

The Buddha was bald

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The Buddha was Bald ... but is Everywhere Depicted with a Full Head of Hair

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One of the most obvious fallacies of modern Therav—Bda Buddhism is the depiction of the Buddha with a full head of hair. Living in Southeast Asia, asking the average Buddhist about this results in a range of answers, from a shrug and smile (admitting that it is incorrect but supposing that it is not worth worrying about) over to the opposite extreme of taking offense and demanding to know how anyone could dare to raise the question. Some might ask how we could know what the Buddha looked like after so many centuries, if we didn't blindly trust in a succession of statues and amulets. It is needless to say that the Pali canon does not contain photographic evidence, but it does contain evidence of another kind, and this article tries to answer the question (that almost nobody dares to ask) in as few words as possible, by working from the primary sources.

In broaching this issue, we deal with another in passing: the core of the Pali canon does contain some useful descriptions of what the historical Buddha looked like, however, these are not found in devotional poetry that simply provides effusive praise of him (without providing useful details). Although the issue is not philosophical, the method used to find the answer is much the same as we use in the study of Buddhist philosophy: the details emerge from the context of debate, from contrasting claims and (sometimes) even accusations and insults.

I am not the first author to raise this question, and, in the closing paragraphs of this essay (†36, below) I do briefly survey the work of a few other scholars have tried to answer it. However, priority is given to disclosing the primary sources: in this case, as in many others, there is no controversy at all if we simply lay bare the original texts, and let them speak for themselves.

I should also note that that many modern authors on this subject have been primarily interested in art-history and statuary; although I can sympathize with this difference in emphasis, it entails that (very often) authors on this subject were neither primarily interested in the textual sources nor in looking beyond the explanation of the extant art and statues of Buddhist tradition. In museums, I have frequently seen the different styles of the Buddha's hair contrasted in explaining different periods of statuary; the failure to question the underlying assumption that the Buddha should be depicted with hair at all is encouraged by the art-history, simply because the latter begins at too late a stage of development (relative to the most ancient texts that are still extant); traditional adherents of Buddhism, finding their own cultural assumptions affirmed with the imprimatur of scholarly institutions (such as museums) are even less inclined to skepticism, when looking back on the timeline of this development. Simply put, many discussions of the art-history commence at a period much later than the composition of the Pali canonical text, with no connection to the historical Buddha, simply because the statuary is

more recent than the texts (and “more recent” by a significant number of centuries, as we shall see, below).

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In mural paintings seen throughout Southeast Asia, there’s an incongruous contrast between the Buddha and the crowd of monks surrounding him: apparently, the Buddha is the only one who doesn’t shave his head. If this tradition actually dated back to the era of the canon’s composition (or, putatively, if these images had any resemblance to the historical Buddha) we would expect to find the same contrast between the description of the Buddha and his fellow monks in the most ancient textual sources. We don’t.

Throughout the Pali canon, the same term, *mucā* मुच, *Haka*, is used to describe both the Buddha and the monks who were his contemporaries and followers. The meaning of this word is no mystery: it means “a bald-shaven man”, and it has a disparaging nuance. In the following examples, it is used in a somewhat insulting way.

In the *Ambacā* अम्ब, *ṇha-sutta* [DN #3] the Buddha debates with a Brahmin who is openly contemptuous of him; the Brahmin describes the Buddha as a bald-shaven man (...*gotama mucā* मुच, *Hakā* हक, *samacā* सम, *ṇha* ण्ह...) and as “black” like other members of the vassal social class, i.e., in reference to India’s caste hierarchy (...*ibbhā* इब्भ, *kacā* कक, *bandhupā* बन्धुप, *ṇha* ण्ह...). [Cambodian canon vol. 14, p. 222–3; cf. PTS DN 1, p. 90; the passage is quoted in full in the boxed text, provided as an illustration.]

