

RELIGION IN MODERN CULTURE

THE AFTER LIFE OF THE BUDDHA: PARINIRVANA IMAGES IN EURASIA

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Abstract

This article examines religions in which the life of the spiritual leader is as important as the death, and where the narratives of death (and not just of life) enter the image cycles in art. The Buddha willed himself to die when he was eighty at Kushinagara. Buddhism is one of the rare world religions where there is a huge repertoire of mahaparinairvana images. Buddhism values the release from the cycle of rebirths and deaths. The sets and cycles of images that make up the representation of the death of the Buddha in sculpture and paintings in caves spread across Eurasia are described in detail. The death images are important spatially, materially and culturally. These images began to be made in Mathura, were perfected at Gandhara and travelled all the way across Central Asia to China and beyond. The relics left behind after cremation were enshrined in stupas. They represented a continuation of dharma, of the presence of the Buddha even after he had passed on. The article analyses in detail three caves – Cave 26 in Ajanta in Maharashtra, India; Cave 205 in Kizil in Kucha, Central Asia (East Turkestan) and Cave 148 in Mogao, Dunhuang, China. All three caves juxtapose monumental images of the Dying Buddha with different themes related to his death: The Temptation of Demon Mara in Cave 26, Ajanta; how King Ajatashatru was told of Buddha's passing along with the cremation of the coffin with the mahaparinirvana Buddha in it in Cave 205, Kizil. Cave 148 at Mogao contains the most complete set of scenes and images representing events pre- and post-Buddha's death in sculptures and murals. In addition, there are Chinese interpretations of the Pure Lands in large murals.

Keywords: Buddhism, *mahaparinirvana*, Buddha's cremation, death scenes, sculptures, paintings, cave art, relics, image cycles

I

The Life and Death of Spiritual Leaders

Buddha's willed death at the ripe old age of eighty probably made Buddhism the first religion to use death to its advantage. He preached for forty five years after Enlightenment, till he attained *mahaparinirvana* in c. 487 BC.

Death was used *spiritually* (the Buddha did not die an ordinary death, he died an extraordinary self-willed death, an enlightened one where he was released from the cycle of rebirth and death). It was used *materially* (the relics were 'capital' and were used to spread the religion far and wide. The relic was real; it was symbolic, for it belonged to the Master or the Teacher or Monk who had become an arhat; it was indexic in that it was a part of the body that stood for the whole. Its use was 'material' also in the sense that it gave rise to the construction of stupas, stupas that came to be decorated and venerated and located in the most diverse spaces - in caves, in residences for monks, in worship halls, in open spaces, in architectural complexes. The relics were also the material link to the Master Teacher that could be maintained and through which the trauma of loss and absence of the Buddha could be dealt with. Relics were the link to the historical Buddha which would help in 'transporting' the devotees to a spiritual realm. Relics, in a sense, belonged to many worlds, this world and others. Death was used *culturally*, in that it gave rise to a vast repertoire of images that were to mingle with local cultures, wherever it spread, to create architectural structures, complexes, sculpture and painting for worship, meditation, for earning merit, and for exercising power.

In other words, Buddha's death had the same power and reach and symbolic value as did his life. The events leading to his death, the miracles associated with Buddha, the body and the coffin, the postmortem fight over and distribution of relics and their worship have the same value and 'weightage' as the events of his life which include birth, his leaving his luxurious life in search of knowledge and answers to ontological questions, his enlightenment, first sermons and preaching. In this, Buddhism is unique and I would suggest that it accounts for its immense popularity and spread across the Asian continent and beyond. The seeking of answers of how humankind could conquer old age, sickness and death, actually find an answer not just in Buddha's life and enlightenment but also in his death.

This is a death that moves from life in this birth to release from all further births. The cessation of the existence of the body, while a cause for mourning for those who venerated the Buddha, is also a sign of existence beyond death, of release from the cycle of rebirth. Absence and presence are thus categories that are blurred and ambivalent. Most importantly, it shows the continuity of dhar-

ma. The extraordinary reach of Buddhism far beyond the boundaries, across the Asian continent, of the land it was born in, surpassing older and contemporary religions, can also probably be explained by this.

The other religion that dealt as deeply with the death of the spiritual leader was Christianity. Christ was judged by a law that could do no justice to Him. He challenged the State and the Law of the Land. He was sentenced and crucified and died a very painful death. The theme of Christ's suffering to wash away the sins of the living is thus an important one. The entombment, the resurrection of Christ and His appearance with a healed body, with the stigmata to show for the crucifixion are important themes of cultural representation.

