

Functions of Buddhist Works of Art

No religious work of art exists for its own sake; none intends merely to bring enjoyment or realize beauty no matter how important these two functions may be. Every single work has a clear purpose. It must provide a service, fulfill a task, have some use or play a particular role in a faith's ceremonials and in religious life. It is essentially a means for achieving spiritual goals and has, therefore, an instrumental character. This instrumentality takes a visible form, pictorial or abstract; it is embodied in a picture, a building, or a symbol which invests and transmits meaning. A numinous power is made present; the invisible is made visible and comprehensible. A supra-sensual reality is thus made accessible to the senses of the believer and made to help him secure his salvation.

These functions of representation, communication and realization may be served in very different ways. The content of the message may also be equally varied. Because the intended meaning transcends all those images which a work of art is bound to employ, all religious art faces a profound paradox. This is particularly true for Buddhist art. We have already reviewed the general character of the religious truth it was supposed to embody. But the instrumental ways in which the different types of Buddhist works of art display these truths have been little studied to date and can be indicated here only in a preliminary and tentative way. Obviously, not every single type of work has a definite purpose of its own while, on the other hand, one particular work may have several functions. As a matter of fact, the latter may even be the rule. Consequently, we should be aware that in most cases where these functions have been isolated and labeled we are actually dealing with different aspects of one and the same phenomenon, though it often presents itself with infinite variations. Functions also change over time and according to the religious doctrine (school, "sect") they serve, but this historical component must remain outside our review and be subordinated to the more enduring and typical factors.

Cult Objects

First and foremost, Buddhist pictorial works, statues as well as pictures, are cult objects. Just as is the word "cult" itself, the term "cult object" is a very ambiguous one. By "cult object" we simply mean some figural work representing a

sacred being who is considered somehow to be present in this image. In some sense he dwells in it or reveals himself through it in either a real or symbolic sense, receiving devotion from the believer, who turns to it in faithful surrender. An identity between sacred entity and image or at least the image's ability to convey a message about the sacred entity's existence and essence is presupposed. The cult object, therefore, has ontological character and may legitimately be the object of a liturgic act. This raises a question about the precise nature of the relationship between the sacred person and its image, the degree of substantiality possessed by Buddhist works of art,¹²⁸ and the relationship between the believer and the depicted sacred being itself on the one hand and with its image on the other. No simple answers to all these questions are possible.

There is plenty of evidence to show that Buddhist works of art--sculptures and paintings alike--somehow convey the personal, even corporeal, presence of a numen, and that they "contain" something of its essence. This notion, in particular, is presupposed by the consecration ritual of the "eye-opening" (cf. p. 84), and by the magical act bestowing life on a particular work of art, primarily performed by way of sacred formulas (mantras). These ceremonials transform a dead artifact into a living, holy being capable of receiving veneration and dispensing mercy. The custom of depositing small "heart-images" or sacred scrolls inside cult statues (cf. p. 83) should also be remembered. This was supposed to impart to them sacred, essential substance and efficacy. The equivalent act in architecture was to enshrine relics in the heart of the pagoda (p. 70 ff.). This transformed the pagoda from a mere physical or symbolic monument into a genuine cult object in which the sacred entity physically resided and which could therefore become an object of veneration.

Many reports mention miracle-working images or those in which a transcendent being had embodied itself or which had been fashioned on the basis of images revealed in a vision and thus made possible the transmission of that being's numinous powers. Such images were frequently kept tightly locked away ("Secret Buddhas"), so that the powers inherent in them would not be squandered. But even if these images were not visible and could, therefore, not become objects of a religious experience, they and their powers were factually and objectively "present."

The transmission of the transcendent powers of certain Indian images to China was the decisive motive for the production of copies (see p. 216). There can be no doubt that we encounter in these instances a transmission of sacred substance in and by means of an image; i.e., a duplication for the purpose of creating an ontological identity. Images which, according to Indian tradition, were of miraculous origin, i.e., either "not made by human hands" or linked to the most sacred places of Śākyamuni's earthly existence, were copied down through the centuries because authentic duplicates had magical qualities attached to them. This ontological identity and "accuracy" of cult image copies was guaranteed by the reproduction of strictly prescribed iconographic signs, symbols, and attributes, none of which could be arbitrarily changed, and by the images' system of proportions (iconometrics, see p. 21) which was independent of the position and visual angle of the viewer, i.e., was non-perspective. These proportions not only do not take the viewer into account but in many cases could not be perceived at all by the viewer as, for example, in cases where he looks at these images from a low vantage point. But they exist objectively. It is crucial for us to realize that Buddhist images possess an

independent, self-contained objectivity and even have incorporated in themselves something of the essence of the sacred beings. The Buddhist artist was charged with the highly "instrumental" function of faithfully transmitting the Absolute into the sphere of visual perception.

