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The Dharmacakramudrā

Variant at Ajanta:

An Iconological Study

This article is dedicated with profound affection to my dear friend Walter M. Spink. Walter's inspiration, intelligence, and insight continue to be a guiding light for all privileged enough to know him. More importantly, his kindness, humanity, and love have made all who have been touched by his presence better for the experience—a true Bodhisattva: OM NAMO WALTERSATTVA HŪM

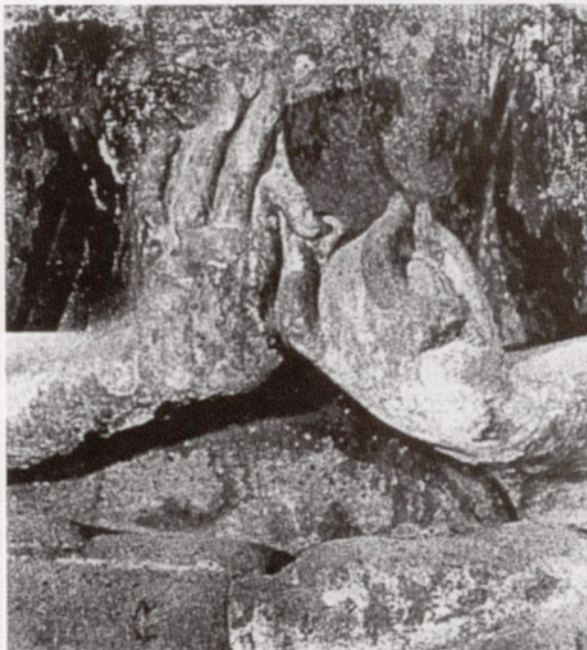
DESPITE BELONGING TO ONE of the most popular and well-studied sites in South Asia, the overriding iconography of the Ajanta caves has continued to elude thorough understanding, particularly of its shrine images. Survival of late fifth-century paintings at the site has inspired scholars such as Yazdani,¹ Schlingloff,² and others to conduct iconographic studies of the murals and shed light on the *Jātaka* tales, which illustrate the perfections of a bodhisattva. But the main shrine images have received far less attention despite being the *ārya*, or emanating source, from which all other iconographic elements in any given cave emanate. As such, the shrine figures are fundamental to the proper understanding of the overall iconography and iconology of the caves. The most common type of shrine image at the site is a seated Buddha making a variant of the *Dharmacakramudrā*, or the gesture of turning the Wheel of the Dharma. The central Buddha is flanked by two attending bodhisattvas. This article will focus on this image type and its Buddhist ramifications.

The basic shrine image type at Ajanta is exemplified in Cave 4 (fig. 1). The shrine houses an image of a Buddha seated in *vajraprayāṅkāśana* (*vajra-*

throne-sitting [posture]) on a simple Mt. Meru platform. To the Buddha's right stands the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara dressed as a Brahmin ascetic with matted locks and an antelope-skin meditation mat tied across his chest. In his right hand, he holds his primary attribute, the *puṇḍarika* (white lotus). To the Buddha's left is the Bodhisattva Vajrapani holding his primary attribute, the *vajra*, in his left hand. Across the bottom of the composition are donor figures on either side of a pair of antelope that flank a central *Dharmacakra*, seen with the edge facing the viewer. Two *mālādharas* (flower garland bearers) hover above the Buddha and the bodhisattvas.

A distinct variant of the *Dharmacakramudrā* (fig. 2), displayed by the Buddha figure in Cave 4, appears for the first time in the fifth-century caves at Ajanta. The right hand is held in a *vitarkamudrā*-like gesture, in front of the chest. The left hand clutches the hem of the robe between the thumb and the first three fingers, while the fourth, or little finger, points to the circle formed by the touching fingers of the right hand. More specifically, the little finger of the left hand lies alongside the thumb of the right hand, and the tips of the two digits are capped by the forefinger of the proper right hand.³ The three fingers come together at precisely the point where the conceptual center of the body is located in Buddhist theory. This center is the seat of the heart-mind, the core essence that transforms an individual into a Buddha. The frequent and unchanging occurrence of this mudra throughout the caves of western India suggests that it was an established iconographic convention based on a conservative tradition or teaching.

