

Arthur Schopenhauer's Bronze Buddha: Neither Tibetan nor Thai, but Shan

by Robert Wicks (Auckland)

The year was 1856. Near the close of his life, it was a great joy for Arthur Schopenhauer to obtain a bronze Buddha figure, about a foot high, which appeared to be at least 100 years old at the time. The 18th century bronze came from an antique shop in Paris, purchased as a favor to Schopenhauer by an acquaintance, Eduard Crüger, a diplomat, during one of his trips to the city. From its appearance, Schopenhauer was convinced that it was Tibetan, probably issuing from “the great foundry” in Tibet. In the tradition of bronze Buddhas, Schopenhauer had it gilded, commenting light-heartedly at one point that he would not be outdone by the Burmese, who gild their temples. He accordingly prepared a shrinelike area with an attractive console for the statue in his living room, rendering it fit, as he stated, to be an object of worship.¹ The present location of the statue is unknown, but a photograph held by the Schopenhauer-Archives in Frankfurt is believed to be of this Buddha. We will discuss the photograph's authenticity below.

Biographies of Schopenhauer available in English contain occasional references to this bronze Buddha. Helen Zimmern's 1876 biography does not mention it, but William Wallace's 1890 biography does, noting accurately that it was purchased in 1856, was of gilded bronze, and was situated in Schopenhauer's apartment on “a glorious console in the corner.”² Rüdiger Safranski's 1987 biography omits reference to the statue, but David Cartwright's extensive and informative biography of 2010 discusses it briefly, although he does not speculate on the statue's origins.³ These sources provide only limited information, and to

1 See Jochen Stollberg's essay, “Arthur Schopenhauer über seinen Buddha in Gesprächen und Briefen”, in: *„Das Tier, das du jetzt tötest, bist du selbst“ – Schopenhauer und Indien*. Ed. by Jochen Stollberg, Frankfurt a. M. 2006, pp. 163–172. This informative article assembles the relevant excerpts from Schopenhauer's letters on this topic in their original wording, here referred to in synopsis.

2 Wallace, W.: *Life of Schopenhauer*. London: Walter Scott 1890, p. 210.

3 Cartwright, David: *Schopenhauer – A Biography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010, pp. 273–274.

form a precise picture of the circumstances surrounding Schopenhauer's Buddha statue, we need to explore some further references in journal articles and monographs, reviewing these against the original remarks from Schopenhauer and his friend, Crüger.

Two claims will emerge here. First, although the provenance of the photograph held at the Schopenhauer-Archives plausibly links to Schopenhauer, there are some considerations that have not yet been addressed that could cast doubt on the photograph's authenticity. The discussion below will dispel some of these doubts. Second, although it has been reasonably denied that Schopenhauer owned a Tibetan Buddha (the Archive photograph does not clearly show a Tibetan Buddha), the presently prevailing view is that the photograph depicts a Buddha from Thailand. We will see below that this is not the case, and that the depicted statue is neither Tibetan nor Thai, but is rather in the Shan style, from Myanmar.

Let us begin with some of Schopenhauer's own remarks about his statue, taken from his personal correspondence. We learn from these letters that it was of bronze, about a foot high, covered originally with black lacquer, sitting in a traditional posture, thin-limbed and smiling peacefully. We also learn that it perfectly matched in structure, another gilded Buddha figure that was in Frankfurt, except that this other figure was life-size, made of *papier-mâché*, and had noticeably chubbier limbs and a flatter nose. Schopenhauer wrote the following:

The other one differs only through its flat nose and short, more plump limbs – Chinese! Mine is lean and long-armed; but otherwise, a duplicate. The orthodox, famous, soft smile – they both have it, exactly! The position, clothing, hairdo, lotus – wholly the same!⁴