Cult images thus have the character of magically real objects, embodying the particular sacred entities.¹²⁹ However, we also know that images of a sacred being, particularly those of the Buddha, were ultimately regarded as something quite illusory, temporary, unsubstantial, and as mere signs and aids (*upâya*; *hōben*), possessing no reality for those who had spiritually matured. In the end, they were just as illusory as all other tangible, conceptual and visual images. In the final analysis, cult images could at best possess the indicative function of symbols or signs with meanings resting in their ability to point beyond themselves. Under these circumstances images are no longer "identical" with particular holy persons but merely "signify" them. Even the holy persons themselves are mere personifications or hypostases which point to something that is nonpersonal, intangible, and absolute. We may perhaps go so far as to speak of a "graduation of signs" or of a nonidentity of the first and second (perhaps even multiple) degrees. This would be quite in line with Buddhist thought which regards every possible intellectual position *eo ipso* as something temporary and in need of being overcome in an infinite sequence of progressions.

This dual nature of cult images reveals, on the one hand, a dialectic typical of Mahāyāna Buddhism--that of the relationship between *samsāra* and *nirvāna*. On the other hand, there is an equally characteristic sequence of stages of interpretive levels: the belief in an identity between the transcendent personality and the cult image and the corporeal presence of the former in the latter which can only be maintained as long as higher stages of enlightenment have not yet been reached. The higher the degree of enlightenment, the less substance the image holds and the closer to the truth the believer has advanced, the less he has to depend on visual aids. The result is a web of several possible levels of interpretations. According to Mahāyāna dialectic, the different notions of the image as "real" and "unreal" may simultaneously all be correct (or incorrect). What may be valid synchronically for various schools or cult communities may also be valid diachronically with respect to an individual's attaining of religious maturity. It is, therefore, impossible to arrive at binding decisions on such matters, particularly in view of the fact that Buddhism lacked a central authoritative institution to settle them.

In any event, such one-sided decisions would have been at odds with fundamental Buddhist convictions and Eastern thought in general. An "iconoclastic controversy" would have been quite impossible, even though individual schools of Buddhism tended to hold definite opinions about those questions. Esoteric (Tantric) Buddhism's magic of images and signs on the one hand, and Zen Buddhism's skepticism concerning all pictorial or objective conceptualization on the other represent the extreme positions. The question whether cult images properly deserved *adoratio* or merely *veneratio* is closely linked to the question of the "reality" of images and to the philosophical interpretations of reality. As a matter of fact, Buddhism was unable (and probably unwilling) to solve this dilemma in principle, lest the process of spiritual maturing in the minds of the faithful might be impeded.

The "reality" of cult images depends decisively on the spiritual attitude, the religious-metaphysical conviction or the maturity of the believers who view and venerate them. The subject joins, therefore, in constituting that reality, and cult images combine both objective-ontological and subjective-religious aspects. The term "religious" refers here to the attitude of the believers toward the venerated numen or the impersonal Absolute for which the cult images stand. The cult itself also has both an "objective" and a "subjective" aspect. It relates, on the one hand, to a personal or objective entity and aims at objective, frequently magical, effects. On the other hand, the ritual acts are manifestations of a spiritual attitude generated by the believer within himself. They lead him to perform spiritual operations through which he undergoes a series of mental transformations. These transformations are by no means solely dependent on faith in the automatic efficacy of the *opus operandum*, but require active, responsible cooperation in the process of one's own enlightenment and salvation as indispensable and, on occasion, even decisive elements.

Veneration and Offering (*pûjâ*)

Two parallel paths to salvation have been pursued by Buddhists: veneration (Sanskrit *pûjâ*; Chin., *kung-yang*, J. *ku-yô*) and meditation (*dhyâna*; Chin. *ch'an* [-*na*], *Zen* [-*na*]). The two paths are intimately linked and reinforce each other. Both are also closely related to the cult image of the sacred entity which serves both as the object of veneration as well as of meditation. *Pûjâ* means veneration, adoration, homage. The Chinese-Japanese equivalent expression, *kung-yang/ku-yô*, means to offer in veneration something nourishing to honorable persons (parents, ancestors, teachers, priests), to the Three Treasures (the Buddha, his Teaching, and his Community) or to any sacred being from whom the believer expects something or with whom he desires to enter into a mystical relationship. Veneration may also be directed toward a Buddha sanctuary as a whole.

The sacrificial offerings may take the form of practical help--food, clothing, medicines, money--or of enjoyable and decoratively effective but, above all, symbolically significant items--flowers, incense, scented water, lamps, jewelry, banners, canopies and, of course, especially images. Everything belonging to the realm of *shôgon* (p. 183 ff.) serves this function of *pûjâ*. The offerings do not have to be of a material nature alone but may also consist of acts of veneration presented as sacrificial offerings,¹³⁰ particularly the cultic rituals inclusive of dancing, singing, and instrumental music (see the chapter on ritual implements).

