

The Unseen Buddha: Looking at the (In)visibility of the Buddha Image

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The Buddha image has been the subject of much scholarly discussion, from exploring its aniconic roots in the first century through to anthropomorphic forms and their cultural transformations, as Buddhism swept through east Asia in the first millennia. Although widely acknowledged, there appears less study on that of the *unseen* Buddha. The very fact that the Buddha image derived from aniconic roots demonstrates the fundamental significance of the unseen Buddha image. As Dietrich Seckel states, 'The artistic creation of the Buddha image begins with the non-image' (2004: 11).

The 'non-image' ultimately stems from a belief in 'the manifestation of an other-worldly Buddha nature (*buddhata*), beyond time, whose true nature cannot be grasped by means of this-worldly, visual representation.' (Seckel 2004: 15). Once the historical Buddha had attained enlightenment, he 'transcended the phenomenal world' (Seckel 2004: 8), no longer belonging to the material realm. This gave way to 'the far more profound problem of whether the Buddha's *arupa* reality can be given a material form.' (Swearer 1995: 269). The absence of the Buddha image instead communicates greater philosophical concerns that are situated higher than representational art. It could be said that the non-image renders a truer picture of Buddhahood aligned with that of belief over body.

'The language of vision is so basic to the discussion of Buddhahood, so much a part of the Buddhist conceptual landscape, that it is almost invisible.'

Eckel 1992: 136

The unseen Buddha is woven into a seemingly paradoxical dialogue of 'vision', which will be approached in depth within this study for, in order to comprehend what it is that cannot be seen, one must first know what they are looking for. This process involves looking at non-images, in

conjunction with doctrinal texts and Buddhist philosophy. Although images may remain unseen to the eye, they are by no means removed of form or meaning and I will here attempt to discover the manifestations of such forms and what they represent. These connections will be looked at through the lens of vision, in relation to Buddhist philosophy and thought, in an attempt to weave together a more conclusive view beyond seeing and, to use the title of Seckel's publication, beyond the image. Eckel's view that the concept of vision is 'almost invisible' within Buddhahood perhaps suggests that we have to adopt a different perspective to be able to perceive a true account of this coexistence and, ultimately, to see the unseen Buddha.

The First Buddha Image

The first Buddha image is known to have been produced in the lifetime of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni. There are two parallel accounts of King Prasenajit and King Udayana, who both order an image of the Buddha to be made in his absence when he went to visit his mother, Maya, and the 33 Gods in Heaven. The story of King Prasenajit was told by the Chinese Buddhist monk Faxian in the 5th century. He writes that when Buddha returns, the statue got up from the throne on which he was depicted to allow Buddha to return to his seat, but Buddha cried out "Return to your seat, after my disappearance you shall be the model for the four classes in search of spiritual truth." (Faxian cited in Kinnard 1999: 70). This sutra tells us that Buddha granted image-making and professed its role as a surrogate in his absence. This approval contrasts such vows as "Thou shalt not make images" (Exodus 20, 4) in the Christian tradition,¹ "You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above," written in the Hebrew Bible (cited in Eck 1996: 18), and the forbidden image of Mohammed in Islam.

The narratives disclose the need for an image, on behalf of the Kings, who wished to look upon Buddha's material form when he was not present. It could be said that the making of the Buddha image was the first ritual act in preparation for Buddha's departure to Nirvana. This devotion reflects the desire of Buddha's followers to be in his physical presence, which escalates as it

¹ The Christian prohibition of images in particular leads us to consider Seckel's proclamation: "Thou canst not/art not able to make images" (2004: 11), which communicates the impossibility of depicting the divine.

nears his *parinivana* (final cessation and exit from the cycle of *samsara*), especially by Buddha's closest disciple, Ananda. On nearing Buddha's death, Ananda cried "Alas! I am still in wanting of training, but a learner, one who has [more] work to do. And the teacher is about to pass away from me - he who is so compassionate to me!" (*The Maha-Parinirvana Sutra* cited in Kinnard 1999: 59). Kinnard relates this outburst to a 'fear that without the present Buddha there to teach and to guide him, his progress on the Path will stop.' (1999: 59). This reflects the interconnected relationship of the Buddha's presence and that of enlightenment, which can be expanded to the concept of wisdom, or *prajna*. This construct is intricately unravelled by Kinnard, who explores the interrelations of the Buddha image, wisdom and the art of 'seeing'. Buddha's direct response to Ananda also helps to further expose these associations in that he proclaims one must be "a lamp unto himself" (cited in Kinnard 1999: 59), offering the notion that truth comes from within and introduces the concept of light, as fundamentally interconnected with vision, *prajna* and the divine.