FIG. 1.
*Shrine image of
 Cave 4, Ajanta,
 Maharashtra,
 India, Vākāṭaka
 period, ca. late fifth
 century.*



The mudra is particularly important as it provides a more specific attribution for the Cave 4 Buddha figure, previously overlooked in scholarship. It identifies the Buddha as Śākyamuni/Vairocana in Akaniṣṭa Heaven. Buddha Vairocana, and Śākyamuni as Vairocana, are well-established notions by the late fifth century. Two texts, the *Avataṃśakasūtra* and the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpasūtra*, discuss the Buddha Vairocana as the manifestation of the Buddhist Dharma. He is also the personification of the state of nirvana, or absolute cessation, but is said to preside physically over Akaniṣṭa, the highest of the form realms in the Mt. Meru system. The texts also imply that he is the reification of the *Dharmakāya*,⁴ or the body of the Dharma. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, all

FIG. 2.
*Detail of the variant Dharmacakramudrā displayed
 by the shrine Buddha image of Cave 4 in fig. 1.*



FIG. 3.
*Buddha displaying standard
 Dharmacakramudrā, Sarnath,
 Uttar Pradesh, India, Gupta
 period, late fifth century,
 sandstone. Sarnath Site Museum,
 Sarnath.*

mānuṣi Buddhas are axiomatically representations of the Dharma, and thereby aspects of Vairocana. Therefore, it is not surprising that Śākyamuni is conflated with Vairocana and is understood to teach several sutras as simply Vairocana, as Śākyamuni/Vairocana, or as Śākyamuni in his Vairocana robes.⁵

Two primary iconographic features allow the identification of the image in Cave 4 as Śākyamuni/Vairocana. They are: 1) the attending bodhisattvas and 2) the variant *Dharmacakramudrā* itself. In the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpasūtra* and the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*, Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and Bodhisattva Vajrapāṇi are described as attending Śākyamuni/Vairocana as he appears in Akanīṣṭha Heaven. It is generally maintained that the two texts in question post-date the Ajanta image. While the extant recensions

may be dated to after the fifth century, both texts are obvious compilations of complex bodies of material from many sources that undoubtedly developed over an extended period. Thus, in the conservative environment of Indic Buddhism, it is not surprising that “precursors” to the present versions of the text may have existed, giving rise to the iconography at sites like the Ajanta caves.

Second, the mudra too points to the identification of the Buddha as Śākyamuni/Vairocana. While the gesture displayed by the Buddha image in Cave 4 is generally regarded as the standard *Dharmacakramudrā*, a closer examination reveals that it is a distinct variation. Commonly, the *Dharmacakramudrā* (fig. 3) involves the forefinger and thumb of the proper right hand forming a circle in a *vitarkamudrā*-

FIG. 4.
Buddha from Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh, India, Gupta period, ca. 475, sandstone. Sarnath Site Museum, Sarnath.



FIG. 5.
Detail of mudra displayed by the Buddha from Sarnath in fig. 4.



like gesture. The forefinger of the proper left hand points to, or touches, the circle made by the digits of the right hand. In the Ajanta variant, the little finger, as opposed to the forefinger, of the left hand points to the circle made by the fingers of the right. Similarly, other variants of the *Dharmacakramudrā* include each finger of the left hand pointing to the *vitarkamudrā*-like gesture of the right hand. For example, the great fifth-century Buddha at Sarnath (fig. 4) points to the circle with the middle finger. This seems to suggest a sequential progression of some sort. Indeed, in Buddhist practice, it is common that sequential aspects of a meditation or teaching are counted on fingers.⁶ So what then do the variants of the *Dharmacakramudrā* communicate?



