

THE NOT-SO-INHERENT POWER OF HOLY OBJECTS



READER QUESTION:

Why do Buddhists value holy objects (stupas, statues, thangkas, etc.) so much? And how do we justify spending millions of dollars and so much energy on the Maitreya Project, for example, when millions of people suffer from abject poverty, disease, etc.?

Answered by James Blumenthal, Ph.D.

The question of the value and power of holy objects in Buddhism is an interesting one. It is one that I have personally struggled with and thought about quite a bit for many years. I have been perplexed at the way I sometimes find holy objects quite moving and at other times, do not. Likewise, it is curious to me that there are times when I am moved when others present are not, and vice versa. This all suggests to me that there is no inherent power in the holy objects themselves. But what does that mean?

More than fifteen years ago, when I first heard about the Maitreya Project and the millions of dollars it would cost to build an enormous statue, my immediate response to myself was, “What a waste! I can think of a thousand ways to offer much more useful and tangible help to those in need than to build a big statue.” Sure, I would love to see a 500-foot statue of Maitreya Buddha, but I would much rather see that money go to caring for the sick and poor, feeding the hungry, finding cures for terrible diseases, etc. Over time, and with more careful consideration, my view has changed.

The role and understanding of holy objects in the Buddhist tradition is in some ways ambiguous. On the one hand, Buddhists have been producing and venerating holy objects since the Buddha instructed his disciples that upon his passing they should place his relics in stupas at holy sites associated with important moments in his life. He said that these could serve as sites of veneration and pilgrimage for the laity. On the other hand, great Buddhist masters like Tsongkhapa have argued quite persuasively in philosophical writings based on other teachings of the Buddha that nothing has any inherent value. Of course it would be a mistake to conflate inherent value or power with conventional value and power and this is where some of the apparent ambiguities become less ambiguous. Let me explain.

Based on the insights of Nagarjuna and the teachings attributed to the Buddha in the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, Tsongkhapa taught that no conditioned phenomena (in

other words, nothing that depends on causes and conditions for its existence – including holy objects) have an essence, a fixed nature, inherent characteristics or any absolute way of being. A statue of the Buddha does not have the *inherent* characteristic of being powerful or transformative. In many senses, the power of a Buddha statue or any other holy object is dependent on a variety of causes and conditions. A hungry animal may see such an object and say to itself, “Not food,” and move on – utterly untransformed by the experience. A devout Buddhist on pilgrimage may see the same object and be profoundly inspired in a transformative way. For example, they may recall what they know of the Buddha’s life story, imagine the actual person of the Buddha and his actions, or his amazing liberating teachings, etc., and all this could have quite a positive effect on that person’s mind. Even a non-Buddhist may see the peaceful image of a Buddha and be touched or inspired. In contemplating these sorts of things, it seems that the statue, in consort with the mind of the person perceiving it, can be an actual catalyst for a transformative experience. So while a statue may not have inherent power, that is not to say it does not have some causal efficacy, some power to be transformative for those with appropriate karma or when the appropriate conditions are present. Lacking independent, inherent power does not equate with a lack of conventional power. To make this mistake would be to fall into the extreme of nihilism from a Madhyamaka perspective.

When thinking of the power of holy objects, conventional as that power may be, I am reminded of a particular statue of Shakyamuni Buddha that has always been incredibly potent and compelling for me. It dates to the 5th century and is often referred to as the “Sarnath Buddha.” It was found in the Deer Park area of Sarnath, where the Buddha gave his first teachings, among the remains of an ancient monastery, and currently resides at the Sarnath Museum. I had seen photos of it before, and even studied aspects of it



"Sarnath Buddha" statue housed at the Sarnath Museum.

in graduate school in a course on Buddhist iconography. I saw it in person for the first time when I went to work on my dissertation and study at the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in Sarnath from 1997 to 1998. I was blown away! For me personally, it is the most powerful image of the Buddha imaginable. When I look at it, I “feel the presence” of the Buddha. It is tangible. I visited that statue many times that year, and have been back several times since. Each visit is equally as powerful and my mental state is altered in a very positive way. I always walk away from it with a more peaceful mind than that with which I approach it. In amorphous ways, I learn from it. It was the catalyst for me thinking about the powerful reality of Shakyamuni Buddha in ways and to depths I had never imagined before. Is there something inherent about the sandstone from which it was carved that made me feel this way? Or was it the particular graceful shape of this statue? Or, perhaps in some mystical way was there a power there due to the thousands or millions who have looked upon that statue with faith for the past 1,500 years? Perhaps the second two possibilities lent a hand, but I would guess, based on my studies of Buddhist philosophy, that the major contributor to my reaction was my own mind. Due to causes and conditions that produced certain karmic predispositions, my mind was primed to be moved when it came into contact with this image.

So what does all of this have to do with my thoughts on

the Maitreya Project specifically? I mentioned at the outset that my thinking about the Maitreya Project had changed over time. What I did not think about when I first heard about the project was the way that so many people’s minds would be affected positively by this project. I did not think about how everybody who gave something of themselves to make this statue a reality for the benefit of others also benefits. This includes the thousands of donors, the thousands of people who will give of their time to make this happen, the millions of people who will be positively affected by supporting and appreciating the relic tours that have been circling the globe constantly for years in support of this project, all the sick and poor who will benefit from the social projects and hospitals associated with the project, not to mention the millions who will be inspired for generation after generation by being witness to its stunning presence and all that it represents. Maitreya Buddha represents, among other things, loving kindness in its most perfect form. We need monuments to loving kindness in the world! We need powerful occasions to contemplate loving kindness. We need reminders.

Beyond all of this, I believe my initial assessment was short-sited in another very important way. According to the Buddha, our most basic and fundamental problem, the problem of suffering in all its forms, is a spiritual problem. While I think that feeding the hungry and tending to the sick are critically important and virtuous activities, and that they are aspects of the spiritual path for those that engage in those forms of generosity, I agree with the Buddha when he says that what we fundamentally need to change and heal is our mind. Holy objects inspire people to do just that. I am a huge supporter of Socially Engaged Buddhism. I believe that being compassionate involves a lot more than contemplating compassion on a cushion. It involves working to co-create a world that engenders peace and our highest spiritual ideals. One way to do that is to tend to the needy or work for justice. But in a fundamental way, creating opportunities for spiritual transformation of the sort that holy objects inspire (with their not-so-inherent conventional power) is an incredible way to be of benefit to others in the world. ☸

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