The story of the first Buddha image exemplifies the paradox that Buddha's presence is unequivocally intertwined with that of his absence, 'Absence and presence, in this regards, are thus a set; the one necessitates the other.' (Kinnard 1999: 42). This concept is not unique to Buddhist philosophy, for example it also appears within ancient Chinese thought, known as *yu* (presence) and *wu* (absence), which fused with Ch'an and Zen practice in later Buddhism. Together *yu* and *wu* embody the Buddhist notion of Emptiness (*sunyata*) and can be thought of not as full or empty - or indeed visible or invisible - but with form and without form: 'Emptiness is no less empty than anything else' (Bhavaviveka cited in Eckel 1992: 39). In this light, the unseen Buddha image is a true rendering of the absolute and essential nature of the Buddha, 'it is the reality of *sunyata*, of emptiness, that is dominant, and therefore at the question of the Buddha's presence is in fact always a question of absence.' (Kinnard 1999: 33). A common metaphor of the 'vessel' is used in elucidating the complex concept of *sunyata*, first instated by the Chinese philosopher and founder of Taoism, Lao-Tzu, and applied by Heidegger on writing about 'Das Ding' (The Thing): 'The emptiness, the void, is what does the vessel's holding. The empty space, this nothing of the jug, is what the jug is as the holding vessel.' (Heidegger 1971: 167). Like the jug that frames the void, one must look at the contextual space surrounding the (unseen) image, as we will see with aniconic imagery, for it to be truly understood and made visible.

Aniconic Imagery

Aniconic imagery was first employed to depict Buddha without the constraints of anthropomorphic representation, in an attempt to portray a true image of the life and nature of the Buddha. Vidya Dehejia unpacks this definition in saying, 'The term "aniconic" carries the dictionary meaning of "symbolizing without aiming at resemblance," and "aniconism" is defined as "worship or veneration of an object that represents a god without being an image of him."' (1991: 45). In place of the Buddha are what Dehejia calls 'multivalent emblems', which 'allude to the person of the Buddha' (Seckel 2004: 12) and events within his life through a 'conflation of meanings.' (Dehejia 1991: 45). These emblems include the wheel (symbolising *dhamma*), the Bodhi tree (representing Buddha's enlightenment), footprints (*buddhapada*), and the empty throne.



Fig. 1 *The Throne of Enlightenment*, Bas-relief Panel, Amaravati, 1 c. BC, British Museum

Aniconic bas-relief panels are seen on gateways and circumambulatory pathways surrounding stupas. 'The Throne of Enlightenment' (Fig. 1) from Amaravati depicts a Bodhi tree and empty throne with worshippers and flying deities. The scene symbolises Buddha's enlightenment, represented by the Bodhi tree with its pointed pipal leaves and throne 'on which the believer is supposed to image the invisible Buddha' (Seckel 2004: 51). The surrounding devotees have come to venerate Buddha and his teachings, who's presence is indicated by the three regal parasols and footprints before the throne. One may think of aniconic imagery like that of the vessel, a frame through which to see the unseen Buddha. Here the image, or the idea, of Buddha is framed by the various multivalent symbols, which 'points to a deeper, truer level of meaning' (Seckel 2004: 17).

‘The form of the Buddha functioned like the buddha’s empty throne beneath the tree of the Buddha’s enlightenment. It was an empty center where a person could appropriate the Buddha’s power, be reminded of the Buddha’s message, and gain a paradoxical vision of the Buddha’s manifested presence.’

