

Symbolism of Elephants in Buddhist Art and Religion

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ABSTRACT

“It is better to live alone, there is no companionship with a fool; let a man walk alone, let him commit no sin (let him do) with few wishes, like an elephant in the forest.” - Buddha 330, Dhammapada

Through theorising Buddhist teachings and the parable of elephants, one gets to know the value of elephants from a Buddhist perspective. In Asian culture, living symbols are a significant aspect of religion; the image of an elephant symbolizes wisdom and strength. The Asian elephants are admired for their memory power and intelligence. Symbols are not just a cultural creation but are the manifestation of mental creation, an inner vision, experienced at a much deeper level by Buddhists. In a Buddhist context symbolism represents certain aspects of Buddha dharma through Buddhist art. The Buddhists relate the symbolism to the karmic activity that manifests in the physical world.

Elephants in Buddhism are regarded as one of the ratna of the seven royal ratna of Chakravartin King. These ratnas were used as symbols and motifs in the earliest Buddhist art of Amaravati and Nagarjunikonda stupas. Elephants in Buddhist art and religion if understood from the perspective of symbolism, carry intellectual intent apart from their socio-cultural, psychological and aesthetical aspects.

This paper will be an attempt to explore the representation of elephants in Buddhist art and religion from the perspective of symbolism.

Keywords: *Symbolism, Elephant, Buddhism, Buddhist art, Religion*

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