The person who bought the statue for Schopenhauer, Eduard Crüger, described it in a letter to a friend, thirty years later – so we might question his memory – stating that as far as he could recall, the statue was of “an almost naked male figure in a sitting position with crossed legs and open hands on its lap” [*in den Schooß gelegten offenen Händen*].⁵ Crüger's reference to the two open hands is worth noting, since indeed many Buddha statues stylistically have both hands open on their lap, as does the world famous, giant bronze Buddha at Kamakura, Japan. The hand position is referred to as the *dhyana mudra*, where “dhyana” means “meditation” in Sanskrit, and where the mudra signifies the attainment of spiritual perfection.⁶

4 GBr, 394, Letter to Julius Frauenstädt, June 6, 1856.

5 “Arthur Schopenhauers Gespräche” ed. Arthur Hübscher. In: Jb. 20 (1933), p. 185.

6 The Chinese word, “Ch'an,” and the Japanese word, “Zen,” have the same basic meaning, as in “Ch'an Buddhism” and “Zen Buddhism.”

In contrast, many Buddhas have the left hand open on the lap, with the right extended down over the knee, pointing towards the ground. This hand position is referred to as the *Bhumisparsha mudra*, where “Bhumisparsha” means “touching the earth.” The mudra is also called the “Earth Witness” mudra; the gesture signifies the attainment of enlightenment, recalling Buddha’s summoning of the Earth goddess as a witness to his having overcome distracting temptations in the forms of fear and lust that the demon, Māra, had cast in his way. Buddha figures with the Bhumisparsha mudra are especially common in Southeast Asia.

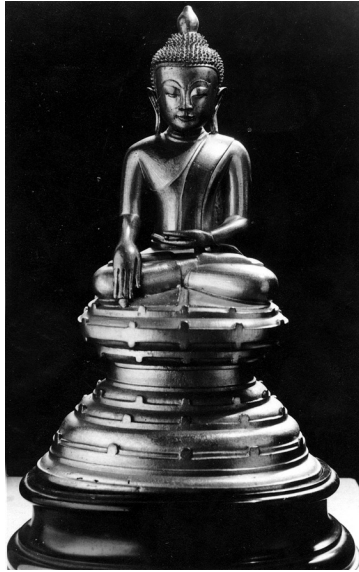
Contradicting Crüger’s description and confusing the situation, Carl Georg Bähr, another of Schopenhauer’s acquaintances, describes a differently appearing Buddha that he saw during a visit to Schopenhauer’s apartment on April 12, 1856. He writes the following:

It was a Buddha represented as a beggar, sitting in an Asiatic style, eyes down, the right hand hanging down over the right knee, and the left held open in front of the chest, to receive an offering. This was apparently the strict orthodox way to represent the Buddha.⁷

Crüger’s and Bähr’s accounts contradict one another, so we must choose between them. Bähr’s full account gives us significantly more detail. His report also only makes sense if we assume that one of the figure’s hands was extended down over the knee while the other was open upon the lap, as if begging.⁸ Crüger was remembering the Buddha figure thirty years later, but since he bought the statue himself, his memory admittedly might have been sharp. In balance, it is not unreasonable to maintain that Bähr’s description is the more reliable of the two, mainly because Bähr’s account also coheres with the supposed image of Schopenhauer’s Buddha at the Schopenhauer-Archives, which shows just such a Buddha figure:

7 “Arthur Schopenhauers Gespräche,” p. 231. Bähr also observed that Schopenhauer also had a crucifix on his chest of drawers (p. 225).

8 Some Buddha figures with the Bhumisparsha mudra include a beggar’s bowl in the left hand, although Schopenhauer’s figure does not seem to have had such a bowl.



We see in the photograph that the gilded Buddha has been placed upon what appears to be a dark pedestal. If we remove this pedestal to appreciate the Buddha figure independently, we would have the following:



As Jochen Stollberg reported in 2006, the Archive photograph itself has a history that traces back to Schopenhauer's estate sale.⁹ A letter from Dr. Paul Günther, a professor at the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, dated March 21, 1949 describes how his great-grandfather, who was a friend of Wilhelm Gwinner, the executor of Schopenhauer's will, obtained the Buddha statue at an auction of Schopenhauer's estate. The statue was then passed down to Günther's father, and then to him. The photograph, now in the Archive's possession, accompanied the letter, on the back of which was written the provenance from Vollgold, to Günther's father, to Günther himself as of 1949.

