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18th CENTURY  
BRONZE

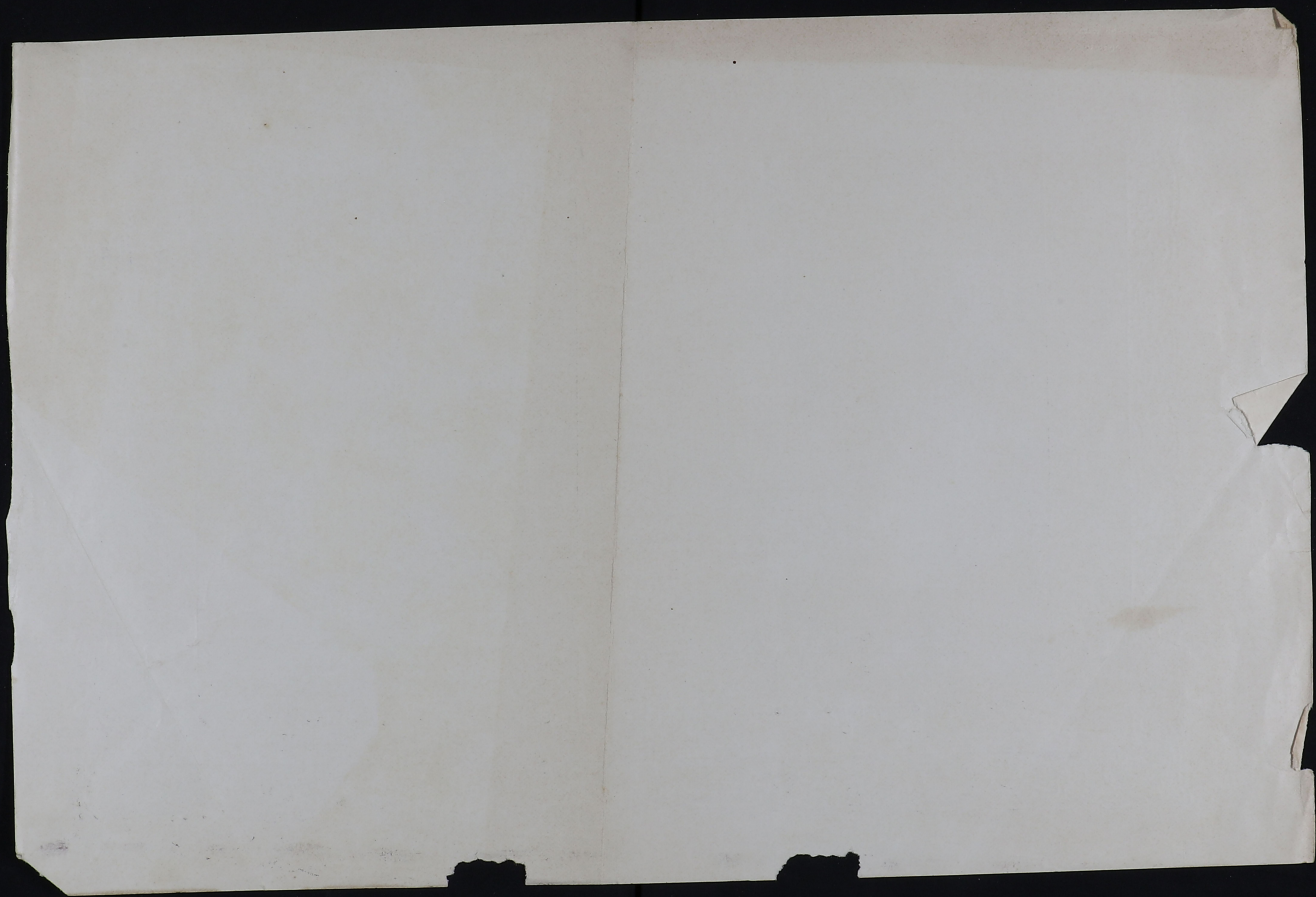
*Government Museum, Trivandrum.*



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 පිටුපස බුදු පිටුවක් බිහිවීම

