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ON IMAGE WORSHIP IN BUDDHISM AND HINDUISM: A SYNOPTIC VIEW[1]

Introduction

A devout Hindu in a village, town or a city in modern India, daily or periodically, offers worship (*pujā*) in his household shrine (*devagṛha*) to miniature images (*murti)* of his lineage deity (*kula daivata*), his chosen deities (*iṣṭa daivata*) and the local guardian deity (*grāma daivata*), carved of stones or cast in metal. While worshiping the deity through unflinching love (*bhakti*), invoking it through fitting ritual, and entreating, appeasing, meditating and repeating its name, a devout Hindu worshiper's ultimate goal is to unite with the deity.

Carved, sculpted or cast in human or supra-mundane forms, the Hindu deities comprise the cosmic gods Śiva and Viṣṇu, and the regional gods and goddesses, who are often associated or identified with the cosmic gods. Some of the deities materialize in their intangible, aniconic shapes. God Śiva god, for instance, is worshiped as *Śivaliṅga*, an aniconic object, signifying the god's potency and creative powers. *Śivaliṅga*, in some instances, is incased in gold, silver or bronze. The deities, both in their image or aniconic forms, are endowed with miraculous powers, energy and wisdom: the worshippers to save them from calamities, to absolve them of their wrong doings, and fulfill their wishes invoke them. However, the spiritual dimension of

[1] Paper presented at the *International Conference of Indologists*, Rashtrapati Bhavan, Delhi, India, 21-23 November 2015.

the worship of a diety in its image or aniconic form is far more important in the eyes of the worshipper than its artistic merit.

The Pāli Canonical Theravāda texts (400-300 BCE) unequivocally state that whenever the Buddha delivered his *dhamma* sermons, his followers and the public in general flocked to hear him speak. The Buddha was greatly venerated in his lifetime as a compassionate teacher, urging people to lead a moral life. However, he taught the monks and nuns, who had joined his monastic order (*saṃgha*), the way to achieve *nibbāna*, the ultimate freedom from unhappiness *(dukkha*). Immediately following the Buddha's death (420-405 BCE),[2] the devotees of the Buddha began to revere him in his aniconic forms: the *Bodhi* tree, the empty seat flanked by his followers, the wheel of *dhamma* (the Buddha's doctrine*),* his footprints, and more importantly the domed shape *stupa*, the funerary monument symbolic of the Buddha's presence. From about the first century CE, the followers of the Buddha, while beginning to venerate the newly emergent Buddha and Bodhisattva images, continued worshiping his earlier aniconic symbols.

Throughout the Pāli Canonical texts (400-300 BCE), the Buddha and to some extent his senior monks were unequivocally positioned above the post Vedic pantheon of the gods in rank and status. The Buddha did not reject the post-Vedic pantheon of gods, who were functioning in his time in the religious space, but they were made subservient to him and his *dhamma*: they became an agency for legitimizing and spreading the Buddha's *dhamma.*

The Buddha's assigned superior status and rank in the texts, placing him over and above the gods, together with the Buddha and Bodhisattva centered Mahāyāna doctrine, which made Buddhahood, not *nibbāna*, as the supreme goal of the Buddhists, and finally the competition that Buddhism had to face from the rejuvenated post-Aśokan Brāhmanic Hinduism, Buddhism's main rival, contributed to the emergence and

[2] See Richard Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, (second edition), and London: Rutledge, 2006, p. XI. Gombrich suggests the date of the Buddha's *nibbāna* as 445 BCE, which brings the date of his *parinibbāna*, the final passing away, as 410 BCE.

consolidation of the Buddha and Bodhisattva images (100 BCE-300 CE). By making the Buddha and Bodhisattva images, along with the *stupas,* the chief objects of veneration and worship, augmented the Buddha's well-established superior standing in the world of the gods. We cannot, of course, ignore the imperial patronage of Aśoka and the Kuṣāṇa rulers given to Buddhism. The complex mix of the Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism began expanding rapidly and widely in the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere in Asia from the first century CE. The centrality of the Buddha image in Buddhism also facilitated its claim for a distinct religious individuality.

Although the Buddhist Emperor Aśoka's active sponsorship of Buddhism led to Buddhism's popularity and growth in his time, Aśoka is not credited with the origin of the Buddha image, despite his close connections with the Hellenic world, where the images of Greek gods were found in abundance. The images of the Buddha in North and North Western India first came into prominence in the post-Aśokan period, a period dominated by the Indo-Greeks, Śaka and Kuṣāṇa rulers (approximately 150 BCE to 300 CE).

Beginning with the first century CE under rejuvenated post-Aśokan Brāhmanic Hinduism, the "Hindu" deities previously worshipped in abstract form or as aniconic objects, through the sacred sacrificial fire altars, and through incantations of the Vedic *mantras,* began to appear with carved and sculpted images *(murti*), and by the fourth century CE, with temples to house them. The Brāhmanic Hinduism helped crystallize its own embryonic post-Aśokan image worship through new interpretations of the *Vedas* and the *Upaniṣads*, reworking the older narrative epics like the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*, and composing the *Dharmaśāstras*, the normative books on law, ethics, morality and expiatory procedures (*prāyascitta*). Brāhmanic Hinduism, above all, was further strengthened by its great body of the *Purāṇas* from the fourth century CE, with their cycles of legends, myths and ancient history of the cosmic gods like Śiva, Viṣṇu, and those of the additional gods and goddesses. Even the Buddhist texts, formerly composed in Prākrit (Māgadhi, Pāli), started appearing in Sanskrit, indicating

the growing influence of Brāhmanic Hinduism with its literature composed in that language. Coincidentally, the period of growth of the Buddha images from the first century onwards harmonizes with the new, consolidated and aggressively competitive Brāhmanic Hinduism, which eventually succeeded in marginalizing Buddhism from the mainline India, pushing it to its North Eastern corners.

The *pujā* (worship) rituals dedicated to the Hindu deities routinely followed by a devout or orthodox individual Hindu worshipper in modern India, described in this paper, establishes the worshiper's intimate relationship with the deity in its image form. The paper also delineates the relationship that exists between the rituals of *pujā* and *bhakti*, which is a form of intense devotion and love of god.

