

# **The World's First Biography of the Buddha:**

## **A Series of Bas-Relief Stone Carvings Predating Buddha Images**

In India there are bas-relief stone carvings of the Buddha's biography which date back to an early period. They were created between 300 and 600 years after the passing of the Buddha, and were discovered at three landmarks: Bharhut Stupa in Northern India, Sanchi Stupas in Central India, and Amaravati Stupas in Southern India. These stone carvings were created not with images of the Buddha, but with symbolisms that represent the Buddha's teachings: the absence of his image in the scenes, the footprints, the swastika, the fire pillar, and the triratna—the ancient symbol of the Triple Gem.

Buddhadasa found these stone-carved images extremely interesting and significant. After carrying out research and visiting India in 1955, he started to create five sets of replicas at Suan Mokkhabalarama Monastery, Chaiya, in Surat Thani Province. The Sculpture Hall was built and ten monks worked on the replicas, enlarging the many images that had been collected, including those sent from the British Museum in London. They were carved in three-dimensional bas-relief on clay and cast in cement.

One set is on display at the Spiritual Theatre of Suan Mokkhabalarama. Another set was given to Wat U-mong in Chiang Mai, and three sets are kept in the living quarters and the Sculpture Hall at Suan Mokkhabalarama. Some images relating to **the Birth, growth, self-practice, Enlightenment, teachings, and the Great Decease of the Buddha** are on display at the Buddhadasa Indapanno Archives. These help us learn about the life of the Buddha, which was filled with purity, wisdom, and loving compassion. They also reflect the ability of people in the early days of Buddhism to understand and focus on the true meaning of Dhamma rather than material objects such as Buddha statues.

Buddhism teaches us to not become attached to objects, people, or a self. Therefore, we must not cling to Buddha images forged in various styles as objects of worship and neglect the teachings of the Buddha, which focus on developing self-awareness and wisdom. It is unfortunate that in recent times Buddha images have overshadowed the Dhamma and the Buddha.

**Text:** *Biography of the Buddha in Stone Bas-Reliefs*, a picture book described by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu



## SCULPTURE 1

### **Lotuses Blossom in the Vase of Fertility**

Symbol of the Buddha's Birth

*(Amaravati Style, Andhra Period, 500–600 B.E.)*

Blooming lotus flowers, buds, and pods, together with other flowers and fruits in the vase of prosperity symbolize the birth of the Buddha. The water in the vase represents the Dhamma, while the blossoming of the lotus cluster represents the joyfulness and virtue of the Buddha's birth. This vase, referred to as '*Purna Kalasa*,' can be found in Thai paintings.



## SCULTURE 2

### Devas Invoke the Bodhisattva's Reincarnation as the Buddha

*(Sanchi Style, Sunga Period, 400–500 B.E.)*

In the realm of Tusita Heaven, devas, or divine beings, gather round the Bodhisattva, who is represented by an empty dais under the Bodhi tree, to invoke his reincarnation into the womb of Queen Sri Mahamaya, who is reclining in a meditative posture with devas tending to her by her side. As the sign of his reincarnation, the Bodhisattva appears in the Queen's dream as the white elephant.



## SCULPTURE 3

### The King's Procession

They come to welcome the newborn prince to the city of Kapilavastu.

*(Sanchi Style, Sunga Period, 400–500 B.E.)*

In a royal procession consisting of elephants, horses, chariots, and rejoicing troops, the king sets out to Lumbini Park to welcome his newborn prince and return together to the city of Kapilavastu. Musicians march ahead, and flags are decorated with *triratna*—the mark of the Triple Gem, the most sacred reminder to all Buddhists. The chariot is shaded by a royal canopy and decorated by a garland. Images of people's houses, roofs, walls, city gate, forests, people, soldiers as well as devas can be seen in this sculpture, serving as an important archaeological find dated 2,000 years ago.



## SCULPTURE 4

### Blooming Lotus Representing the Buddha's Birth

Welcomed at birth with four triratna, four srivatsa, and eight blossoming lotuses.

*(Bharhut Style, Sunga Period, 300–400 B.E.)*

The large lotus in the middle is the symbol of the Buddha's birth. It has sixteen petals equal to the sixteen stages of *Anapanasati*, or the meditation practice with the focus on mindfulness of breathing. The sixteen stages of Anapanasati are divided into four quartets of teachings called *Satipatthana*, or the four foundations of mindfulness – awareness of the body, feelings, mind, and mental phenomena. Satipatthana provides practice guidance from basic to top levels with the highest goal of *Nibbana*, or Enlightenment.