# පටුන

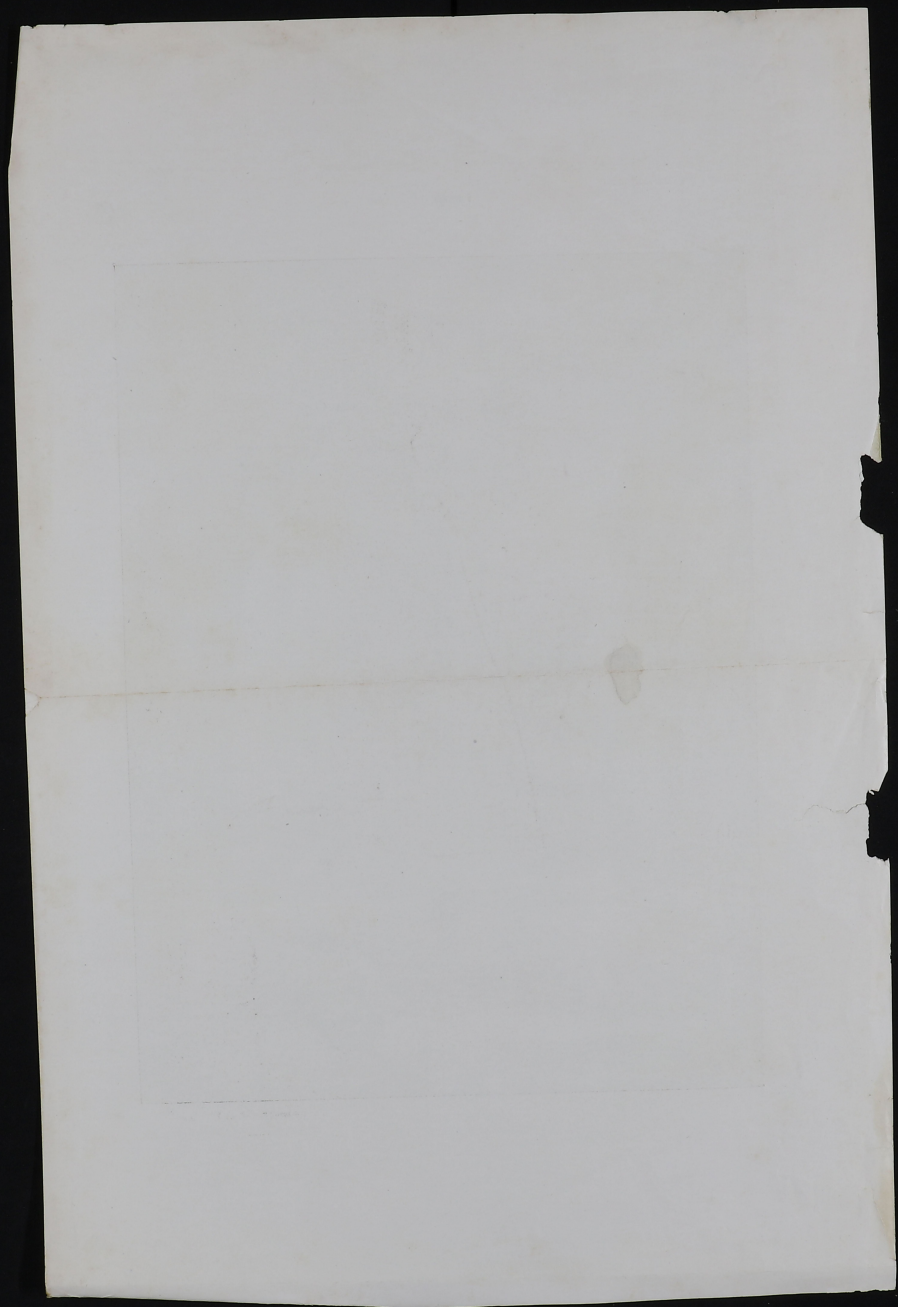
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# Legend Of The Buddha's Bowl

by P. THOMAS

**T**HE alms-bowl is to the Buddhist monk what the sceptre is to the King.

It is the symbol of the monk's renunciation and the insignia of his authority. Succession of abbots and patriarchs is often mentioned as "the passing of the bowl". As such, the alms-bowl Gautama Buddha used has a particularly mystic significance for the Buddhist world. Shortly after Gautama's parinirvana, myths and legends rose about the miraculous powers of the bowl, and, in course of time, the *patra*, as the bowl was reverently called by the pious, became the holy grail of Buddhism. Philosophers even argued that the Buddha's bowl was uncreated and eternal; Buddhas after Buddhas would come and go, but the bowl would remain for ever; aoncs will see the rise and nirvana of innumerable Buddhas but the bowl endures, passing from one Buddha to another.