Earle Coleman's statement that art and religion have been reciprocal powers, religion inspiring art and it, in turn, communicating the numinous, rings true in India's case.[3] Coleman also finds no essential distinction between aesthetics and the spiritual. Theologian-art historian, Thomas Martland, also says that the religious art, as a form of aesthetic appreciation, is a kind of human religious behavior and spiritual behavior of a community as well.[4] In fact, the tenth Century Kashmiri Philosopher and aesthetician, Abhinava Gupta (950-1016 CE), through his inimitable logical acumen, had established a correspondence between mystical trance and aesthetic bliss.[5]

While not focusing on the technical and stylistic analysis of Hindu and Buddhist religious art forms in their historical settings, the paper attempts to describe and analyze, synoptically, (a) the origin and veneration of the Buddha image in ancient India, and (b) the worship of Hindu gods and

[3] See, Earle Colman, *Creativity and Spirituality: Bonds Between Art and Religion*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998, p, xii.

[4] See, Thomas Martland, *Religion As Art: An Interpretation*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981.

[5] See, Larson, Jerald James, "The Aesthetic (*Rasāsvāda*) and the Religious (*Brahmāsvāda*) in Abhinavagupta's Kashmir Śaivism", in *Philosophy East and West*, 26: 371-387.

goddesses in their image forms done with devotion and love, and who are continually perceived as living entities from ancient to the present time in India. In this context, the *Āgama* texts (600-1200 CE) are still closely followed as guidelines to the procedure of installation and worship of the deities in the temples and households of India.

The Buddha in aniconic art form (400 BCE-100 CE)

The transformation of some of the cosmic Vedic deities from their abstract forms into images in the late Vedic and the post-*upaniṣadic* periods right in to the Buddha's time cannot be ruled out. But the concrete evidence from the fourth century BCE texts to prove the existence of their image forms beyond a reasonable doubt is yet to be established. Constructing fire altars, the Vedic deities continued to be invoked and worshipped through sacred *mantras*, and were given offerings to satisfy their needs. But the deities are not specifically referred to in the texts as represented or crafted in their image forms on earth.

The reluctance of the Buddhists in representing the Buddha in his physical form in the centuries immediately following the Buddha's death may have been due to the conventional post-Vedic practice of not showing the concrete, visible forms of the gods and goddesses. More importantly, for the Buddhists, the Buddha, by attaining the *nibbāna*, had reached a state beyond time and space. His *nibbāna* had liberated him from the *karmic* cycle of birth and death. To represent the Buddha in human form after his death may have been regarded as inconceivable by the early Buddhists. The Buddha, therefore, could not have been represented as an icon. The artistic symbols of the Buddha's presence, as Peter Harvey comment, "were preferred as better indication of the inexpressible nature of the Buddha".[6] The absence of physical image of the Buddha in relief and in

[6] Peter Harvey, "Venerated objects and symbols of early Buddhism", in *Symbols in Art and Religion*, Karen Werner (ed.), London: Curzon Press, 1990, p.68.

round sculptured form characterizes the phase of Buddhism, which lasted approximately from 400 BCE to 100 CE.

The well-organized *saṃgha*, the monastic order established by the Buddha, sustained the Buddha's *dhamma* (doctrine) after his *parinibbāna*, the final passing away. His lay followers (*sāvakas*, *upāsakas*) began worshipping the symbols associated with his life's transformative movements: a wheel, the *Bodhi* tree, his footprints, an empty seat and *stupa*.

The wheel of *dhamma,* carved in relief, symbolized both the Buddha's first teaching of the *dhamma,* called the turning of the wheel of *dhamma* (*dhamma cakka parivattana*), to the five monks in Sāranath, and the universality of the Buddha's *dhamma*. The Buddhist emperor Aśoka in the third century BCE used the wheel as an emblem of his spreading empire, as well as pledge to his subject to rule the empire with justice and equity according to the Buddha's doctrine.[7]

The symbol of the *Bodhi* tree (Aśvattha, *ficus religiosa*), fittingly, represented Buddha's mental and physical struggles leading the attainment of *nibbāna* sitting under the *Bodhi* tree. Thus, the tree represented the Buddha's *nibbāna*, his awakening. The worship of footprints of the Buddha acknowledged his greatness as a teacher of *dhamma*, deserving salutation. An empty seat, usually surrounded by the devotees paying respect to it, represented his presence as a great teacher.

The most important object of veneration of the Buddha was the *stupa*, a hemispherical dome constructed out of bricks, on the top of which were kept the funerary remains, supposedly of the Buddha and those of his important monks. Bireille Benisti states that "like a statue or icon, it [*stupa*] itself was an object of worship and venerated as the representative of the Buddha".[8] The *stupa* embodied Buddha's physical remains (*sarīrika*), identified with the elements (*dhātu*), of the great person that Buddha was. According to the Pāli texts, the Buddha's funerary

[7] See, A.K. Warder, *Indian Buddhism*, Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 1970, pp. 266 ff.

[8] Bireille Benisti, *Stylistics of Buddhist art in India*, New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2003, p. 23. Benisti offers a comprehensive study of the *stupa* architecture in India and elsewhere in Asia.

remains were distributed after his *parinibbāna* (final passing away) in eight parts and the recipients of the remains constructed commemorative columns to house them. Emperor Aśoka, according to the traditional account, reinterred and redistributed the remains, using them for building thousands of *stupas.*[9]

We would like to argue that one of the key factors in the emergence of the Buddha image was due to the highest esteem with which the Buddha was held in the earliest Pāli Theravāda Canonical texts during his lifetime and after his death. More importantly, due to the highest rank and status vis-a-vis the deities attributed to him by the Pali texts led to the concretization of the Buddha in his image form with a human face his devotees could relate to.

The Pāli texts (400-300 BCE) admit the highest assigned rank of the *Brahmaloka* (Brahmā's heaven), with its Brahmā gods and their frontrunner Mahābrahmā, in the hierarchically arranged heavens where the gods reside. The Buddha actually acknowledges the existence of the gods and ranked hierarchy embedded in their worlds. But the Buddha, according to the texts, outranked all the deities, including Brahmā gods residing in the Brahmā's heaven.

There are far too many examples of the Buddha's explicitly stated superior rank in the world of the gods in the early Canonical texts (400-300 BCE). As the Buddha says "he sees no one in the world of gods (*sa deva loke*) whom he should salute, rise up from his seat for or offer a seat".[10] In a famous episode in the annals of Buddhism, Brahmā Sahampati, saluting the Buddha reverentially, entreats the Buddha to teach his new doctrine to mankind, when the Buddha had initially decided not to teach to teach it after achieving his *nibbāna*.[11]

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[9] A.K. Warder, *Indian Buddhism*, p. 267. Warder contends that by constructing *stupas*, Aśoka made the Buddha physically accessible to the population.

[10] *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, I, IV.173. Pāli references are from Pāli Text Society (PTS) edition.

[11] *Majjhima Nikāya*, I., 168 ff; *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, I. 137 f. Brahmā Sahampati is shown in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* as agreeing to the Buddha's path to *nibbāna*, *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, V, 167 f.