អថខោភកវា អម្ពដ្ឋំ មាណវំ ជំតទរោច ជំវិនុខោ
តេ អម្ពដ្ឋំ ព្រាហ្មណេហិ វិទ្យោហិ មហាលូកេហិ
អាចរិយច្វាចរិយេហិ សទ្ធិំ កហាសល្លាច្វោ ហោតិ
យថយិទំ ចរំ តិដ្ឋំ និសិទ្ធនេ មយា កញ្ចិ កញ្ចិ កបំ
សារាណីយំ វិទិតិសារេសីតិ។

*Atha kho bhagavā ambatṭhaṃ māṇavaṃ etadavoca
evannu kho te ambatṭha brāhmaṇehi vuddhehi
mahallakehi ācariyapācariyehi saddhiṃ
kathāsallāpo hoti yathayidaṃ caraṃ tiṭṭhaṃ
nisinnena mayā kañci kañci kathaṃ sārāṇiyaṃ
vītisāresi—ti.*

នោហិទំ ភោ គោតម គច្ឆន្តោ វា ហិ ភោ គោតម
គច្ឆ ន្តេន ព្រាហ្មណេន សទ្ធិំ សល្លបិគុមរហតិ
បិគោ វា ហិ ភោ គោតម បិគេន ព្រាហ្មណេ
ព្រាហ្មណេន សទ្ធិំ សល្លបិគុមរហតិ [...] យេ ច
ខោ ភោ គោតម មណ្ឌកា សមនកា ឥព្វា កណ្ណ
ពន្ធច្វាទាបច្ចា តេហិបិ មេ សទ្ធិំ ជំវិ
កហាសល្លាច្វោ ហោតិ យថរិវិ ភោតា
គោតមេនាតិ។

*Nohidaṃ bho gotama gacchanto vā hi bho gotama
gacchantena brāhmaṇo brāhmaṇena saddhiṃ
sallapitumarahati ṭhito vā hi bho gotama ṭhitenā
brāhmaṇo brāhmaṇena saddhiṃ
sallapitumarahati. [...] Ye ca kho bho gotama
muṇḍakā samaṇakā ibbhā kaṇhā
bandhupādāpaccā tehipi me saddhiṃ evaṃ
kathāsallāpo hoti yathariva bhotā gotamenā—ti.*

[Ambatṭha-sutta, op. cit. supra]

“Black” and “white” are correlative and culturally-conditioned concepts, but it is nevertheless significant that a Brahmin would perceive the Buddha as “black” (i.e., by the Brahmin’s own social standards) and that one would reproach the other on this account. While the Brahmin’s bias is obvious, this text is much more useful than passages that merely glorify the Buddha without telling us how he was perceived by his contemporaries.

The dialogues of the canon depict the Buddha at various ages and stages of his career, but in this dialogue he explicitly describes himself as elderly (...vuddhehi mahallakehi —Бcariyap—Бcariyehi...) and so the situation is of a young Brahmin insulting a non-Brahmin who is significantly older than himself.

In the discussion that ensues, the Buddha does not dispute his own appearance (he neither protests against the description of him as “black” nor describes himself as otherwise); instead, he points out that the Brahmin’s own ancestry is partly black. The discussion reveals that this Brahmin’s clan-name (scil. कच्छिन्ना —Бyana) incorporates the same Pali word for “black” (कच्छिन्ना) because the family traces their origins back to one of the slaves of the (presumably mythic) king Okka —Бka. Eventually, the Brahmin admits that he had been taught the same origin story for his clan and clan-name (though he concedes the point only after some coercion from the gods, who seem to intervene just to keep the story moving at a rapid pace).

Not all of the Brahmins in the canon are so rude; as drama or satire, it is both peculiar and plausible that this one Brahmin who was especially motivated to question the Buddha’s ethnicity was himself of questionable ethnic status within his clan –the story makes it clear to the reader that this imperious Brahmin was precarious in his own position of caste privilege. Whereas the dialogue started with the Brahmin insulting the Buddha, the Buddha ends up consoling the Brahmin (who is ridiculed by other Brahmins, on account of his lineage). The Buddha tells him that he

should not feel ashamed of his ancestry, relating some of the accomplishments of this former slave of king Okk—Bka, who became a holy-man or conjurer of some kind. This entire discussion of genealogy is laden with magic and mythology, but it retains an aspect of social realism, and clearly reflects cultural attitudes from the milieu of its authorship.

