

# Buddhist Symbols in Circulation: Triratna Iconography in Ancient Indian Coinage

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## Abstract:

The Triratna (Three Jewels) — the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha — forms the central spiritual and philosophical core of Buddhism. While Buddhist literature elaborates upon the Triratna as the ultimate refuge and the foundation of moral and intellectual life, its visual expression across ancient Indian coinage reveals how sacred knowledge transcended textual boundaries to enter the public sphere. This study explores Triratna as a dynamic symbol that bridges Buddhist literature and the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) through numismatic media. Drawing from canonical sources such as the Dhammapada and Vinaya Pitaka, and analysing coins from the Mauryan, Shunga, Satavahana, and Kushana periods, the paper examines how the Triratna evolved as a marker of ethical, philosophical, and epistemic ideals.

The appearance of the Triratna alongside motifs like the Dharma Chakra, Bodhi Tree, and Stupa demonstrates a sophisticated integration of literary symbolism with artistic and technological craftsmanship. These coins functioned not merely as economic instruments but also as vehicles for preserving, creating, and disseminating knowledge — embodying the Buddhist vision of harmony between spiritual insight and material culture. Through an iconographic and textual analysis, this paper argues that the Triratna symbol represents an early form of visual knowledge communication in the IKS framework, linking moral philosophy, aesthetics, and social education. Thus, the Triratna on coinage stands as a testament to the enduring unity between Buddhist intellectual tradition and India's broader civilizational understanding of knowledge.

**Keywords:** Buddhist Coinage, Buddhist Literature, Dhamma, Indian Knowledge System, Mauryan, Symbolism.

## Introduction

Buddhist symbols have long served as powerful conveyors of knowledge, transmitting complex layers of philosophical meaning through simple yet profound visual forms. From early aniconic representations found in Gandharan and Mathura art to later fully developed iconography, these symbols acted as bridges between abstract thought and collective understanding, shaping how communities perceived and interacted with Buddhist teachings. Central among these symbolic expressions is the **Triratna**, or the Three Jewels—the **Buddha**, the Enlightened Teacher; the **Dhamma**, the body of teachings and moral truths; and the **Sangha**, the monastic community entrusted with preserving and transmitting the doctrine. These three pillars represent both a spiritual refuge and an intellectual framework, appearing throughout Buddhist literature, ritual texts like the *Ratana Sutta*, and historical narratives from early Buddhist communities. Scholars such as V.R. Sasson (2021) emphasize how material culture—jewels, ornaments, and sacred imagery—encoded deeper forms of religious imagination, demonstrating that symbols are not

merely decorative but function as epistemic tools within Buddhist traditions.<sup>1</sup> The Dhamma, as defined and debated by scholars like J.R. Carter (1976), encompasses universal truths and ethical laws<sup>2</sup>, while the Sangha, explored in works by De L. Young (1970) and the Pluralism Project, represents the living embodiment of those teachings, forming a socio-religious structure responsible for intellectual continuity.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the Triratna is both a doctrinal anchor and a symbolic lens through which Buddhist knowledge systems can be interpreted.

In the study of **Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS)**, Buddhist iconography occupies a foundational role because it transforms intangible philosophical ideas into accessible visual language. Iconography is not merely artistic representation; it is a medium through which Indian philosophical thought was encoded, preserved, and disseminated across regions and centuries. Works on Buddhist art—from John Marshall’s research on Gandhara<sup>4</sup> (1960) to R.C. Sharma’s study of Mathura images (1984)—show how symbols like the Triratna, Dharmachakra, and Bodhi tree became carriers of epistemological meaning. These symbols communicated the essence of teachings such as impermanence, compassion, and liberation without relying on extensive textual literacy, making philosophy visually and socially transmissible. In this sense, Buddhist symbols operate within IKS as **semiotic vessels**, enabling transmission not only within monastic spaces but also across diverse public contexts including trade, pilgrimage, and royal patronage. Oza, Beer, and Richie (2021) further note that Buddhist iconography reflects layers of religious symbolism that evolved across regions, demonstrating how meaning was negotiated between textual traditions and local artistic idioms<sup>5</sup>. The Triratna, appearing frequently in early inscriptions, manuscripts, ritual texts like the *Ratana Sutta*, and material culture, thus embodies the dialogic relationship between philosophical abstraction and symbolic representation.