Like several of the Brahmā gods who are known in the text to propagate the Buddha's *dhamma,* Brahmā Sanankumāra is identified as a fervent follower of the Buddha.[12] In another instance, a certain Buddhist monk wants to know where do the earth, water, heat and air, the four elements, absolutely cease. He traverses through the hierarchically arranged heavenly worlds asking the gods for an answer. The gods in each of the heavens send the monk higher up in scales of heavens, until that monk reaches the great god Brahmā in the highest reaches of the havens, the *Brahmaloka*. Brahmā takes him aside and tells him that he has no answer to the question; only the Buddha has the answer and he should go and ask him, which he does.[13] In another instance, the gods endowed with long life and well settled in their heavenly abodes become frightened and uneasy, when they hear the Buddha's preaching that the life is impermanent (*anicca*). The text adds, "Thus potent is the Tathāgata (the Buddha) over the *devas* (gods) and their world and such might, such power has he."[14] The Buddha in one instance is shown to humiliate the proud Baka Brahmā, who wishes to disappear from where the Buddha was seated after loosing a debate with him, but was unable to do so because of the Buddha's superior psychic powers, while the Buddha left the *Brahmaloka* in Baka's presence as easily as he had entered it.[15] More importantly, the gods in the heaven, including the Brahmā gods, according to the Theravāda texts, were subject to *karmic* cycle of rebirth; they were not immortal, whereas the Buddha and his monks, who had destroyed the *āsavas* and attained the *nibbāna,* were totally released from the cycle.[16]

The Buddha's superior stature outranking the post Vedic gods of Brāhmanic Hinduism in the Buddha's period became a

[12] *Dīgha Nikāya,* I. 121, *Saṃyutta Nikāya,* I. 153.

[13] *Dīgha Nikāya,* I. 215ff.

[14] *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, IV.33.

[15] *Saṃyutta Nikāya,* I.141f.

[16] The Buddha's highest rank and status in the heavenly world assigned by the Pāli texts (400-300 BCE) is analyzed in details by N.K. Wagle, "The gods in early Buddhism in relation to human society: an aspect of their function, hierarchy, and rank as depicted in the Nikāya texts of the Pāli Canon", in A.K. Warder (ed.), *New paths in Buddhist research*, Durham, New Caroline: The Acorn Press, 1985, pp. 57-80.

permanent fixture of Buddhism. It became an important leverage for his disciples to carve out an independent and higher standing for the Buddha and his *dhamma*, a device useful for recruiting potential followers. The Buddha's superiority was further accentuated in the Mahāsaṃghika, Lokottaravāda and Mulasarvāstivāda schools of early Buddhism of the third century BCE by their reinvention of the Buddha as an omniscient and omnipotent being.[17] All that was needed was a sculpted and carved Buddha image to reinforce the Buddha's superior rank in relation to the Brāhmanic Hinduisms' gods and goddesses. This process of transformation began earnestly from the first century CE. The emergence of the Mahayana Buddhism with Buddhas and Bodhisattvas help consolidate the worship of Buddha and Bodhisattva images exponentially.

The Buddha image and its worship (100 BCE-600 CE)

Despite emperor Aśoka's vast contacts and relations with the Hellenistic world accustomed to the images of Greek gods and goddesses, the Buddha image did not manifest itself in his time, although Aśoka had advanced the cause of Buddhism during his regime on an unprecedented scale, with the erection of the *stupas* and the *dhamma* pillars, with inscriptions specifying his public policies affected by the Buddha's *dhamma.* Emperor Aśoka may not have encouraged the Buddha figure to appear during his reign, lest the attention of his subjects be diverted to or preoccupied with the images of Buddhas or Bodhisattvas. Presumably, Aśoka did not want to deflect attention away from him as a supreme emperor. It may not be a coincidence that the Buddha images began appearing regularly from the first century CE onwards, only after the demise of the empire.[18]

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[17] A. K. Warder, Paul Williams

[18] See Romila Thapar, *Aśoka* and Decline of the Mauryas (2nd ed.), New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1973; A. K. Warder, *Indian Buddhism*, pp. 242-271. Romila Thapar and other art historians have not analyzed the reason for the absence of the Buddha and Bodhisattva images in Aśokan times. Warder, too, has no explanation for absence of the

To reiterate, the emergence of the Buddha image was most likely heavily influenced by the spread of Buddha's *dhamma* and his position well defined in the Pāli texts as a person of highest rank in the world of the gods, thus superseding the ranks of cosmic post-Vedic gods in the Brāhmanic Hinduism in Buddha's time. The Buddha image on a casket belonging to the first half of the second century CE under Kaniṣka's rule (78 CE onwards) depict him as being adored by the gods Brahmā and Sakka. Commenting on this casket, B.N. Mukherjee observes: "The casket has four images of the Buddha, one on top attended by Indra [Sakka] and Brahmā and three [images of the Buddha] above garlands encircling the lower portion of the casket body. [Emperor] Kaniṣka as a convert to Buddhism would have made every attempt to have doctrinally appropriate caskets made to contain the relics."[19] The Buddha's greatness as Supreme Being – supreme Lord of the universe according to the Mahāyāna texts – high above the cosmic gods was intensely etched in the minds of both the Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhists, but who needed physical manifestation of Buddha's ascribed highest rank. The first century CE presence of the Buddha image seems to have been an appropriate response.[20]

Surveying the data from the Kuṣāṇas to the Gupta period (approximately 100 CE to 500 CE), the art historian, K. D. Bajpai underscores the Buddha's acclaimed status as a supreme being who was ranked above the gods. Bajpai writes: "Several of the Buddhist images of the Kuṣāṇa period tend to indicate the supreme aspect of a deity (*devātideva*). The Kuṣāṇa rulers took pride in calling themselves *devaputrāh* (sons of gods). The idea is incorporated in the contemporary images of the Buddha, who is shown seated on a lion throne with *pārṣadas*, attendants flanking the Buddha. This idea is further accentuated in the

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Buddha image, although he asserts that Aśoka, as a practicing Buddhist emperor, implemented Buddha's *dhamma*, especially in its moral and ethical manifestations.

[19] B.N. Mukherjee, "Shāhjī-kī-dherī Casket Inscription," in *British Museum Quarterly*, Vol.28. 1964, pp. 39-45.

[20] See, Maurice Winternitz, *History of Indian Literature*, Delhi: Motilal Banarisdass, 1963. Winternitz states that by second century CE, the Mahāyāna Buddhism and the cult of relics and image worship, above all, had reached an advance stage of Buddhist art p. 62.