Of course, the description of the Buddha as bald is neither questioned nor disputed in the text itself, but the same sutta contains an interesting mention of the (contemporaneous) practice of the higher castes (ritually) shaving a man's head before casting him out of the community (... pakaras= 3e khuramuc= 3c= Ha+Л karitv—B... [PTS p. 98]). This provides some further cultural context for the disparaging use of the term muc= 3c= Haka (“bald-shaven man”) found in the core of the canon. Evidently, there was more than one religious reason for a man to have a shaven head in India at that time: if there had been significant numbers of men whose heads were shaven as a punishment (prior to some sort of banishment or period of penitence) we cannot expect that any special respect was accorded to the Buddhist monks of that era simply on account of their lack of hair.

For Buddhists who have grown up in cultures where the shaven head is exclusively associated with monasticism, this sort of contrast in cultural assumptions is too easily forgotten in considering the evidence of the original texts.

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For a brief corroboration of these intersecting cultural attitudes, we may consider the description of a Brahmin who shouts out at the Buddha, seeing him at a distance, “Stop right there, you shaven-headed man, you recluse, you outcaste.” (...tatreva muc= 3c= Haka tatreva samac= 3aka tatreva vasalaka, tic= hc= nh—Bh—l-ti) [KN:Sn, , Uragavagga 1:7, Vasala

sutta+Л; PTS Sn p. 21]

Although it is not a consistent feature of the Pali language, this sequence of three epithets all end with “-ka”, and (as with muc+Л 3c+Л Haka, aforementioned) the suffix can add a diminutive nuance. This means that the word here translated as “recluse” is clearly disparaging in the source text (samac+Л 3a+ka makes this clear, even though, in other contexts, the word samac+Л 3a is certainly not insulting). The cultural association of being bald-shaven with banishment from one’s clan (and loss of caste status) makes this an unsurprising trio of insults.

Each of these scenarios confirms that the Buddha was perceived and described as a bald-shaven man in his own cultural context, and there was at least some ambivalence toward him on account of his appearance (if not outright hostility, on occasion) . It is also clear that the Buddha’s selection of the bald-shaven head as the sole ornament of the monastic uniform created a very clear break (or demarcation) between his own religion and the religion(s) of the Brahmins in his own time.

Similarly, in the Sundarika-sutta [SN 137:1:9, PTS vol. 1, p. 167] a Brahmin responds negatively to the sight of the Buddha’s baldness, on account of its implications for his caste status. The story is told as the prose preamble to a poem and the circumstances seem to be contrived to bring latent caste attitudes (and antipathies) to the fore. The Buddha is sitting under a tree, apparently with part of his robe draped over his head, or using some of the robe’s loose cloth like a hood (...rukkham+Л le s+Л sa+Л [~sas+Л sa+Л] p+Л Bruta+Л nisinna+Л... [ibidem]). A Brahmin approaches him on foot, seeing that the Buddha is a holy man but not yet seeing that he is shaven bald, intending to give him the food left over from a Brahmanical fire-offering ritual that he has just conducted by the riverside.

In terms of the simple fact that the Buddha was indeed bald, I would note,

that when the Buddha hears the Brahmin approach and reveals his head (s—лsa†Л vivari) the Brahmin is surprised to see that this is a man with a shaven head (and this is denoted with the same term discussed above, muc— Зс— Haka).

The Brahmin then reconsiders offering the food, not wanting to donate to a bald-shaven man; however, he is ambivalent because, he reflects, amongst the bald-shaven men, some are still Brahmins after all (muc— Зс— H—Бpi hi idhekacce br—Бhmac— З—Б bhavanti). Apparently, the implicit concern here is that the vast majority of men with bald-shaven heads are either low-caste or outcastes, i.e., perhaps with reference to the form of banishment aforementioned, or else simply reflecting the ethnic and religious divisions of the era. The next step for this Brahmin, then, is to ask the Buddha his caste status, to determine (from his perspective) whether or not the Buddha is a suitable recipient for the donation.

