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The Former Buddhas

Vicky Pulu

Assistant Professor, Dept. of History

IGG College Tezu

Arunachal Pradesh, India

Abstract: In Buddhist cosmology, the historical figure Siddhartha Gautama, commonly known as the Buddha, is not regarded as the only individual to have attained enlightenment and taught the Dharma (the path to liberation). Instead, Buddhist scriptures and traditions speak of a lineage of "Former Buddhas"—enlightened beings who appeared in previous eras to guide sentient beings toward liberation from suffering. This concept underscores the timeless nature of the Dharma and the recurring emergence of Buddhas across vast cycles of time. This article explores the idea of former Buddhas, their significance in Buddhist thought, and the textual as well as archaeological evidence supporting their historical existence.

Keywords- Former Buddhas, Buddhist Cosmology, Siddhartha Gautama.

I. Introduction:

The notion of multiple Buddhas is a foundational aspect of Buddhist cosmology, particularly in the Theravāda tradition, which preserves the earliest surviving Buddhist texts in the Pāli Canon. According to Buddhist teachings, a Buddha is an individual who discovers the path to Nirvana independently, without a teacher in their lifetime, and then shares this path with others. The title "Buddha" means "awakened one", and it is conferred upon those who achieve this extraordinary realization. The '*Buddhavamsa*' explains that Buddhas arise only in specific cosmic conditions, when the Dharma has been forgotten and sentient beings are ready to receive it anew (Bv 1.4). The Pāli Canon explicitly mentions former Buddhas who preceded Gautama. One key text, "*the Mahāpadāna Sutta*" (Dīgha Nikāya 14), describes six Buddhas who appeared before Gautama in previous eons: **Vipassī, Sikhī, Vessabhū, Kakusandha, Koṇāgamana, and Kassapa**. The sutta provides detailed accounts of their lives, including their birthplaces, families, and the duration of their teachings. Each of these Buddhas is said to have attained enlightenment under a specific tree, mirroring Gautama's enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, and to have taught the Four Noble Truths to their respective followers.

Aims of the Study:

To Explore the Concept of Former Buddhas
To Analyze the Historical Context

Research Methodology:

The study adopts a qualitative approach to interpret the historical and philosophical dimensions of Former Buddhas. The study includes systematic analysis of Pali Canon texts (Digha Nikaya and Khuddaka Nikaya) and Mahayana Sutras corroborated by epigraphic and archaeological artifacts from early Buddhist era. It correlates textual data with archaeological chronologies using a historiographical approach. The study employs a single-case study design, focusing on the lineage of Buddhas as delineated in canonical texts and cross-referencing with material evidences about their existence. The secondary sources are also critically evaluated for bias and cross-referenced with primary source. The methodology also acknowledges limitations, like reliance on translated texts may introduce distortions inherent to colonial and modern scholarship, which is subject to further debate and research.

Historical and Archaeological Insight into the Concept of Former Buddhas:

Former Buddhas serve several purposes within Buddhist doctrine. First, they illustrate the universality and eternity of the Dharma. The '*Buddhavamsa*' (Chronicle of Buddhas), a text from the Khuddaka Nikāya of the Pāli Canon, narrates the biographies of 27 Buddhas prior to Gautama. However, the Mahapadanasutta, part of Digha Nikaya provides detailed accounts of six Former Buddhas, Gautama being the seventh Buddha. These six, along with Gautama, form the group of seven Buddhas often referred as '*Sattatathagata*'. Fa-Hien, a 4th-5th century Chinese scholar who visited India during the closing years of 4th century, witnessed the stupas dedicated to former Buddhas while he was on his way to Kapilavastu via Sravasti. He explicitly mentions the name of these former Buddhas as Kasyapa, Krakuchanda and Kanakamuni Buddha who were predecessors of Sakyamuni. Two centuries later, another Chinese scholar, Huen Tsang also mentioned about the stupa of Kasyapa Buddha, Krakuchanda Buddha and Kanakmuni Buddha.

Apart from these textual references, there are many archaeological evidences which testify the existence of former Buddhas, many Buddhas other than Gautama. Firstly, the Nigalihawa Inscription of Emperor Asoka records his visit to the birthplace of Kanakmuni Buddha. The inscription in Pali language and Brahmi script, dated to around 249 BCE. The translation of the inscription reads;

"His Majesty King Priyadarsina in the 14th year of his reign enlarged for the second time the stupa of the Buddha Kanakmuni and in the 20th year of his reign, having come in person, paid reverence and set up a stone pillar".

This confirms Asoka's dedication and reverence to not only Sakyamuni Buddha, but also to Kanakmuni Buddha- one of the Former Buddhas.