Gupta period when the Buddha is shown seated on the *vajra-paryarīkāsana or pralampādāsana* like a *cakravarti* [imperial] ruler."[21]

The emergence of the Mahāyāna Buddhism also called Bodhisattavayāna acted as a catalyst in the growth of the Buddha image, with new changes in the doctrinal orientation of Buddhism. In the Mahāyāna, the goal of *nibbāna,* the liberation from the *dukkha*, became a secondary target. The new goal in the Mahāyāna was to cultivate Buddha mind (*bodhicitta*) and to become a Buddha. The belief persisted in the context of Mahāyāna doctrine that there are thousands of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas inhabiting the multiple universes, needing more Buddhas to save them. Buddha's icon as a focal point of concentration, along with the cultivation of moral perfections, would be considered a vital aid to achieving Buddhahood.[22]

By the beginning of the first century CE, among older Mahāsaṃghika and Lokottaravāda schools and in the Mahāyāna, the historical Buddha had become an omniscient being with an immaculate birth. According to Aśvaghoṣa's *Buddha Carita*, the Buddha descended from the Tusita heaven into his mother, Māyāvati's womb, who then gave birth to him from the side, without experiencing pain in the process of delivery.[23] In the Mahāyāna, it is not uncommon to notice a Buddha empowered with miraculous powers. The Mahāyāna Sūtra, *Sukhāvatīvyūha,* states that Amitābha Buddha released a ray of light raising the palm of his hand, which lighted up the whole of universe for Bhikkhu Ānanda to see.[24]

The Buddhas and the Bodhisattvas in Mahāyāna Buddhism became savior gods of their worshippers, not just their teachers, to improve their moral values and chances of salvation. The ideals for lay followers of the Mahāyāna was to worship and have faith in the compassionate Buddha and Bodhisattvas to

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[21] K.D. Bajpai, " Early Buddhist Art: Some Salient Features of Iconography", in *Buddhist Art and Thought,* Kewal Krishan Mittal and Ashvini Agrawal, New Delhi: Harman Publishing House, 1993, pp. 1-11.

[22] Warder, pp. 355-356.

[23] Warder gives the details of the Buddha's miraculous birth and early childhood.

[24] Warder, p. 362.

save them from calamities and to fulfill their wishes for their health and welfare. Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, for instance, helps and offers protection to the worshipers. A believer of the Buddha Amitābha desiring birth in Amitābha's heaven can be reborn in it, but only through his grace. The text *Saddharmapuṇḍarikā* (white lotus of the true doctrine) is replete with description of Buddhas and Bodhisattavas, with all kinds of miracles attributed to them: universal transformation, illuminations, and manifestations of Buddhas from the past.[25] The *Saddharmapuṇḍarikā* illustrates the worship of the Buddha, the omniscient being, who is here to save his devotees and take them to heaven. Another important concept in the Mahāyāna is the transfer of merit from the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to their devotees in order to save them. The existence of the concrete images of Buddhas and Bodhisattavas in the Mahāyāna were meant to facilitate their worship.

The images of the historical Buddha – often referred to as Śākyamuni in Mahāyāna *sūtras* – either in Theravāda or Mahāyāna, generally are not shown as fierce, inspiring awe and terror. The Indian artists attempted to characterize the Buddha's persona by portraying him as calm, contended and peaceful person, above all, as a compassionate being. The artists also wanted to depict the Buddha's towering high rank among gods and human beings, deserving honor and respect.

The images of the Buddha, as earlier stated, began to appear with greater frequency and numbers from the second century CE onwards, although the image first appeared around first century CE. The images are found sculpted free standing in round, or carved in high relief on the walls of the Buddhist monuments, generally making note of Buddha's idealized bodily signs (*lakṣaṇas*), with him standing, sitting mostly cross legged in *yogic* position, and reclining, indicating his final passing away. More important, perhaps, the artists tried to conceptualize and encapsulate in their art work the six

[25] Paul Williams, Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations, London: Rutledge, 1989, pp. 141-156.

perfections (*pāramitā*): generosity, virtue, toleration, energy, meditation and wisdom in the Buddha and Bodhisattvas figures.

The Buddha is depicted as raising his right hand palm, with fingers pointing upwards, indicating his pledge of assurance of safety to mankind; the gesture of touching the earth with his right hand (*bhumī sparṣa mudrā*) symbolizing his summoning the earth to witness his impending awakening. Several other hand gestures (*mudrā)* reveal his compassion and kindness towards all.[26]

The Buddha image shows the Buddha's head with curled hair and in addition, has a raised scull portion called *uṣṇiṣa*, which symbolizes the sun's lighted aura (*sūrya maṇḍala*), indicating phenomenal intellect of the Buddha. An incised spot, originally a tuft of hair, *urṇa,* in between the eye and forehead, supposedly represents the Buddha's supra-human vision, often called 'the Buddha's third eye'. The Buddha images also have elongated ear lobes, indicating the Buddha's supernatural hearing faculty.

The Buddha's tranquil, contended, and half-smiling face, seen on many of his sculptured heads, is evidently meant for depicting him an *arahat*, a person who has attained *nibbāna*, a person liberated from the cycles of reincarnation, who has conquered the flow of desire, greed and ignorance, and who has eliminated the *dukkha*, unhappiness, once and for all. The Buddha's facial expression equally indicates the Buddha as embodiment of qualities of loving kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*) and equanimity (*upekkha*).

In their abilities to reward their devotees in return for their worship, the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas in the Mahāyāna increasingly resemble the wisdom and the powers of the Hindu cosmic and savior gods Viṣṇu and Śiva, and to lesser extent the local deities in India. In the Mahāyāna sūtras, we find the Buddha as a supreme overlord of the universe. Brāhmanic Hinduism in the same period (100-500 CE) was elevating Śiva and Viṣṇu as the creators and rulers of the cosmos. It is not just

[26] See, Benjamin Rowland, *The Art and Architecture of India: Buddhist, Hindus and Jains,* Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963, pp. 91-99. See also, Dietrich Seckel, *The Art of Buddhism,* New York: Crown Publishers, pp. 152-172.

a coincidence that the temples with the images of the cosmic gods such as Śiva, Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa-Vāsudeva, whose worship amongst the followers of Brāhmanic Hinduism crystallized in Sanskrit religious texts devoted to those gods began to appear regularly from the second century onwards.