The poem that follows opens with a standard Buddhist argument that it is a man's conduct that should be judged, not his birth nor his ethnicity. There seems to be a minor witticism here: the poem specifies that people who are born to "low" status can become great religious figures, just as fire can be born from any block of wood. The word used for "fire" is not one of the most common nouns, but an old Vedic ritual term (j—Бtaveda); evidently, most Brahmins would neither have accepted the premise that such a sacred fire is equal to any other fire, nor would they have accepted the equality of human beings that the Buddha advocated. The same allegory of lighting a fire is used to refute caste privilege elsewhere (in the core canon) several times, with significant variations (in context and content); however, this instance is especially dramatic, and clearly links the issue of the shaven head to caste identity.

There is no difference between the terms used to describe the Buddha as bald and the terms used to describe other monks of the same era. In numerous passages, exactly the same terms are used to refer to Buddhist monks (in general) as men with shaven heads. For a very brief example, a group of monks including the Buddha are all forbidden from coming to drink water (at a particular well) with the same disparaging terms for “shaven-headed recluses” (...m—Б te muc—|| Зс—|| Нак—Б samac—|| Зак—Б р—Бн—луа+Л ара+Лs+л-ti). [KN:Ud 7:9 Udar—Бна-sutta, PTS Ud p. 78]

Unlike the depictions found in Southeast Asia today, wherein the Buddha appears starkly different from his followers, there is an indicative passage in the canon where we find that the Buddha cannot be distinguished from a crowd of other Buddhist monks. Of course, if the Buddha had a full head of hair (or magical hair of any kind) he would have been clearly visible in a crowd of men with bald-shaven heads; however, these passages (quoted below) also show more generally that there was nothing supernatural about the Buddha’s appearance, and that (for most of his career) he did not look much different from the other monks who were his followers.

In the (relatively well-known) S—Бmaññaphala-sutta [DN #2] a King rides an elephant from his palace to seek out the Buddha in a mango-orchard. After the king dismounts and approaches the Buddha on foot, he looks at the assembled monks, and asks aloud, in effect, “...but which one here is the Buddha?” Literally, he asks his companion (named J—лvaka) “...but J—лvaka, where indeed is the blessed one?”, i.e., where within the group of monks he is looking at. (Upasa 卐kamtv—Б j—лvaka+Л kom—Бrabhacca+Л etadavoca, kaha+Л pana samma j—лvaka bhagav—Б-ti) [PTS DN vol. I p. 50]

The reply, too, does not indicate anything remarkable about the Buddha’s appearance, but simply indicates where he is sitting, and the direction he is facing. I would digress to note that the same remarks on the seating arrangements (with the Buddha located by a central pillar, facing

eastward) appear in the Sekha-sutta, [MN #53] in the Mahāparinibbāna-sutta, [DN#16] and also in the Sacchī Egānti-sutta [DN #33]; in the opening pages of the latter source, we seem to be reading a complete description of the cultural protocol for hosting a Buddhist lecture compiled largely from passages found elsewhere in the canon. In other words, either there really was a standard seating-arrangement for public lectures in ancient Buddhism, or else it came to be presented as if it had been standard (after the fact) in order to set out the desiderata for organizing such a sermon (in the process of the canon's redaction).

Despite the fact that the Buddha is seated prominently, according to the formal seating arrangements described, the King in this dialogue cannot differentiate the Buddha from his followers at a glance. This has clear implications for the (still-widespread) Mahayana assumption that the Buddha had freakish physical abnormalities.

In a very different sutta [MN #140, Dhātuvibhacchī Egā-sutta] a young man who is (by happenstance) sleeping in the same room as the Buddha (in a potter's workshop) actually explains to the Buddha that he is a devotee of the Buddha, not realizing to whom he is speaking. It is significant that neither party can initially recognize the other as a Buddhist, despite the fact that the circumstances have already made it obvious that both are religious eremites of some kind. It is also salient to our present interest that this younger man sat and had a conversation with the Buddha for a fairly long time before surmising that he was speaking to the Buddha himself –and even this was an inference based on the content of the sermon, not on the man's appearance. We should also note that the Buddha seems to enjoy the dramatic irony of the situation, asking aloud if the young man has actually seen the Buddha before, or if he thinks he could recognize the Buddha on encountering him (dicchī nānarubbo pana te bhikkhu, so bhagavā, disvā ca pana jāneyyāsi-ti). [PTS MN Vol. 3, p. 238-9] In the denouement to this discussion, the young man apologizes for having failed to address the Buddha in accordance with his

higher status, as he did not know to whom he was speaking; however, there is no mention made of the fact that the Buddha was also incorrect in addressing the younger man as a monk (bhikkhu); the unwinding of the plot reveals that the latter had aspired to become a monk, but had not yet ordained.