The outer circle comprises different symbols which are four triratna, four srivatsa and eight blossoming lotuses. *Triratna*, or the mark of the lotus blossoming in a circle with three flames above, represents the Triple Gem. *Srivatsa*, or the mark shaped like a fan with five tips, symbolizes the qualities of the noblest human being. The numbers 4 and 8 represent the central teachings of Buddhism—the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path respectively.



## SCULPTURE 5

### **The Birth of Young Prince Siddhattha**

The Queen's dream prophesies Prince Siddhattha's greatness.

*(Amaravati Style, Andhra Period, 400–700 B.E.)*

This sculpture consists of four connected parts. It starts with Queen Sri Mahamaya asleep and having a dream in the top right corner, and then four Brahmanas make predictions from the queen's dream in the top left corner. All of them show two fingers, foretelling that the prince would later become either the world's greatest emperor or the Enlightened One.

The lower right corner depicts the Queen giving birth while holding a branch of the sal tree. Here four devas are holding neatly folded cloth to receive the infant prince Siddhattha, who is represented by the two tiny footprints on the cloth. In the lower left corner, the baby prince, depicted as the footprints under the royal canopy, is presented to a tutelary yaksha (a non-human being who guards the forest or a city), who appears and pays homage to the prince.



## SCULPTURE 6

### Prince Siddhattha's Excursion through City Streets

He experiences hardship and misery for the first time.  
*(Sanchi Style, Sunga Period, 400–500 B.E.)*

Prince Siddhattha in his youth ventures out into the city in his chariot. The royal canopy with a garland above an empty chariot represents the young prince. As he travels through the city streets, he witnesses ageing, sickness, and death for the first time and reflects on the miseries veiled from him in his sheltered, happy palace life. He also encounters an ascetic and contemplates true happiness and suffering. This experience leads him to embrace a life of asceticism.

## SCULPTURE 7

### The Great Renunciation of Prince Siddhattha

Assisted by Devas, he leaves the city gates for the Great Renunciation and his horse is led back to the city.

*(Sanchi Style, Sunga Period, 400–500 B.E.)*

The Great Renunciation of Prince Siddhattha is depicted in a series of images starting from the left, where devas, or celestial beings, are carrying his horse, and a servant is carrying the royal canopy. Then in the middle the royal canopy placed over the empty horseback represents Prince Siddhattha.

On the right side upon the journey end, the horse is being lowered. Then by the Anoma River, the royal canopy shades two footprints, which represent Prince Siddhattha after the renouncing. The same horse, no longer being carried by devas, heads back to the city with Channa, the Prince's servant.





## SCULPTURE 8

### The Great Renunciation

Prince Siddhattha leaves the palace.

*(Early Amaravati Style, Andhra Period, 400-700 B.E.)*

Leaving behind the comforts and luxuries of palace life, Prince Siddhattha sets out to live as an ascetic with four devas, or celestial beings, leading his way. The four devas represent the gods of the four directions. The empty seat on horseback for which a man is holding the royal canopy represents Prince Siddhattha.



## SCULPTURE 9

### The Great Renunciation

Prince Siddhattha is accompanied by rejoicing devas and nagas.  
*(Late Amaravati Style, Andhra Period, 400-700 B.E.)*

The empty horseback under the royal canopy represents Prince Siddhattha, while four devas, or celestial beings, are supporting the horse's feet. One special feature of this sculpture is that there are two dancing naga (serpent-headed) figures; one in front and one behind the horse. The dance posture of nagas is commonly found in this period of Amaravati art and is now part of the traditional Thai long drum dance.



## SCULPTURE 10

### Prince Siddhattha's Hair is Taken to the Celestial Realm

Various Devas Paying Homage.

*(Amaravati Style, Andhra Period, 400-700 B.E.)*

Prince Siddhattha's hair, cut on the day he decided to leave the worldly life, is taken to the celestial realm. The devas or celestial beings exhibit a variety of graceful bodily movements, each with his own unique form. Owing to its intricacy and fine detail, this sculpture is highly praised for its magnificence even in today's Western art circles.



## SCULPTURE 11

### Receiving Alms from Sujata

Various poses of Sujata offering fine milk rice to Prince Siddhattha.