FIG. 6.

Buddha displaying the Dharmacakramudrā with his ring, or third, finger pointing to the vitarkamudrā-like gesture, detail of a folio from a Prajñāpāramitā manuscript, Bihar, India, Pāla period, ca. 1025, opaque watercolor on palm leaf. Purchased with funds provided by Mr. and Mrs. Paul E. Manheim and Dr. and Mrs. Pratapaditya Pal, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, M.86.185b.

An early fifth-century development in Chinese Buddhist thought may shed light on what probably occurred within the Indic Buddhist context as well. Zhiyi, the founder of the Tian Tai sect of Buddhism in China, presumed that there were different periods of the teaching of the Dharma by Śākyamuni. He divided Śākyamuni's teachings into five distinct categories.⁷ According to Zhiyi's division, Śākyamuni's first teaching took place not at the so-called "Deer Park" near Varanasi but in Akaniṣṭa Heaven. Immediately after the defeat of Māra resulting in the enlightenment at Bodh Gaya, Śākyamuni rose to Akaniṣṭa and, as Vairocana or adorned in "Vairocana robes," gave the profound description of the Dharma realm.

According to Zhiyi, the teaching that took place at the Deer Park near Varanasi was the second propagation. He expressly states that "[After the teaching in Akaniṣṭa, Śākyamuni] traveled to the Deer Park. There he took off his radiant Vairocana robes and put on . . . worn dusty robes."⁸ It was here that Śākyamuni spoke to the five ascetics and commenced his ministry. Subsequently, Zhiyi notes three other teaching phases, which include an esoteric or "secret" phase and a phase in which the *Saddharma-puṇḍarika*, a *Vaiṣṭhīya* (extended) sutra of primary importance in China, came about.

Given the close religious ties between China and

India around the fourth and fifth centuries, it is reasonable to assume that a similar classification system existed on the subcontinent as well. This speculation is further corroborated through examining extant Buddhist sculpture. While the specifics of an Indic classification are unknown, the *Dharmacakramudrā* displayed by the fifth-century Buddha image from Sarnath (fig. 5) provides a significant clue. Instead of the standard gesture with the forefinger of the proper left hand pointing to the *vitarkamudrā*-like gesture of the proper right hand, the Sarnath Buddha points to the *vitarkamudrā*-like gesture with the middle, or second, finger. This may indeed be a reference to the second teaching propounded by the Buddha Śākyamuni at Sarnath, similar to Zhiyi's classification.

Further, a Pāla dynasty Buddha image on a palm-leaf manuscript from the Bihar area of eastern India (fig. 6) displays the *Dharmacakramudrā* with his ring, or third, finger pointing to the *vitarkamudrā*-like gesture. This may again refer to a specific teaching, thereby supporting the probability of an Indic classification system similar in concept to that of Zhiyi. Given the standard semiotics of mudra as symbolic language, it is highly probable that each finger refers to a particular category of teachings. Unfortunately, we have no direct information regarding the details of the classification system in South Asia that

correlates precisely to the images discussed. Given the relatively early dates of these images, it is obvious that the discourse classifying different teachings had occurred by the late fourth or early fifth century.

The question of what the variant mudra at Ajanta specifically means remains to be addressed. The answer seems to relate directly to the categorization of teachings. In all known Indic Buddhist methodology classification systems, the Tantras, being the most complex, are enumerated at the end of any given sequence. It is therefore probable that the little finger pointing to the *vitarkamudrā*-like gesture in the Ajanta variant refers to Tantric teachings. Further, images from the nearby site of Aurangabad, and dating from only a few decades later, clearly indicate that Tantric practices of the *Mahāvairocanasūtra* and related texts already existed in their fully developed forms.⁹ Thus, it is probable that the same *mūla* (root) Tantric text was already well known by the time of the Ajanta excavations.

