not in a one-sided manner. It allows us to sense that "Emptiness" and radical transcendence which is at the heart of all phenomena without, however, abandoning the phenomena entirely or depriving them of all value. Buddhist art has avoided the limitations and dangers of purely literal and purely abstract expressions by its ability to avoid binding the Sacred and Transcendent to human and earthly forms and standards and by its ability to "dehumanize" its highest, personified figures without making them entirely non-human.

Bodhisattvas, but also the Buddhas who, according to the doctrine of "Nirvâna without rest,"¹¹² are basically empty and remote, participate in the human-earthly realm because they radiate their universal compassion throughout the universe. They participate in it also insofar as something of the essence of the Absolute is present and alive in all phenomena. We should add to this the notion of the different levels of existence. All spheres of life, from the Buddha downward, contain a graduated reflection of purest being. This being--in more or less pure form--becomes phenomenal and causal. Buddhist art faces the task of making

visible these graduated levels and of bestowing on the Absolute a form which allows it to be accessible to the senses. It also had to take the Absolute--embodied in the Buddha--and project it into the phenomenal world despite its remoteness and basic transcendent, non-dual nature. A totally abstract form located in an absolute Beyond would be unable to accomplish this. The abstractions found in Buddhist art have always retained a certain "openness", actively pointing towards the human and phenomenal aspects of the Absolute's strictly closed nature, but whenever the Buddha and his manifestation appear in the human sphere this happens as movement from the sphere of transcendence into the "here," and not from "here" towards the transcendent. In Buddhist art, too, the forms of these figures also approach us "from the other side."

This holds true particularly for the highest sphere, that of the Buddha, whose primordial figure remains in the motionless remoteness of the meditative pose. Bodhisattvas, as beings of the next lower level--by virtue of their compassionate activities and their different incarnations--are already deeply involved with the phenomenal world, but remain free from any entanglement with it because of their spiritual advancement. Their figures are therefore not as abstractly remote as those of the Buddhas, but neither do they enter the realm of terrestrial immediacy and near-human corporeality occupied by the beings at the next lower level, the deities.

The deities remain below that crucial threshold of transcendence. They are tied to the karma cycle and perform their tasks in the world of phenomena. This hierarchy of existence--extending from the highest and purest distance and remoteness to tangible, concrete proximity, from the coolness of nirvāna to the warmth of near-human figures--is continued in the figures of the Buddha's disciples and the patriarchs. They represent the human sphere proper, albeit in a heroically intensified realism. The Arhats show similar but not quite identical features. They have already reached nirvāna in this life by virtue of their own power of enlightenment. They have overcome rebirth, i.e. they have advanced directly from the human sphere to the Absolute without, however, already having left the former. They are therefore depicted in a quite human rather than abstract manner. But their images are directly and dramatically intensified at this human level so that the supra-human, mythic and, preferably, even grotesque features given to them elevate them into a state of detachment from the mundane world.

In spite of its consistent use of anthropomorphic elements, Buddhist art has little interest in the human body or its real or divine nature. To be sure, figures of full, weighty corporeality and idealized beauty do appear, but their beauty means something fundamentally different than, for example, that of Greek divine images. The ideal nature of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas does not entail an enhancement on the level of human-organic and given natural forms. Rather, it is the result of abstraction--of processes which isolate their figures, make them remote, and denaturalize them. The body and garment types of the Indian models of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas, i.e., the "classic" forms of body and garment types in East Asia, contribute to this process insofar as they place the figures into an "alien" sphere and help them escape the kind of historicization which occurred in China with respect to body and facial types, dresses and ornaments of almost all the other figures of the pantheon.