One of the most compelling mediums through which Buddhist knowledge entered the public sphere was **coinage**. Coins, circulated across vast geographical areas and social strata, acted as “vehicles of intellectual transmission,” carrying religious symbols into everyday economic transactions. Unlike manuscripts accessible only to the literate or monastic communities, coins allowed Buddhist ideas to travel across merchants, artisans, kings, and common people. Scholars such as Osmund Bopearachchi (2015) illustrate how Indo-Greek, Kushan, and other early Indian rulers strategically placed Buddhist symbols especially the Triratna, on their coins to express political legitimacy, spiritual alignment, and cultural integration<sup>6</sup>. The appearance of the Triratna on coins was not accidental; it signified a conscious act of representing Buddhist identity and intellectual heritage in the public domain. By imprinting the symbol on metallic currency, Buddhist philosophical ideas became part of everyday life, entering marketplaces, trade routes, and administrative systems. This intertwining of economy, polity, and religion demonstrates the unique role of coinage in extending the reach of Buddhist knowledge beyond monastic boundaries. The Triratna symbol on coins thus encapsulates an important phenomenon in Indian intellectual tradition: **the translation of textual philosophy into widely recognizable visual forms**. The Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha—while rooted in canonical literature such as the *Dīgha Nikāya* (trans. Walshe, 1995),

<sup>1</sup> Vanessa R. Sasson, *Jewels, Jewelry, and Other Shiny Things in the Buddhist Imaginary* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2021), 12.

<sup>2</sup> J. Ross Carter, “Traditional Definitions of the Term ‘Dhamma,’” *Philosophy East and West* 26, no. 3 (1976): 330.

<sup>3</sup> D. N. De L. Young, “The Sangha in Buddhist History,” *Religious Studies* 6, no. 3 (1970): 244.

<sup>4</sup> John Marshall, *The Buddhist Art of Gandhara* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 22

<sup>5</sup> P. Oza, R. Beer, and Richie, “Buddhist Iconography and Religious Symbolism in Different Buddhist Statues” (2021), 5.

<sup>6</sup> Osmund Bopearachchi, *From Bactria to Taprobane* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2015), 109.

*Vinaya Piṭaka* (trans. Horner, 1938), and Ambedkar's *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1956)—found their most widespread reception through symbols that ordinary people encountered in daily life. This interplay between textual transmission and symbolic circulation highlights the dynamic nature of Buddhist communication strategies. Through rituals like chanting the *Ratana Sutta*, through artistic production in Mathura and Gandhara, and through the ethical interpretations found in Ambedkarite thought (Sravanthi & Vamseedhar, 2025), the Triratna became a unifying emblem of spiritual authority, moral clarity, and communal identity. Coins further strengthened this unity by bridging the gap between esoteric doctrine and public consciousness. They functioned as micro-monuments, portable statements of philosophical and political allegiance..

Therefore, the present research seeks to explore a central and compelling question: **How does the Triratna symbol reflect the interconnection between Buddhist literature and Indian Knowledge Symbolism through coinage?** This inquiry examines how textual meanings encoded in Buddhist scriptures and commentaries were visually rearticulated through symbols, and how those symbols, when placed on coins,, contributed to the dissemination of Buddhist knowledge across regions and communities. By tracing the journey of the Triratna from canonical literature to religious art and finally to economic instruments, the study aims to reveal how Buddhist intellectual traditions shaped—and were shaped by—cultural, political, and material contexts within the broader framework of Indian Knowledge Systems.