*(Amaravati Style, Andhra Period, 400-700 B.E.)*

This sculpture shows different stages of Sujata offering alms of milk rice, starting from approaching Prince Siddhattha, making the offering, paying homage, and leaving. The swastika mark at the base of the Bodhi Tree represents the Prince in a sitting position under this tree by the Niranjana River. The milk rice is rice cooked with milk and sweetened with honey—a true vegetarian meal, suitable for an offering.



## SCULPTURE 12

### Obstruction of Mara

Demons and seductive women surround the Bodhi Throne.

*(Amaravati Style, Andhra Period, 400 - 700 B.E.)*

Mara, or evil and temptation power personified as fierce demons, flirtatious women, and wicked spirits, surrounds Prince Siddhattha's meditation seat at the base of the Bodhi Tree, also called the 'Bodhi Throne.' The swastika symbol above the cushion represents Prince Siddhattha sitting in meditation, finding a way to attain Enlightenment by the bank of the Niranjana River in Uruvela, Bodhgaya.

Despite all the disturbances obstructing his meditation, the prince has resolved not to move from his seat until he attains full Enlightenment no matter what it takes, even if his flesh and blood were to dry out and his body shriveled to skin and bones.



## SCULPTURE 13

### Enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree in Bodhgaya

The Bodhi Tree is adorned with jewel garlands; devas and people celebrating.

*(Bharhut Style)*

Worshippers pay homage to the Buddha after his Enlightenment. The empty throne and triratna (lotus blossoming in a circle with three flames above) represent Prince Siddhattha sitting at the base of the Bodhi Tree. The branches are adorned with jewel garlands and devas are celebrating the Buddha's Enlightenment—insight into the cause of suffering and the cessation of suffering, also known as *Paticcasamuppada*, or the Dependent Origination.



## SCULPTURE 14

### The Buddha's First Sermon

Devas gather at the Isipatana Deer Park  
(Sanchi Style, Sunga Period, 400–500 B.E.)

At the Isipatana Deer Park, *devas*, or celestial beings, gather amongst the deer to hear the Buddha's first sermon, *Dhammacakkappavattanasutta*. The empty throne represents the Buddha, while *Dhammacakka* or the Wheel of Truth represents the teaching he delivers on this day: the Four Noble Truths, consisting of *Dukha* – suffering, *Samudaya* – the cause of suffering, *Nirodha* – the cessation of suffering, and *Magga* – the Noble Eightfold Path or the Middle Path, which leads to the cessation of suffering.



## SCULPTURE 15

### Teaching the Three Jatila Brothers in Uruvela

Fire worshippers become disciples of the Buddha.

*(Bharhut Style)*

After his Enlightenment, the Buddha sets out to teach. He goes to a large ascetic group residing at the bank of the Niranjana River. It is led by three brothers who are *Jatilas*, or fire worshippers. The three brothers and their 1,000 followers all become disciples of the Buddha after hearing his teaching.



## SCULPTURE 16

### Gathering for a Dhamma Sermon

The Buddha teaches devas, people, and ascetics  
(Amaravati Style)

Devas, people, and ascetics gather around the empty throne, paying homage to the Buddha and listening to his Dhamma teachings. On the seat of the throne lies a cushion with a swastika. Behind the throne is a pillar surrounded with flames, with a *triratna* (lotus blossoming in a circle with three flames above) at the top. All these symbols represent the Buddha.



## SCULPTURE 17

### Blessing Young Prince Rahula with Noble Treasures

Yasodhara brings Son Rahula to seek the throne; the Buddha ordains him as the first novice monk.

*(Amaravati Style)*

When the Buddha visits his relations in the city of Kapilavastu, his former wife Princess Yasodhara presents to him their son Prince Rahula, to formally request the throne. Instead, the Buddha offers Rahula the greatest treasure of all—noble treasure— by offering to ordain him.

King Suddhodana, the Buddha's father, is greatly grieved, as there would be no one to inherit the throne. He then pleads with the Buddha that whoever wishes to be ordained should first seek permission from their parents. Thus starts this regulation. Nevertheless, Prince Rahula becomes the first *samanera*, or novice monk.

The Buddha is represented by various symbols: the throne with a swastika symbol on the cushion, the footprints below the throne, and the flaming pillar with a triratna (lotus blossoming in a circle with three flames above) at the top.



## SCULPTURE 18

### **Taming Nalagiri the Elephant with Loving Kindness**

The Buddha pacifies a dangerous drunken elephant.