The pre-death and post-mortem images of great spiritual/religious leaders forms an important part of the art that draw inspiration from these belief systems. Pontius Pilate delivering the Judgement, Christ on the cross and resurrection are important themes. The dramatic events leading to the decision to crucify – the court presided over by Procurator Pontius Pilate – has been the subject not just of paintings, but of literature as well. Mikhail Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*, Chingiz Aitmatov's *The Executioner's Block* and Yuri Dombrovsky's *The Faculty of Useless Knowledge*¹ figure the trial of Christ prominently in their narratives. Dostoevsky was so shaken by Holbein's painting *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521) that he made it an important theme in his *The Idiot*².

Christ's death was violent; Buddha's was peaceful. Christ was judged and put to death; Buddha willed his own death.

Image Cycles

Mahāparinirvāna images dot the Eurasian space from the Indian subcontinent to Central Asia, all the way to China and beyond. The earliest nirvana images that have come down to us are from around the II century AD from the Indic world. According to Sonya Lee this image became popular in China from the second half of the V century onwards. Where the iconography of the *mahāparinirvāna* Buddha began has still not been definitively proved by specialists. The aniconic representation of *mahāparinirvāna*, most probably, began in Mathura and was finalized in Gandhara. The range and power that this image exercised cut across the spatial and temporal borders of empires and dynasties.

One of the oldest large sculptures was the remnant of the 14 meter long statue found at Bhamala in Khyber Pakhtunwa, Pakistan, dated to 3 century AD. According to Vinay Gupta and Monika Zin, a stele (68 cms in height and 50 cms in width), found in the Varaha Temple, Mathura, dates to the early Kushan period from Kanishka's time (c. 127–150 AD)³. The many Gandhara sculptures on this theme date to the second and third centuries AD. The Sarnath Buddha in the Indian Museum, Kolkata, with four life events of the Buddha depicted in a vertical frieze is dated to the Gupta Dynasty (c. mid 3rd – mid 6th c AD).

At Kushinagara, where the Buddha is said to have passed away, a Gupta period sandstone statue was found in excavations in 1876 that is 6.1 meters long. The incomplete 13 meters long Sleeping Buddha image found at Ajina Tepe in Tajikistan dates to the 7th century AD. The fragments of the *mahāparinirvāna* Buddha, found at Krasnaya Rechka, Kyrgyzstan, said to have been 8 meters long, has been dated to the 7th – 9th centuries AD.

The *mahāparinirvāna* sculptures and murals usually occur in three different sets: (1) as part of a four-scene or eight-scene series covering four important events of his life: birth, enlightenment, first sermon and *mahāparinirvāna*; (2) as part of a series of events leading up to the *mahāparinirvāna*, with Buddha going to Kushinagar (where he passes away) and (3) as part of the events preceding and succeeding the *mahāparinirvāna* (death, cremation, fight over and distribution of relics and stupa worship).

The cycle of images include: The River Crossing Episode as Buddha proceeds to Kushinagar, Stone of the Mallas, Lecture for Queen Maya, Death of Buddha, Shrouded Buddha, Bier of Buddha, Miracle of the Immovable Coffin, Cremation, Earthquake and Ajatashatru, Advance of Warriors Demanding Relics, Guarding and Distribution of Relics, the Stupa and Worship of Relics and the First Council.

This article will examine three *parinirvāna* complexes in detail: Cave 26 at Ajanta (468 – 480 AD), Cave 205 (500 – 600 AD) at Kizil and Cave 148 (771 AD) at Mogao, Dunhuang. The Ajanta Cave is a stupa cave; the Kizil Cave is a central pillar cave and the Mogao Cave is without a central pillar. All three caves are part of complexes that are on trade routes, but are also a little away, being carved in mountains. They thus are part of regions with fairly cosmopolitan cultures, where merchants, monks and scholars from many empires visit and pass through the areas. They bear witness to the fact of not just people, but ideas, cultural representations and styles travelling long distance and gaining in complexity despite the distance. Both the Ajanta caves (the second phase, in which Cave 26 was carved) and Cave 148 at Mogao were made in times of political turmoil. All three caves were sponsored by the elite of their times – Cave 26 by the rich and accomplished Monk Buddhahadra; Cave 205 at Kizil by the royal family and Cave 148 at Mogao by the powerful and rich Li family.