### Aim & Objectives

The aim of this research is to conduct a comprehensive study of the Triratna symbol by examining its presence in Buddhist canonical literature as well as numismatic traditions, in order to understand how this symbol evolved as a philosophical idea, visual form, and medium of cultural communication across various historical contexts. The study seeks to explore the doctrinal foundations of the Triratna as described in early Buddhist texts such as the *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, and *Vinaya Piṭaka*, and to assess how these textual interpretations relate to its artistic and material representations. In pursuit of this aim, the research sets several key objectives: to analyze the symbolic meaning and religious significance of the Triratna within Buddhist philosophical discourse; to examine its diverse visual expressions on coins issued by the Mauryan, Indo-Greek, Kushana, and other regional dynasties; to trace the historical evolution and regional variations of the symbol from its scriptural origins to its adoption in art, architecture, inscriptions, and numismatics; to compare doctrinal interpretations with archaeological and numismatic evidence in order to understand how religious concepts were translated into material culture; to investigate how political authorities used the Triratna on coinage as an instrument of legitimacy, cultural integration, and the spread of Buddhist ideology; and finally, to evaluate the enduring legacy of the Triratna as a cultural and intellectual emblem that continues to influence Buddhist visual traditions today. Together, these aims and objectives help position the Triratna not merely as a religious icon but as a dynamic and historically significant symbol that shaped, and was shaped by, the evolving social, political, and cultural landscapes of ancient India.

### Review of Literature

Scholarly attention to the **Triratna** has proceeded along two complementary tracks: close reading of canonical Pāli texts that formulate the Three Jewels as doctrinal touchstones, and material/numismatic studies that trace how those doctrinal meanings were externalized as visual signs. Canonical works repeatedly enunciate the supreme status of the Three Jewels: the *Ratana Sutta* (a canonical “Jewel

Discourse”) explicitly praises the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha as incomparable refuges and has long served as a liturgical and conceptual touchstone for understanding the Triratna in practice. The *Dīgha Nikāya* and other sections of the Sutta Piṭaka codify aspects of the Dhamma and Sangha that undergird later symbolic representation. Likewise, disciplinary and institutional descriptions in the *Mahāvagga* (Vinaya Piṭaka) illuminate how the Sangha’s social role and ritual forms helped fix the Three Jewels as both doctrinal and communal reference points.

Historians and art historians have established the visual vocabulary within which the Triratna later circulated. John Marshall’s foundational work on Gandharan art demonstrates how early Buddhist reliefs and stūpa decoration formed a repertoire of motifs (including triadic emblems and crowning devices) that later numismatic artists drew upon. R.C. Sharma’s scholarship on Mathura likewise maps regional sculptural conventions that favoured abstraction and emblematic representation—conditions that made the three-pronged Triratna well suited to stylized rendering on small media such as coins. Numismatists have directly treated coins as carriers of religious identity and political messaging. Osmund Bopearachchi’s numismatic corpus and collected studies trace the diffusion of Buddhist symbols across Indo-Greek, Indo-Scythian, and Kushan issues and show how coin iconography negotiates Hellenistic, local, and Buddhist idioms—often using compact emblems (including Triratna variants) to signal piety and legitimacy. A.K. Narain’s work on the Indo-Greeks remains an important historical baseline for understanding how Hellenistic rulers adopted and adapted local religious imagery on coinage, creating precedents for the syncretic visual language visible in later Kushan and indigenous coin types. Within the broader field of **Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS)**, recent studies emphasize that knowledge transmission in South Asia has always been multimodal: textual, ritual, architectural, and material. The literature on IKS stresses that symbols—portable, repeatable, and legible—serve as cognitive technologies that encode, preserve, and disseminate ethical and epistemic content. Coinage, therefore, is read by scholars not merely as economic artifact but as a deliberate medium of symbolic pedagogy that helped embed Buddhist epistemic claims in everyday social practice (this interpretive lens ties canonical formulations of the Triratna to their numismatic afterlives).