Concerning the question of whether the statue in the photograph depicts Schopenhauer's own statue, there are some residual concerns. The statue's posture matches Bähr's description well, which refers to a Buddha whose hands express the Bhumisparsha mudra. Schopenhauer nonetheless consistently describes the original statue, as does Bähr, as being "1 foot high," but the letter from Günther describes it as 40–50 cm [1.31 feet–1.64 feet]. This is a discrepancy to reflect upon, but it remains possible that both Schopenhauer and Günther are referring to the same item, since the height differences are not alarmingly different, as if one had reported "one foot high" and the other, "two foot high."

A probably more significant point to clarify concerns Schopenhauer's reference to the "lotus" that his and the large *papier-mâché* Buddha in Frankfurt had in common. On the statue depicted in the photograph, one might think that there is no lotus to discern, assuming that we have in mind some sort of floral configuration. On Buddha statues in general, the base upon which the Buddha sits is often in the form of a lotus, but there is no such lotus throne in the photograph. The absence of a lotus would certainly eliminate the possibility that the Archive photograph is of Schopenhauer's Buddha.

There is a second meaning of "lotus" which signifies the yogic "lotus posture" (*padma asana*) of the sitting Buddha. As shown in the photograph, the Buddha is in a "full lotus" position with both feet upon the thighs, crossed. There are few sitting Buddha statues that are not in this lotus position, though, so it could be odd for Schopenhauer to comment enthusiastically that the "lotus" matches, although it is conceivable that he might say so, given that the Buddha figures were uncommon in his environment.

Counting against this, we can note that when Schopenhauer mentions the "lotus," he includes the word in a sequence, saying that the "position, clothing, hairdo [and] lotus" ("*die Stellung, Kleidung, Frisur, Lotos*") are all the same. If he meant by "lotus," the "lotus position," then the word "position" might have

9 Jochen Stollberg, "Arthur Schopenhauer über seinen Buddha in Gesprächen und Briefen," pp. 170–171.

been absent in this list of common features, since “position” presumably refers to the sitting lotus position as well as the rest of the figure’s general posture.

In connection with Schopenhauer’s reference to the “lotus,” the style of the Buddha’s headdress is relevant. When Schopenhauer mentions the lotus along with the other features, his description moves our gaze up the statue, from the sitting position, to the clothing, to the hairdo, and finally, up to the “lotus.” This draws our attention to the lotus bud on top of the Buddha’s head – a common feature of Buddha figures that signifies enlightenment. Since the head adornment can vary amongst Buddha figures, it makes sense for Schopenhauer to notice that the head ornament shape was identical between his and the lifesize Buddha figure. Many Thai Buddha figures, for example, have more elongated and pointy headdresses. Other Buddha figures have a flame in the place of the lotus bud.

Some scholars have doubted the authenticity of the Archive photograph by arguing that the Buddha depicted is not Tibetan, and that the details of the various descriptions do not correspond to the photograph. Writing in 1950, Hugo Busch offered grounds to doubt the photograph’s authenticity along these lines by citing Crüger’s letter alone, and emphasizing that the statue is probably of Siamese (*siamesischer*) origin, that is, presumably from Thailand.¹⁰ Contra Busch, we have seen that the set of descriptions do match the photograph for the most part, with the exception of the open hands that Crüger describes and the larger size that Günther reports. Whether the statue in the photograph is or is not from Thailand, has no bearing on how well it does or does not correspond to Schopenhauer’s and his acquaintances’ descriptions, since the descriptions stand independently of the label, “Tibetan,” that Schopenhauer ascribed to it.