The emergence of the iconic Buddhas and Bodhisattvas may have prompted the post-Aśokan Brāhmanic Hinduism to fashion its deities with human features. On the other hand, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas helping their devotees, even to the point of finding a place for them in heaven in return for their worship and devotion, may have been to influence of Brāhmanic ideology of god as a savior. The ultimate goal of the Mahāyāna initiate was to cultivate *bodhicitta* and attain Buddhahood, essentially replacing the Theravāda's strivings for personal *nibbāna.* While one of the key religious goals of the followers of the Brāhmanic ideology was to become one with the supreme spirit (universal principle) through meditation and realizing that soul of a being is the same as that of the universal being. The supreme goal of the Mahāyānist too was towards achieving Buddhahood by acquiring merits, through meditation and cultivating wisdom. The net result of the symbiotic relationship between Brāhmanic Hinduism and Buddhism was the exponential growth of image worship in India in the temples and household shrines, irrespective of sectarian and religious differences among Hindus and Buddhists alike.

Image worship and *bhakti* in Hinduism: second century CE to the present

God for Hindus is not just an omnipotent and omniscient being, not always without attributes and inaccessible, but is, in its image form (*murti*), a living being, routinely necessitating worship and devotion. It is the crux of Hindu view of divinity, which is explicitly acknowledged in the Jaimini's *Purvamīmāṃsāsūtra* (IX.I-8), a second century CE text. The deity (*devatā*) possessing physical characteristics (*adhikaraṇa*) is stated in the text as follows:

> The deity possesses a bodily form (*vigrahatva devatā*). The deity really consumes food given as offerings (*devatā bhukṅte*). The deity gets truly satisfied with the offerings (*prasīdati devatā*). The diety rewards the worshipper with the desired fruit (*pritā satī phalaṃ prayachati devatā*). The deity can be owner of property (*arthapati devatā*).[27]

Sontheimer, however, equates these characteristics of the deities as representing folk beliefs. That the deities are real entities, approachable and down to earth, receiving worship and gifts from the devotees and claiming ownership rights over land, is very much a dominant ethos of the later *Purāṇas* as well as *Āgama* texts. In that sense, the statement found in the Jaimini's *Purvamīmāṃsāsūtra* might be regarded as mainstream Brāhmanic Hinduism's reason for performing a *pujā* ritual. The statement also seems to synchronize with the actual presence of the images of gods and goddesses of Brāhmanic Hinduism emerging in the second century CE, the date assigned to the Jaimini's *Purvamīmāṃsāsūtra*.

The deities in the Brāhmanic Hinduism's texts from the second century onwards are depicted as interacting with their worshippers: blessing them, saving them from the calamities, and giving them rewards of wealth and power in return for their worship and gift-offerings. The worship of a deity at home or in a temple is generally distinguished by a *bhakti* mode, which is an act of intense, pure, and unsullied devotion and love felt for god. More important, the worshippers though the *pujā* ritual are shown as eager to merge with the deity, to be one with it, to experience spiritual ecstasy.

In the scholarly discourses on *bhakti*, the close affiliation that exists between *bhakti* and image worship is not given the attention that it deserves. The scholars generally tend to focus on *bhakti* saints and their poems, their interpretations of past Hindu theological works, and the hagiographical accounts of their saintly life. The emotional intensity of their poems is also

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[27] The translation by Gunther-Dietz Sontheimer, "Hinduism, the five components and their interaction", in *Hinduism Reconsidered*, Gunther-Dietz Sontheimer and Herman Kulke (eds.) New Delhi: Manohar, 1997, p.315.

the subject of scholarly discourse. In the present paper, the intertwining relationship existing between *pujā* of an image (*murti*) and *bhakti* is suggested as key to understanding the personal rapport, which a devotee establishes with the image of a deity. Undoubtedly, the intensity of meditation on an image of the deity with total *bhakti* plays a vital role toward setting up unity with god.

That the loving devotion of god is an important element in *bhakti* is well illustrated by Nārada's *Bhakti Sūtras* and their commentaries. Both the texts in Sanskrit were composed between twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The emergence of the Sūtras suggest that the Brāhman writers were busy appropriating and legitimizing the *bhakti* ideology's popularity in medieval India, which was already known to the people through *bhakti's* vernacular expressions in Tāmil in Tāmil Nādu from the seventh century CE and little later from the twelfth century in Marāṭhī in Mahārāṣṭra. Nārada in his *Bhakti Sūtras* raises the status of *bhakti* to its new height.

> *Bhakti* is the highest quantifiable love for god alone. It is an unconditional love for god. It is a termination of all actions in the service of god. Distinctions based on caste, or learning, or family or wealth or achievement is non-existent in *bhakti*. *Bhakti* is the end of totality of knowledge (*jnāna*). It is end of all action (*karma*) and the end of all meditative efforts (*yoga*). *Bhakti* is an end in itself.[28]

It is essential that the worship of the deities should be conducted with the right spirit of commitment and aptitude. Prior to the Muslim conquest of Mahārāṣṭra beginning in the second decade of the 14th century, an important *bhakti* saint, Jñānadev (1275-1296), is shown as disapproving flippant behaviour and insincere attitudes of an ignorant person worshiping several deities indiscriminately. In his Marāṭhī commentary on *Bhagvat Gitā*, Jñānadeva cynically observes

[28] See, Swami Prabhavananda, *Nārada's Divine Love: The Bhakti Sutra*, Hollywood: Vedanta Press, 1971, pp. 25-30.

how oddly an ignorant person has the habit of worshiping several deities, some deities set up inside his home and others stationed elsewhere, but does this only for seeking worldly gains. According to Jñānadeva the person "is like an unfaithful wife who behaves lovingly to her husband in order to go on associating with her lover". Jñānadeva fears that the individual, despite his incessant image worship, might not be able to focus on true love of god. Jñānadev states:

> When a self absorbed and ignorant person inordinately attached to his wife and family, worships god, he does so because of an ulterior motive material goal to gain money. Should he fail to gain his object through worship, he gives up worshiping god, calling it an illusion.
>
> As a peasant cultivates one field and then another, he sets up one deity after another, with the same intensity of devotion with which he had worshiped the first deity. He follows a *guru*, whom he considers eminent. He learns some *mantras* from him, ignoring everything else. He makes an image of god and sets up in a corner of his house while he himself goes pilgrimages to worship other gods and goddeses. He worships God daily, and on various occasions he worships his lineage deity. Again at special time he offers his devotion to other gods. In his house is god's shrine, but he pays his vows to other gods and on the day of *srāddha* memorial ceremonies for his father, he worships his ancestors. He feels as much devotion for God on the eleventh day of the month (*ekādaśī*) as he does for the serpent god on the day of Nāga Pañcamī with the same intensity. At dawn, on the fourth day, he will worship the god Gaṇeśa, and, on the fourteenth, he will declare his devotion to goddess Durgā. On the ninth day of the worship of goddess Caṇḍī, he relinquishes his daily observances to god, and offers his devotion to that goddess, and on Sunday he offers food at the feet of Bhairava. Again on Monday, he goes to the temple of Śiva and there offers leaves of *bel* tree; in such ways he shows devotion to all manner of gods. In this way he worships continuously with never a

> moment of silence, as a whore who sits at the city gate. He who thus seeks to follow any and every deity may be tagged as ignorance incarnated.[29]

Ekanātha (1533-1599), a prolific writer, and one of the a best-known *bhakti* exponents of Mahārāṣṭra, in his *Ekanāthi Bhāgavat*, a Marāṭhī gloss on the *Bhāgvata Purāṇa*, expresses moving transformation of a devotee, who concentrates on God, remembering, reciting his name constantly, meditating on his image form (*mūrta svarūpa*), and ending in emotional outburst and mystical awakening.