Eckel 1992: 49

This ‘empty center’ is directly reflective of the emptiness (*sunyata*) of Nirvana, which can only truly be depicted via the non-image. As with the concept of *sunyata*, the throne is not in fact ‘empty’ but imbued with Buddha’s being and teachings. In a sense this ‘center of emptiness’ (Seckel 2004: 34) functions as a meditative space, offering the devotee a way to engage with the work and inviting them to be active in the perceptual process. Therefore, the image of Buddha doesn’t remain wholly invisible, but visible in the mind of the viewer.

‘The nature of the Buddha and of the ultimate truth manifested and revealed by him, as shown by this inner view, is infinitely more real and effective than any “true” image could ever be.’

Seckel 2004: 11

Through the empty throne we do, however, see a trace of the Buddha in the *buddhapada*.² This synchronic icon simultaneously signifies his absence and presence, transcending time and signifying Buddha’s infinite being. The *pada* are paradoxically depicted as a relief rather than an intaglio engraving, defying the idea of a *footprint*. This could be interpreted as a cast of the impression left by Buddha, a commemorative memorial of site and visualisation of the void that remains. It also bears reference to Buddha’s inability to walk flatfooted upon the earth, as with all kings who are not depicted dirtying their feet.³ Seckel writes that ‘... with his footprint he [Buddha] “seals” the spot where the sphere beyond this world touches our visible world... The “trace” - the visible, testifying legacy of an absent or non-graspable being - is thus situated in the dialectic of visibility and invisibility, of the visible sign and its invisible meaning.’ (Seckel 2004: 60). Seckel’s assertion that the *buddhapada* straddles the realms of visibility and invisibility helps to discern the space where the unseen image resides. In a sense, the *buddhapada* has one foot set upon the earthly, representational world and the other in the phenomenological realm.

² *Buddhapada* are a transreligious symbol in that they feature in Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, as well as Buddhism. In ‘The Polyvalent Pādas of Viṣṇu and the Buddha’, Kinnard epitomises this through the example of the *pada* atop Adam’s Peak in Sri Lanka, which is claimed by religions alike, see pp 56-57.

³ See ‘The Walking Buddha’ by Robert Brown.

Fig. 2 *The Dhamma-Cakra*,
Bas-relief Panel, Amaravati,
1 c. BC, British Museum



On both the soles of Buddha's feet and the palms of his hands is the *cakra* (wheel), one of Buddha's 32 physical characteristics, 'thus pressing it on to the ground wherever he goes.' (Seckel 2004: 41). The *cakra* leaves a trace of a journey, like the wheel leaves a track, to be followed by others in Buddha's footprints. In aniconic art, the *dhamma-cakra* also symbolises Buddha's first sermon at Sarnath, in northern India (Fig. 2). The bodhi tree is replaced by the *dhamma-cakra*, representing Buddha's teachings, which is surrounded by worshippers and spirits in veneration. Here the 'wheel, intended to indicate the wisdom of the Buddha, also serves to remind the viewer of the Buddha whose wisdom it exemplifies.' (Dehejia 1991: 46).

The *cakra* was 'primarily meant as a symbol of the sun and by extension as a symbol of the ruler, and only in second place as the Buddhist wheel of the Doctrine.' (Seckel 2004: 13). This multivalence is shown iconographically through the spokes of the wheel radiating as if rays of the sun. The symbolic correlation between the sun and the *cakra* is bridged by Dehejia's interpretation of the *cakra* representing Buddha's wisdom: as the sun illuminates the sky, the *dhamma* enlightens the mind. The concept of light, as we saw through Kinnard associating *prajna* and 'seeing' the Buddha image, exposes the gap between the invisible and visible, ultimately shedding light on what can not be seen.

Seckel also asserts the ancient relationship between sun and ruler, in this context signifying Buddha's association with kingship. Whilst Theravada Buddhism contemplates the life of the historical Shakyamuni Buddha, Vajrayana Buddhist traditions are comprised of families of Buddhas, including the Five Tathagata Buddhas. The Five Buddhas represent the five cardinal

directions, with the central point represented by Vairocana; ‘... when the Adi-Buddha Vairocana, whose name is translated in East Asia as “Great sun,”... holds in his hand the wheel, it is an attribute (or rather impersonal symbol) of himself, not a symbol of the Buddhist doctrine.’ (Seckel 2004: 61).⁴ This reinstates the importance of context when interpreting such symbols - ‘The exact interpretation of the emblems depends on their visual context.’ (Dehejia 1991: 45) - and sustains the symbolic correlation of light and *prajna*.