The really decisive processes of de-corporealization and abstraction--really decisive because by necessity born out of the spirit of Buddhism--can already clearly be observed as having taken place at the point of origin itself. The Indian Buddha figures--inspired by the Gandhâra art which, in turn, was influenced by late Greco-Roman models--became more and more divorced from the sensuous and naturalistic qualities of the Gandhâra figures and came to display "absolute" or "abstract" forms--for example, in their body and facial forms, garment folds, etc. Here, as in Buddhist art in general, the apparently natural forms arise not from observation and enjoyment of naturally given objects, but rather from insights based on enlightened vision and sacred tradition. The goal of Buddhist art--in painting more than in sculpture--is to capture spiritualized figures whose essential natures are divorced from their bodies and neither rest within them nor ascetically deny them. Their bodies are thus neither in themselves perfect vessels or shackles for their spirit but rather quiet and remote transcended manifestations. This may explain the peculiarly floating and remote appearance of these otherwise frequently rather massive figures with their carefully modeled physical features. Human physical characteristics cannot be at the center of attention in the artistic expression of a world view which regards any form of life as really existing only insofar as it represents a shadowy form of the All-spirit and as a temporary crystallization of the Universal Consciousness.

The same holds for nature and landscapes. Though many splendid painted landscapes serve as Sûtra illustrations, they always represent a purely spiritual symbolization of some jewelled paradise whose very essence denies their participation in "nature," just as the bodies of the figures are meaningful only insofar as they avoid any "real" embodiment. Wherever individual natural objects--such as animals, trees, or flowers--appear, they either have symbolic meaning (as do elephants and lotuses) or they provide the background for some important moment in the life of the Buddha or some other legend. This rule does not, of course, apply to the narrative paintings and their strongly secularized stock of formal elements.

All of the above may be summarily referred to by the abbreviated formula of "abstracting principle" which accounts for some of the most characteristic features of the highest types of Buddhist sacred figures. It explains their lack of corporeality and gravity, their lack of three-dimensionality, the strongly two-dimensional impression they make in spite of their tangible presence as objects accessible to the senses; their non-sensuous and remote aura despite their explicit visual definition and beauty. Their quiet and calm harmony is the expression of a perfection which consists of their own "a-nihilation," their total remoteness, their "distance" and yet numinous presence, their supra-personal objectivity and their untouched, timeless resting-in-themselves. All this expresses the essence of the "Buddha nature" of this world as "la toute-puissance de l'abstraction métaphysique et du détachement," as "la force de la spiritualité."¹¹³

The Symbolizing Principle

The religious-philosophical foundation of Buddhist art necessitates the creation of symbols. While the oldest Buddhist art in India could only employ mere aniconic signs as its Buddha images, these signs, such as the footprint, wheel of law, Bodhi tree or stûpa, were independent of the actual figure of Gautama. Once

Mahâyâna art had moved in the direction of personal representations of the Buddha, it was forced to create actual images side by side with symbolic signs. This difficult task was made even more difficult by the fact that the Buddha was no longer merely or, perhaps more accurately, preferably the historical human founder of the religion, but instead had become a hypostasis of the Absolute. Buddhist art was faced with the task of creating personal archetypes to capture Absolute Being symbolically and hold it in the world of visible forms with the help of certain signs.

These archetypes came also to be basic models valid for all times of all the hierarchically graduated types of being in which the Absolute manifests itself. We may even regard the very conception of these archetypes as the products of Buddhism's symbol-creating religious thought and vision. But such archetypes did not arise from such interpretive studies into the essence of reality, as Goethe's "Urphänomen" or the ideal types of classic art, but rather are "established" or "revealed" from the realm of transcendence. Their meaning had, therefore, to be firmly established by certain arbitrary symbolic signs. From this necessity arose the vast system of Buddhist symbolism whose detailed description is the task of iconography. It may be claimed that such symbols tend to become mere but indispensable distinguishing signs and props for visual imagination, their ever-present significance for speculation, cult and religious experiences notwithstanding. One may even be justified in claiming that the great variety of sacred entities, particularly within esoteric Buddhism, can only be captured and clearly distinguished with the help of such pictorial representations and visible signs. This clarifying, discriminating, cultic-minded "labeling," clearly defines a limited number of the sacred figures from the vast number of images either latent in religious imagination or theoretically derived as hypostasized entities by theological speculation. Without such definition the vast number of such images could easily lapse into formlessness. This is why such clarifying dogmatic-cultic definition and "labels" constitute a highly important formative principle of Buddhist art.