Ekanātha, in fact, graphically describes the euphoria induced by passionate *bhakti*.

> Incessantly calling upon God's name, because of God's doings, a *bhakta* (devotee) becomes madly entwined in his yearnings for God. His whole self undergoes a transformation. Tears flow from his eyes. His body shudders intensely. His breathing grows heavy. Acutely, he is spiritually awakened. He chokes with euphoria. Goose bumps cover his entire body. His eyelids remain half open. His face becomes expressionless. Repeating God's name constantly, he is overcome by love of God. Uncontrollably, he starts weeping. The weeping turns into a frenzied laughter. He laughs and weeps at the same time... Ecstatically, dancing, he starts singing songs, extolling God. Ending his praise to God, with a clear voice, he proclaims, "There is no duality that I experience. I am the only truth there is in the world. I am both the singer as well as one who hears that singing. I am that song.[30]

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[29] Translated with minor modification in V. G. Pradhan, *Jnāneshvari,* London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1969, XIII, verses, 805-821, pp. 77-78. God in this case refers to God Kṛṣṇa of *Bhagavat Gitā.*

[30] L. R. Pangarkar (ed.), *Ekanāthi Bhāgvat,* and Mumbai: Nirnaya Sagar Press, 1909, III, 589-602. See R. D. Ranade, *Mysticism in India: Poets saints of Maharashtra*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983, p. 251. Cf. the *Bhāgvata Purāṇa*'s Sanskrit version (XI, 3, 32): *kvacid rudantyacyutacinatayā kvacid dhasanti nanadanti vadanty alukikāḥ, nṛyanti gāyanti anuśīlayantyajaṃ bhavanti tūṣṇīṃ paraṃ etya nirvṛttāḥ.* "Contemplating God, they [the devotees] burst into laughter, express joy, chatter—they are

In the context of *bhakti*, Eknāth distinguishes between the *saguṇa*, the discernable qualities of a deity in its image shape, and the *nirguṇa*, the non-perceptive qualities of a deity in its abstract and amorphous form. According to Eknāth, a newly initiated person needs a concrete object, such as an image of a deity, to focus on for *bhakti* to succeed.

> The *saguṇa*, the tangible qualities of god, in its image form, is easier to comprehend than the *nirguṇa*, the quality-less, abstract, essence of god. ...Persons seeking god, with proper insights and love, should focus their minds on *saguṇa*, the tangible qualities of god. It is far easier to invoke god who is seen than an unseen one. Image worship is meant for one who cannot realize god's presence in all beings.[31]

In another instance, Ekanātha explicates the use of nine senses (*indriyas*) in worshipping a god's image. In fact, Ekanātha is attempting to sketch a mode of worship in its totality.

> The 'mind' of a *bhakta* meditates on god. The 'ear' listens to the words praising god's immeasurable compassion. The 'tongue' is engaged in uttering god's name. The *bhaktas* 'feet' walk towards the temple where the image is set up. The *bhakta's* 'hands' are engaged in the worship of god's image. The 'nose' smells the aroma of flowers and the *tulsi* leaves, with which the god is worshipped. The discarded flowers, the remains of the worship, are placed on top of 'head' in reverence. The water consecrated by the touch of the god's 'feet' finds its way into the 'mouth'.[32]

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beyond the world (*alukikāḥ*). They start dancing, singing in praise of god, and they lapse into silence (*bhavanti tūṣṇīṃ*), having reached the highest one, they are at peace". Ekanātha's powerful gloss in Marāṭhī on the *Bhāgvat Purāṇa*, in its substantive description, appears to project the euphoric state of a *bhakta* (devotee) as a result of the latter's meditation on god's image. It does not appear to be an abstract description of a *bhakta's* mental and physical state induced merely by repeating and thinking about god.

[31] *Ekanāthi Bhāgavat*, II. 298-303. See R. D. Ranade, *Mysticism in India*, p. 250.

[32] Ibid. 346-347.

Elsewhere Ekanātha articulates the *yogic* like trance (*ekāgratā*). The feeling of oneness with the image through *yoga* that the worshipper experiences. The emotional intensities felt by the *bhakta* towards an image of a deity in a household shrine or in a temple may be compared to the intensity with which the sacred images were imagined and viewed by a devout Christian in a Church in medieval times appreciating a medieval religious painting or sculpture. Image worship is a spiritual solace that allows the *bhakta* to access god.[33]

Murtī Pujā: image worship

The ritual of *pujā* provides Hindus in their household setting or in temples a distinct opportunity to communicate with a diety in its image form. In a temple, the priest is instrumental in giving devotees direct access to the persons who attend the *pujā* performed in a temple, up to six prescribed times, during the day and evening. However, most devotees regard one time attendance at temple *pujā* as adequate. Also an act of a *darśana*, seeing the image of a deity of a deity in a temple and saluting it gives to a devotee a spiritually charged, life-rejuvenating experience. Of course, the devotees have an opportunity to communicate with god during a *pujā* ritual that they perform daily or periodically at home. The images of the deities chosen for the *pujā* performed in a temple or at home, are considered real and breathing. The deities are not distant and abstract entities, their *pujā* makes it possible for a worshipper to communicate directly with the divine.

In several orthodox, practicing and ritualistic, Brāhman homes in several regions of India, more so in Tāmil Nāḍu, Keralā, Karnāṭaka, and Āndhra Pradeśa, Telaṅgaṇa and Mahārāṣṭra, worship of an image of a deity is enacted daily or weekly, the whole procedure lasting less than an hour. Generally, a professional priest performs the *pujā* for those

[33] See, R.D. Ranade, *Mysticism in India: The poet-saints of Maharashtra*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983, pp. 247-251.

households who can afford his services, more so on special occasions and to perform more complex rituals. A modern day example of an orthodox Brāhman householder's performance of a *pujā* rite in Mahārāṣṭra, conducted at his home, should suffice. There would be, however, regional variations in India with regard to the details of the household *pujā* as described below.