Nirvana Image

The core of the nirvana image of the Buddha is the tranquil figure of the Buddha lying on his right side, with the head on the left and the feet on the right. Surrounding him are the mourners who are often shown in deep grief and unrestrained mourning. The dynamism, born of the contrast between the serene figure of the Buddha who has attained nirvana and the mourners' emotions of grief on display, is part of the visualization of this event. The body as material

presence on display in frontality is overwhelming. This indestructibility is usually conveyed through monumental sized sculptures.

The historical Buddha who attained *mahāparinirvāna* in his eighties was ill and probably, emaciated. In the nirvana image, however, Buddha is depicted not as old and sick, but as body in the beauty of maturity. The body is slim, but not sickly and the face is not worn and haggard, but unlined, full and peaceful. While the reclining Buddha in Cave 148 at Mogao looks quite thin, the Buddha in Cave 158, is much more well-rounded.

It is the paradox of the indestructible living, sentient body, passing on and attaining nirvana that is being depicted. Many of the nirvana paintings show this dual nature of belonging to this and the other world and its religious value. The nirvana is also seen as a sacrifice made by the Buddha to share merits of his perfect and strong body through the distribution of relics postmortem. The material body is transformed into invaluable material relics, as an indexical presence of Buddha's absence.

It is the expression of the face, however, that marks the figure as a threshold being. The face is youthful, but also ageless. Buddha here, in this world and Buddha who has willed to and left this world and the still here/gone moment is captured through the eyes. The eyes in the nirvana Buddha may be closed (Cave 26, Ajanta) or just open a slit (Cave 158, Mogao) or slightly open – enough to show the iris (Cave 148, Mogao). They are unseeing; shut or partially open, they are no longer focused on this world. The face is peaceful and tranquil. The nirvana image is a utopian one, in its promise of the cessation of the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth. It celebrates the passage from impermanence and suffering to eternal bliss, from history to eternity and from grief to peace for the followers. It brings together the human and the super-human. The nirvana image reflects what Mimi Hall Yiengpruksawan calls the 'interstitial moment' in which the finite and the infinite, the sentient and the insentient coexist⁴.

Relics

Buddha had wanted only one stupa that would bear within it the collection of relics. However, eight *saririka* stupas (bearing body relics) and two *paribhogika* stupas (bearing relics used by the Buddha) were built after Buddha's passing. These were the only stupas for one hundred and thirty years. It was the Mauryan King Ashoka, whose reign in the Indian subcontinent lasted from 268 – 232 BC, who after the Kalinga War, pained by the suffering it had caused, converted to Buddhism. He opened seven of the original *saririka* stupas and had the relics redistributed into 84000 stupas. This served to spread Buddhism but also had a political aim of ensuring cohesion and stability over a vast empire that stretched from present-day Afghanistan to Bangladesh.

The expansion of Ashoka's kingdom to Gandhara happened around the mid-3rd century BC. Relics play an important role in Gandhara from the 3rd century BC to the 8th century AD. Buddha assumes anthropomorphic form in 1 AD in representations in Gandhara and Mathura.

The preservation of relics in the womb of a stupa was a unique feature of the propagation of Buddhism. The relic was a proxy for the presence of the Buddha himself. The establishment of stupas to preserve relics thus created a system of sacred sites that spread far and wide with the spread of Buddhism. The stupas were decorated and the images were drawn from the life of Buddha.

II

Cave 26, Ajanta

Cave 26, which houses the *mahāparinirvāna* statue, belongs to the second phase of development of Ajanta. It is a *chaityagriha* (a prayer hall and not a residence for monks) with a stupa towards the end of a long hall that has pillars on both sides with carvings. The cave is said to have been adjusted to correspond to the summer solstice⁵. In the aisles beyond the pillars on the left side, near the entrance is the huge *mahāparinirvāna* image of the Buddha. This is followed by a scene with Buddha in meditation, with Mara and his daughters trying to distract him and break his concentration. All along the walls are images of Buddha and in the right aisle images of the Sravasti miracle. The stupa in the centre has a frontal image of a *bhadrāsana* seated Buddha, with several panels of decorative images in the front and on the sides.

Sublime Beauty

The face of the *mahāparinirvāna* Buddha in Cave 26 in Ajanta is an image of great beauty that reflects the youthful sublime. The full cheeks and lips (the stone carving gives a feel of even the lines on the skin of the lip), the slight smile, the closed eyes and the tranquil expression are all pointers to the great sleep that Buddha passed into eternally. The mourners at the bottom and the deities on the top are all in a smaller proportion as compared the monumentality of the Reclining Buddha. The pillow his head is resting on is a circular one with the centre visible. From the whorls of his hair, the soft folds of the robe covering his body to the cuticle and nails on his feet, the statue is a stupendous feat of execution. There is the beauty of youthfulness in this image which is supposed to represent the eighty-year old Buddha who passes through layers of meditation to finally give up the body.