Certain types, such as Devas and particularly world guardians and similar protective deities but also Arhats, are depicted in a strongly "realistic" manner compared to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. This realism is not imitative, but rather symbolic, because it is based on religious inspiration and metaphysical insight and not on acceptance of a given reality. It is anti-anthropomorphic and aims at capturing the supra-human as well as supra-mundane in tangible formulas. But all this precise fixation in tangible symbolic images aspires to an archetypal, supra-empirical level which transcends all concrete images. Symbolism is thus closely related to "abstraction." Another factor placing symbolism close to abstraction is its characteristic tendency to rely on a simplifying concentration which focuses on firmly established formulas.

Such symbols not only serve to delineate and define images. Especially in esoteric Buddhism, they are also magico-mystical formulas possessing crucial numinous powers. Even small deviations from the prescribed forms could change the meaning or even destroy the cultic powers and efficacy of the image. For this reason, a most scrupulous exactness is necessary lest the image become an "equation with wrong figures" (Tucci).¹¹⁴ We are dealing here with creative achievements only in a narrower sense because the symbolic elements--such as body postures and characteristics, attributes, colors, etc.--are first and foremost meaningful signs

attached to the figures. They are a language which has been determined a priori and employs a number of formulas which may be selected according to circumstances.

Nevertheless, the achievements of the artists should not be underestimated. This is the case for two reasons. First, the substance of the artist's task and thus his major responsibility tended to make him select from among a repertoire of formulas. Second, such art not only required mastery of this, strictly speaking, still pre-aesthetic language of symbols but also its artistic integration into convincing personal images. This took the artist far away from a mere conglomeration of slavishly codified elements no matter how ritually efficacious each of them might be if encountered alone by itself. The best works of Buddhist art have been able to achieve an artistically convincing interplay of the outer forms of sacred figures and their symbolic signs. This has allowed all signs or formulas to assume lively artistic forms and all forms to become powerful expressive vehicles for Buddhist truths. We have already shown the strongly symbolic elements in architecture and the symbolic powers of such artistic techniques in sculpture and painting as, for example, with respect to surface and spatial relations, treatment of body and garment, lines, colors, and the use of gold.

These observations answer the obvious question of whether we are dealing here with real art or merely with a symbolic language of cult and ritual which is beyond aesthetic considerations, because its ideas were predetermined and their application purely mechanical. Further answers will be obtained from an investigation of the third formative principle which, in the absence of a better term, we will call "decorative principle," and which I should like to analyze more precisely because its importance has still not been sufficiently appreciated to date.

The Decorative Principle

Even the casual observer of Buddhist works of art, whether buildings, sculptures, paintings or ritual implements, will notice the substantial role played by decorative elements. East Asian art has a strong tendency to impart decorative value to all artistic forms and to give them a pleasing or festive "ornamental" appearance. To the East Asians, ornamental elements, understood in a more profound sense, frequently bestow to works of art their supreme charm. It is well known that we tend to appreciate even natural forms for their ornamental value in an entirely spontaneous manner. We never deal with "mere" form alone. That would be impossible. Every form also possesses expression and meaning so that the distinction between form and content is nothing but an arbitrary intellectual distinction which can become detrimental for an understanding of art. After all, the so-called content must be embodied in particular form and has no reality independent of it. Any change of form, be it ever so slight, would also change content and meaning. Form creates and completes meaning. In the religious sphere it may even attain a kind of magic function. Without correct form there will be no objectively important manifestation of essence and no efficacy in cultic performance. In this instance, form or formula--fixed in a stereotypical manner in order to perform this function--converge with symbols. Insofar as form and formula rise to a certain degree above the level of the phenomenal world, leave behind its corporeal weight and proximity, and transport the represented object to a sphere of

greater purity and general validity, they also get very close to the "abstracting" principle.

Buddhist artists, therefore, have attempted to impart to their sacred figures a transcendent beauty. They have sought to attain this goal not only by making physical beauty stand for spiritual beauty or by relying on a highly abstract ornamentalizing treatment of composition, line play and coloration, but also by depicting an abundance of jewelry and a wealth of colors with minute and delicate craftsmanship. In particular, the numerous canonical symbols and attributes could be employed with "aesthetic" playfulness to increase the decorative beauty of their figures.

