

Buddha Reborn

After the dust clears from the wrecked statues at Bamiyan, another ancient Buddha reappears.

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By Ahmed Rashid/Dushanbe

When Afghanistan's Taliban declared its intention to destroy the ancient Buddhas at Bamiyan, it only added impetus to the restoration of a unique 5th century stone statue of Buddha that had lain hidden for decades in neighbouring Tajikistan.

With the loss in early March of the two Bamiyan Buddhas, the newly unveiled Tajikistan "sleeping Buddha" is being hailed as the largest ancient Buddha statue in Central Asia. It goes on public display in the capital, Dushanbe, in August as the centrepiece of the new Museum of National Antiquities. Both the Bamiyan Buddhas and the Tajikistan Buddha are about 1,500 years old.

The Review's exclusive photographs show the 14-metre-long statue of Buddha lying on his side in the last moments before he attains nirvana. "This Buddha is a most remarkable discovery for the Buddhist world and the cultural heritage of mankind," says Hiroshi Takahashi of Japan, a UN diplomat in Dushanbe. "There will be many people in Japan and other countries who will be enormously interested in coming to see this Buddha."

According to Saidmurad Babamulloev, the newly appointed museum director, until last year the Buddha was stored in the basement of the museum in 100 pieces in boxes before experts started painstakingly piecing it back together like a gigantic jigsaw. "We worked like demons around the clock for six months," he says. "I did not sleep the whole night when I heard that the Taliban had destroyed the Bamiyan Buddhas, but it only moved us to work harder to restore our Buddha."

A key contribution was made by Frenchman Frederick Roussel of the Agency for Technical Development and Cooperation. "I had a feeling that the Taliban would not tolerate the Buddhas of Bamiyan for long and when I saw these boxes and the serenity of the Buddha's face, I was determined to help restore the Tajik Buddha," he says. His French non-governmental organization paid for an archaeological expert from the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg to spend three months in Dushanbe putting together the Buddha.

The statue was originally excavated by Soviet archaeologists in southern Tajikistan in 1966, from a Buddhist monastery complex built under the Kushan kings in Ajina Tepa, on the ancient Silk Road connecting China with Europe and Central Asia with Indian ports. But rather than being put on display, the Buddha was buried in the basement of the Dushanbe museum because it was too big to ship to the Hermitage. Says Roussel: "The Soviets never allowed Tajikistan to show its pre-Islamic and Islamic archaeological collections, instead there was a museum of socialist labour-with items such as the first tractor in Tajikistan."

Bringing the sleeping Buddha to the public in independent Tajikistan is the culmination of a life's dream for Babamulloev. "The Soviets tried to tell the Tajiks that they had no history before the 1917 Russian Revolution even though the Tajiks are the most ancient race in Central Asia," he says.

Parveen Abdullova, an assistant to Babamulloev and a restorer and artist, argues that the shockwaves of the Taliban's blow against Buddhism were felt across the region. "The Taliban have destroyed not just Afghanistan's history but also the pre-Islamic cultural heritage of all Central Asia, because the Bamiyan Buddhist civilization was the centre for the spread of Buddhism in Central Asia and China," she says. The first most Tajiks heard of their rediscovered Buddha was in March when a local newspaper ran a story headlined: "Tajikistan's Buddha is sleeping safely despite Taliban actions."

The museum will also feature remarkable artefacts from both Zoroastrianism and Hinduism. The Kushans allowed all three religions to flourish together.

Another 5th century statue shows the Hindu god Shiva and his wife Parvetti riding on a cow. It is believed to be

the largest artefact found until now showing the spread of Hinduism so far north into Central Asia and its peaceful co-existence with Zoroastrianism and Buddhism-in contrast to the fate of the Bamiyan Buddhas under the Taliban.