Urs App, who discussed Schopenhauer’s bronze Buddha in 2008 and 2010, adopts a middle position, concurring with Busch that the statue is probably Thai, but disagreeing with him that the statue’s alleged Thai origins have any bearing on the photograph’s authenticity.¹¹ App is clearly on a better track here. Schopenhauer’s knowledge of Buddhas was relatively impressive for the times in

10 Busch, Hugo: *Das Testament Arthur Schopenhauers*. Wiesbaden: Eberhard Brockhaus 1950, p. 167: „Gegen diese Annahme spricht, daß diese Statue *siamesischer* Herkunft ist [...]“.

11 App, Urs: “Arthur Schopenhauer and China: A Sino-Platonic Love Affair.” In: *Sino-Platonic Papers*, No. 200 (April 2010), p. 63. App writes: “Hugo Busch pointed out that this photograph shows a statue of Thai origin (p. 172) which is probably correct but is no argument against it being a depiction of Schopenhauer’s statue.” (App’s page 172 reference is to Jochen Stollberg’s essay, cited above in note 1.) In his 2008 essay, “The Tibet of the Philosophers: Kant, Hegel and Schopenhauer” in *Images of Tibet in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, ed. by Monica Esposito, Paris: EFEO 2008, App follows along with Busch, asserting that Schopenhauer’s “beloved figure was probably of Thai origin” (p. 59).

which he lived, but was still thin in relation to what we know now.¹² He very well might have had a Thai Buddha while believing that his Buddha was Tibetan.

There are other scholars who seem to take Schopenhauer at his word, or at least, do not motivate us to identify precisely the kind of statue Schopenhauer owned and so highly valued. For instance, in his 1997 work, *Le Culte du néant: Les Philosophes et le Bouddha*, Roger-Pol Droit refers to Schopenhauer's Buddha as a "Tibetan Buddha" and as "a supposedly Tibetan Buddha – one that was authentic, 'completely authentic' – sitting next to an autographed, 'certified' book by Kant."¹³

As a matter of fact, Busch and App are mistaken to assure us that the Buddha in the Archive photograph is probably Thai, because it is neither Tibetan nor Thai. The photograph shows a figure whose style originates from a territory within the present country of Myanmar. Specifically, it shows a Buddha in the 17th–18th century Shan style. Shan Buddhas fit the descriptions of Schopenhauer's Buddha extremely well: typically, they have a thinner body, the right hand facing down and the left hand open on the lap, the peaceful look, and the meagre clothing. Catherine Raymond characterizes the Shan style Buddhas in the following excerpts, the details of which cohere with the Archive photograph:

Among the common aspects of Burmese Shan seated Buddha images, and also Lan Na [Thai] and Lan Xang [Laotian] seated Buddhas, is the *māravijaya* posture.¹⁴ Indeed, this evocation of Gautama Shakyamuni's 'victory over Māra', whereby the seated Buddha extends his right hand towards the Earth Goddess to call her to witness, is by far the prevalent posture in Mainland Southeast Asian Buddhist iconography.

Other distinctive Shan characteristics may also be identified, including an oval and serene face with a rounded chin and a shy smile: the downcast eyes often represented as simple, inclined small slits, and the arched eyebrows that could be incised, seeming to extend from the bridge of the nose, commonly displaying rather wide nostrils. Although the three creases on the neck are sometimes visible, this

12 Schopenhauer had close to fifty books on Buddhist subjects in his library. For a detailed list of his references to Buddhism throughout his writings, see Nicholls, Moira: "The Influences of Eastern Thought on Schopenhauer's Doctrine of the Thing-in-Itself". In: *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer*, ed. by Christopher Janaway. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 200–204.

13 Droit, Roger-Pol: *The Cult of Nothingness: The Philosophers and the Buddha*, trans. David Streight and Pamela Vohnson. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003, pp. 93–95. Droit discusses Schopenhauer's Buddha at some length, quoting several passages from Schopenhauer's letters that appear in Stollberg's article almost a decade later.

