

The Buddhalakṣaṇa: some medical considerations.

The physical representation of the Buddha (Siddhārtha Gautama) is characterized by some thirty-two uncommon attributes that are described in the Lalitavistara and many other texts (including non-Buddhist texts) as the marks of a great man (*mahāpuruṣa-lakṣaṇa*). The origin of these attributes, whether they are actual physical observations, or of symbolic origin or a combination is unclear. In various art forms depicting the Buddha, he is usually shown with some but not all of these attributes. We should like to look into the origin of these physical attributes, by considering what is known of similarly described physical variations in humans (both congenital and acquired) and by exploring Sanskrit medical texts, such as the *Suśruta-Saṃhitā* and the *Caraka-Saṃhitā*, for descriptions of these and/or similar attributes.

We expect to be able to determine the plausibility of his physical variations based on current data available for congenital abnormalities, such as connective tissue disorders (Ehlers-Danlos and Marfan's syndrome) to explain his skeletal features (his long reach, long digits and legs, pedal deformity), and acquired physical changes as with endocrinopathies, as one might see with acromegaly (large tongue and jaw) and Cushing's syndrome (interscapular hump, soft skin, hair growth quality). We should like to keep in mind that an explanation for these physical attributes are being sought in disorders, while the Buddha is described as physically well-endowed and healthy. By examining some early Sanskrit medical sources, such as the *Caraka-Saṃhitā*, we hope to come to understand early Indian concepts of how qualities are inherited (including congenital variations) and the associations suggested by various physical attributes. This should allow us to acquire some insights into the significance of some of the thirty-two marks.

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