The symbolic meaning of these offerings and acts has been systematized in a scholastic manner. Flowers, for example, symbolize compassion, the highest virtue of a Bodhisattva. Incense, with its fragrance spreading everywhere, stands for the all-permeating dharma world of absolute reality. Light symbolizes the destruction of the darkness of illusion by the world-illuminating Buddha light. The six offerings: scented water, fragrance, flowers, incense, food, and light are considered analogous to the six *pâramitâs*, the six perfections of the Bodhisattva: charity, moral purity, equanimity, vigorous striving, meditation, wisdom.

The *ku-yô* offerings and acts are also personified as *Ku-yô Bosatsu* (Bodhisattva practicing *pûjâ*) which appear not only in the halos of Buddha figures and in the decorations of canopies or temple halls (28, 36, 103, 106, 109, 152, 155)

but also occupy a particular place in the complicated world diagram of the esoteric-Buddhist Dharmadhātu Mandala (Kongōkai Mandara). In this context, eight of them are found at the margins of the central field occupied by the Buddha Vairocana in his *sambhoga-kāya* form (Birushana). They occupy an inner and an outer zone in groups of four each. The Flower, the Incense, the Fragrance and the Light Bodhisattvas are located in the outer zone while the Garlands, the Enjoyment (Play), Song, and Dance Bodhisattvas can be found in the inner zone. "They are all regarded as indestructible entities . . . They are meant to indicate the act of adoration and veneration of Vairocana whose manifestations they are; or, in other words, Vairocana, the 'world spirit', adores himself through these different emanations of his own spiritual powers, while these indestructible beings simultaneously venerate by their acts the true spiritual unity and source of all emanations."¹³¹ These cultic acts and offerings also represent the basic characteristics of many branches of art; they are, so to speak, prototypes--essential elements of art in ideal form as found in the spirit of the Absolute.

Every imaginable work of art has been presented as a *kuyō*, or pious donation, in gratitude for compassionate grace received or as a merit-creating deed for one's own salvation or for the salvation of others, particularly of deceased parents. Individuals took vows to donate or decorate temples or pagodas, to commission a certain number of pictures of a particular sacred figure or to paint them personally. Such pictures or drawings could number in the thousands. Particularly meritorious was the offering of the sacred word, i.e., the reciting or copying and donating of Sūtra texts, for the purpose of venerating the Three Treasures, the promotion of the doctrine, the salvation of the deceased, or the attainment of one's own perfection.

The search for one's own perfection was, according to higher levels of understanding, the crucial act. Sacrifices, offerings, or acts of veneration were not presented primarily for the delight of the holy beings or in order to influence them on behalf of one's own particular purposes but rather as acts of self-renunciation and for the sake of one's salvation. In Buddhist language, one sought to "compile merits" or to "create good karma." The "offering" of such merits to promote the salvation of others--understood in a material sense--and the magic efficacy of such offerings naturally also played a significant role, but only on the "lower" level of interpretation. Most important in *pūjā* is the mental attitude of sincere veneration and the act of making a serious effort to advance on one's own along the path to salvation. Only this attitude, according to the doctrine, makes the offering truly effective. It alone gives assurance that the numen venerated in the cult image as its visible manifestation will be reached and encountered in a true experience.

The artist is also expected to assume that attitude of veneration while creating an image. He should "pay threefold homage in every stroke of the chisel and in every line of the brush" to the "Three Treasures"--Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.¹³² The act of artistic creation, born out of both the ego-transcending quietude of the heart and the meditative insight into the essence of things, is itself a cultic performance. A valid cult image can only be successfully created if executed in a pious and prayerful manner.

Perhaps the most frequent function of a Buddhist work of art, regardless of its type, content, spiritual level and artistic quality, is to serve as a votive offering.

This function is based on the concept of *pūjā* and on the doctrine of merit and karma. Everything from the most modest offerings and simplest implements to the most grandiose cult figures, precious paintings, and monumental, richly furnished and decorated temples may be presented in veneration as pious gifts to the Buddha or other sacred beings. The numerous donor "portraits"--frequently with consecrating inscriptions listing year, month, and day of their completion and name and rank of the individual--prove how much this function was dominant not only for Buddhist sculptures and paintings, but also for buildings and other monuments.

Sacrifice, which was never as prominent in Buddhism as in Brahmanic-Hindu sacrificial mysticism, was predominantly understood in a symbolic-spiritualized sense--at least at the highest level of interpretation. As we have seen, this does not rule out a number of lower levels where sacrifice is understood in much more material terms. True, its magic efficacy was often the main purpose of ordinary believers and certain schools, and sacrifices frequently provided an opportunity for donors to demonstrate power, prestige and wealth. Works of art, therefore, also functioned as symbols of power and stately representation. Frequently the naive intent to make one's own sanctuary look as impressive as possible may have played a part in instances where founders or congregations turned their sanctuaries into objects of parochial fervor and competitive spirit.