In sum, the literature converges on three propositions: (1) canonical Pāli sources supply the doctrinal grammar that makes the Triratna intelligible; (2) regional art histories (Gandhara, Mathura) demonstrate how that grammar was visualized; and (3) numismatic scholarship documents how rulers and mints transformed the Triratna into a compact public epistemic device. Together these strands provide the methodological scaffolding for reading coins as sites where Buddhist textual meaning and Indian knowledge praxis intersect.

## Methodology

This research employs a multidisciplinary methodology to examine the Triratna symbol as a point of convergence between Buddhist literature and Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), with particular focus on its representation in ancient Indian coinage. The study begins with a textual foundation, analyzing canonical Buddhist literature to trace how the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha were conceptualized as the Three Jewels (Triratna). Key Pali texts such as the *Ratana Sutta* of the *Sutta Nipāta* provide the primary doctrinal grounding, emphasizing the Three Jewels as “supreme” and “unsurpassed” objects of refuge. Translations from Access to Insight and Bhikkhu Ñāṇadassana are referenced to explore how these ideas were framed in early Buddhist communities. Additional insights come from the *Mahāvagga* of the *Vinaya Piṭaka* (Horner’s translation), which outlines the ethical structure and institutional organization of the early

Sangha, and the *Dīgha Nikāya* (translated by Walshe), which situates the Buddha's teachings within broader philosophical and cosmological contexts. Modern interpretations, such as B.R. Ambedkar's *The Buddha and His Dhamma* and J.R. Carter's analysis of evolving notions of "Dhamma," help trace how abstract concepts became systematized into a coherent symbolic triad with ethical and ritual significance. Building on this textual analysis, the second methodological layer focuses on iconographic and numismatic study. The research examines how the Triratna appears in ancient Indian coinage issued by dynasties such as the Mauryas, Śuṅgas, Satavahanas, and Kushanas. Numismatic data is gathered from archaeological reports, museum catalogues, ASI databases, and photographic archives cited in the works of Bopearachchi. The study catalogs coins that depict the Triratna or its variants—whether merged with crescents, solar discs, or Śrīvatsa forms—and documents their physical attributes, including stylistic detailing, composition, placement, and accompanying motifs such as elephants, Bodhi trees, or auspicious symbols. Through this examination, the analysis seeks to understand how the visual form of the Triratna communicated meaning in the constrained medium of coin design.

The third component engages in comparative interpretation, synthesizing textual and visual evidence. It explores how literary descriptions of the Triratna as an "incomparable refuge," as seen in the *Ratana Sutta*, correspond to its visual placement on coins—often centrally located or given prominence, suggesting sacred authority and royal endorsement. The philosophical depth of the Dhamma, as elaborated in Pali literature and modern scholarship, is contrasted with its simplified numismatic representation, showing how complex doctrines were translated into accessible symbols for a largely non-literate public. The role of the Sangha in transmitting the Dhamma, discussed by scholars such as De L. Young, is considered alongside the political implications of rulers minting Buddhist symbols on currency, indicating ideological alignment with monastic institutions.

The final methodological layer situates the entire inquiry within the IKS framework by examining the Triratna symbol through the lenses of knowledge creation, preservation, and dissemination. Texts like the *Dīgha Nikāya* represent knowledge creation; the repeated appearance of the Triratna in sculptures and coinage reflects knowledge preservation; and its circulation through currency demonstrates knowledge dissemination, allowing Buddhist concepts to permeate everyday life. Through this integrated approach, the study reveals how the Triratna functioned as a bridge connecting Buddhist literature, symbolism, and material culture within the broader landscape of Indian knowledge traditions.