The *Mahāvairocanasūtra*, in its present recension, was translated into Chinese by the monk Yixing and the aged Indian master, Śubhākarasimha, in 725 C.E.¹⁰ The latter brought to China drawings of the mandalas of the *Sarvatathāgatātattvasaṃgraha*, the explanatory text to the *Mahāvairocanasūtra*, which provides additional mandala cycles. Using East Asian nomenclature, the Garbhadhātu Mandala and the Vajradhātu Mandala are the primary mandalas of the two texts, respectively.¹¹ The central deity in both mandalas is Mahāvairocana, the primordial Dharmature, from which Śākyamuni/Vairocana emanates. As evident in Caves 6 and 7 at Aurangabad, the primary mandalas of the *Mahāvairocanasūtra* and the *Sarvatathāgatātattvasaṃgraha* were in full practice in India by the sixth century.¹²

In the *Mahāvairocanasūtra* the central eight-petaled hall of Mahāvairocana is described as flanked by the quarters of Avalokiteśvara and Vajrapāṇi to the north and south, respectively.¹³ This same configuration, with the two attending bodhisattvas flanking Vairocana, occurs in the Ajanta and Aurangabad caves.¹⁴ Further, the central Buddhas in Caves 6 and 7 at Aurangabad display the same variant of the *Dharmacakramudrā*, with the little finger pointing to the circle of the *vitarkamudrā*-like gesture. Given

that the central image in Cave 4 at Ajanta is iconographically identical to those at Aurangabad, it is clear that the Buddha at Ajanta is specifically Vairocana of the *Mahāvairocanasūtra*.

BUDDHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE SHRINE IMAGE AT AJANTA

The caves at Ajanta serve as attested documents of the history of Indic Buddhism as well as Buddhist art. Axiomatically, the caves reflect Buddhological concerns of the time in which they were excavated. Unlike Buddhist texts that are frequently appended, “corrected,” and modified, rock-cut monuments like Ajanta are not prone to alteration. Thus, the identification of Vairocana, specifically from the *Mahāvairocanasūtra*, in these caves suggests that some form of the Tantric soteriological methodology explained in the *Mahāvairocanasūtra* was extant in the fifth century.

Moreover, as stated above, the Buddha in Cave 4 is specifically understood as Śākyamuni/Vairocana. The clue to the identification lies in the subsidiary iconographic features of the cave as well as in the fact that Śākyamuni is the *mānuṣi* Buddha of the present *kalpa* (eon). If the shrine image at Ajanta were a Buddha other than Śākyamuni—for example, Kāśyapa, the Buddha preceding Śākyamuni, or Maitreya, the Buddha of the future—each would be provided with specific identifying characteristics.¹⁵ Such attributes are obviously absent in Cave 4 and other similar *vihāras* at Ajanta. Further, the shrine images in Caves 1 and 2 at Ajanta are iconographically almost identical to those in Cave 4. The renowned murals in the outer halls of these two caves are predominantly depictions of *Jātaka* tales, or the stories of the previous lives of the Buddha Śākyamuni. Thus, it is clear that Śākyamuni, as the paradigm of perfections (*pāramitās*), is the principal subject of all three caves.

As is ubiquitous in Buddhism, each monument and image can be read on several levels. Thus, the *Jātaka* stories illustrate the actions that a practitioner must undertake to become a Buddha. The Buddha, in the shrine, making the variant *Dharmacakramudrā* with the little finger pointing to the circle is

Śākyamuni teaching the esoteric tradition. Because he is specifically teaching esoteric methodology, and because he is attended by Avalokiteśvara and Vajrapāṇi, the Buddha is clearly Vairocana of the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*. He is envisioned as presiding over Akaniṣṭha, where he resides in the “vast palace of the Dharmadhātu.”¹⁶ Thus, it is evident that the Buddha figure in Cave 4 is a dual image of Śākyamuni/Vairocana representing both his *mānuṣi* and universal aspects. □