It is clear that the cave here, while it bears similarity in function for which Buddhist caves were carved out in in the most daunting of landscapes here and

in other parts of the world, the structure was very different. Gaining merit in this world and the next was one of the prime functions.

The Central Asian and Chinese caves were designed in such a way that the *mahāparinirvāna* Buddha occupied the rear of the cave and the sculptures and murals led up to the monumental Reclining Buddha. That is, there is a sense of leading up to, of the centrality of this Buddha in the ensemble of images the cave has to offer. The Ajanta Cave Buddha greets the viewer on entry being situated close to the doorway in the left aisle. The Cave actually splits the viewer's gaze on entry, in a sense, with the stupa in front with the image of the seated bhadrāsana Buddha and the Buddha lying in *mahāparinirvāna* beyond the pillars. There is no directed training of the gaze or movement of the viewer leading up to the climax of viewing, which would be the still, monumental, tranquil image of the *mahāparinirvāna* Buddha. This is not the central pillar cave that is found in Kucha or Dunhuang, for instance, nor is it like Cave 148 at Mogao, Dunhuang, which has no pillar.

It is also interesting that while the Buddha is viewed first and not as a climactic moment, the death is followed in a sequential movement of images, prompted by circumambulation, by the image of the Temptation of Mara. While the stupa divides the cave into a front and back, and the *mahāparinirvāna* image could have been, had the planners so desired, been kept in the rear, (as was popular later in Central Asia and China), this was clearly not part of the plan in fifth century India.

Mara is a constant negative presence in Buddha's life and the one who reminds him twice to take nirvana. Demon Mara asks Buddha to take nirvana after he gets enlightenment under the bodhi tree: "The Buddha, however, refused to die before the dharma was spread and the sangha was established. The first time that Mara demands that the Buddha enter *parinirvāna* is directly related to the texts talking about his death in the literary sources. Mara appears after the Buddha's first illness, in Vaisali, in the Capala sanctuary. ... He reminds the Buddha of the promise he made years earlier on the bank of the river Nairanjana – that he intended to die after the dharma had been spread and the sangha had been established. The Buddha promises to die at the end of a three-month period"⁶. Mara, therefore, in many ways is central to Buddha's *mahāparinirvāna*. The panel in Cave 26, however, depicts Mara using his daughters to seduce and distract the Buddha's concentration before he attains enlightenment. The image is interesting for the way in which it has Buddha at the centre, a tranquil core while the temptations in the form of Mara's daughters are at the bottom and Mara's demonic armies on the top, barring the space above Buddha's head where there is the tree. The panel is very dynamic with 'action' around and stillness at the centre; the material world of power, desire, temptation surrounding spirituality at the core.

III

Cave 205, Kizil

The outer wall of the left corridor of Cave 205 is destroyed. The inner wall of the corridor has the painting of Ajatsatru (now in Berlin).

The partially preserved *mahaparinirvana* Buddha is on rear wall of the cave. On the inner wall is the cremation (in Berlin), in which Buddha is also shown lying in the coffin that is being opened by one of the mourners, identified as Ananda. On the inner right wall is the distribution of relics mural, while on the outer, the mural of the first council is destroyed.

Kucha is distinguished by the presence of the episode of Ajatashatru learning of Buddha's death from his Prime Minister. Although Ajatasatru has been identified in eight caves at Kizil, this is considered to be the best representation.

King Ajatashatru

The space is divided to represent several episodes.

On the bottom right is the depiction of the earthquake in which Mt Meru trembled and the sun and moon rolled.

On the upper portion on the left is an interior scene with the King and Queen seated with the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister is seated in a comparatively relaxed/informal position, with one leg over the knee of the other. All the figures in this section seem to be listening to the Prime Minister.

The upper right portion of the drawing is another interior scene with the Prime Minister showing an opened out scroll painting that depicts the four major events of the Buddha's life – Birth, Enlightenment, The First Sermon and *Mahaparinirvana*.

King Ajatashatru has been put into a huge vessel and is gesticulating with his arms thrown upwards as he sees the scroll. The vessel contains herbal medicines to stop the King from fainting from the shock of hearing of Buddha's passing. This section of the painting has more of these huge vessels, and is quite chaotic for it shows daggers poked into the ground and heads of animals.