We should not pass over in silence the fact that in China the manufacture of bronze statues might at times also become a form of capital investment, making it necessary on several occasions for the government to intervene in order to stop the supposed economic disorder resulting from this kind of immobilization of metal for coinage. In such instances the government ordered cult figures to be melted down so as to put the metal back into circulation, or allowed their casting only on a limited scale.¹³³ But, all other considerations notwithstanding, spiritual purposes were dominant as far as sacrifice and pious offering were concerned. The *shōgon* idea, so important for Buddhist art, shows a most intimate relationship with the spiritual meaning of offering and veneration.

Meditation

The ultimate goal to be achieved through all forms of veneration, the liberating insight into the timeless non-duality between the self of the believer and "Buddha nature" can, however, only be attained by means of meditation. As a matter of fact, meditation is an indispensable precondition for securing the proper effect from acts of veneration. Buddhist meditation, which we cannot describe here,¹³⁴ progresses in a long series of steps to an ever purer vision which is more and more radically released from tangible *samsāra* elements. It begins, however, quite concretely with visual images of the sacred figures built up in a systematic way by revealing every detail as, for example, in the sixteen-step vision of Amitābha and his Pure Land.¹³⁵ Cult images are most effectively used in this process. The detailed descriptions of the sacred beings in the *Sūtras*, their revelation in supra-mundane realms, and the pictorial representations based on them are valuable aids in stimulating and supporting meditative visions. A believer may even imitate the postures and the *mudrās* of the cult images in order to better be able to identify himself with them. The aim is to grasp the powers, virtues and wisdom symbolized

in these representations by signs and attributes and ultimately, with their help, to realize the hidden, veiled "Buddha heart" within himself.

As we have seen during our review of the relationship between representations and the sacred beings actualized in them, this relationship and, together with it, the degree of reality attached to cult images depend on the degree of spiritual maturity attained by the faithful. This maturity, in turn, determines the manner in which these images are viewed. Whenever images are used in meditation, the two elements of identification--numen and its picture--are completed by a third element, the essential nature of the faithful. The faithful are expected to realize the essence of the images within themselves and make their essence come alive within themselves through a process of meditative transformation. Strictly speaking, artists, too, are expected to follow this process. Disregarding for the moment the mechanized workshops described earlier, an artist was held to be capable of creating images in the proper manner only by projecting an inner spiritual reality experienced by himself through a process of meditation from within himself and through himself into these images, thereby reproducing the preexisting paradigm.¹³⁶ Buddhist works of art are, therefore, not creations of individual personalities expressing their character and their experiences; they are "not self-sufficient products of creative acts but are functionally determined utensils of a sacred psychological act."¹³⁷ Postures, mudrās, attributes of cult images--including the cult symbols representing them (vajra, lotus, wheel of teaching, stūpa, etc.)--even the "seed syllables" (bīja) containing the essence of cult images, are not merely iconographic characteristics and dogmatically significant signs. They are also specific aids for an extremely refined psycho-physical meditation technique.

An important role is also played by visions which are often linked to meditation to a degree which makes the discipline of meditation and the role of visions virtually indistinguishable. The ultimate goal of meditation, however, is to go beyond all visions and cult images and to dissolve the figures originally evoked as aids to meditation into "nothingness," into the realm of no-images, where ultimate insight and liberation alone are possible. The more spiritualized, the more "abstract" cult images or symbols are, the higher their rank and value. Initially so full of essence and power, the images ultimately fulfill their true function only by transcending all functions altogether.

Instrument (yantra)

This does not, however, render images superfluous, because only rarely can the pious reach the highest goal directly. They usually reach this goal only or, perhaps better, most assuredly, with the help of cult images and cult symbols. In veneration (pūjā), meditation, and in all other religious acts these objects are indispensable points of departure and necessary means, tools, and implements for the achievement of higher levels. In Indian Buddhist and non-Buddhist cults they are called *yantra*.

Heinrich Zimmer has defined *yantra*, a term of fundamental importance in East Asian Buddhism, in his book *Kunstform und Yoga im indischen Kultbild* (Berlin, 1926; compare his *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, New York, 1946, and later editions, p. 140 ff.), as "an apparatus purposefully constructed to fulfill psychic-sacral as well as magic functions" (*ibid.*, p. 26), as "a tool to effect the

identification (*samādhi*) of viewer and vision" (*ibid.*, p. 25) and to cancel the duality of cult symbol and believing soul. Yantras assume different forms in order to carry out this function. But since all these forms are congruent in their spiritual essence, they can stand for each other. Their external form is "of secondary importance to the role of imagination in the act of veneration," i.e., to the meditative visualization or "unfolding of the image" (*dhyāna*) which makes use of this "implement" as an aid (*op. cit.*, p. 183). The end may be purely spiritual but the "implement" may initially assume the form of a linear-abstract schematic order, such as a geometric drawing consisting of circles, triangles, etc. Subsequently, symbolic signs may be employed for the sacred figures (cult symbols, Siddham letters) or diagrams filled with their depiction as in the figural *maṇḍalas* and, finally, "representational" personalized cult images (*pratimā*) may be used. Architectural sanctuaries may combine several or all of these yantra types (see above, p. 74 ff.).