Evidently, the Buddha did not have physical abnormalities (nor any other remarkable characteristics) that would have allowed his devotees to recognize him at close range, nor did his followers have a tradition of believing this to be the case in the era of the composition and compilation of the most ancient canonical texts. Conversely, in this scene, it seems that it was not even easy for the Buddha himself to distinguish his own adherents from eremites of other kinds, i.e., apparently because of the simplicity of the monastic regalia.

Apart from the question of his hair (or lack thereof) all of these examples affirm that the Buddha wore the same uniform as the other monks: in the former example, the king cannot distinguish the leader from his followers, and in the latter example, both the Buddha and the younger man are unsure of each other's monastic "rank".

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There is a more flattering (but still very mortal) description of the Buddha in the Khuddaka-Nikāya that reflects some of the same cultural issues. On first seeing the Buddha from a distance, and then later approaching him in person, King Bimbisāra considers the Buddha as a candidate to recruit into the army. [KN:Sn, Pabbajjā-sutta, PTS Sn 71 et seq.]

Here, too, the perception of caste identity plays a role. The king remarks that the Buddha seems to be suitably born for the job, as a member of the warrior caste (vacā 3cā 3—Brohena sampanno j—Btim—B viya khattiyo).

Given that the Buddha is in his usual attire of robes, and the same passage describes him collecting alms with his begging bowl (and so on), the king seems to be responding directly to the Buddha's physical appearance with these comments (there is nothing to suggest that he is a descendant of warriors in his regalia, and the king had never seen him before). This first impression would therefore be based on the Buddha's facial features (or ethnic characteristics).

This dialogue further indicates that the shaven head was not of any univocal significance during the Buddha's lifetime: the scenario is that a king might see such a man and offer him a position in the military (and, apparently, this is neither offensive nor extraordinary). While we could imagine that (once in a while) monks might be tempted to change careers and become soldiers, I would tend to think that those who were perceived as long-term holy-men by the recruiters would not be actively sought after for the job (i.e., presumably, most eremites would lack the strength and skills to become soldiers). The plurality of possible meanings for the shaven head explains the king's assumption that this unknown wanderer passing through his kingdom might be interested in joining the military. and the (aforementioned) custom of shaving a man's head before banishment provides some useful background to the episode.

We could speculate a little further that shaven-headed exiles from one kingdom could (sometimes) be conscripted into the military of another kingdom: having lost their status within their own clan, they might be eager candidates for such a job in a foreign land.

The fact that this dialogue between the Buddha and a king seemed plausible (and inoffensive) is more significant than whether or not it actually happened; its apparent ordinariness within the cultural context of the canon's composition is what makes it significant to us now.

Presumably, some of the monks reciting this story would have had similar experiences of being offered employment of some kind, based on a

misunderstanding of their appearance, and then having to (politely) decline.

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Thus far, we have demonstrated that (1) the core canon explicitly describes the Buddha as a bald-shaven man; moreover, (2) implicitly, these texts are incompatible with the historically-subsequent assumptions about the Buddha's physical appearance now commonly found in statuary. The ancient texts can neither be reconciled with the image of the Buddha having a full head of hair, nor with his having magical curls of hair, nor with his having a freakishly deformed skull. There is no doubt as to the antecedence of one source of information over the other.

Over the very long period of time we are describing, it is not surprising that we would have major discontinuities in the public cults surrounding the Buddha: if we presume the earliest origin of the Pali texts to be in the fifth or sixth century B.C., there is a tremendous lapse of time before the iconography of the second century A.D. –and even then, culturally, there is no reason to assume that the sculptors were attempting historical accuracy. The materials that the art-historians rely upon (such as extant stucco, bas-reliefs, etc.) are generally available from the second century onward, and the early “aniconic” tradition (of sculptors refusing to depict the Buddha at all, representing only his absence or his footprints, etc.) obviously does not contain any indication of what people assumed about the Buddha's hairstyle at the time.