*(Amaravati Style, Andhra Period, 400–700 B.E.)*

Devadatta, a cousin and the wicked disciple of the Buddha, misleads King Ajatasatru of the city of Rajagaha and makes him want to harm and kill the Buddha. At Devadatta's instigation, the King has the elephant Nalagiri made drunk and violent, then sets loose Nalagiri in the Buddha's direction during his alms round in the city streets.

The Buddha, however, wins over the elephant with his loving compassion. The elephant stops attacking people and lies down peacefully before the Buddha, represented in the sculpture by footprints and a flaming pillar with a triratna (lotus blossoming in a circle with three flames above) on top. The event is depicted in a series of images starting from a rampaging Nalagiri on the left to the pacified elephant before the Buddha on the right.



## SCULPTURE 19

### **Angulimala Meets the Buddha**

The violent murderer Angulimala is transformed by the Buddha's Teachings.

*(Amaravati Style)*

This sculpture displays subsequent movements of Angulimala, the son of a court advisor of King Pasenadi of Kosala. Angulimala has been tricked by his teacher, a prominent guru of Taxila, to kill one thousand people and collect the index finger from each body in order to be eligible to study the "supreme knowledge."

In this sculpture, Angulimala is depicted with a garland of fingers around his neck, madly attacking villagers and attempting to chase down the Buddha. Once he hears the Buddha's teachings, however, he becomes truly remorseful. He puts down his sword and prostrates himself before the Buddha, who is represented by footprints and a flaming pillar topped with a triratna (lotus blossoming in a circle with three flames above).



## SCULPTURE 20

### **Anathapindika the Great Benefactor Builds Jetavana Monastery for the Buddha**

Anathapindika spreads gold coins on Prince Jeta's land to purchase it.

*(Bharhut Style)*

The sculpture depicts Anathapindika, the millionaire and the chief lay disciple of the Buddha, having his servants spread gold coins on Prince Jeta's land in the city of Savatthi. Anathapindika is determined to buy the prince's land to build a monastery as an offering to the Buddha for an upcoming rains-retreat, but Prince Jeta refuses to sell by telling Anathapindika he would have to cover the whole park with gold coins in order to buy it.

When Anathapindika covers almost the whole piece of land with his gold, Prince Jeta realizes how much the millionaire wants the park, and gives in. Prince Jeta decides to donate the gatehouse area as his contribution to the Buddha and requests to have the monastery named 'Jetavana' in memory of himself. People commonly refer to it as 'Jetavana Monastery built by Anathapindika the Millionaire.'



## SCULPTURE 21

### King Bimbisara Visits the Buddha

The king's procession moves to Grdhrakuta Hill.

*(Sanchi Style, Sunga Period, 400–500 B.E.)*

King Bimbisara of Magadha leads a procession to pay a visit to the Buddha, who is dwelling at the top of Grdhrakuta Hill.

The sculpture depicts different stages of the King's journey: he starts out on elephant back and horseback inside the city gates, then once outside the city gates he travels in a horse-drawn chariot, and finally continues on foot to reach the Buddha atop the hill.

King Bimbisara then pays his respects to the Buddha when arriving and walks clockwise around the Buddha to pay him great respect when leaving. The dais at the top left corner represents the Buddha. The wavy pattern under the dais represents the hill.



## SCULPTURE 22

### The Buddha Returns from the Realm of Tavatimsa Heaven

After blessing his late mother, the Buddha descends amidst Worshippers.

*(Bharhut Style)*

After teaching Dhamma to his late mother at the realm of Tavatimsa Heaven during the Buddhist rains-retreat, the Buddha returns to the human realm on the Retreat-Ending Day.

Devas, or celestial beings and humans rejoice and celebrate the return. The God Indra has created jewel stairs for the Buddha, who is represented by footprints. Gold and silver stairs on the left and right of the jewel stairs have been created for the God Brahma and the heavenly beings.

The stairs descend from Mount Meru to the gates of the city of Sankassa. Thus originates the tradition of giving alms to monks at the end of the rains-retreat, as it celebrates the day the Buddha returned from the celestial realm.



## SCULPTURE 23

### The Great Decease

The Buddha attains *Parinibbana*; devas and people gather to pay their respects.