The faithful are expected to evoke the supra-sensual images of the sacred beings within their own minds in an act of meditative veneration. To produce a cult image or populate the abstract-linear yantra with personal images also amounts to a summoning or evocation of a metaphysical relationship with the numen or numina. The cult image is a spatial concretization or materialization of that visionary image. Only in this way can it function as yantra and become "a magic vehicle for the individually differentiated manifestations of the Divine or the Absolute through which the unevolved-unvisible presents itself to the inner eye of the faithful" (*op. cit.*, p. 42, 119). In the case of linear yantras or symbolic signs reverse processes of reduction may take place during the act of veneration. The variety of forms and figures of the yantra are merged or reduced, through meditation, to an unevolved central point which will ultimately also vanish. The faithful are expected to understand themselves as this unevolved center. Unfolding and reduction of images are two reciprocal processes in which the dual aspect of the world is both experienced and transcended. The yantra provides a crucially valuable aid in this process--the nonfigural yantra even more than the figural one because the "disassembly" of the latter is more difficult.

One case in which a directly identifying relationship between the believer and a sacred figure is achieved with the help of a figural-schematic diagram, i.e., a *maṇḍala*, is the *abhiṣeka* ritual in esoteric Buddhism which constitutes a kind of mystic initiation. The person to be initiated has to throw a flower onto a horizontally unfolded *maṇḍala* while blindfolded. He will receive his spiritual name from the figure on which the flower comes to rest because he has been visibly found to be in a mystic relationship with that sacred being. A flower coming to rest on the central figure of *Vairocana*, the Original or Universal Buddha, is considered to be a particularly auspicious sign.⁷⁸

In addition to this higher, more spiritual function of the yantra in the *dhyāna* process as a means of evoking some tangible manifestation of the Absolute with which the believer may identify himself or which he is at least able to venerate, the character of the yantra always includes, at a lower level, a "practical" application as magic instrument for attaining more mundane purposes--good fortune, health, long life, children, good harvests, etc., and for promoting the spiritual progress of the deceased or for banning evil powers. It can be demonstrated that Buddhist cult images have been used for all these purposes, and these purposes often provided the

reason for commissioning such images. It is difficult even to envision how the history of Buddhist art could have taken the course it did without these rather mundane motivations.

Devotion

The functions of cult images described above were "objective" in their aims. An image and the sacred person meant by it were instruments for attaining practical results, such as assuring salvation or a particular ontological relationship between the believer and the Absolute. This realization was experienced by the believer as a vision, enlightenment, wisdom, experience of identity with the Absolute, and required his personal intensive participation. But its essential component was not a spiritual-emotional experience and not something "subjective" in that particular sense.

Things were quite different in cases where the image was a devotional image, i.e., served the personal, private edification of the believer and was related primarily to his individual religious sentiments. In these instances, the images attempted to show the sacred being in its human dimensions and held almost lyrical emotional value. Such devotional images, as far as we can see at this point, do not seem to have played an essential role in Buddhism—at least none which would be comparable to that of the Pietà or similar images in Christian art. This is not to say that during the veneration of a cult image, and the act where the believer turned in complete trust to a helpful sacred being, the subjective-emotional element of devotion does not enter the "objective" processes of pūjā. Furthermore, meditation could hardly have been possible without intimate spiritual involvement with and loving devotion (bhakti) to the venerated and magically or meditatively evoked numen.

This element is perhaps strongest in the sphere of Amitābha pietism, where we encounter a faithful trust in the saving "powers of another" (ta-riki, see p. 28) which far transcends the "own powers" (ji-riki) of any individual. Works of art inspired by this piety come closest to possessing the character of devotional images. The Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (Kuan Yin, Kannon) comes closest to being a nearly all-powerful dispenser of compassion and was venerated in the spirit of personal, emotional devotion. Such devotion is clearly reflected in the "lyricization" of his images.

Sculptured or painted depictions of the Amitābha triad, paintings of Amitābha's Pure Land or the raigō scenes (57, 58) fulfill still another function as "mystery pictures." This term refers to pictures depicting a numen not in its existential presence as a cult object worthy of adoration, but rather in a mythic sacred act of archetypal and exemplary character. They may depict the holy event in its historical context, but will also present it in its supra-temporal, eternal, non-dimensional state as an act capable of being repeated at any time by way of cultic imitation "as an image archetypal and forever valid" which exists in an "enduring moment embracing past and future."¹³⁸

"Mystery images" relate primarily to the goal of salvation, which is experienced by cultic or venerating acts in anticipatory fashion as part of the present, but has also a strongly "objective" character. It is typical of "mystery images" that they frequently isolate a particular mythic event from its epic-cyclic

context. This event is then shown in the main portion of the picture while the other scenes are often used to fill adjacent marginal areas with explanatory pictorial narratives (103).

