

People and Monkeys in Yoga Poses in the Wall Paintings Decorating the Buddhist Caves of Kucha

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Kucha was an oasis kingdom that ruled the region centered around present Aksu Prefecture, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People's Republic of China, before the 10th century. The local population was mostly Buddhists before they converted to become Muslims around 9th and 10th centuries, and they carved numerous Buddhist cave monasteries and nunneries.

Those cave monasteries consisted of the cave groups, that were in turn sets of caves serving different functions. Some of the caves were carved for devotional activities, the other caves were living quarters of the monks and nuns, and some were depositories. Among the caves for devotional activities, some were decorated, and the commissioned artisans painted beautiful paintings both narrative and ornamental.

Some of those wall paintings contain the illustrations containing the persons and monkeys posing similar body postures practised in present yoga practices. Two cases are special focuses of this studies, first is the Brahman standing on one leg with the other leg raised, with his both hands gathered before his chests. The second is the meditating monkey seated on grass mats. These illustrations in Kucha show some close similarities with the versions survived in Sanskrit literature such as *Avadānaśataka* and *Divyāvadāna*.

First image depicts the story of Siddhartha Gautama as the Brahman practitioner in his former life. To accelerate his perfect enlightenment the Buddha at that time meditates inside a cave or under a tree before the Brahman. The Brahman in awe stands in one leg with gathered hands, and chants the meditating Buddha for seven days and nights without a blink of an eye. The second story depicts the elder Upagupta born as a monkey. He served the *pratyekabuddhas* and tried to emulate them by meditating.

There are also other images containing the persons and monkeys in yogic poses painted in Kucha's Buddhist caves. The repeated appearance of these poses may show that the shared tradition between the schools of Yoga and Buddhism that was also transmitted to the ancient Kucha.

Author: YI, Ji Ho (Universität Leipzig)

Presenter: YI, Ji Ho (Universität Leipzig)

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