Notes

1. Ghulam Yazdani, *Ajanta*, 4 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1930–55).
2. Dieter Schlingloff, *Studies in the Ajanta Paintings: Identifications and Interpretations* (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, distributors, Ajanta Books International, 1987).
3. Visually, the gesture is a combination of the *vitarka* and *ūrṇā* mudras, held together to form a variant *Dharmacakramudrā*. Thus, not only does the combined gesture communicate the idea of teaching the Dharma, but each hand also suggests individual meanings. The *vitarkamudrā* suggests overtones of discourse in the Dharma. The *ūrṇāmudrā*, or the gesture of holding the hem of the robe, suggests the prediction of enlightenment. These secondary meanings would have been obvious to Buddhist practitioners who were familiar with the semiotics of the mudra as a symbolic language.
4. The *Dharmakāya*, representing the absolute universal, is understood to be indefinable and, thereby, nonrepresentational. Thus, when Vairocana is represented as a Buddha in physical form, he is generally understood to be manifesting the *Sambhogakāya*, or “ecstatic body,” aspect of the *Dharmakāya*.
5. While these distinctions are addressed in various texts, in essence, the overarching message communicates that all Buddhas are essentially one and all Buddhas are merely exemplars of the Dharma, or the appropriate behavior to achieve enlightenment.
6. The best-known example in art of communicating progression through using hand gestures is evident in depictions of the nine ranks of rebirth in the perfected land of Sukhavatī. In the fourteenth through the sixteenth meditations of the *Amitāyurdhyāna-sūtra*, nine different “welcomings” by the deity Amitāyus and/or his representatives are described. In Chinese and Japanese painting and sculpture, each rank of welcoming, and level of rebirth, into the pure land is communicated through different hand gestures.
7. For a detailed discussion of the Four Methods of Conversion and the Five Periods, see Monk Chegwan, *T'ien-T'ai Buddhism: An Outline of the Fourfold Teachings*, trans. The Buddhist Translation Seminar of Hawaii (Tokyo: Daiichi-Shobo, 1983), 55–61.
8. Chegwan, *T'ien-T'ai Buddhism*, 57.
9. See John C. Huntington, “Cave Six at Aurangabad: A Tantrayāna Monument?” in *Kalādarśana: American Studies in the Art of India*, ed. Joanna G. Williams (New Delhi, etc.: Oxford University Press, 1981), 47–55.
10. Chikyo Yamamoto, *Mahāvairocana-Sūtra* (New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture and Aditya Prakashan, 1990), vii.
11. In the Indic region, the Vajradhātu Mandala may have been referred to as the Karmadhātu, or “Action Realm,” Mandala. This is the primary mandala of the *Sarvatathāgatattvasaṃgraha*, which appears to be the most emphasized methodology in the Indic tradition.
12. See Huntington, “Cave Six at Aurangabad,” 47–55.
13. The same configuration occurs in the mandala of the *Mañjuśrīmulakalpa*, which is based on the Garbhadhātu Mandala of the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*. Yet in the former, Mañjuśrī is understood as the Buddha Vairocana in the center of the mandala. As there are no central shrine images of the deity Mañjuśrī at either Ajanta or Aurangabad, in all probability the caves are a reference to the older *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*.
14. Although the quarters of the two bodhisattvas in the mandala include more than twenty-one deities and other acolytes, it is axiomatic in Buddhism to suggest the presence of an entire entourage through just the central, or presiding, deity. Therefore, though the quarter of Avalokiteśvara in the mandala includes various forms of the bodhisattva, their presence is implied through just the single image of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara in the caves. The same holds true for the Bodhisattva Vajrapāṇi.
15. Several other Buddhas occur at Ajanta and are clearly discernible by their iconographic features. For example, the Buddha in *badrāsana*, or the so-called “European pose,” on the stupa in Cave 26 is Ketumati Maitreya.
16. Yamamoto, *Mahāvairocana-Sūtra*, 1.