There is, however, no common tradition among the Buddhists about the alms-bowl, though all agree that it is a precious object worthy of adoration. Every Buddhist king and country in ancient and medieval times wished to possess the bowl as it was considered a talisman against all misfortunes, and we have a wealth of legends about the mysterious appearance and disappearance of the bowl in several parts of the world.

## EARLY ACCOUNTS

The earliest tradition about the Buddha's bowl comes from Ceylon and is given at some length in Buddhaghosha's *Sumangalavasi*, a work composed in the fifth century A.D. It would appear from this authority that only a part of the relics was divided among the eight clans after Gautama's cremation; the remaining, including the bowl, was buried in a stupa by King Ajatasatru on the advice of Mahakasyapa. This elder had been elected the leader of the Sangha on the Buddha's parinirvana, and he prophesied the advent of Asoka and declared that this monarch, by virtue of his piety, would be the best person to dig up the relics and distribute them to countries worthy of receiving the precious possessions.

The prophecy was forgotten, and the stupa with it, and the site was hidden by jungle growth. It was, however, fulfilled when Asoka was born; in his search for relics the Emperor discovered the stupa, and on opening it, found the relics and an inscription authorising him to dispose of them as he thought fit. Asoka is said to have distributed the relics among 84,000 monasteries. The bowl, it would appear, he retained for himself.

When Devanampiya Tissa, King of Ceylon, was converted to Buddhism during Asoka's reign, he sent a mission to Pataliputra, the Mauryan capital, for obtaining some relics. This mission proceeded not only to Pataliputra but many other regions, including the court of Indra, King of Gods, and returned to Ceylon with several relics, of which the most important was the Buddha's bowl. A magnificent stupa was built in Anuradhapura, capital of Tissa, and the precious relic was enshrined in it.

When Fa Hien visited India and Ceylon in the early part of the fifth century, he, however, found the bowl not in Anuradhapura but in Peshawar. According to this pilgrim, Kanishka, who reigned in the first century A.D. in the north-western regions of India, came in possession of the bowl, because of zeal for the Law, and built a wonderful tower over the relic. The bowl was in this tower at the time of Fa Hien's visit; he dearly loved the miraculous and has left us many fabulous accounts of the bowl. Shortly before his visit, it would appear, the king of a neighbouring country, wishing to possess the bowl, made war with the ruler of Peshawar and defeated him. But when the conqueror took the bowl and placed it in the howdah of his elephant, the

bowl broke the elephant's back. A bullock cart was then tried, but the wheels of the vehicle sank into the ground. This convinced the impious king that he was not the proper person to possess the Bowl; hence he placed it back in the tower, worshipped it and went his way.

Fa Hien gives a detailed description of the bowl. "There are some seven hundred priests at the shrine; when it is just noon, they bring out the bowl and, together with the people, present all kinds of offerings. They then eat their midday meal; and in the evening at the hour of vespers, they replace the bowl as before. . . It holds perhaps over two pecks and is of several colours, chiefly of black. The four joinings are clearly distinguishable. It is of about one-fifth of an inch thick, of transparent brilliancy and of a glossy lustre. Poor people throw in a few flowers and it is full; very rich people wishing to make offerings of a large quantity of flowers may throw in a hundred or a thousand or ten thousand bushels without ever filling it."

When Fa Hien was in Ceylon, he, very naturally, did not find the bowl there but heard a sermon by a Sinhalese monk that the bowl would be taken in the course of centuries "to Central Asia, China, Ceylon and Central India whence it would ultimately ascend to Tasia



WORSHIP OF THE BUDDHA'S BOWL; from Amravati; 2nd century A.D. (Court-ney: Government Museum, Madras).

Heaven for the use of the future Buddha". The Sinhalese seem to have derived some satisfaction from the thought that the bowl would not remain long in Peshawar.