Secondly, Gotihawa which is located 4 kilometers southeast of Kapilavastu (Nepal) is widely recognized as the birthplace of Krakuchanda Buddha (another Former Buddha). A significant piece of historical evidence is the pillar erected by Emperor Asoka at Gotihawa. The pillar, standing 3.25 meters high with a diameter of 83/79 cm, is still in situ on its original masonry foundation. Unfortunately, the upper portion of the pillar, which likely bore an inscription similar to Lumbini and Niglihawa, is missing, and no Brahmi script has been recovered from Gotihawa. However, Chinese travellers Fa-Hien and Hiuen Tsang had documented the presence of Asokan pillar with a lion capital at Gotihawa, reinforcing its association with Krakuchanda Buddha. The presence of Asokan pillar at Gotihawa in 3rd Century BCE lends credence to its identification as Krakuchanda's birthplace.

Another archaeological evidence which remains as a testament to the legacy of Former Buddhas comes from Barhut Stupa in Madhya Pradesh. It is generally believed that the stupa was constructed during Emperor Asoka's reign in 3rd century BCE but it also received patronage of the Shunga rulers during 2nd century BCE particularly the railings and the gateways. The stupa's railings, now largely preserved in the Indian Museum, Kolkata, feature aniconic representations- symbols like Bodhi trees, stupas and thrones- rather than human figures. It also contains inscriptions in Brahmi script and Pali language which explicitly names six Former

Buddhas: Vipassi, Sikhi, Vessabhu, Kakusandha (Krakuchanda), Konagamana (Kanakmuni) and Kassapa (Kasyapa), alongside Gautama. Each Buddha is represented with its own Bodhi Tree and the names inscribed on it make it easier to identify different Buddhas. The trees associated with each Buddha are;

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| 1. Vipassi Buddha | Pipal (Ficus religiosa) |
| 2. Sikhi Buddha | Pundarika (White lotus tree) |
| 3. Vessabhu Buddha | Sal (Shorea Robusta) |
| 4. Kakusandha Buddha | Sirisa (Acacia sirisa) |
| 5. Konagamana Buddha | Udumbara (Ficus Glomerata) |
| 6. Kassapa Buddha | Nigradha (Banyan, Ficus benghalensis) |
| 7. Gautama Buddha | Pipal (Ficus religiosa) |

Similarly, the Sanchi stupa, located in Madhya Pradesh, primarily dating to 3rd century BCE with significant expansions through 1st century CE during Shunga and Satavahana periods. Like the Bahrut Stupa, its carvings and reliefs provide evidence of the veneration of Former Buddhas. However the depiction of Former Buddhas at Sanchi is less explicit than at Bahrut, relying more on symbolic representations and contextual scenes rather than direct inscriptions naming individual Buddhas. The depiction of *Sattatathagata* at Sanchi and also in Ajanta's cave no. 17 confirms the early Buddhist belief in Former Buddhas through its symbolic art and expression.

Conclusion:

The Pali literature like Buddhavamsa and Mahavastu provide detailed account of 28 Buddhas, including the six predecessors of Gautama. The consistency of their names, life events and chronological order across these texts suggests a structured oral tradition predating their written form, potentially rooted in their historical memory. Depiction of Former Buddhas in Sanchi and Barhut Stupas suggests that the concept of previous Buddhas was already well established, possibly reflects the historical reverence for earlier teachers. Lastly the Asokan pillar at Niglihawa further supports a pre-existing tradition that might have historical origins. There are enough of reasons to believe that few predecessors, if not all, of Gautama Buddha were as much historical figures as Gautama himself. If not so, why would a universal ruler like Emperor Asoka would construct stupa and erect a stone pillar with inscription dedicated to Kanakmuni Buddha if his existence would have been in question? Secondly Fa-Hien unambiguously mentions stupa of Kasyapa Buddha where his body relics were kept. Similarly, stupas of Krakuchanda and Kanakmuni Buddha were also witnessed by him at their place of Parinirvana. If stupa was constructed at place of their Parinirvana then it must also have the body relics in them as per Buddhist tradition. For example, from Piprahwa excavation (1896-98) the body relic of Gautam Buddha was recovered from stupa. Lastly, Hiuen Tsang's account also testifies the fact that stupas were still standing dedicated to Former Buddhas namely Kasyapa, Krakuchanda and Kanakmuni Buddha. Based on above examination, If not all, at least Kasyapa, Krakuchanda and Kanakmuni Buddha could be considered as historical spiritual leaders who preceded Gautama Buddha from 9th-6th Century BCE whose legacies were mythologized within Buddhist tradition.

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