14 We referred to this posture (*Bhumisparsha mudra*) in connection with Bähr's description of Schopenhauer's statue.

element may vary between the bronze images [...] and the wooden and dry lacquer images.¹⁵

Many Shan Buddhas are bronze – some are also done in *papier-mâché* – and most importantly, unlike the Thai Buddhas, they more frequently have a pedestal inspired by the double lotus shape, where one flower faces up, and the other, down. In some examples, this double lotus throne has been stylized into a series of steps, often to the point of dissolving the lotus shape’s recognizability, as in the Archive photograph; in others, one sees the lotus shape itself. The key to understanding the kind of Buddha that the Archive photo depicts, resides noticeably in the Buddha’s bodily figure, but also definitively in *the style of the pedestal*. The creases on the neck, we should add, are also distinctively Shan.



Consider four Buddha images in juxtaposition, as shown. The first image above is of the Archive photo; the second, third and fourth are Burmese Buddhas in the Shan style.¹⁶ The middle segment of the pedestals matches in all four in-

15 Raymond, Catherine: “Shan Buddhist Art on the Market: What, Where and Why?” In: *Contemporary Buddhism*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (May 2009), p. 143 and p. 146. For more information on Shan style Buddha figures, see Fraser-Lu, Sylvia: “Buddha Images from Burma,” Parts I–III. In: *Arts of Asia*, February 1981 (pp. 72–81), March/April 1981 (pp. 62–71), and May/June 1981 (pp. 129–136).

16 The second image is Burmese, bronze, Shan style, circa 18th century, height 25 cm (.82 feet) from http://cgi.ebay.com/ws/eBayISAPI.dll?ViewItem&_trksid=p4340.l2557&item=400157088713&nma=true&rt=nc&si=s%252Bae1eM6uoAx1ASGoAM%252Bj0o5e84%253D (March 17th, 2011). The third image is Burmese, Shan style, early 20th century, from <http://www.aziatischekunst.com/Explanation-statues/Shan-Buddha/60/1/3/> (March 17th, 2011). The fourth Buddha image is Burmese, Shan style, 17th century, height 22 cm (.72 feet) from <http://www.trocadero.com/asiantiques/items/1052492/item1052492store.html> (March 17th, 2011).

stances, the first and the fourth have virtually the same face, and the pedestal points on the first and the third are stylistically matching, rather tellingly. All four have similar bell-shaped or “waisted” pedestals, clothing, hairdos, lotus caps, bodily shapes, downward looking eyes, hand positions, four equal-lengthed fingers on the downward pointing hand, elongated ears that touch the shoulders, soft smiles, flatly upward soles as per the “full lotus” position, and Shan-style neck folds. These combined features indicate that the Archive photo depicts a Buddha of the Shan style, originating from Myanmar.

The ethnically diverse Union of Myanmar (Burma) presently divides into fourteen political divisions (seven regions and seven states), the largest of which is the Shan State in eastern Myanmar, home of the Shan people. The Shan, whose language is distinct from Burmese, constitute the second largest ethnic group in the country (approximately 10 % of the present population) out of about 10 main ethnic groups. The Bamar (also called Burman) constitute the majority at about 70 %. In a broad sense, the ethnic divisions within Myanmar call to mind comparisons to the former country of Yugoslavia, with its variously conflicting groups and similar political complications. This indicates the need to qualify generic references to Schopenhauer’s Buddha as “Burmese,” where this would be opposed, say, to Tibetan or Thai works of art, and note its specifically Shan origins.

To conclude: if the Archive photograph is genuine, then Schopenhauer owned a Shan, 17th–18th century, bronze Buddha. Given the photograph’s provenance, along with its reasonably strong coherence with Bähr’s and Schopenhauer’s descriptions, the photograph appears to be genuine. It also offers the only present hope for appreciating Schopenhauer’s experience of his Buddha figure, which he so treasured. If the photograph is not genuine, then this will leave us presently with no precise idea of the kind of Buddha Schopenhauer owned, since the vivid verbal descriptions of his Buddha remain stylistically consistent with instances, although not necessarily paradigmatic ones, of Chinese, Tibetan, Nepali, Thai, Cambodian, Laotian, Indian, Sri Lankan and Burmese bronze Buddha figures.