

## **THE FASTING BUDDHA: A BRIDGE BETWEEN PAKISTAN AND THAILAND**

***Remarks by Most Venerable Anil Sakya***

*Handing-over Ceremony of the Replica of the Fasting Buddha  
Issarawinitchai Throne Hall, National Museum, Bangkok  
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Your Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my profound honour to speak on this meaningful occasion—the official handover of the Fasting Buddha statue from the Islamic Republic of Pakistan to the Kingdom of Thailand.

This is far more than a ceremonial event. It is, in truth, a moment of spiritual reconnection—where art, faith, and history converge to remind us of the deep and enduring ties between our two ancient lands.

The statue before us—the Fasting Buddha—is one of the most profound and powerful depictions of the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, before his enlightenment. Emaciated from years of intense asceticism, yet inwardly calm and resolute, this image is not one of suffering, but of realization. It captures the pivotal moment when the Bodhisattva turns away from self-mortification and discovers the Middle Way—a path of balance, clarity, and liberation.

While such imagery is rare in Thai Buddhist iconography, the message it carries resonates deeply within the Thai Theravāda tradition. This statue is not only an aesthetic marvel; it is a timeless reminder that wisdom arises from inner balance, not from extremes.

What makes this statue even more exceptional is its origin. It hails from Gandhara—an ancient seat of Buddhist civilization, located in present-day Pakistan. Once a flourishing centre of Buddhist learning, Gandhara played a vital role in shaping the artistic and doctrinal transmission of the Dhamma across Asia.

### **The Uniqueness of Gandhara Art**

One of the most intriguing questions in the study of Buddhist iconography is: where was the first Buddha image created? Scholars often debate between Mathura in India and Gandhara in Pakistan. While both schools developed around the same time, I believe that Gandhara—perhaps at Butkara I—was the birthplace of the first Buddha images. The realism and serenity seen in these sculptures bear the imprint of Greco-Roman artistic influence, which Gandhara uniquely absorbed.

In Mathura, early Buddha representations are far fewer and mostly symbolic. In contrast, Gandhara offers a complete visual biography of the Buddha's life—rendered in intricate stone reliefs and stucco. At a time when the Buddha's story had not yet been codified in text, these artists—perhaps monks themselves—crafted his life in a compelling 3D visual language. In many ways, the Gandharan narrative art may have laid the foundation for how later generations came to know and transmit the life of the Buddha.

### **Thailand's Historic Recognition of Gandhara**

Gandhara is not unfamiliar to Thailand. Historical records show that the name “Gandhara” has long resonated within Thai Buddhist consciousness.

One of the earliest references dates to the Dvaravati period, around the 8th century. A 5.2-metre seated Buddha image, carved from green stone, was enshrined in Wat Na Phra Meru in Ayutthaya and became known as the *Gandhara-Ratha Buddha*. Although stylistically Dvaravati, not Gandharan, the name reflects the reverence and mystique associated with Gandhara, which Thai devotees linked to longevity and spiritual blessing.

A second instance appears during the reign of King Rama I, when a smaller bronze Buddha image—only 65 centimetres tall—was cast. It depicts a rare mudra: the right hand calling for rain, and the left hand open to receive it. Today, it is enshrined in the *Gandhara-Ratha Pavilion* at the Temple of the Emerald Buddha.

According to the renowned historian M.C. Subhadradis Diskul, the name derives from a legend involving a great serpent named Elapattra, said to have once flooded the Gandhara region. Upon becoming a Buddhist, the serpent learned to release water in moderation, turning destruction into abundance. Though the art bore no stylistic link to Gandhara, the legend left a lasting impression on the Thai imagination.

#### Revival of Gandharan Art in Thailand

A more direct artistic encounter occurred in the reign of King Rama V. Following his historic journey to India in 1875, His Majesty commissioned a standing Buddha image in the *abhiseka* (rain-summoning) gesture, clearly inspired by Gandharan sculptures. This marked the first conscious adoption of the Gandharan style into Thai religious art.

Further deepening this connection was a significant episode in 1891, when Prince Damrong Rajanubhab visited India. He expressed interest in viewing the finest examples of Indian Buddha images. In response, the Lahore Museum—then part of British India—gifted a replica of the *Fasting Buddha*, modeled directly from the original stone statue. Initially housed at the royal palace, this striking image later inspired the casting of a bronze version, now enshrined in the cloister of Wat Benchamabophit Dusitvanaram. Today, it stands among 52 Buddha images that surround the temple's ordination hall.

Thus, the cultural bridge between Gandhara and Thailand was firmly established during the reign of King Rama V—built on shared reverence, storytelling, and artistic admiration.

#### A Living Bridge

In Thailand, we often revere Jambudīpa—the Indian subcontinent—as the sacred source of Buddhism. Yet we must also remember Gandhara's profound contribution, particularly in preserving and shaping the Buddha's image and teachings through art.

The Fasting Buddha embodies a unique cultural fusion: Greek realism, Indic devotion, and Gandharan craftsmanship—all converging into a single form of sacred beauty.

This statue, therefore, is not merely an object of the past. It is a living bridge—connecting Pakistan's ancient Buddhist heritage with Thailand's living Buddhist faith.

Today's handover, then, is not just an act of cultural diplomacy. It is a gesture of spiritual kinship. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the Government of Pakistan, the National Museum in Karachi, and all officials and scholars involved in this generous and visionary initiative.

You have not only honoured the Thai people, but have reaffirmed Pakistan's rightful place as a guardian of one of Asia's most sacred legacies.

To the people of Thailand, I say: this is a rare and precious opportunity. Soon, Thai Buddhists will stand before this sacred image—not as visitors to history, but as spiritual

pilgrims. In the silent presence of this statue lies a timeless lesson: to persevere, to seek wisdom, and to walk the path of balance.

Let us embrace this moment as a beginning—an invitation for deeper collaboration between our peoples. May this handover inspire academic partnerships, cultural exchanges, spiritual pilgrimages, and mutual understanding between Thailand and Pakistan.

The journey of this statue—from the Gandharan hills to the heart of Thai devotion—is a journey of reconnection. It reminds us that though centuries have passed, and borders may separate us, the Dhamma still unites us.

In closing, let me say: today we do not merely receive a statue. We honour a shared legacy. We reaffirm a friendship. And we walk together—across a bridge built not of stone, but of respect, understanding, and faith.

Thank you.