The other elements of this splendid beauty were largely taken from the numerous enthusiastic descriptions found in the sacred scriptures detailing the supra-earthly splendor of the sacred figures and their realms. Jewels and precious metals always play a dominant role in such texts. Nearly all things of the other worlds seem to be fashioned of them. We hear of jewel trees and ponds of precious stones; palaces and pagodas abound in precious objects, and even the sacred figures themselves radiate all the colors of the "Seven Treasures." These Seven Treasures--mentioned time and again--are highly significant for Buddhist art because they are the way this art can convey a sense of the splendors of this paradisaical world. The Seven Treasures are gold, silver, emerald, crystal, agate, coral, and a kind of mother-of-pearl. In addition, the seven symbols of the world ruler (*cakravartin*)--which are ascribed to the Buddha--are identified with the Seven Treasures. Furthermore, the label Seven Treasures, in an analogous, spiritualized sense, is also applied to the seven achievements of a religious life or the seven spiritual virtues. Thus, visible-concrete and sensuous-ornamental elements are sublimated and abstracted: Both opposing poles are linked or, rather, equated by their symbolic meanings.

Bodhisattvas and Devas above all others partake in this wealth of precious materials. Both bridge the worlds of the sensuous and the supra-sensuous; the former by virtue of their free compassionate minds and the latter by virtue of their high, but not altogether transcendent, level of existence. Buddhas are treated differently. They appear as radiant beings but in an ultimate transcendent simplicity beyond the splendor of any decorative jewelry and its wealth of individual forms; they are elevated and rendered remote by the color of gold alone--a color which resides beyond all individual colors and yet exceeds them all in depth and splendor: Gold is the "embodiment of the Highest and the most precious of the Holy" (Hetzer). Though pictures showing Buddha figures wearing garments covered with fine ornaments and seated on splendid thrones are not unknown, they remain relatively rare. Only in special cases which are theologically justified do Buddhas wear crowns (see p. 26).

Adornment of sacred figures and their realms--we know that temples are earthly replicas of these blessed realms--are not only based on attempts to illustrate the sacred scriptures and their visionary descriptions but also rooted in a particular religio-artistic idea of great beauty and depth. Wherever in East Asian (especially Japanese) literature on the history of art the decorative splendor of the Buddhist precincts and figures is referred to, the term *shōgon* (Chin. *chuang-yen*) appears.¹¹⁵ This term is of central significance because it provides an instance where the

vocabularies of religious and aesthetic life intersect. The essence of Buddhist art can only be understood from the vantage point of this intersection.

Shô means "festive, noble," and also "wealth of splendor." *Gon* means "sacred," also "sober, festive, awe-inspiring." Both words together give the sense of "sanctification through a wealth of splendor." The term *shôgon* corresponds to the Sanskrit term *alamkāra* which has the original meaning of "suitable or making ready for a purpose" and, more specifically, "to put into the state of holiness and numinous efficacy by magic means." In India, the meaning of "to adorn" has only evolved as a secondary connotation of *alamkāra*.¹¹⁶ The Indian word's ritual-instrumental meaning is still implicit in the East Asian Buddhist term *shôgon*. It is therefore important that we pay attention to this very ancient component in evaluating the importance of beauty for the sanctification of temples and cult images.

But *shôgon* is also an equivalent for the Sanskrit word *vyûha* which has the following meanings: "distribution; ordering the parts of a whole; individual description; form, manifestation, appearance; structure, group, multitudes."¹¹⁷ To these are closely joined the following meanings: beautification, ornament, beautiful order. But the meaning of the word is "not a beautiful order for the sake of ornamentation, but rather a filling of the abstract emptiness [i.e., the 'desert'] of [absolute] reality with variety. It may occasionally also be equated with individualization or individual objects."¹¹⁸ All things of our world down to the most insignificant are, therefore, all *vyûha* (*shôgon*). They adorn the absolute dharma world in perfect mutual harmony. They are the "treasures with which the universe adorns itself" (Goethe).