According to literary sources, a massive earthquake occurs as a result of Buddha deciding to take *mahaparinirvana*. The right side of the painting, thus, depicts earthshaking events – the actual earthquake and the precarious condition of King Ajatashatru. The King's health was delicate and he could not personally attend Buddha's *mahaparinirvana*; so he sent his Prime Minister to attend and bring back the news. In the painting the proportion of the King's body 'fitted' into the huge vessel is not very realistic.

The unique feature of the scroll in the mural is that it depicts the four major events from Buddha's life not vertically as one would expect from a scroll. With-

in the scroll, the four events of Birth, Enlightenment, First Sermon and *Mahāparinirvāna* are diagonally opposite each other.

This is a painting within a painting, a framing within many frames: The multiple framing outside the scroll (the division into four distinct spaces of the entire Ajatashatru narrative) and the multiple frames of the four events of the Buddha's life within the scroll/cloth painting being held up by Varashakara. This is almost equivalent to what is today called the need to narrativize in order to cope with trauma, which is part of Trauma Theory. The function of the scroll painting is to 'sum up' the Buddha's life and to make his death one of the many events of his life. In doing so, the aim was to reduce the impact of the force of tragic news of Buddha's passing on, on the King.

The wall painting as well as the cloth scroll painting contain multiple scenes. The scenes on the wall depict actions embracing the cosmic (the earthquake and the sun and moon) to the familial/societal (King and Queen and others listening to the Prime Minister) to the individual (Varashakara showing the scroll and the King swooning and grieving). This larger narrative of King Ajatashatru unfolds at the same plane as the earthquake that occurs as the Buddha goes into *mahāparinirvāna*. There is a consecutive chronology at work here with the scenes featuring Ajatashatru occurring later in time than the earthquake.

The wall painting further carries in its 'womb' - on the cloth painting - the entirety of the birth, life and death of the Buddha. The mortal king painting holds the kernel of the immortal Buddha in the cloth painting within it. The greater narrative is miniaturized and the physically weak King is given the larger representation. This inversion of the narrative significance of the macro and micro vis-s-vis their representational proportions is what is truly unique in this painting. It is this inversion along with the non-symmetrical division of the wall painting into four segments that actually makes me wonder if the non-realistic proportions of the King in the vessel or of the lying Buddha in the cloth painting are all intentional and are meant to show a world gone awry with the passing away of the Buddha.

Though sequential, the wall painting is not a continuous narrative, but is presented as disjunctive. The lower right section on the earthquake (whether it relates to the earthquake occurring due to the Buddha's *mahāparinirvāna*, or just refers to King Ajatashatru's nightmare of the skies falling and not to the earthquake), the 'real' Buddha is missing from representation. The Buddha only appears as a drawing on the cloth painting, as precisely a drawing meant to soften the blow of the devastating news of his passing. The main 'protagonist' is thus absent in the representation of the earth-shaking event in the lower right section of the wall painting, even though he is the 'cause' of it. He is present, however, as a drawing, a representation, to assuage the grief of the King. The drawing is

a watered down version of the very real event the King could not attend but is now witnessing an a representational form! The inversions and paradoxes captured here are many!

Cremation Scene

This painting faces the *mahāparinirvāna* statue of the Buddha. It shows the cremation of the encased Buddha. Ananda on the left has opened the lid of the coffin. Monica Zin explains why Cave 205 is unique in many respects: “First, in this case, the monk opening the coffin is Ananda, while Mahakasyapa is not depicted; second, the figures on the right are not monks, but three nuns. This is the only case in all of the representations of the entire *parinirvāna* narrative cycle where nuns are depicted”⁷.

The Buddha is in the coffin, but he is not laid out flat. He is in the pose that he is said to have attained *mahāparinirvāna* in, lying on his right side with his right arm under his cheek. His expression is peaceful. His eyes are slightly open and the iris visible. The plump rings of the neck are quite prominent in the representation of the face and neck. The face, too, is not emaciated.

The body is covered in strips of different colours. The Buddha is ‘bandaged’ although his face, neck and a small part of the chest is visible. The bandage strips are ‘woven’, in the sense that the strips are not running straight on top of each other but go under and come out in a loose weave. The lid is being held open on the side of the Buddha’s head while it is shut on the opposite side, so the view of the Buddha’s body is a tapering one.

The coffin is decorated and is standing on triangular stilts of wood. In the front triangular portion of the lid is a carved dragon and at the other end of the lid, the tail of this dragon seems to be jutting out.