It is also in the second century A.D. that the Sanskrit poet A┐blvaghoc┐ ra began writing his lyrics about the life of the Buddha; he had undertaken the creation of entirely new myths that had no precedent in the (much more ancient) Pali canon, and many innovations in the increasingly fictional life of the Buddha have no earlier precedent than his poetry.

There is certainly confusion about this simple fact: Aśvaghoṣa's myths (that are neither canonical nor even Theravāda) continue to be depicted in Theravāda mural paintings, movie adaptations, and even appear in seemingly-authoritative textbooks (as if they could be cited as canonical texts).

However, in looking at the shifting assumptions about the Buddha's appearance, it is important to keep in mind that Aśvaghoṣa's work is still earlier than the composition of the Pali commentaries. There is a great deal of confusion resulting from the conflation of the core canon with the (much later) commentarial literature in the minds of many Buddhists (and even secular researchers) today. The present subject of discussion is one of many that demands we keep these two bodies of literature distinct in visualizing the progress from the canon to the commonly found iconography.

Writing in the second century A.D., Aśvaghoṣa was apparently the first to dramatize the Buddha cutting off his hair. In contrast to the historically plausible tone of the Pali texts quoted in the foregoing sections, Aśvaghoṣa's poetry makes everything glitter, and the action proceeds with an unreal sense of stagecraft: the Buddha's hair (along with his royal turban) is cut away with a glittering sword, covered with glittering jewels, and the Buddha then throws it into the air, whence the gods snatch it in mid-flight. [—Anadajoti, ed., 2005, Ch. 6, verses 56–59]

Elsewhere in the same poem, it is lamented aloud that the Buddha's once-beautiful hair had been tossed on the ground; [Ch. 8, verse 51] this passage presumes the Buddha had merely mortal locks of hair, and specifies that they had been cut off and discarded in a normal fashion. In contrasting these two passages, it does not seem possible that Aśvaghoṣa himself was (intentionally) proposing any change to Buddhist iconography in his poetry, nor that he (implicitly) thought of the Buddha as having supernatural hair (in either passage); his purpose seems

have a clean-shaven head, but instead possessed a set of supernatural curls that remained in the same shape (i.e., neither growing in length nor falling out) after this episode with the sword and the gods collecting his severed locks out of the air. This is not explained at length in the *Nidāna-kathā*, but is presented in passing; presumably, the authors did not think that this was anything surprising, and that it did not require explanation. At the time of authorship, it seems likely that this reflected an assumption that was already widespread amongst the audience and patrons for a new work of popular literature of this kind; in religion, innovation requires careful justification, whereas the affirmation of crass assumption requires none at all.

In retrospect, we seem to have a very casually adopted heresy: the notion that the Buddha had hair (after becoming a monk) seems to have become a normal assumption among many Buddhists in the 5th century –despite the fact that it was blatantly contradicted by the most ancient (and most sacred) of Buddhist texts. Clearly, people continued to make new statues and tell new stories, regardless of this contradiction.

In this respect, I differ from Coomaraswamy (1928, p. 833) who proceeds on the assumption that, “...the old books would have been examined with a view to testing the propriety of the current representations...”; at the same time, Coomaraswamy wants to believe that the authors of the Pali commentaries were themselves influenced by the Buddha as they saw him in (5th century A.D.) statuary, because they lived “...long after the practical problem of iconographic representation had been settled...” (ibidem). Approaching the matter in this way, Coomaraswamy is looking at the statues as if they were evidence of the interpretation (or misinterpretation) of the ancient texts, and then he is looking at the commentaries as if they were interpretations of the statues.

The “problem” (if it is a problem) is simply that the earliest extant statues all have hair (or else, as mentioned, they are “aniconic” and do not depict

the Buddha at all). Writing much more recently than Coomaraswamy, and partly in response to him, Krishan (1996, p. 117) remarks that the trouble is that the *Nidānakathā* does explain the popularity of depicting the Buddha with short curls of supernatural hair, but it fails explain why so many of the very earliest statues have long, flowing hair. I think, however, the nature of this problem arises from the interpretation. Krishan remarks that, "These types of hair arrangement... could only be explained by assuming that the sculptors had disregarded the scriptural tradition. This, however, could not be." [p. 117-119] This repeats same the fundamental mistake made by Coomaraswamy. The simplest assumption is that the sculptors did not know or did not care about the contents of the most ancient texts.