### What is Triratna?

The concept of the Triratna, or the Three Jewels, stands at the heart of Buddhist identity, serving both as the doctrinal foundation of the tradition and as the personal gateway through which an individual enters the Buddhist path. In canonical and later Buddhist literature, the act of taking refuge—"***Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi, Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi, Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi***"—represents not only a ritual formula but a conscious reorientation of life around three interdependent principles: the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. As described by The Buddhist Centre and The Pluralism Project, this declaration initiates formal belonging within the Buddhist community, yet it is more than ceremonial; it signifies the commitment to a transformative intellectual, ethical, and communal journey structured around the qualities embodied in the Three Jewels.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> "Three Jewels," The Buddhist Centre, n.d.; "The Three Treasures," The Pluralism Project, n.d.



In literary discourse, each Jewel encompasses its own rich spectrum of meaning. The Buddha, as the Enlightened One, is portrayed across the Pali Canon as the embodiment of perfected wisdom and compassion, serving as empirical proof that liberation from suffering is attainable. The Dhamma, which Carter's "Traditional Definitions of the Term 'Dhamma'" shows to be extraordinarily multilayered, refers both to the teachings articulated by the Buddha and the universal, natural law governing moral causation and conditionality.<sup>8</sup> It is simultaneously doctrine, ethical code, and cosmic principle. The Sangha, explored historically by De L. Young and described by modern resources like the Pluralism Project, comprises not just a monastic fraternity but a living structure dedicated to preserving, interpreting, and exemplifying the Dhamma in the world<sup>9</sup>. Together, these three form a symbiotic triad: the Buddha reveals the truth, the Dhamma articulates the truth, and the Sangha sustains it.

Buddhist literature elevates the Triratna through vivid metaphors and exalted imagery that highlight its sacred, incomparable nature. Nowhere is this more powerfully expressed than in the *Ratana Sutta*, a celebrated discourse found in the *Sutta Nipāta* and preserved in translations by Access to Insight and Bhikkhu Yaṇḍadassana<sup>10</sup>. The text extols the Three Jewels as the supreme treasures of the universe, proclaiming that there exists "no jewel comparable to the Buddha, no jewel comparable to the Dhamma, no jewel comparable to the Sangha." Through repetitive praise, the sutta constructs a poetic and protective framework around the Triratna, emphasizing their moral purity, spiritual potency, and salvific power. Other canonical works, such as the *Dhammapada*, further develop the symbolism by depicting the Dhamma as a raft for crossing the ocean of suffering, a lamp that dispels darkness, and a path that is timeless and directly observable. The *Sutta Piṭaka* repeatedly describes the Dhamma as "well-proclaimed," "visible here and now," and grounded in experiential verification—qualities that underscore its accessibility and rational foundation.<sup>11</sup>

Within this literary landscape, the Three Jewels become far more than doctrinal categories; they function as the intellectual and moral architecture of Buddhist thought. The metaphors scattered throughout the canon—treating the Buddha as physician, the Dhamma as medicine, and the Sangha as the community that administers and lives the cure—highlight an enduring interpretive model in which the Triratna addresses both existential suffering and ethical disorder. Modern scholarship, such as Ambedkar's reinterpretation in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, extends this symbolism into the realm of social justice, emphasizing the Triratna as instruments for overcoming inequality, caste oppression, and ignorance.<sup>12</sup> Thus, across historical periods, the literary tradition not only defines the Three Jewels but continuously reinterprets and revitalises their meaning to meet the needs of changing communities.

Through this rich tapestry of canonical descriptions, metaphorical elaborations, and modern reinterpretations, the Triratna emerges in Buddhist literature as the supreme triad that encapsulates the essence of the tradition. It is simultaneously philosophical, ethical, symbolic, and deeply practical. This profound conceptual elaboration laid a powerful foundation for the subsequent visual and material

<sup>8</sup> J. Ross Carter, "Traditional Definitions of the Term 'Dhamma,'" *Philosophy East and West* 26, no. 3 (1976): 329–37.