It is the lid that is of interest in this painting. Half open, it creates a diagonal axis almost in the centre. It also splits the painting into an upper and lower portion. However, it is quite possible that the lid is deliberately not given in a realistic perspectival depiction, precisely because it ‘inhabits’ two worlds. This is a cremation scene where the coffin is not shown as being shut even though the fire is lit and has gathered strength.

There are two time frames, it seems, in the painting: the Buddha lying peacefully inside the coffin, still whole and not yet on fire, with Ananda still holding the lid, an act not possible had the lid actually already been on fire. The flames have engulfed the lid from slightly lower down and the portion that Ananda is close to and holding, does not have any hint of fire or heat. The fire is behind the lid; the front of the coffin’s lid are still clearly visible with all the decorations. The male deity at the top left seems to be about to consign a long string of pearls he is holding into the flames. There is also a distinct difference in the emotions being expressed by the figures standing on the right and those on the

left. The nuns and the deity about to chuck the pearls seem calmer and more resigned; the figures on the left are still grieving with the figure at the bottom left throwing his arms outward trying to reach out to the Buddha. The flames that are closer to the figures on the right, the lid that is closed, the body that is not visible, probably point to the cremation having started and the resignation to the inevitable for these figures. The figures on the left, who can still view the body that is visible through the lifted lid, feel the presence of the Buddha as real and are in a prior stage of grieving. The cremation has still not engulfed this part of the frame. This 'split' in time frame is at the same time a conflation of two times frames and this is expressed through the 'twisted' perspective of the two triangular ends of the coffin that should not have been visible in a realistic depiction, but are visible here precisely due to the 'time lag' in the upper/lower, right/left portions of the painting.

IV

Cave 148, Mogao, Dunhuang

Cave 332, one of the first 'nirvana caves' at Dunhuang was completed in 698 AD. Within a hundred years, several nirvana caves came up in the Mogao complex.

In Cave 148 (High Tang Dynasty, 704 - 781) a huge reclining Buddha statue is placed against the rear wall of a chamber at the back. The width of this space is much more than the depth, giving it the feel of a coffin. In Cave 148, which is not a central pillar cave, the viewer enters to behold the great spectacle.

The three great rulers of the Tang Dynasty (Emperor Taizong, Empress Wu and Emperor Xuanzong I) came to rule by usurping the throne from rightful successors. They became patrons of Buddhism to legitimise their reigns as bodhisattvas with the divine right to rule. Giant statues were considered to reflect socio-economic prosperity and political strength and giant Buddha statues, of *mahaparinirvana* and otherwise, were reflections of this.

It contains, apart from the giant reclining Buddha statue, several statues and many panels of murals. On entering the cave the corridor has painted images of the Paying Back Kindness Sutra. On the left wall is the image of the painted Manjusri with Maitreya on top, with a sculpted Amoghapasa in the niche. In the centre is the *mahaparinirvana* Buddha on a platform and on the right wall is the painting of the Devatas on the top, and of Samantabhadra on the wall, with sculpted Chintamanichakra in the niche. All along the lower portion of the walls and on the lower platform of the Reclining Buddha are images of donors. As the viewer turns to leave the cave s/he is greeted by the paintings of Amitabh in the Pure Land, Avalokiteshvara and the Medicine Buddha.

On the rear wall, above the Reclining Buddha are paintings of scenes that begin from the edge of the left wall and end at the edge of the right wall. These scenes from left to right are the Last Lecture, Cunda's Plea, Entering Nirvana, Encasement in the Coffin, Lecture to Queen Maya, Funeral Procession, Cremation and Theft of Relics, Division of Relics and the Stupa. On the ceiling are the images of a thousand Buddhas. Eugene Wang uses the apt term 'optical theatre'⁸ for the caves in which sculpture and painting are brought together in the exposition of a particular theme.

The standing statues of mourners behind the length of the Buddha all bear signs of grief; some have their hands raised, some have a hand on their chest; others are standing with their hands respectfully folded together.

Sonya Lee, in her description of the cave has referred to the mirroring of themes across walls⁹: the Maitreya painting on the left wall and the Devatas painting on the right; the Paying Back Kindness and Filial Piety in the corridor theme reflected on the opposite wall behind the Reclining Buddha in the painting of the buddha coming out of the coffin to give a last lecture to his mother, Queen Maya.