The pictures inspired by the Amitābha faith mentioned above conform in many respects, particularly in the latter, to this definition. The raigō event and the rebirth in the Pure Land of the West were the archetypical act of salvation. It constantly repeated itself during holy moments and flowed out of Amitābha's compassionate vow to save all creatures. The faithful kept experiencing this act anew and even acted it out in ritual processions. All these were "historical" events insofar as the Sūtras describe them as mysterious happenings which had taken place in the past. But this past is made timeless, and these events are considered the eternal fruit of Amitābha's vow and of his way to salvation which was cast into a sort of "biographical" legend.

In this sense the scenes from the legend of the life of Śākyamuni Buddha are also historical. Aside from their illustrative character, however, they predominantly serve as cult images in a manner typical of "mystery" pictures. Scenes like Śākyamuni's solemn sermons, surrounded by Bodhisattvas, deities, monks and believers, for example, or "Śākyamuni Entering into Perfect Nirvāna," i.e., his deathbed scene, in which all kinds of living creatures gather around him--appearing not only in paintings (119) but also in groupings of figurines--isolate crucial moments from sacred history with its archetypical character and perpetuate them for all eternity by dehistoricizing them into symbols of Buddhist salvation in general. Such scenes serve as the main cult images during the memorial rites on Śākyamuni's death day and--as clearly indicated by their name "nirvāna pictures"--focus on the central idea of Buddhism. Likewise, the figure groups of the nirvāna scene in the pagoda of the Hōryūji are most closely linked to the relics (śarīra) which constitute the mystic center of the monument and the cult devoted to it.

As we have already seen from our analysis of the function of cult images, participation of the believer himself in veneration and meditation is of vital importance. The believer experiences during such moments a profound realization of his liberating goal which permeates and transforms his entire being. This, too, is a feature found in "mystery" cults. Pictures of historical and legendary events are thus elevated and intensified and acquire a timeless dimension. As a result, their narrative mode does not have pointed anecdotal highlights or otherwise "interesting" features springing from the fertile imagination of individual artists. The artist's personal imagination has to be restrained as much as possible in order to avoid interpretations of the sacred theme which would be too subjective and "secular."

Commemoration and Tradition

Another important task of Buddhist works of art is to commemorate important events and leading personalities within the Buddhist tradition, be they historical in our sense or not. Even portraits of disciples and patriarchs or scenes from their spiritual lives may serve as ordinary cult images, but are at the same time also vivid vehicles for traditions which bestow a numinous presence and power upon events long past and on mythicized personalities. These works of art make them appear to be "present" and, like bridges resting on strong foundations, link over the centuries the present cult and religious life to the origins of the doctrine. They do

this in a direct manner which does not aim at achieving a historical distance but rather at a cultic presence. These commemorative and transmitting functions are served in particular by the chronicle-like narrative pictures, temple legends and pictorial biographies which have survived in the form of numerous *emakimono*.

Exhortation

Portraits and pictures about great men and events in history or even about the life and teaching of the Buddha himself or those works which make Arhats and patriarchs come alive with the help of idealizing portraits (86 ff., 127, 130) in a most impressive manner were clearly intended to confront the faithful with valid models of spiritual conduct. Their function is to exhort--either to encourage or to warn--and thus serve an exhortative function. But not only works of this kind "encourage the good and warn against the bad" (in the words of a well-known formula). Many other works of art--ranging from cult figures and wall paintings in temples to depictions of human, supra-human and sub-human worlds--serve the same purpose. Paradise pictures (103) are effective in a positive and scenes of purgatory (124) in a negative way. The latter belong to the picture cycle of the "Six Realms of Existence." These Six Realms are the arena for the karmic cycles of the *samsāra* world which Buddhists are to leave behind. Some themes are clearly didactic, as, for example, the painting of "The White Path Between the Two Rivers," i.e., the narrow path leading from earthly-human existence to the pure land of Buddha passing between the threatening rivers of water and fire--allegories for greed and rage. The large numbers of parable pictures belong to the same category. As a matter of fact, almost every Buddhist work of art *inter alia* is supposed to preach and thereby guide the believer along the right path. As stated earlier, different functions overlap and the wealth of meaning becomes visible only when this multitude of functions is taken into account. These didactic functions, together with the role of images as missionary and propaganda tools, were highly important particularly during the early periods of Buddhism in China and Japan. But even in later times sculptures, portraits, and woodblock prints were something akin to a *biblia pauperum* for the predominantly illiterate masses.