> The Brāhman male householder, having taken a bath, naked to the vest, wearing only a loincloth, his sacred thread over his left soldier, is ready to do the *murti pujā* (image worship), with all the necessary equipment assembled in advance, such as spoons, cups, pots, flowers, and other items required for the *pujā*. While engaged in the *pujā* mode, the Brāhman, since he will be in direct contact with the deity, is in a state of ritual purity, not to be polluted by the touch even of his immediate family members, including his wife and children. He removes the main image of the deity and subsidiary images if there are any, kept in the center of his miniature wooden replica of a temple-shrine.
>
> First, he gives the image a head bath using pure objects such as milk, yogurt, and honey, followed by pouring water over the image from a silver jar. He then wipes the image lovingly, dressing it with fresh and suitable silk or cotton garments and adorning it with flowers, ornaments, and applying sacred marks to the image with sandalwood paste. He then places the image on the center spot of the shrine from where he had removed it. While busy conducting these activities, he keeps on chanting *mantras* in praise of the deity in Sanskrit, supplemented, occasionally, by the hymns from medieval *bhakti* poet-saints of Mahārāṣṭra like Jñāneśvar, Nāmdev, Ekanātha, Rāmdas, and Tukārām in Marathi. He then signals his wife to bring food for the deity. She places near her husband, without touching him, the cooked vegetarian food in a covered metal platter, and one or two locally obtainable fruit, such as guavas, apple bananas and oranges, which will be consumed later as a *prasāda* by all in the family. The food, which is offered to the deity, is called the *naivedya*; it becomes a *prasāda*, the food

> consumed by the deity, regarded as divine grace of the deity, apt for consumption by the devotees.
> With a non-stop flow of Sanskrit *mantras* (some from the Vedas) addressed to the deity, the next stage of the *pujā* is the called *dipārdhana*, which is an act of waving lighted oil lamp fitted on a platter before an image. Directly facing the image, the Brāhman waves the lamp with his right hand, and with the left, he keeps on ringing a small metal bell. Next, in the closing fire-ritual (*ārati*), he burns the camphor placed on the platter, which emits bright light and fire instantly which he first waves before the deity and then presents it to the other family members of the household to partake of it, usually his wife and children; it compliments the act of waving of lamp. During the entire *dipārdhana* and *ārati* procedure, the Brāhman senses a satiated feeling of oneness, however, fleetingly, with the deity through fire, light, and the din of ringing bells. The lamp is then circulated among members of the family. Putting their right hands over the lamp and moving them with a circular motion, the family members inwardly absorb light, fire, and smoke stemming from the lamp. In the process, they, too, experience, momentarily, a sense of harmony with the deity.
> To signal the completion of the *pujā*, the Brāhman pays homage to the deity by prostrating on the ground, facing it, with all his eight limbs (*aṣṭāṅga namaskāra*). The householder after competing the ritual of *pujā* becomes an ordinary person and is ready to carry on with other daily chores.[34]

The structure of *pujā* ritual for an image of the deity performed in a house, either by a householder or a priest, with

[34] The above annotated account is a standard procedure of a household *pūjā* in Mahārāṣṭra, performed in an orthodox, ritualistic Brahman household. Its description is mostly based on personal observation of the author. There is a caveat to my description: most Brahmans of Mahārāṣṭra do not follow this elaborate procedure. Some will make do with a shortened version of the *pūjā* ritual or ignore it altogether. But most will say a prayers address to the deities, both in the morning before proceeding to their daily chores and at night before going to bed.

modification, is replicated in an elaborate manner in the major temples of India having larger revenues and endowments from their patrons and devotees. The details of the temple worship were standardized in the *Āgama* texts from six hundred CE onwards, with periodic revisions. Generally, in the renowned Hindu temples of India, the deities, in the inner sanctum of the temple, will be dressed in costly garments, preferably silk, adorned with valuable jewelry, and covered from head to toe with flower garlands. Several full-time professional priests would be continuously engaged in chanting away the Sanskrit *mantras* in praise of the deity during various stages of the *pujā* ritual. Drumming and playing of musical instruments by the temple musicians, adopting the melodies, tempo and styles prescribed in the *Āgamas*. Ringing of larger bells during the *pujā* is yet another recurring fixture. The waving of the platter fitted with five lamps (*pañcārtī*) before the deity, instead of one lamp, would be one of the highlights of the temple *pujā*. Burning of the camphor on a larger platter emits powerful burst of light. The devotees, too, are eager to participate in the *āratī* ritual to experience a close encounter with god through fire and light, especially when they encounter sudden burst of light, when the camphor is ignited giving a two to three seconds of intense fire. In an already charged atmosphere of the inner sanctum of the temple that houses the deity, the total effect, personally experienced by the author, is overwhelming and the devotees experience a movement of divine presence. The temples generally announce the timing of the *ārati* in advance and the devotees make special efforts to be present at the *āratī* sessions. The food and sanctified water mixed with other pure liquid objects such as milk and honey, offered initially to the deity (*naivedya)* in the *pujā* procedure, when consumed by the deity, becomes the *prasāda*, food eaten and blessed by the god. It is shared among the devotees and performing priests who are present on the occasion.

In all likelihood, the worship of deities (*murti pujā*) tightened deities' hold on the population of India with greater frequency after second and third centuries of Common Era. A vast body of sacred literature in Sanskrit produced by the Brahman literati in

Sanskrit that emerged from the second and third centuries CE began to transform many abstract and aniconic Hindu gods and goddesses, into iconic figures, who assumed human and superhuman image-forms on earth. The gods, in the popular mind, and according to the Brahmanic literature like Purāṇas, save the earth from falling into anarchy (*adharma*), save people from the impending calamities and bringing them prosperity. Starting with fourth century CE, Hindu iconographical representation of the deities becomes incredibly sophisticated, depicting deities' different personalities, miraculous powers, moods and functions.

With the resurgent Brahmanic Hinduism, numerous Hindu deities emerged in their image forms and were made accessible to the urban and rural population of India. Prominent among them were the god: Śiva, Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva, Viṣṇu, and the goddesses: Durgā, Saraswatī, Lakṣmī. Similar cluster of deities, some with different local names, appeared in South India. Increasingly from the fourth century CE, the temples began to be built to house the deities. Artistic merit of the temples aside, through *pujā*, the devotees were given direct access to the deities residing in the temples. The devotees went to the temples to be nearer to their deities out of deep-seated devotion, seeking oneness with them as well asking them for pragmatic favors such as wealth and prosperity and freedom from the calamities.