The Death Scenes

There were two styles during Sui period that were used in the Tang period as well: The first was light colouring of simple, refined line drawings. This was called *shuti*, the sparse style. The second was a more complex one where the figures were placed in environments: "The paintings with spaces occupied by halls, pavilions, courtyards, mountains, flowing brooks, trees, animals and so on are all drawn with minute and realistic details. The coloring is magnificent with multilayered applications leading to a thick and heavy tonal effect. Zhang Yanyan called this 'detailed, exquisite and extremely beautiful' dense style (*miti*)"¹⁰. The colours used were black, indigo, gamboge, azurite, mineral green, earth red, cinabar, gold and inky blue.

Both these styles are evident in this cave. The nirvana images behind the Reclining Buddha are in the sparse style. These include the paintings of the cremation of the buddha, the fight of the eight kings over the remains of the sarira and the division of the relics. The large sutra paintings exhibit the *miti* style. Maitreya's Descent and the Devatas on the left and right walls and the Bhaisajyaguru and Pure Land Amitabha murals are complex paintings with several planes (a minimum of three) and several points of view. There is the bird's eye view, but there is also a frontality of the middle plane, which usually contains the main theme of the painting. The lower plane is usually from the point of the bird's eye view, but there is a kind of tilt-down of the view. According to Dorothy Wong, "In these eighth century murals, the Pure Land is portrayed from a very high viewpoint, forcing the ground plane to tilt sharply upward. Descriptive details

of the wonders of the pure land are extravagantly captured in vivid imagery, further enhanced with the magnificent Chinese-style palatial architecture and a mature, sensuous figural style. The convergent multiple-point perspective is more developed and grandiose, and experimented in a variety of ways. In some compositions, the orthogonals at the sides direct the viewer's gaze away from rather than toward the centre, resulting in the so-called herringbone perspective¹¹.

Paintings such as the cremation, the fight over the remains and the sharing of relics are simpler compositionally. They are more like watercolours. The 'framing' occurs as the eye moves from one painted event to another. It is notional. Sometimes frames are suggested but at most times the eye assumes and creates 'limits' for each painting, creating mental separations, where there are actually flowing into one another.

The astonishing fact about these nirvana paintings is the lightness of touch and yet the details that come through such an economy of lines. Facial expressions, piety, grief, differences in dress and posture are all captured through the most minimal of means. The nirvana-related paintings are not multi-perspectival unlike the larger sutra paintings in the cave. While they may suggest 'movement' there is no convergence of multiple perspectives.

The Larger Murals

The two 'mirroring' paintings on opposite walls on the left and right of the cave of Maitreya Descending to Earth and of the Devatas are large paintings with several planes.

According to Sonya Lee, "The Maitreya mural in Cave 148 was the very first specimen of its kind in Dunhuang to incorporate extensive episodes about Maitreya after his descent into the world as Future Buddha. Altogether sixteen episodes have been identified thus far, including seven that chronicle major events from the birth of Maitreya to his acceptance of Sakyamuni's monastic robe from Mahakasyapa and four others that illustrate the many felicitous phenomena in life made possible by the coming of the Future Buddha, like seven harvests after one sowing or five-hundred-year-old women getting married"¹².

The Devata mural on the opposite is a monoscenic mural: "Based on Xuanzang's one fascicle translation of the Sutra on Deva's Inquiries... from 649, the mural is a pictorialisation of a series of lessons that have been couched in a question-and-answer dialogue between Sakyamuni Buddha and the inquiring Deva.....As the picture contains literally no narrative element other than the initial scene with the Deva's request, these doctrinal lessons are necessarily abstracted into a static, timeless setting represented by a large preaching assemblage. This layout is then complemented on the top with a band of palatial structures and at the bottom with twelve smaller preaching scenes denoting the various dialogues between the Buddha and Deva"¹³.

The two Pure Land murals of Bhasajyaguru and Amitabha are far more complex in terms of execution.

Rich and Diverse

The richness and variety of murals and sculptures in Cave 148 point to the fact that master sculptors and painters were employed. These consisted of artists not just with different aesthetic and stylistic orientations, but also mastery over different kinds of content. The nirvana paintings are different from the left and right wall paintings in the nirvana chamber and these are, in turn, different from the Pure Land sutra paintings.

While central pillar caves, by virtue of creating a circumambulatory space around the pillar were able to control the moving gaze of the viewer to a far greater extent, in this cave, on entry into the rear chamber, the viewer is confronted with the colossal *mahaparinirvana* Buddha and the wealth of statues and murals all around. The direction of the gaze that is on the one hand stilled into viewing the magnificence of the Reclining Buddha and then into an unguided multidirectional movement all around the cave. The eye, neck and body movements then are further micro directed towards viewing the details within the compositions of separate events. When not even a small portion of the walls is left without some image, the viewing experience is over rich and saturated.