In this context the term *hua-yen* (J. *kegon*) should be mentioned. It corresponds to the Sanskrit term *gandha-vyûha* or *avatamsaka* (*gandha* = fragrance; flowers of different kinds; *vyûha* = decoration, beautiful order; *avatamsaka* = garland, flower decorations). In the center of the *Avatamsaka-sûtra* (*Hua-yen ching*; *Ke-gon-kyô*) rises the mystic tower (*stûpa*) of *Vairocana* which is decorated with great splendor and embraces numerous other towers. It represents both the universe spreading out before us with all its individual objects but simultaneously also the unity and mutual interpenetration of the absolute and relative aspects of existence, which have transcended beyond duality to "emptiness."¹¹⁹

From its point of departure the term *shôgon* has been comprehended in an ever more metaphorical and spiritualized way and has also been systematized in almost scholastic fashion. At the basis of all this is the idea that the Buddha body and the Buddha realm, which are in a certain sense not different from earthly human bodies and worldly empires, though the two realms are by no means simply identical, are "decorated" both by acts of religious merit such as ascetic discipline, meditation, wisdom and good works, and by the compassionate effect of the "Buddha nature" in the world, just as the physical body may be decorated by gold and jewels.¹²⁰ The *sambhoga-kâya* of a Buddha is sometimes even called the *shôgon* body.

This idea is not alien to Christian thought, but in Asia it was taken not merely metaphorically but also quite literally. Ancient Indian thought, which is built into Buddhism, regards qualities, relations and acts, and even virtues, as substantial. They are attached to man like pieces of jewelry and are therefore even transferable. This is why transfer of merit to others is an important religious act in Buddhism.

Beyond that they are also regarded as independent potentialities of transcendental reality.¹²¹ The pious Buddhist earns the highest merit if he decorates Buddha images, Buddha temples, and "Buddha fields" with every imaginable treasure and in this manner "perfects his own Buddha field." Thus *shōgon* takes its place among the other offerings and sacrifices as a path to salvation, and the decorative splendor of the Buddhist works of art derive a still deeper meaning. As a matter of fact, works of art in Buddhism perform one of their most important functions as votive offerings.

In its concrete application within the artistic world, the word *shōgon* applies above all to the various decorative elements which impart to temples and cult images their aura of sacred noble beauty: crowns, jewel garlands and metal decorations, canopies, and cult implements. It is therefore also simply a technical term in Buddhist art. But it is always based on the idea of creating a mysterious atmosphere permeated and sanctified by other-worldly as well as worldly beauty, by means of a wealth of jewelry. This aesthetic magic intensifies and deepens the experience of the numinous. But the reverse process also happens: the enjoyment of beauty and splendor is spiritualized and sanctified, because all these beautiful objects are not only "merit-compiling" offerings, but are also pointing to Ultimate Reality and its "Emptiness," to the absolute wisdom, compassion and beauty of the Buddha.

The Absolute stands beyond all manifested forms no matter how splendid or beautiful, and whenever Transcendence assumes the garb of visible manifestations, even these necessarily poor reflections of the highest being into objects appear to the human eye as if of immeasurable beauty and splendor. But this numinous beauty, no matter how noble and overwhelming, still lacks essence. It is "empty" and, therefore, only a preliminary crutch.¹²² It is but one of the many steps along the path to that state of ultimate liberation brought on by a complete "extinction" of perception and consciousness. This splendid and colorful world of beauty owes its peculiar depth to a dialectical paradox, i.e., to the antinomy between the realm of highest meaning, phenomenal fullness and power of experience on the one side and the principle of lack of essence and definition on the other. This inherent dialectical paradox leads to a state of non-duality--or rather ultimate unity--of phenomenal fullness and "emptiness."