*(Sanchi Style, Sunga Period, 400–500 B.E.)*

At the city of Kusinara, the Buddha reaches *Parinibbana*—the Great Decease or the complete release from samsara, the round of rebirth. The stupa shaped like an upside-down alms bowl represents the Buddha in the reclining posture of *Parinibbana*.

At the base of the stupa, worshippers gather to pay their last respects to the Buddha. The worshipper in the centre looking up is thought to be leading the ceremony, while the others may be relatives or servants, some clasping their hands together in a praying position and some making offerings. In the lowest row musicians are playing various instruments.



## SCULPTURE 24

### The Great Decease of the Buddha

Worshippers come to Kusinara from afar to pay their respects.

*(Amaravati Style, Andhra Period, 400-700 B.E.)*

The stupa shaped like an upside-down alms bowl represents the Buddha in the reclining posture of *Parinibbana*, or the Great Decease or the complete release from samsara, the round of rebirth. Groups of monks as well as laypeople have travelled from afar to the city of Kusinara to pay their last respects.

On the left are a monk and two men, while on the right are two monks and three women. One woman is reaching for a garland from her servant to pay homage to the Buddha. Below the stupa are women making garland offerings and paying their respects. Five cows are brought in as an offering. The two men at the bottom are musicians.



## SCULPTURE 25

### Distribution of the Buddha's Relics

Kusinara will share the Buddha's relics.  
*(Sanchi Style, Sunga Period, 400–500 B.E.)*

At the centre of the stone sculpture lies the fortress of the Mallas' kingdom, which is surrounded by armies from various kingdoms. Several kings have come to force the King of Mallas to divide up the relics of the Buddha.

The lower half shows approaching armies ready for battle. On the fortress amidst the armies stands the Brahmana Doha, whose successful arbitration averts a clash of arms. He divides the relics of the Buddha among all the kings.

The upper half shows the armies with their portions of the relics in urns placed on elephant heads underneath their royal canopies. These armies march back to their lands, each with a flag decorated with a triratna (lotus blossoming in a circle with three flames above), which marks their refuge in the Triple Gem.



## SCULPTURE 26

### Acquisition of the Buddha's Relics

A King on elephant back carefully holds an urn of relics.  
*(Bharhut Style)*

This bas-relief sculpture depicts a king carrying the relics of the Buddha back to his land. Travelling with an army of elephants and horses, he is carefully holding the urn of relics above the head of his elephant.

On the right, a cavalier on horseback is carrying a ceremonial baton used to invite gandharvas (heavenly beings with superb musical skills) to join the procession. Above the cavalier is a winged deva celebrating along. The sculpture is framed with curtains and decorated with lotuses and hanging garlands, similar to the ones hung from the baton above the horse.



## SCULPTURE 27

### Paying Homage to the Buddha's Relics

King of Koliyas brings back the relics; the queen faints with delight and then makes garland offerings in different postures.

*(Amaravati Style, Andhra Period, 400-700 B.E.)*

This bas-relief sculpture depicts four continuous scenes. In the center, the male figure with many *nagas* (a deity in the form of a great serpent) on his head is believed to be the King of the Koliyan clan of Ramagama, one of the kings who received the share of the relics. The urn of relics is placed on the throne before him.

To the right of the throne stands the queen with a naga on her head. She is so delighted that she faints and has to hold onto the person next to her for support. On the left of the throne, after gaining consciousness the queen receives a garland from her servants to pay homage to the Buddha's relics. The lower part depicts various postures of paying homage in Indian style, including wiping the ground with one's hair.

## SCULPTURE 28

### King Ashoka the Great Pays Homage to the Holy Bodhi Tree and Stupa in Bodhgaya

The king arrives on elephant back with his entourage.

*(Sanchi Style)*

King Ashoka the Great travels with a procession of elephants and horses to worship at the Holy Bodhi Tree in Bodhgaya. After descending from his elephant's hind leg, the king walks with his queen into the Mahabodhi compound, where the Holy Bodhi Tree is adorned with flower garlands and surrounded by a carved stone stupa.

On the other side is a procession of offerings including pots, lotuses, and flags displaying the *triratna* symbol (lotus blossoming in a circle with three flames above, representing the Triple Gem). Various kinds of musical instruments are being played.



## Life of the Buddha Stone Carvings

*Combined, these carvings help us learn about the life of the Buddha, which was filled with purity, wisdom, and loving compassion. They also reflect the ability of people in the early days of Buddhism to understand and focus on the true meaning of Dhamma rather than material objects such as Buddha statues.*