The two time frames that this cave is dealing with is the last events of Sakya-muni Buddha before his *mahaparinirvana* and the future with Maitreya and the Pure Lands. The past lives of the Buddha are not evinced here. The buddhas of the Three Ages are not the subject of this cave. The subject of this cave is specifically *mahaparinirvana* with the important events leading up to it and then the possibilities of the future which include future Buddhas. According to Sonya Lee, “Two characteristics in particular stand out: the eclecticism involved in the selection of motifs, and the unprecedented level of innovation in compositional design and presentation of each motif. Indeed, among the twelve themes selected, four – Devata, Paying Back Kindness, Amoghapasa and Cintamanicakra – have no precedents at Magao, whereas five – Maitreya, Medicine Buddha, Amitabha, Avlokitesvara with thousand arms and eyes, and nirvana – were rendered as the grandest specimen of their respective kind both in scale and quality. Their coming together in one place was a creative phenomenon rarely seen in high Tang caves, which are already known for their diversity in painted and sculpted subjects. In this light, the pictorial program of Cave 148 had clearly outdone the standard of its time by achieving a relative comprehensiveness in encapsulating what Buddhism meant in Dunhuang at that time”¹⁴.

Notes

1. See 'Issues of Multiculturalism in Yuri Dombrovsky's *The Faculty of Useless Knowledge*' by Rashmi Doraiswamy in *Perspectives on Multiculturalism: Pre-Soviet, Soviet and Post-Soviet Central Asia*, Rashmi Doraiswamy (ed.), Manak, New Delhi, 2013.

2. See 'Idiocy and Civilisation: A Study of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*' by Rashmi Doraiswamy in *The Russian Enigma* (ed. Madhavan Palat, Geeti Sen), UBS Publications, New Delhi, 1994.

3. See 'Parinirvana Representations in the Art of Mathura: A Study Based on the Discovery of a Unique Parinirvana Stele from the Varaha Temple of Mathura', Vinay Kumar Gupta, Monika Zin, *Art of the Orient*, 2016, Vol 5, Polish Institute of World Art Studies.

4. 'The Interstitial Buddha: Picturing the Death of Sakyamuni', Mimi Hall Yiengpruksawan, *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin*, Japanese Art at Yale, 2007.

5. For differing accounts of why the Cave 26 complex is situated at a distance from the other caves, see 'The Early Development of Cave 26-Complex at Ajanta', Rajesh Kumar Singh, *South Asian Studies*, Vol 28, No 1, March 2012, pp. 50-51 and 'Ajanta's Chronology: Solstitial Evidence', Walter M Spink, *Ars Orientalis*, 1985, Vol 15, 1985, p. 100. For an account of how the stupa in the cave is located to correspond to the summer solstice, see 'Architectural History and Painting Art at Ajanta: Some Salient Features', Manager Singh, Babasaheb Ramrao Arbad, *Arts*, Vol. 2, 2013, p. 140.

6. *Representations of the Parinirvana Story Cycle in Kucha*, Monika Zin, Leipzig Kucha Studies 2, Dev Publishers, New Delhi, 2020, p. 39.

7. Ibid, p. 93.

8. 'Painted Sculpture in an Optical Theater: A Fifth-Century Chinese Buddhist Cave', Eugene Wang, *Notes in the History of Art*, 30, 3 (2011).

9. *Surviving Nirvana: Death of the Buddha in Chinese Visual Culture*, Sonya S. Lee, Hong Kong University Press, HK, 2010, pp. 191 – 198.

10. 'Style and Artistry of Dunhuang Art', Duan Wenjie in *Dunhuang Art Through the Eyes of Duan Wenjie*, Edited by Tan Chung, IGNC, Abhinav Publications, 1994, New Delhi, pp. 72-73.

11. 'The Mapping of Sacred Space: Images of Buddhist Cosmographies in Medieval China', Dorothy C Wong in *The Journey of Maps and Images on the Silk Road*, Philippe Foret, Andreas Kaploni (eds.), Brill, Leiden/Boston, 2008, p. 67.

12. *Surviving Nirvana: Death of the Buddha in Chinese Visual Culture*, Sonya S. Lee, Hong Kong University Press, HK, 2010, pp. 194-195.

13. Ibid, p. 195.

14. Ibid, p. 199.