Definition and Representation--World Image

Whenever, in statues and paintings, sacred groups appear either by themselves or in the complex groupings of the "Pure Lands" or the diagram-like order of the *maṇḍalas*, whenever events from the Buddha's lives or other legends are depicted, whenever the various realms of existence are presented, these works of art perform the function of showing, presenting, depicting, making visible elements of Buddhist teaching. The intent is to show either the supra-empirical world not accessible to the ordinary eye or the structure of the empirical world in a manner which shows it in its true essence. This essence is to be made visible without being veiled or clouded by non-essential features.

Since this truth has been laid down in the sacred books and has been poetically described there as the revelations of the Buddha, i.e., has already been artistically pre-formed, the image assumes the role of an "illustration" even in cases where such function is not immediately obvious. The image always depicts a world existing at a higher level or, rather, our world is seen under a higher aspect and the image offers a pictorial representation of it in those terms. It aims at making this

world and its sacred persons come alive, which means that this function merges into that performed by the cult images, that of giving a mystic-magic personal presence to the numina.

The Buddhist sanctuary with all its images constitutes a supra-empirical sphere where the sacred beings are present and where the faithful could feel transported into the "Pure Land" or the "Buddha Realm." This Realm is projected, as it were, to earthly levels in the form of the sanctuary and evoked there by veneration and meditation. This sphere is constituted wherever even small domestic or ambulatory altars are erected, wherever kakemono are suspended, or rites or meditation are performed. Under all of those circumstances a temporary sanctuary has been constituted as a Buddha land (buddha-kṣetra), i.e., a spiritual realm realized by one who has attained Perfect Enlightenment and where he, appearing in supra-mundane splendor, teaches all sentient beings and prepares for their final salvation all those who have been reborn in this Buddha land according to the degree of their spiritual advancement.

This holds true particularly for the temple proper, for its entire layout, as well as its individual cult halls and pagodas. We have already seen (p. 74 ff.) that the temples, down to their last details, depict and "realize" projections of the world structure, i.e., that they are world images or world symbols. This world image may be realized in figural, geometric-abstract, symbolic-cipherlike or architectural forms. One form may stand for the other, and all kinds of art works, even cult implements and cult symbols, may serve as vehicles for this meaningful language.

The temples also assume a number of other functions. They provide the setting for rituals and serve as "implements" for cult performances. One may even go so far as to characterize them as liturgy turned into tangible form. Their symbolic structure may be the object of meditation. The spatial unfolding of their exterior axis, the *via sacra*, represents the internal way of the process of maturation and enlightenment. Finally, as a whole and in their parts, they are offerings to the Buddha, his Teaching, and his Congregation--i.e., to the Three Treasures--or to individual sacred persons, dedicated as acts of veneration intended to promote the more or less spiritually conceived bliss of the faithful.

Ritual Value and Artistic Value

Looking back over the numerous fields of Buddhist artistic endeavors and the different genres which we have described, it becomes clear that all these creations, which may be highly different from each other, fulfill one or the other particular religious purpose or even several such purposes at the same time. It is also clear that these works cannot be understood without knowledge of their particular functional value, their concrete role in the religious life of Buddhism, no matter whether this role be practical and tangible or symbolic and spiritual.

Does this raise doubts about their character as works of art and about their aesthetic value? Does this even degrade them to the status of something at best enjoyable but not really necessary? Is it possible that an image may be capable of rendering the services expected from it and yet be still valuable and useful to the believer if it merely conforms to iconographic prescriptions and is mechanically suited for its functional tasks, but has no artistic value and rank? Are excellent

works of art better instruments of salvation than mediocre or bad ones? What, after all, is the relationship between ritual value and artistic value?

Meaning, "content" and function are, no doubt, given prominence in Buddhist art to a degree which modern man is barely able to conceive. It is certainly not all that significant in the eye of the ordinary believer whether the cult images he venerates or donates possess true aesthetic value. After all, East Asia, too, has enjoyed widespread manufacture of devotional trash. But a tradition of solid craftsmanship with high standards of taste has survived into recent times and has managed to impart even to more modest works a faint glow of the great, outstanding creations of the past. This means that even these more modest works never, or rarely, degenerate into mere kitsch. Though the average believer may not be conscious of the problem, it is of basic importance to our understanding not only of Buddhist but of any religious art.

Leaving aside the consideration, valid for any art, that content and form mutually determine each other and that in the final analysis, any work of art constitutes an inseparable whole, there are reasons to claim that craftsmanship and artistically valuable design in Buddhist works of art were by no means a matter of indifference, particularly with respect to their religious functional value. In presenting these reasons very briefly we take for granted the simple but never to be forgotten fact that in all artistic creations, including religious ones, a very elementary, entirely naive sense of form and beauty--man's natural playfulness, so to speak--expresses itself.

