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THE BUDDHAS OF BAMMIAN
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By now we have all heard the reports from Afghanistan about the Taliban's orders to destroy all of the pre-Islamic religious images in the country, the most famous of which are the two statues of Buddha in the Bamiyan Valley, just west of the capital, Kabul. World attention is focused on these two statues for good reason; they are probably the largest standing Buddhist sculptures in the world. Just as important, they are artistic masterpieces that mark a vital period in the history of Buddhism as a world religion, and the role of Afghanistan and Central Asia in world history.

The two Buddha statues at Bamiyan are colossal figures hewn out of solid rock. They were plastered and then painted, the larger one red and the smaller one blue, and their hands and faces were painted gold. They also served as models for other large Buddhist sculptures that can still be found in China and Central Asia (for example, a 20 foot-long reclining Buddha also in Afghanistan, and also targeted for destruction by the Taliban).

World opinion rightly condemns the Taliban for their insistence on destroying these great records of the past, and criticism can be leveled against their radical Sunni doctrine that includes a proscription against any human images and "idols." The Taliban are not, however, the first iconoclasts to attack these impressive statues. The hands and faces of the two Buddhas were cut off and obliterated long ago by any of the several invading armies that traversed that route into India, perhaps including Muslim armies who brought Islam to the area in the ninth century. Iconoclasm has typically been expressed by carving out the faces of statues or paintings, or by destroying the head and hands, since it was thought that this act would take away the soul of the image.

The two Buddhas at Bamiyan now (if they still stand) only give us hints at their former glory and grandeur; the faces, arms, legs and all of the plastered drapery and other features are long gone. Buddhism has long since vacated eastern Afghanistan, but it would be a huge loss to have these statues destroyed by the Taliban, whether we see them as potent religious icons or as records of the past.

The statues and monastery complex at Bamiyan date from the fifth century, sometime in the reign of an important patron of Buddhism, King Kanishka. He ruled the Kushan Empire which spanned present-day northwest India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. Kanishka

sponsored many Buddhist monasteries, sculptures, and stupas, including the ones at Bamiyan.

It was at this time that the Buddha began to be represented in human form. We have examples of Buddha shown as an Apollo figure with roundels, full figure and other characteristics of Greek art.

This integration of western and eastern art styles reflects Afghanistan's unique role at the center of the overland trading system, the so-called silk road. The caravans that traversed this route invariably stopped in this valley for rest and trade, and the sight of these huge Buddhas carved into niches in the south-facing mountain would have been a welcome sight to the weary traveler.

We can and should protest this destructive action by the Taliban religious authority in Afghanistan. Yet there is a curious twist to this issue that may be worth exploring in the context of these statues as Buddhist icons: the central tenet of Buddhism is non-attachment, to things, to ideas, to people, and even to existence itself. Are we, in fact, dishonoring the very intention of the creators of these statues by placing undue attachment on them? Can the doctrine of non-attachment coexist with the need to preserve antiquities?

(Picture provided on next page.)



DESTROYED?

This colossal statue of the Buddha, carved during the fifth century at Bamiyan in what is now Afghanistan, stands 115 feet high. The country's rulers, the Taliban, are destroying it. (Huntington Photographic Archive of Buddhist and Related Art, Ohio State University.)