Body of the Buddha

In response to Dehejia’s paper ‘Aniconism and the Multivalence of Emblems’, Susan Huntington writes that ‘The richness of the role of relics and their implications for Buddhist practices are not addressed’ (1992: 140). Huntington takes this opportunity to then explore the ‘important distinctions among the principal types of relics’ (1992: 140); *sariraka* (corporeal remains), *paribhogika* (objects of use and sites of contact), and *uddesaka* (images or representations). Huntington’s observation that ‘... at least in some Buddhist traditions, *uddesaka* are considered to be less important than the other two types’ (Huntington 1992: 140) poses a hierarchical order within reliquary classification, whereas they could equally be seen as interchangeable, or indeed bestride categories,⁵ in the same way that ‘Holy person, holy object, holy site... can take each other’s place, and they can be worshipped in the same way.’ (Seckel 2004: 46).

The Maha-Parinirvana Sutra describes Shakyamuni Buddha instructing his disciples that, after his *parinirvana*, his corporeal remains were to be treated like that of a king and entombed in a stupa.

‘According to Buddhist thinking these relics are crystal peals left after the cremation of the body of an enlightened person; they contain the essence of his being and are his holy body (*sarira*). They are called “seeds” (*bija*) contained in the “egg” (*anda*) or “womb” (*garbha*) of the stupa body.’

Seckel 2004: 30

⁴ Vishnu is similarly depicted with a *sudarshana cakra* in his right hand, which translates to “auspicious vision” and is used as a weapon against enemies.

⁵ See Kinnard’s analysis that ‘the *padas* [feet] seem to straddle the line between relics of use and relics of commemoration’, in ‘The Polyvalent Pādas of Viṣṇu and the Buddha’, pp 42.

Seckel elucidates a connection between *sariraka* relics and reproduction in the form of the stupa, as supported by Faure's view: 'One could argue that Buddhist art begins with a stupa, a funerary monument usually seen as a symbol of death but that is also a symbol of life and fertility.' (1998: 793). This reflects the cyclical image of life and death present in the eternal cycle of *samsara*, which is also evocative of absence and presence, as interconnected entities.

With the *sariraka* relics hidden in the *anda*, 'the Buddha is present bodily in the stupa... in the form of these formless relics, and the stupa can therefore be worshipped as the Buddha.' (Seckel 2004: 31). When aniconic reliefs encircle a stupa, like at Amaravati, the relics could be interpreted as a surrogate for the image, allowing Buddha's spiritual powers to emanate through the monument. Buddha becomes present in the mind of the pilgrim as they circumambulate the stupa, much like the prayer wheel with its engraved mantra, spinning at the hand of the devotee. This ritual action emulates the image of the stationary world axis with the movement of life orbiting around it, 'the static image at the center and its mobile counterparts at the periphery' (Faure 1998: 794), with pilgrims tracing the eternal cycle of *samsara* and the stupa as Buddha, symbolising 'the release from a life of illusion and suffering.' (Seckel 2004: 34). Whether 'Buddha was thought to be present in images and relics,' as claimed by Stanley Tambiah, or that 'Buddha is not actually present in relics and *stupas*', as Richard Gombrich contends (Kinnard 1999: 27), is to be debated given the scope of another study with regards to the various schools of Buddhist thought and traditions. However, this mediation does give rise to the idea of a mutuality between the two:

'Practicing Buddhists are able to maintain *at once* that the Buddha is present in such things as relics, sculptures, and paintings, *and at the same time* able to hold the conflicting (and seemingly contradictory) view that it is only the emblem, or reminder, of the no-longer-present Buddha that they worship. In other words, they are able *simultaneously* to maintain an ontological and a semantic/symbolic position on the presence of the Buddha.'

Kinnard 1999: 11

At the same time the devotee experiences the presence of the Buddha through proximity with his enshrined relic' (Dehejia 1991: 47), one can also envisage the Buddha, seated in *dhyana mudra* (meditation posture), the stupa embodying his form (Fig. 3). This visualisation of the invisible

Buddha reflects the belief that 'the stupa and the Buddha are equivalent and exchangeable' (Seckel 2004: 63).