There are good reasons which prompted the creators of Buddhist works of art to make them so beautifully and carefully. Moreover, this fact was quite in line with the wishes of their sponsors. An artistically inferior and technically deficient image or cult implement would not only lack the seriousness of genuine devotion and true sacred power, it would also fail to be a suitable vehicle for religious meaning and expression and might even constitute an offense against the holy being to which it was offered in veneration. Because it lacked sufficient artistic power of expression it would be incapable of revealing its intended meaning. An integration of different signs and formulas is indispensable for creating a unified meaning, but such an integration can only be successfully accomplished in a truly living work of art whose formal perfection is more than merely a bonus without a value of its own.

Valuing the artistic achievement in religious art and applying aesthetic criteria to it is by no means--as is frequently assumed today--merely an approach of modern aestheticism, but goes to the very heart of the subject at hand. However, these criteria must be derived from the subject matter itself and not from external points of view. To be sure, the people of the times during which these works of art were created certainly judged them by aesthetic criteria, but aesthetic values at that time had not yet attained independent status nor were they considered as being of primary importance.

A Buddhist work of art also could not "function" as a yantra unless its ritual correctness attained formal perfection. The absence of ritual correctness or its formal perfection would mean failure to achieve its functional purposes in an "ontological" as well as in a "psychic" sense (cf. p. 186 f.). This latter aspect, the emotional impact and mood of a work of art, its value as an aid to the venerating and meditating attitude of the believer, is vitally dependent on its aesthetic

appearance. Nor could its ontological meaning be truly comprehended if an image did not speak to the faithful with great potency, with the magic charm of its manifestation in a beautiful, perhaps even overwhelmingly beautiful form. This required full mastery of all suitable artistic means. Only works filled with such beautiful harmony can be symbolic images of Perfection and Absoluteness. Only perfect forms point beyond all forms and serve the highest goal: salvation.

Moreover, outstanding artistic achievements were acts of pious service and merit-creating deeds. The ethos of masterly craftsmanship not only had its own value and rewards but resulted also from the belief that only the best could be considered as truly adequate and admissible for representing the Holy. The glory of the Buddha, his teachings and his congregation could only be served by something truly outstanding and splendid, something which required true sacrifices not only in term of money and material but also in devotion and physical efforts.

This expenditure, which in ancient times could be quite compatible with true artistic quality, was, to be sure, frequently linked with the desire to promote the glory and prestige of the donors. Great periods in religious art have always attached high value for ostentation to their works. This value was not, however, mere empty conspicuous waste, but was intended to realize the particular ideals of artistic beauty prevailing at that time. These ideals, in turn, were most intimately joined to the ideal values of religious life, or, rather, only they were deemed capable of translating these values into tangible symbolic forms. Divergence from these values is a phenomenon of modern decadence.

The demand that a Buddhist work of art--regardless of its genre--should possess as much beauty as possible arises from the *shōgon* idea. It requires that convergence of sacred and aesthetic values which is so crucial for an understanding of Buddhist art. It also arises from something which we may call the "*imago* concept," i.e., from the nature of a work of art as a depiction and visualized projection of supra-mundane realms and from its character as an *imago mundi* in general. Moreover, these spiritual objects could only be successfully represented symbolically if their pictorial depictions at least tried with all the means at their disposal to allow the viewer to sense a beauty which lies beyond all sensory perception. Finally, these works have the task of leading in the right direction the visionary-meditative powers of imagination of the viewer whom one is even tempted to call the user of the work of art. The traditional viewer was, however, a person who did not yet know the sense of detached distance toward the work of art which is so characteristic of the modern viewer. All this is to say that a *summa pulchritudo* belongs to the *ens realissimum* and *summum bonum*. This holds true for Buddhism as well though in a peculiar way. In this sense the aesthetic value, particularly of the highest figure, the Buddha, is of genuinely metaphysical significance.

Beyond any of its specific individual meanings, every Buddhist work of art is a general symbolic-figural expression of the Buddhist world view in the sense in which all artistic creations are expressions of a world view. The more importance a work of art holds as an aesthetic phenomenon, the better suited it is to represent this world view and to transmit it to the mind in forms created for the eye. Here, too, it becomes obvious that the aesthetic value of beauty does not merely serve as an aid to the various religious functions of Buddhist works of art and to their realization and effectiveness. This aesthetic value is also, in its own right, a function

of religious works of art, and a very crucial one at that, because their main task is to represent religious content adequately, and this can only be done with the greatest possible artistic perfection. The fact, however, that even the highest beauty of Buddhist works is "without essence" does not cancel the importance of their aesthetic value. It only confirms the specifically Buddhist meaning of beauty: though intended to point beyond itself to that ultimate "Nothingness," beauty had to be taken to the very limits of perfection to accomplish its task.