Anyway the Sinhalese sermon seems to have been the forerunner of a widespread belief that the bowl had acquired the power of waiting itself at will from any country that tended to disrespect the Law and moving to more congenial regions, and this belief gave ample scope for people of all countries to claim possession of the bowl. When Hsien Tsang visited India in the seventh century, the Law was on the decline in India and the bowl had left Peshawar for Persia having visited en route several countries. In Afghanistan there was a legend that the bowl was once in Kandahar and could "contain any quantity of liquid without overflowing."

It is interesting to note that the Tamil classic *Manimekalai*, a Buddhist work attributed to the early centuries of the Christian era, combines with the miracles of the Buddha's bowl a very ancient folk belief in an inexhaustible magic pot. Manimekalai, the heroine of the classic, was asked by a sage, in a year of famine, to proceed to a charmed lake; here she keeps vigil on a full moon night and at midnight the magic bowl floats in the lake and the

lady, by virtue of her purity, is able to take it and feed the starving millions out of its inexhaustible supply. On Manimekalai's death the bowl disappeared.

The Ch'an Buddhists of China have an unbroken tradition of the "passing of the bowl" from the time of the Buddha till the death of Hui-neng, in the seventh century A.D. The sect believes in patriarchal succession and maintains that the Buddha, on his parinirvana, passed the bowl to Mahakasyapa, the first patriarch who passed it on to Ananda. The bowl went with his successors till it reached Bodhidharma, the twenty-sixth patriarch. This worthy took the bowl to China where he is honoured as the first Buddhist patriarch. The bowl passed hands in succession till it reached Hung-jen, the fifth patriarch, after whom it had a misadventure as the succession of the sixth patriarch was disputed. It is worthwhile mentioning the dispute as it shows at once the importance of the bowl and its miraculous powers.

## TEST FOR A SUCCESSOR

Hung-jen, becoming old, wished to name his successor and declared that any of his disciples who considered himself competent to succeed him could compose a stanza of erudition and bring it to his notice. On this, one of the monks who was very popular with his colleagues wrote on the wall outside the meditation hall:

*This body is the Bodhi-tree,  
The soul is like a mirror bright;  
Take heed to keep it always clear,  
And let not dust collect on it.*

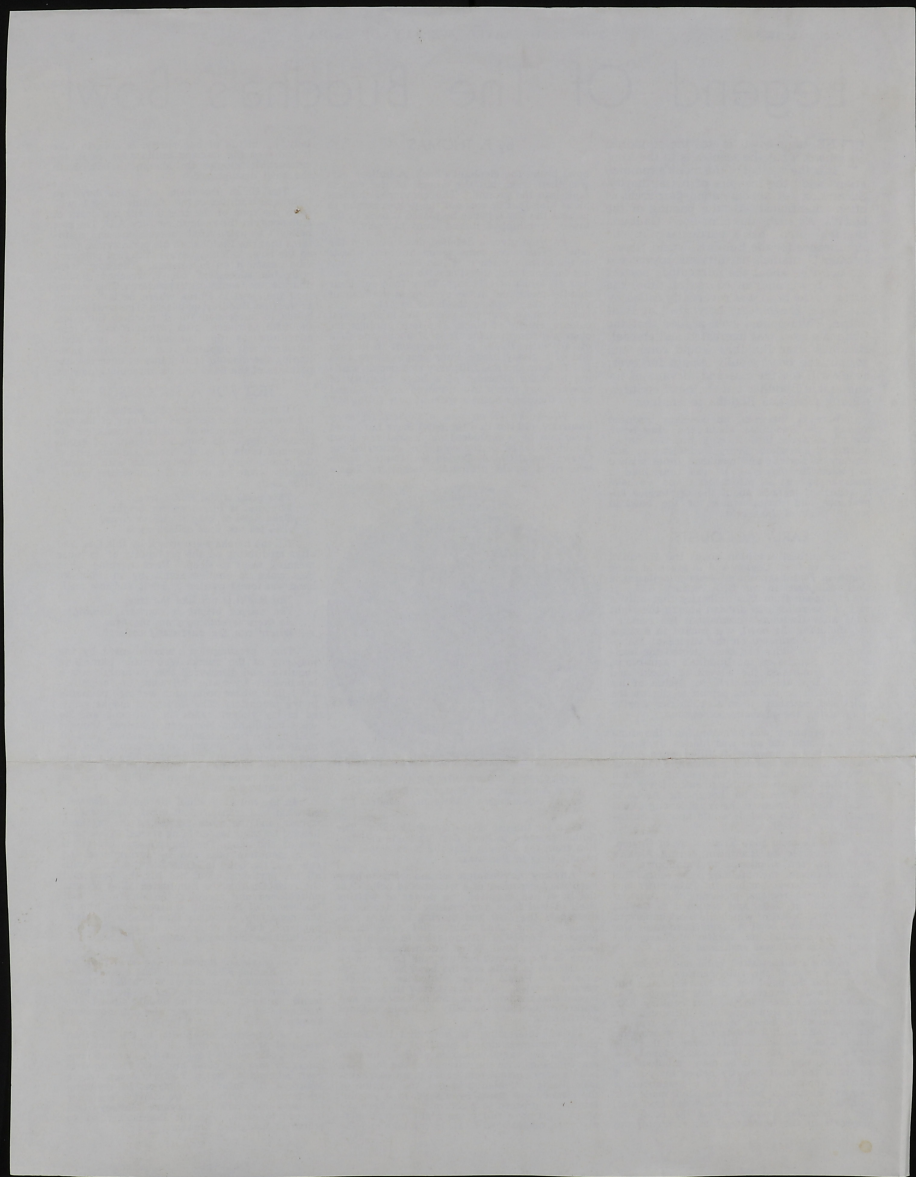
All the monks were struck by this feat, and after meditating on the profundity of its inner meaning went to sleep. Next morning when they woke up another stanza by an unknown hand was found written under it, and this read:

*The Bodhi is not like the tree;  
The mirror bright is nowhere shining;  
As there is nothing from the first,  
Where can the dust itself collect?*

This presumption was resented by the majority of the monks who made immediate enquiries and discovered that its author was a lay brother by name Hui-neng, an insignificant fellow whose occupation was rice pounding in the monastery. The infuriated monks wanted to lay violent hands on Hui-neng, and he went into hiding. Hung-jen, however, thought well of the performance of Hui-neng, and at night when the monks were asleep called the rice-pounder to his room, gave him the patriarchal robe and the bowl to Ming, and the latter with all his partisans could not lift the bowl and the robe. On this the humiliated Ming became enlightened and accepted the superiority and leadership of Hui-neng and conducted him to the monastery. Hui-neng thus became the sixth patriarch, but he nominated no successor; the patriarchate thus being abolished, the bowl disappeared.

The persistent legend of the bowl finds an echo in Kubli Khan's time. This emperor accepted Lamain and, if we are to believe Marco Polo, sent an embassy to Ceylon, in the thirteenth century, to fetch the Buddha's bowl. The fortunes of this embassy are not, however, known.

The concensus of opinion in the Buddhist world at present is that the bowl is nowhere in the world as the Law has deteriorated considerably and the pious are few. The bowl is now believed to be in Tasia Heaven where Maitreya, the future Buddha, resides awaiting his time. Exactly five thousand years after Gautama Buddha's parinirvana, Maitreya will descend to earth on a full moon night and enlighten benighted humanity.



## Wealth of Buddhas At British Museum

By Max Wykes-Joyce  
**L**ONDON — "Buddhism: Art and Faith," at the British Museum, represents virtually every aspect of Asian and Far Eastern art: the 422 exhibits forming an anthology. The magnificent exhibition is drawn almost entirely from the museum's collections and from the British Library.

The exhibition and catalog are divided geographically after introductory groups on "The Buddha Legend," which consists chiefly of carved stone reliefs from Gandhara, and "The Scriptures and Their Transmissions," a rich selection from the library's manuscripts.

Among them are a late 18th-century Burmese manuscript of Buddha's first lecture in Pali, on palm leaf; 6th-century Chinese scrolls of "Rules for Monks;" 18th-century Tibetan translations of a 5th-century Indian commentary on the scriptures; a colorful illustrated book from mid-19th century Burma, portraying "the previous lives of the Buddha"; and Japanese scrolls in fine calligraphy dating from the 16th and 17th centuries.