It does not matter whether the statues prefigured the belief (that the Buddha had magical hair) or if the belief was the cause of new styles of statuary: the fundamental fact that we must reiterate is that the *Nidānakathā* is the first Pali text to record the belief in a non-bald Buddha (and it is a non-canonical text). This arose as something completely separate from the Pali canon, many centuries after the death of the historical Buddha, with no connection to the more ancient texts whatsoever. If it is asked why the authors of the *Nidānakathā* were not concerned that they had contradicted the core canon, I would assume the answer is the same as for the sculptors: most likely, they did not think of themselves as historians (nor as philologists) but as the creators of something new.

In rebuttal to Coomaraswamy's work, Banerjea (1931) set out an array of useful facts; the latter article settles a range of questions about the Buddha's hair (and the earliest appearance of the deformed skull, now standard in Chinese Mahayana images) from the 2nd century onward. It is a very good article, but it neither asks nor answers the question of the Buddha's baldness prior to the period of art-history it investigates (i.e., the oldest part of the Pali canon, the subject of our inquiry above, is not

discussed). However, for readers who would like to know more about this history, Banerjea's work is useful because it is scrupulous in detailing the author's sources, and in describing how certain facts first came to be known (including, e.g., the difficulties of the first European scholars who struggled to identify particular statues as bald, the classification of the different types of hair, and so on).

†37.

In every illustration I've seen in the current generation of Cambodia's (government-issued) school textbooks, the illustrators draw the Buddha with a full head of hair, worn in a loose topknot. Consistently, these pictures show the Buddha with naturalistic hair, never the supernatural curls typical of Chinese-Mahayana images. In my own university textbooks, so far as I can recall, the hirsute Buddha was only contrasted to the earlier period of "aniconism" in Buddhist art. The simple but inevitable question as to why the Buddha would be depicted with anything other than a shaven head is rarely asked, and rarely answered.

It is not only traditional Buddhists who have selectively disregarded the evidence. I was surprised to find that Professor Donald S. Lopez has published his opinion in support of the notion that the Buddha as depicted with magical hair and a deformed skull is correct; in his opinion, the supernatural reality of the Buddha's appearance, "...was suppressed by European scholars who used their scientific skills to reduce the swelling and rearrange the Buddha's hair to make him more human." [Lopez, 2005, p. 32] This amazing claim is offered without the citation of any specific source. If it were true, Lopez's argument would mean that I myself and all the sources I have cited (primary and secondary) are somehow a party to a "scientific" conspiracy to "suppress" the truth of the Buddha's physical appearance.

On the contrary, I think the only conspiracy is a widespread lack of interest in the primary sources –and this lack of interest is neither new nor limited to laypeople. Lopez’s opinion is also a reminder that secular authorities on religious matters require as much skepticism as authorities of any other kind; employment as a university professor does not exclude religious motives, nor religious bias.

For Theravāda Buddhists who are alive today, and who continue to paint new images of the Buddha on temple-walls, there is a genuine question of why they (or anyone) should value a tradition that actually contradicts the writ of their own religion’s canon. If the Buddha was bald, why is he everywhere shown with a full head of hair?

To ask the same question in another way, is the purpose of the religion (today) to pay homage to the man described in the ancient texts, or to pay homage to a style of statuary that began in Gandhara many centuries after his death?

The real significance of culture is the sum of the questions that it prevents from being asked: the doubts that are precluded by crass assumption are the substance of culture itself. Texts may answer questions, but they remain inert if people do not ask them; philosophies may raise new doubts, but only for those who are willing to hear them.

The question of the Buddha’s baldness is an interesting example wherein Buddhist culture has become something quite separate from the religion, and, indeed, the culture has come to exalt a heresy. In Southeast Asia, this heresy is not merely common but ubiquitous; it is fair to say that many modern followers of the Buddha know very little that came out of his head aside from his hair, and this very dubious hair (along with the worship of “hair relics”, and so on) is now more widely known than any philosophical discourse the Buddha ever recited.

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