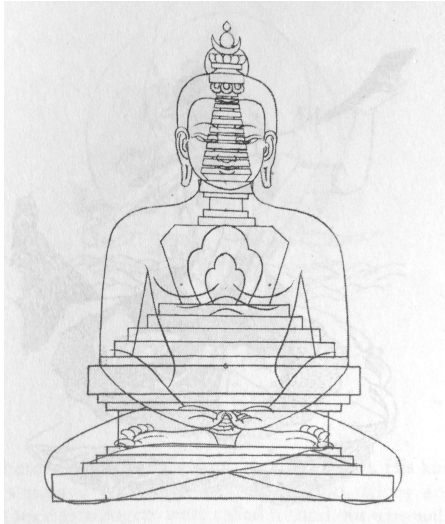


Fig. 3 (Above) *Design of Stupa*, illustration by Mukhiya N. Lama & Mingyur T. Lama

Fig. 4 (Right) *Buddha Eyes on Swayambhunath Stupa*, Kathmandu, Nepal. Photo H. Foskett-Barnes (2015)



Alongside the stupa representing the Buddha, it also communicates metaphysical concepts, especially within the Vajrayana tradition: 'The cosmos is, after all, represented to perfection by the stupa with its circular shape encompassing all world directions and with the world axis at its center.' (Seckel 2004: 42). In a Vajrayana context, the stupa symbolises the Five Buddhas, who represent the cardinal directions; *Amoghasiddhi* (North), *Akshobhya* (East), *Ratnasambhava* (South), and *Amitabha* (West). As noted before, Vairocana represents the central cardinal position - 'the world axis' - therefore is not typically seen as a sculpture but metaphorically in the stupa as a whole. The Nepalese stupa also features four sets of eyes painted on the *harmika* (Fig. 4), '... which may serve as the eyes of the Four Heavenly Kings who guard the four directions of the world, or as the eyes of the all-seeing Cosmic Buddha, Vairocana.' (McArthur 2002: 24). This idea of the power of sight and non-figurative representation is also echoed by 'the abstract linga of Siva' (Faure 1998: 808), which can either depict the four faces of Siva, with a metaphorical fifth above it, or is left abstract for the devotee to visualise 'Brahma, Visnu, and Siva respectively.' (Eck 1998: 36).

At the top of the stupa sits the crest jewel, crowning Buddha's head. With the sign 'Relocated to the top of the central pole, the crest jewel creates another equation with the Buddha himself.' (Gutschow 1997: 24). Here Gutschow is making reference to Buddha's *usnisa*, a protuberance on his head and one of his 32 characteristics representing his absolute enlightenment and *prajna*. The symbolic correlation of the *usnisa* and enlightenment is iconographically found in the Thai depiction of the *usnisa* as a flame, as fire is a universal symbol of wisdom and further compounds the connection between light and enlightenment.

'Another symbolic expression of the excess that constitutes the unrepresentable is the invisible *usnisa* or fleshy protuberance on the top of the Buddha's head. We are told that this *usnisa* remains invisible because no one can look down on the Buddha. On the one hand, it is but one of the thirty-two signs that configure the Buddha's body, obfuscating it while revealing it. On the other hand, it is a paradoxical, formless sign that implies its own negation. According to Stella Kramrisch, it constitutes "an extension of the body-like appearance of the Buddha beyond its anthropomorphic limits" (EI, p. 131). The *usnisa* is the unseen top of the Buddha icon, symbolizing its *nirguna*, or unqualified aspect, the paradoxical quality of the supramundane or transcendent Buddha.'