Āgama (tradition) and *Bhakti*

The quintessential Brāhmanic *Āgama* texts (600-1200 CE) are largely responsible for continuation of essential and codified Brāhmanic Hinduism's image worship (*murti pujā*) tradition more than any other body of sacred literature emanating from Ancient India. The Śaivite, Vaiṣṇavite and Śākta *Āgama* texts, even now in use, systematically demonstrate how a newly sculpted image of a deity, made according to the specifications of the texts, is installed in a temple as a replacement for the old worn out one, or for setting it up in a newly built temple. In an elaborate ritual, the presiding priest invokes the deity, chanting

mantras, to come from the heavenly sphere and dwell in the image. Deeply immersing himself in communicating with the deity and literally breathing life into it, the priest induces the deity to materialize in the image. Only when the priest completes the "life-giving" procedure, the newly activated, live, and energized deity's image is formally installed in the inner sanctum of the temple for worship. When a devotee worships an image of a deity in a temple, he or she does so with awareness that the deity facing him or her is the real, live image of a god.[35]

It is noteworthy that the Vedas are regarded as essential part of the ceremony of the installation and worship of an image as described in the *Āgamas*. The recitation of the Vedic *mantras* during the worship indicates an extraordinary, unbroken, continuum of Brahmanic Hinduism from the Vedic times onwards to the present. Even today, the Vedas constitute a vital part of the *pujā* rituals in the major pilgrimage centers and temple complexes of India in the North and South. Most Brahman householders in their domestic *puja* tend to use a smattering of the texts from the Vedas.

The Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava (Pañcarata) and Śākta *Āgamas'* focus is not just on the images of deities. The *Āgama* texts deal with entire spectrum of Hindu religious activities. It seems to have a unique holistic view of Brahmanic Hinduism in theory and practice. The *Āgamas* are classified in four broad categories. Under the category of the *Jñāna*, for example, we find several Indian philosophical traits that define Śaṅkara's absolute monism (*advaita*) and Rāmājunā's qualified monism (*viṣiṣṭa advaita*) and *bhedā bheda,* meaning any variations and computations of Indian thoughts (*darśana*) suited to the local regional cultures. Under the category of the *Yoga*, the methods of concentration are meticulously defined, even the ultimate *kuṇḍalini yoga,* the enlightenment *yoga*. Intense meditation on a single object (*ekāgratā*) is regarded as metal preparedness to experience godhead through his image form. The *kriyā* category

[35] For the installation rituals, see, H. Daniel Smith," Pratiṣṭhā" in, *Agama and Silpa*, K.K. A. Venkatachari (ed.), Bombay: Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, 1984, pp. 50-68.

refers to an act of formation of a sacred space for a temple, its architectural plan and its construction. The *Arcā* category of the *Āgamas* explicates on the installation procedures (*pratiṣṭha*) of images in a temple, and the technical details concerning the *pujā* of an image performed by priests.

Concluding remarks

Both iconic and aniconic art forms of the Hindu deities, and those of the Buddha and Bodhisattva, may or may not confirm to the ideals of beauty of non believers, the true believers internalize the spirit embedded in them. Hindus, especially, do not perceive a sacred image of a god as stationary art object, but a real breathing body to be revered, loved and adored. The initial act of paying respect to the image of a deity is called *darśana,* literally, seeing, observing and internalizing the image. The image's spiritual content is as important as its artistic merit in the eyes of a worshipper. Colman's observation that there is no difference between aesthetics and spirituality is verifiable by the experiences of Hindu devotees engaged in image worship.

A deity singled out for domestic *pujā*, goes through a process of highly stylized ritual action: the sanctification of image, the chanting of sacred *mantras*, the hymns of praise, offering of food, waving of lighted fire constitutes a total religious experience. The essential aspect of a *pujā* is not congregational worship, but an individual's adulation and worship of a deity. As a concluding act of a *pujā*, the ritual of *dipārdhana* and *ārati* are performed, involving waving of the light before the deity, a burning of camphor on a platter emitting bright flare, which is waved before a devotee to partake of it. Through the camphor flare, a devotee experiences a fleeting sense of oneness with the deity. Not only the devotee sees and seeks oneness with the image as deity during the *ārati* ritual, but also the deity is understood to see the worshipper becoming one with it. The experience could be replicated in a bigger temple setting. However, the structure and function of the worship, although

conducted by a professional temple priests, essentially remains the same as the worship performed at home by a householder.

In dealing with the Buddhist and Hindu image worship, we pointed out the supreme status assigned to the Buddha in the early Buddhist Canonical texts (400-300 BCE), which, unequivocally, ranked the Buddha above the Post-Vedic pantheon of gods in Buddha's time. In order to assert its identity as a powerful religion patronized by the ruling powers of the day, first by emperor Aśoka and then by the Indo-Greeks, the Śakas and the Kuṣāṇas, the Buddhist began further transforming the superior rank and status of the Buddha into a concrete form of his image. Buddhism, we may point out, was in fierce competition with Post Aśokan Brāhmanic Hinduism, and needed innovative measures to assert its popularity with the masses. The Buddha and Bodhisattva images were also given a boost by the emergence of the Mahāyāna with omnipotent and omniscient Buddhas, with Buddhahood as its ultimate object. The images of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas helped consolidate Buddhists' position against equally aggressive Brāhmanic Hinduism. It is not a coincidence that images of the gods of Brāhmanic Hinduism, also began to appear in great numbers in India.

Our synoptic survey vindicates that in Hinduism, whenever there is a close encounter between a worshipper and a deity in its image form in a *pujā* setting, the deity manifests itself as a living and energetic entity. The worshipper, via the fire, experiences a sense of oneness with the diety, however, temporarily. But the worshipper must first come equipped with self-preparedness; the intense *bhakti* for god is a prerequisite for experiencing god.

Interestingly, the ancient *Āgama* texts (600-1200 CE), although the actual *Āgama* traditions may go back to centuries before 600 CE, makes it clear that an installation of an image of deity in a temple entails inviting a deity to materialize right into an image thereby making it possible for the priest to "breath life into it". The *Āgamas*, in an unbroken and elaborate manner, have preserved a very ancient Brāhmanic Hinduism's ritual of

installation of an image of a deity and its proper worship in all its details.

For a devout Hindu, an appreciation of religious art cannot be divorced from worship of images of Hindus gods and goddesses, the worship, which is conducted through a *pujā* ritual intermingled with *bhakti* sentiments. To reiterate, Hindus regard the images as living and communicable entities, and, by nature, not inert or static. Finally, once can even venture to claim that a Hindu's aptitude for focused meditation (*ekāgrata*) on the images of deities, always with heightened sense of appreciation, intermingled with love and devotion (*bhakti),* can be extended to include non-religious objects of art.