

Zhang Huan

**“BUDDHA IS OUR GOD, EACH ONE OF US IS BUDDHA.
WHENEVER YOU FACE HARDSHIP OR DIFFICULTY IN LIFE,
JUST GO TO LIGHT INCENSE AND PRAY TO BUDDHA.
BUDDHA CAN MAKE US LIVE AND WORK IN PEACE AND CONTENTMENT,
LIVING A STEADFAST LIFE. THE TRANSMIGRATION OF LIFE IS LIKE A STEEL
COIL, WITH NO BEGINNING AND NO END”**

ZHANG HUAN

The body is as sacred as a temple, every breath is an anthem to life. We have only one, yet at times, when fatigue and excess burden our weary limbs and we feel we are carrying our own weight and that of others, one does not seem to be enough. In modern society, the body is commonly thought of as a near-perfect machine, to be exploited for as long as it can resist, in a compulsive rush to consume quantity rather than quality, a desire for immediate experiences rather than the inherent meanings of things and people who make our brief stay on this planet special.

**The beating heart that gives sense to all
our actions and thoughts is not found
in appearance, but in substance.**

Zhang Huan first visited New York in 1998, and his memories of the trip convey the impression of those years: a world overshadowed by technology, in which everyone rushes around frenetically, too busy “suffering” life, growing old with head down, pushing and shoving so as not to be trodden on, solving a few of their worries while breathlessly searching for others.

People have become addicted to rhythms that are not their own: as information technology has speeded up the pace at which we respond and interact, humans have speeded up a form of competition which can only have disastrous results.

**Machines have no soul to heal,
nourish and respect, but people do
(or at least they should).**

This is why Zhang Huan wrote in 2000: *“I think we should separate some from contemporary civilization; we should return to slower times and live closer to nature”.*

This is an express invitation to return to a daily life marked out by a rhythm that transforms certain actions into rituals, restoring ancient values to gestures and silences that are more eloquent than any words yelled aloud.

For Zhang Huan, the body is where the individual identity can express itself. Through it, we can (or should) express ourselves, even without the help of words, and especially without clothes and other trinkets.

This is why, over the past ten years, the artist has staged performances in which he appears naked, although in a form of nudity never synonymous with fragility but with a proud self-sufficiency, uninhibited and non-conformist.

NUDITY ALSO TAKES PEOPLE BACK TO THEIR EARTHLY CONDITION: DEPRIVED OF CLOTHES AND SOCIAL STATUS, THEY ARE PLACED IN CLOSE CONTACT WITH THEMSELVES. PARADOXICALLY, THE ONLY TANGIBLE THING IS THE PERSON'S INNER NATURE, EXPRESSED BY A PHYSICALITY THAT IS AT LAST PERCEPTIBLE.

Being without clothes means also being without the armour that swathes us in reassuring conventions, and also without defences, in a semi-wild state.

Getting back in touch with your own body also means being able to achieve harmony with the world, the world of Nature from which we originated and to which we will return. A world that all too often we violate, denying it, and ourselves, a future.

In line with this, the work created for Steellife redefines man's centre of gravity through Buddha.

Spirituality and listening to the inner self are the tools a man needs to rediscover himself and the reality which surrounds him.

In meditation and prayer, the weight of our burdens are consoled, confusion and distraction are silenced by concentration, the passage of time is no longer a sequence of minutes and commitments but a mental, emotional flow that heals wounds and cheers the spirit.

In the silence of stasis, Buddha counteracts the frenetic activity of “progressed civilisation”, a solemn monument to contemplation and peace, in harmony with Creation.

BUDDHA OF STEEL LIFE sits before a steel coil which becomes a three-dimensional form of the mandala, a symbolic and ritual reference to the creation of the cosmos and the cyclical flow of events, where there seems to be no beginning and no end, in a continual mutation and renewal.

Mandalas are normally painted or drawn in coloured sand, but their existence is unsubstantial: they are a physical projection of the mental plane, which is the only one that counts.

This is why they are usually destroyed, renewing the awareness that terrestrial things are finite.

Choosing steel as a material makes the meaning even more incisive: a sculpture is truly designed to outlive the artist and future generations, with its spiritual message unaltered and uncorrupted.

Small mandalas are also dotted over hands and feet, in an alliterative figurative climax.

The Buddha depicts “*Amoghasiddhi*”, as it is pronounced in Sanskrit, one of the five Buddha Dhyani, known as the “*Buddha of meditation*”.

Also known as the “*five Jina*”, each refers to a point of the compass, plus the zenith.

Amoghasiddhi is the Buddha of the North, and is associated with the colour green. His hairstyle, “*ushnisha*” in Sanskrit, is classic.

The bulge on the skull evokes the virtue of wisdom and the dot in the centre of the forehead represents the “third eye of wisdom”.

Thirty-two primary characteristics and eighty secondary ones identify the iconography of Buddha, according to ancient Buddhist laws.

The secondary characteristics include the elongated ear lobes “*as long as lotus flowers*”, indicating both the ability to listen and the sign of a long life.

Other interpretations highlight the rejection of royal life, and therefore the magnificent regal earrings, in favour of an introspective life path.

The position of the hands, “*mudra*” in Sanskrit, is also significant.

The right hand is open and stretched forwards, in the “*Abhaya mudra*” position (“*abhaya*” means “*free from fear*”).

It is told that the historic Buddha, Siddhārtha, used this gesture to calm rampaging elephants frightened by his hostile enemy and cousin, Devadatta.

As for the position of the body, “*asana*” in Sanskrit, the Buddha is sitting down and therefore in the meditation pose, unlike when preaching when he is depicted standing.

The soles of his feet are clearly turned upwards: he is sitting in the classic lotus position, “*padmasana*” in Sanskrit (also known as diamond, a metaphor for a pure, enlightened conscience).

His robe is simple and falls in luxuriant folds around the body. On his chest is a hooked cross, an ancient symbol of Indian tradition, far removed from the Nazi version both in terms of the design (the hooks are facing the opposite way i.e. to the left not the right) and in terms of meaning and consequence.

The Buddhist swastika is associated with wishes of good fortune; it is a kind of charm and sign of good luck.

Buddha literally means “*the Reawoken*”, he who has reached the ultimate level of enlightenment and is ready to leave the Samsāra and enter Nirvāna.

Siddhārtha Gautama, a prince believed to be the founder of Buddhism, decided at the age of 22 to abandon his father's palace and all its luxuries in order to seek the cause of human suffering.

Even in Hesse's fictional work, he is presented as a bold, intrepid traveller who uses his experience and knowledge to grasp the delicate reins of perception and intellect, through concentration transcends suffering, through meditation crosses the threshold of the finite into the infinite, the transient for the eternal, the subjective for the universal.

In conclusion, the Buddha of Zhang Huan crosses the thresholds of a work of art to give us a much deeper, timeless spiritual message, positioning himself as the unassailable emblem not only of an ancient, wise religion but of a peaceful yet revolutionary philosophy of life.

[Elisabetta Pozzetti, *art curator*]