Faure 1998: 789

The invisibility of Buddha's *usnisa* parallels the understanding that true Buddhahood cannot be visually represented. Seckel writes that 'the essence of its wisdom is beyond visibility and comprehensibility... For enlightenment is emptiness.' (Seckel 2004: 93) and, like the Buddha post-*paranirvana*, it transcends material form and dwells in the void. Faure's observation that the sign adopts paradoxical qualities, such as that it 'implies its own negation', echoes the Buddhist notion of non-binary opposites. His understanding of '*nirguna*' could also be explored in this way if one looks at Eck's use of the term to describe Brahman:

'Although some Hindus, both philosophers and radical reformers, have always used the terms *nirguna* ("qualityless") and *nirakara* ("formless") to speak of the One Brahman, this can most accurately be understood only from the perspective of a tradition that has simultaneously affirmed that Brahman is also *saguna* ("with qualities")'

Eck 1998: 10

If Eck's reading is then applied to Faure's description of the *usnisa* - and even to the idea of the Buddha image as a whole - we are again faced with locating the *nirguna-saguna* paradigm neither 'here' nor 'there'. However, this ceases to be an issue if one is not 'enmeshed in the world of dualities' (Seckel 2004: 96), as in the Buddhist tradition. It is this very concept that allows us to locate the non-image and understand its place within the landscape of Buddhist thought.

Vision

In Hinduism, when devotees go to the temple, they go for *darshan*. This term equates to "seeing" and, rather than going to worship, they go 'to see and be seen by the deity' (Eck 1998: 10). Eckel also states this exchange within Buddhism in saying, 'The seeing of the Buddha is also an experience of being seen, an experience of seeing that also involves a sense one is illumined by the Buddha's (absent) presence.' (1992: 147). John Berger in 'Ways of Seeing' notes this as a transcultural realisation, observing that 'Soon after we can see, we are aware that we can also be seen.' (1972: 9). Whilst *darshan* reflects the significance of sight in Hinduism and India - 'For most Hindus, the notion of the divine as "invisible" would be foreign indeed.' (Eck 1998: 10) - it also poses the idea of philosophy and knowledge:⁶

'Seeing is not only an activity of the eye, however. In India, as in many cultures, words for seeing have included within their semantic fields the notion of knowing. We speak of "seeing" the point of an argument, of "insight" into an issue of complexity, of the "vision" of people of wisdom.'

Eck 1998: 9

Here, the interrelationship of vision and wisdom is again reiterated. Eckel continues to explore this notion in a Buddhist context, reflecting on how one has to 'use the words for "vision," "insight," and "illumination" quite deliberately.' (1992: 26-27). He applies this to the philosophical quests of Bhavaviveka and Sankara, who 'saw (or understood) understanding as vision, as you would expect in a philosophical tradition where the word we customarily translate as "philosophy" (*darsana*) literally means an act of "seeing".' (Eckel 1992: 27).

⁶ Eckel writes that this translation of *darshan* can also be seen in the Chinese word *kuan*, as 'It can refer to the vision of a Buddha...or it can refer to the cultivation of insight in the study of philosophy.' (1992: 137).

The 'equation of vision and knowledge' (Kinnard 1999: 59) also translates to that of *dhamma*, shown in a conversation between Buddha and Vakkali in the *Samyutta Nikaya* when Buddha states 'He who sees the *dhamma*, Vakkali, he sees me; he who sees me, he sees the *dhamma*.' (cited in Kinnard 1999: 62). Buddha's teaching here not only embodies the affinity of sight and wisdom but gives rise to the interchangeability of the Triple Gem; the Buddha, the *Sangha* (monastic community), and the *Dhamma*. A narrative that helps to elucidate these connections further is the 'Cave of the Buddha's Shadow'. The Chinese Buddhist monk Hsuan-Tsang travelled to the cave in order to see Buddha's legendary shadow. The image was said to be conjured up by recitations of scripture and 'he chants the Dharma to make manifest the physical form.' (Eckel 1992: 61). After many fervent prostrations there appeared only a flash of light. Hsuan-Tsang continued to repeat hundreds of salutations and, finally, Buddha's shadow revealed itself in a glow of white radiating light upon the wall. This narrative generates several important distinctions within a discussion of the unseen Buddha image.