The Vimalakīrti-nirdēsa-Sūtra (Yuima(kitsu)-kyō), which is of fundamental importance in Mahāyāna Buddhism, states that it is the exemplary Bodhisattva deed and highest objective of the pious Buddhist to practice the truth of non-becoming and non-dying while the body is surrounded with beauty and splendor. This leads to the realization that all Buddha lands by their very nature are forever in a state of nirvāna, i.e., are empty and formless, and yet capable of revealing to sentient beings Buddha lands of various kinds. The truth will be known that all things are pure, i.e., "empty" and yet, in accordance with the emotions of sentient beings, act to adapt themselves to earthly and hence impure states of being.

Buddhist art accomplishes the manifestation of the empty and formless but, because of *shōgon*, it sees to it--in observance of doctrinal tenets--that these manifestations do not remain in a state of pure abstraction and unapproachable absoluteness and distance from the human world and that their perception does not remain locked in a world-negating, icon-rejecting asceticism. Rather, the empty and

formless reveal themselves in grace and beauty, i.e., adapt themselves to human emotions and powers of comprehension. Many texts refer to this as the "Buddha grace" of Universal Being. But this beauty is removed from the earthly, naive, and unenlightened beauty of our directly given and experienced world. It has experienced suffering and enlightenment. "Coming from the other shore," it interprets everything in a more profoundly beautified and beatified manner. Its highest unfolding and fulfillment lead beyond itself to its own negation.

We would, therefore, be mistaken if we were to regard the splendidly decorated, colorful works of mature and late Buddhist art as the creations of an aesthetic sense lapsing into the throes of decadence and as proof for the secularization of sacred art. Undiscerning Western scholarship is prone to do so whenever flawed criteria are applied. (It might even be profitable to follow the reverse process and--*mutatis mutandis*--interpret certain phenomena of European art from the point of view of the shōgon idea.) Could a mentality which had degenerated into aestheticism and fallen into a superficial secularism have produced such great masterworks of religious art? We must learn to recognize the dialectic which permeates all of Buddhist art between the passionate enjoyment of beauty on the one side and the deep insight into the profundity and sadness of the world and recognition of the lack of essence and fleeting nature of even the greatest beauty on the other.

This art opens itself in two directions: To being in and of itself, i.e., to transcendence beyond the human world; but also to the psychological aspect, i.e., to the religious experience. Both share a common order. Buddhist art can make this relationship explicit. It is simultaneously ontologically objective and psychologically subjective.¹²³ Aesthetic experience as subjective-spiritual function derives its real meaning and content only by virtue of its ontological significance and blissful efficacy. The transcendent, in turn, is experienced in its true bliss only through its manifestation in beauty. Between the seemingly mutually exclusive formative principles of abstraction and decorative fullness, between de-sensualization and sensualization there exists, therefore, a dialectical relationship which leads beyond both, or which, given the notion of non-duality, transforms them into one. The third principle, the symbolic mode, plays an intermediary role in this relationship which is open to both aspects.¹²⁴

The Visionary Principle

If the highest realm of existence or absolute transcendence reveals itself in its full overwhelming and supra-sensuous glory during a moment of meditative-mystic experience, this revelation is called a vision. Visionary elements play a decisive role in Buddhist art because they are the unifying factor for all three formative principles. Religious visions show their effect on all three--the processes of "abstracting," of forming archetypal images and signs, and of bestowing sacred ornamentation. Such effect may tend to be more spiritualizing or sensualizing and places the symbolizing principle on a middle ground where it mediates between the two.

The visionary element protects Buddhist art against the ever present danger of dragging the sacred down to the realistic or ordinary and near human level. It keeps it from burdening the sacred with the weight of earthly reality or trivializing

its rich beauty into merely material splendor. It keeps the sacred figures from becoming too tangible and yet allows them to leave infinity and reveal their splendor in that intermediary sphere which points from the "there" to the "here" and the "here" to the "there." This intermediary quality is of great importance both for religious experience and sacred art (but by no means for sacred art alone). Its illuminating and floating qualities can be identified in the most detailed formal features of Buddhist figures and pictures. They belong to the most poignant impressions conveyed by works of this art. One of the greatest achievements of Buddhist artists is to have dissolved and spiritualized by means of this visionary principle all the material means employed to depict the Sacred.

