

RETRACING FOOTPRINTS

PEOPLE'S BUDDHISM STUDY SOCIETY

In 1978, the Nanyang University Buddhist Society was active with about 20+ undergraduates who were keen learners of the Buddha Dharma and had great respect and belief for Buddhist principles and philosophy such as rebirth and cause-and-effect. Later, more Buddhist youths from the Singapore National University and the Singapore Buddhist Lodge Temple joined them in their spiritual development...

How time has flown by and these young people of yesteryears have now become the backbone of the Buddhist community in Singapore playing important roles, be it as a monastic or laity to support the Buddha Dharma work. They include the Founder of *For You Information*, Venerable Master Guang Chao; Spiritual Advisor of the People's Buddhism Study Society, Venerable Guo Hui; Venerable Yuan Qing; Venerable Yuan Fan; Vice-Chairman of PBSS, Ng Hoo Seng and Lim Heng Moh. And the establishment of the People's Buddhism Study Society (PBSS) is inextricably linked with them.

Back to the Past

In the late 1970s, Venerable Guang Chao and Venerable Yuan Qing, together with 20 young men, initiated Buddhist studies and discussions in a barber shop along the shophouse row of Lorong 3, Geylang. With their initial self-learned Buddhist knowledge, they often



debated with an old man who was a believer of the Chinese folk religion. These discussions strengthened their understanding and belief in Buddhism. Shortly after, they rented a wooden hut along the same lane with a monthly rental of \$100 – an amount raised by putting together their savings. Though small, the hut was dynamic place that served its function well – a conducive place and space for Buddhism discourse – the initial small group discussions burgeoned to attracting more than 200 people in three years.

However, in the early 1980s, a sudden fire broke out and the raging fire destroyed all the furniture and even melted the phone. Miraculously, the *Diamond Sutra* and the small statue of the Buddha remained intact which has enshrined and still in public display today. Although the fire burnt down tangible material possessions, it did not burn out hope and the people's Dharma aspirations. In 1981, with joint efforts and ideation of these young people, PBSS was formally founded. Moreover, the old man who was originally was a non-believer took refuge and received the Bodhisattva precepts and it was also then that more than 20 of them, including Venerable Guang Chao, Yuan Qing and Guo Hui decided to practice monasticism.

In 1983, 20 members raised \$38,000 to lease a house located at Still Road as the society's new space and immediately started a series of activities. At that moment, PBSS already had a large youth base and it also saw an increase in the women's participation. Three years later, due to government land acquisition, PBSS had to relocate to Lorong 8, Geylang.

Some years later, PBSS relocated to Lorong 9, Geylang again in 1989 and reinvented itself. PBSS not only held large-scale lectures, short-term monastic retreats but also the first-ever Buddhist Congress. This congress, held at the Clementi Stadium was graced by Taiwan's renowned Venerable Hui Lv and saw a few thousand attendees, another first for Dharma assembly turnout – setting the direction and momentum for many Buddhist events to follow in both Singapore and Malaysia.

In 1992, PBSS acquired No. 25 along Lorong 22, Geylang and this is a dream come true – a building with three levels all dedicated to the study and practice of Buddhism. Around the same period, the Venerables also brought back Mahayana, Zen and Tibetan Buddhism. Venerable Master Guang Chao who studied at the Larung Gar Buddhist Academy (喇荣五明佛学院) also introduced tantric practices, new methods of Buddhist teaching. It was also then that PBSS's Dharma network also grew from strength to





Seated Buddha, Gandhara. Berlin Museum.
Photo Credit: Smith, Vincent Arthur 1848-1920. A History of Fine Art in India and Ceylon, from the earliest times to the present day by Smith, Vincent Arthur, 1848-1920, published in 1911.



Seated Buddha from Gandhara. Object 41 of 100, British Museum, United Kingdom. Photo Credit: Mike Peel on www.mikepeel.net



Buddha Statue in the Gandhara style. Circa 2nd century AD. Delhi Museum, India. Photo Credit: www.Photos.com/Thinkstock

The face of the Buddha statues is round with a gentle smile, characterised by high curving eyebrows, a hooked nose, narrow lips and a knobbed chin. A short mantle with a zigzag 'centipedes fang' design is usually positioned above the breast. Common postures would depict Buddha subduing Mara (*Maravijaya*) and the Buddha would be sitting with crossed legs, showing the soles of both feet.

2. Later Phase:

During this phase, influences from Sokothau introduced an extended lotus-shaped or flame-shaped finial, fine hair curls and a thin hair band. The torso and the chest sometimes resemble those of the former phase but the face was more oval.

The mantle usually extended down to the navel and the posture was also modified to a seat that was usually undecorated. However, it is common to find the Buddha draped in royal attire and appearing in different postures, often featuring more decorative elements on the base. And it was during this time that the creation of Buddha images in crystal and precious stones became very popular.



Buddha Subduing Mara in Lanna Style, 16th century. The National Museum, Bangkok. Unknown Provenance, Gift of Phraya Chaiwichit Wisitthammathada's descendants.

The Art of Gandhara and Mathura

The art of Gandhara flourished and benefited from centuries of interaction with Greek culture since the conquests of Alexander the Great in 332 B.C.E. and the subsequent establishment of the Greco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek Kingdoms. This also led to the development of Greco-Buddhist art and the Gandharan Buddhist sculptures definitely shows the Greek artistic influence. And artistically, the Gandharan school of sculpture is said to have contributed wavy hair, drapery covering both shoulders, shoes, sandals, acanthus leaf and decorations, etc.

On the other hand, the art of Mathura was based on a strong Indian tradition, exemplified by the anthropomorphic representation of divinities such as the Yakshas, although in a style rather archaic compared to the later representations of the Buddha. The Mathuran school thus contributed unique features like clothes covering the left shoulder with thin muslin, the wheel on the palm and the lotus seat, etc. And nonetheless, both Mathura and Gandhara greatly influenced each other, and though it is difficult to pin-point whether anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha was a consequence of Greek cultural influence or local Buddhist art evolution, one thing for sure is that it set the direction of iconic Buddhist art. An expression of art form characterised with a combination of realistic idealism, realistic human features, proportions, attitudes and attributes all working in harmony to epitomise the Buddha's qualities.

The Lanna Buddha Statues

The Lanna Buddha Statues refer to the artefacts found in Northern Thailand dating between 11th, 13th or 10th centuries AD. And even from this period, there are two phases that historians has categorised into:

1. Former Phase:

With close similarity to the Pala-Indian style, the Buddha statues featured a lotus bud or orb shaped finial and large hair curls (without a hair band), a plump torso and prominent chest.