Firstly, the recitation of the *dhamma* is calling upon the past to make present the Buddha image. In relation to Buddhist image consecration in Northern Thailand, Swearer writes that 'The ritual re-presents not only the story but also the person of the Buddha seemingly unavailable because of the Buddha's *parinibbana*.' (1995: 269). This recalls the polarity of the absence and presence of Buddha, made apparent by Swearer in rendering 're-present' two distinct elements, suggesting that 're' is a reminder of a 'timeless Buddha lineage' (Swearer 1995: 267). It is this very absence that is felt in the presence of the *dhamma*, 'For Hsuan-Tsang in the cave, the teaching is even more present than the object, and he uses the teaching to make present a vision of the Buddha's physical form.' (Eckel 1992: 62). This idea is also reflected in meditational practice when the Buddha image is utilised as a *dristi*, a point of focus and contemplation. The concept of recollecting the Buddha (*buddhanusmrti*) is 'explicitly meditational, and therefore involves a cognitive or imaginative act of "making present" the Buddha in the mind.' (Kinnard 1999: 45) and is itself 'a form of image making, one that results in a mental icon.' (Faure 1998: 783). In the moment the shadow is seen, Hsuan-Tsang is struck by the diachronic distance between the present moment and the life of the historical Buddha and 'perceived the image as a sign of absence, and he responded to the absence with tears.' (Eckel 1992: 58).

A second element within the story is that the Buddha image is itself a vision. The image, materialised by the mind and mantra of Hsuan-Tsang, appears magically as an apparition, or illusion. In Buddhist thought, the true perception of reality is understood as illusion. Therefore 'in a world where everything finally is an illusion, a manifestation can work just as efficiently as anything else to bring about a 'real' effect.' (Eckel 1992: 85). In light of this perception, the image can equally be called a non-image, as it transcends all dimensions.

The last reflection is on the Buddha image itself, simultaneously born of light and shadow. A shadow in a cave is itself a paradox, with the cave assumably hidden from the sun's rays. As a shadow requires a form to render it 'visible', this too negates its very existence. The radiating light that appeared in the cave makes a clear reference to the concept of vision and again instigates the correlation between enlightenment and seeing. This final image draws together many themes within this study and illuminates the transcendental idea that the Buddha image resides in the space, or *emptiness*, between; light and shadow, reality and illusion, absence and presence.

Concluding thoughts

The first Buddha image, empty throne, reliquary stupa, *usnisa*, and Buddha's shadow all allude to the complex notion that 'The icon is at the same time here and there, bridging the gap between two realms and partaking of both.' (Faure 1998: 789-790). Images of the unseen Buddha lift the veil of invisibility to reveal a true rendering of Buddhahood that lies beyond the image. In this moment they are able to expose an 'ontological communion' (Kinnard 1999: 42) between presence and absence, which in turn communicates the fundamental principle that 'God cannot be made *visible*, only his *invisibility* can be made visible.' (Kinnard 1999: 36).

Having explored 'images as a means of reflecting on the tensions between these two simultaneously held positions.' (Kinnard 1999: 11), one is able to position the unseen Buddha. Through a 'dialectical infinite negation' (Seckel 2004: 96), the invisible Buddha transcends the bifurcation that governs the material realm and enters the Nothingness of Nirvana. 'It is in this dialectic or paradox of image and non-image that Buddhist art remains suspended.' (Seckel

2004: 96), in pure *sunyata* and, like formless *dhamma*, ‘Whoever sees emptiness sees the Buddha’ (Bhavaviveka cited in Eckel 1992: 170). Here the unseen Buddha is liberated of form, sound and movement, ‘it cannot be defined, but only alluded to by silence or at best by a sign’ (Seckel 2004: 96). Like when Buddha’s truth-proclaiming voice can best communicate through “thundering silence” (Seckel 2004: 80), the image is sometimes best left unseen. Or rather, seen only in the mind’s eye.

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Figure 2. *Dhamma-cakra*, Bas-relief Panel, 1st century BC. Amaravati, British Museum, London.

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Figure 3. *Design of Stupa*, illustration by Mukhiya. N Lama and Mingyur T. Lama.

In: *Ritual Objects & Deities: An Iconography on Buddhism and Hinduism* (2012) Kathmandu: Vajra Publications, pp 43.

Figure 4. *Buddha Eyes on Swayambhunath Stupa*, Kathmandu, Nepal. Photograph H. Foskett-Barnes (November, 2015).

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