Different visionary elements may be distinguished as the basic factors underlying Buddhist art. The sacred scriptures of the Buddhist canon as well as the vast edifying literature are full of poetic descriptions. They frequently display an unrestrained power of imagination in the description of supra-sensuous miracles which they aim to make accessible to the senses. Art, with its limited power of visualization, has often been hard pressed to follow these poetic flights but has gone to the limits of its possibilities in conveying a sense of the immeasurable beauty, vastness and infinity of the sacred world. Its imagery is therefore close to that of phantasies or fairy tales. Naturally, painting can go further in this direction than sculpture or architecture, but even buildings and their decorations contribute to this effect.

If poetic imagination is the first form of the visionary element, dreams are the second. The revealing and formative powers of dreams are also found in the religious scriptures. There are numerous reports of an artist having had a vision of sacred figures in a dream,¹²⁵ and occasionally departures from the iconographical standard are justified by references to such dreams. The faithful in general and the artists in particular frequently regarded daydreams or ecstatic visions as revelations from a higher source, i.e., as objective realities which should, therefore, be captured with the greatest possible fidelity in tangible images.

Many Buddhist paintings and sculptures and even some standard iconographic types may be traced to such origins. Artistic traditions continuing over centuries were wont to attach themselves to such visionary archetypes. In such instances, for example, legends would be told that the first artist in such a tradition had ascended by supernatural powers to those regions where the particular envisioned sacred figure resided and that he had returned to earth after carefully viewing his subject in order to be able to create a true and faithful image of it. All later representations are then considered replicas of this original image.¹²⁶ One of the many reasons for the strictness of the iconographic tradition is revealed here: The absolute authenticity of the archetype is guaranteed by virtue of the fact that it had been revealed in a vision.

Another form of the visionary experience which came to be important in art is the meditative vision. Particularly in esoteric Buddhism, the image of the sacred figures is conjured up with the help of a systematically evolved technique. The aim is to realize the identity of the essence of one's own Ego with that of the particular manifested form of the Absolute. But it should be remembered that, strictly speaking, any such meditative vision always took place only at a relatively low level of the spiritual world. It occurred in the "world of pure form" (*rûpadhātu*) which,

though above the "world of sensual desires" (*kāmadhātu*) and showing things in a supra-sensual, mystic-miraculous revelation, will soon be left behind as one proceeds along the meditation path to another, purely spiritual "world without form" (*arūpadhātu*) and, ultimately, to total extinction (*nirodhadhātu* = *nirvāna*). This notion of form, meditative vision and, finally, transcendence of form, is of basic importance, particularly for art.

It is often difficult to decide from what source a visionary image originated, but this is religiously and metaphysically unimportant because all such experiences basically arise from the same numinous reality and are only different reflections or visions of one and the same entity. Moreover, even these differing visions are interrelated in a variety of ways. Poetic imaginative narratives could be traced to visions and meditations. The latter, in turn, may have been stimulated by literary descriptions and frequently were perhaps purely literary creations. Meditations could merge into dreamlike visions, and, finally, artistic images in which visions or literary descriptions have found concrete embodiment. These could, in turn, engender visionary or meditative experiences of their own.

The result of all this is a complicated web of relations and influences stretching across several intellectual layers. For example, images may make generous use of gold and other artistic means to symbolize the mysterious Buddha light which, as described in the *Sūtras*, emanates from all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and illuminates all worlds. Ultimately we may interpret this light as a visionary phenomenon. Almost all mystically oriented religions employ light phenomena as part of the revelation of the Holy. But we also know that the Buddha light appears to believers not only as a dreamlike vision during moments of bliss, but also realizes itself within them as the innermost experience in meditation after a long drawn-out mental training.¹²⁷ At that point the believer does not merely envision this light but actually becomes this light. He generates it from within himself as soon as he fully realizes the identity of his Ego with the Buddha nature and understands that it has existed since times without beginning. Naturally, artists have made use of such encounters and experiences in their depiction of the Buddha light. It is, therefore, quite possible that what appears to us in works of art as only externally beautiful and exalted splendor or even mere pomp may actually hold a multi-layered internal religious significance.