Siddhartha Gautama, who lived from about 563 to 483 B.C., was a rich young man of a princely family in the kingdom of the Sakyas, on the borders of present-day Nepal and India. At age 29, he left his wife and children in their palatial home and wandered India in search of enlightenment. This he is said to have achieved under a sacred tree at Bodhi Gaya six years later. Thereafter, at least, in Buddhist scriptures, he is more often than not referred to as the Buddha, or Enlightened One.

At Sarnath he lectured to his first five disciples. He traveled India preaching, rather than proselytizing, the ways of Enlightenment. Where he died at Kasia, formerly called Kishinagara, in the northern province of Bihar, he was cremated and his ashes divided among the eight chief Buddhist communities, where they were preserved in stupas (shrines).

From India, Buddhism spread to become the dominant religion in Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Java, Central Asia, China, Korea and Japan. In each of these territories it assumed a slightly different face, and even images of the Buddha assumed a "local" appearance, as may be seen here.

The sections of the exhibition provide an overview of each region's sculptural styles. For example, Tibet embraced a rather fierce form of Buddhism, in which proselytization was represented by the

five Jinas or conqueror Buddhas, one at the center, the others at four corners of the earth.

The one who found the most favor in Tibet was Akshobhya, the Eastern Conqueror, who over the years lost the Indian aspect of his origins and became more typically Tibetan, as in a 14th-century brass figure that has been remounted on a much later stand.

The Deccans in the south of India, like the Tibetans, modified the early imagery, Buddhism having reached that part of India about 200 years after its founder's death. Among the many southern Indian images in the exhibition, the most perfect spiritually is damaged, lacking the left hand and forearm, but this in no way lessens the serenity of this small bronze, which resembles a certain style of bronze sculpting going on at the same period — the 7th and 8th centuries — in Byzantium.

The Chinese section has, as one would expect, a fine selection of Buddhist sculpture, but it excels in the ink and color paintings on silk dating from the 9th century. Many of the silk paintings were found and brought to England by Sir Aurel Stein, from the Dunhuang caves in Gansu province, the famous "Caves of the Thousand Buddhas of Tun Huang." Of the Buddhas in the exhibition, none is more powerful than Vaisravana, the guardian deity of the north. He is patrolling his domain, borne above the waves of the sea on a purple cloud. In his hands he bears his two attributes — in the right, the golden halberd of his office; in the left, encased in a smaller purple cloud, a stupa enshrining the seated Buddha. Before him walks his sister, Sri Devi, offering a golden bowl of flowers. The colors of this painting are indescribably subtle and varied. Indeed, it must be accounted a masterpiece of Tang Dynasty art.

The Japanese section is strong in sculpture, which need occasion no surprise, since it was from China, via the Buddhist kingdom of Paekche in Korea, that the art of sculpture reached Japan. A large gilt Buddha arrived in the form of a gift, from the Korean king to the Emperor Kimmei, in the mid-6th century.

In 593, Crown Prince Shitoku Taishi became regent of Japan. A devout Buddhist, he had erected a temple to the Heavenly Kings of the Cardinal Points, from which evolved the Shitennoji Temple at Osaka. He made the Horyuji Temple, not far from Nara — then the



Deccan bronze from southern India, 7th-8th century.

capital city, founded by his aunt, the Empress Suiko — the center of early Buddhist art and architecture, which it has remained.

The Buddhist component remained strong in Japanese sculpture for many centuries, as witness the lacquered and painted wood portrait sculpture (c. 1700) of a lay follower in Buddhist priestly guise; and the votive wood sculpture portrait made by Miwa in 1788 of the artist Sesshu (1420-1506), who became a Zen Buddhist monk.

As Victor Harris observes in the catalog notes on Sesshu: "His ordination as a Zen monk occurred when Zen Buddhism was the main force behind traditional schools of painting, poetry, fencing, the No theater, flower arrangement and the tea ceremony."

By way of the tea ceremony, all civilized Japanese have ingested the aesthetic and philosophical values of Zen Buddhism. And the contemporary cult of Zen has imparted a new worldwide significance to the Buddhist faith.

"Buddhism: Art and Faith," Prints and Drawings Gallery and Oriental Gallery II, British Museum, Montague Place, London WC1, through Jan. 5.

Max Wykes-Joyce writes regularly in the IHT on London art exhibitions.