<sup>9</sup> D. N. De L. Young, "The Sangha in Buddhist History," *Religious Studies* 6, no. 3 (1970): 243–52; "The Sangha: The Buddhist Community," The Pluralism Project, n.d.

<sup>10</sup> "Ratana Sutta: The Jewel Discourse," Access to Insight, n.d.; Bhikkhu Yaṇḍadassana and N. Ariyadhamma Mahāthera, *Ratana Sutta* (2011).

<sup>11</sup> Maurice Walshe, trans., *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 54.

<sup>12</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1956).

representation of the Three Jewels—most notably in art, architecture, and numismatic symbols—where the abstract literary qualities of the Triratna found a tangible form capable of communicating Buddhist knowledge far beyond scriptural contexts.

### Iconography of the Triratna symbol in coinage

The iconographic development of the Triratna symbol in ancient India emerges from a deep visual tradition that predates its appearance on coinage, beginning with the early architectural and epigraphic remains of the Mauryan period. The **Ashokan pillar inscriptions**, which emphasize the moral authority of the Buddha and the Dhamma, laid the ideological foundation for Buddhist symbols to enter state-sponsored art. Though Ashoka's pillars do not explicitly depict the Triratna, their lion capitals, chakra motifs, and inscriptions promoting *Dhamma-vijaya* created an aesthetic and philosophical environment in which Buddhist symbols could gain political visibility. The **railings at Bharhut and Sanchi**, documented through extensive archaeological studies such as Marshall's work on Gandhara<sup>13</sup> and Sharma's research on Mathura,<sup>14</sup> show the earliest stone-carved versions of the Triratna. These depictions frequently appear atop pillars, stupa railings, and as crowning emblems above depictions of the Bodhi tree or stupa. In these reliefs, the Triratna is often shown as a **three-armed emblem emerging from a lotus base or mounted above a stupa**, symbolising the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha as the threefold refuge. The association of the symbol with other sacred motifs—such as the **Dharma Chakra, Bodhi tree, nandipada, and lotus pedestal**—reveals an evolving semiotic system in which multiple layers of Buddhist meaning were visually interwoven.

This symbolic vocabulary later transitioned into the numismatic realm, particularly during the late Mauryan and Śunga periods. Early **punch-marked coins** and **city-state coinages** feature abstract, geometric forms of the Triratna—frequently a **three-pronged symbol** combined with a crescent, taurine mark, or nandipada. These simplified Triratna marks reflect the broader literary reverence for the “Three Jewels” as expressed in texts like the Ratana Sutta,<sup>15</sup> which praises the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha as “incomparable jewels.” Their abstraction on coins allowed the symbol to function as a shorthand for Buddhist identity and royal patronage, accessible even to those unable to read Brahmi inscriptions. As numismatic traditions expanded under Indo-Greek, Śaka, and Kushana rule, the Buddhist visual language became increasingly syncretic. Scholars such as Bopearachchi<sup>16</sup> have shown how **Indo-Greek and Kushana coins** integrated Buddhist symbols into Hellenistic artistic conventions. The Kushana emperor Kanishka, whose rule marked an important phase in Buddhist patronage, issued coins depicting **the Buddha as a standing figure**, often surrounded by a **Triratna-shaped halo or accompanied by the Dharma Chakra**, fusing Buddhist iconography with Greco-Roman stylistic realism. These coins reflect not only dynastic reverence for the Three Jewels but also the cosmopolitan cultural environment in which Buddhism interacted with Western artistic traditions.

Across these numismatic phases, the Triratna symbol served a crucial epistemic function: it became a **vehicle of visual knowledge**, allowing Buddhist philosophical ideas to circulate far beyond monastic settings. Because coins passed through the hands of merchants, farmers, soldiers, and travellers, the

<sup>13</sup> John Marshall, *The Buddhist Art of Gandhara* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960).

<sup>14</sup> R. C. Sharma, *Buddhist Art of Mathura* (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1984).

<sup>15</sup> “Ratana Sutta: The Jewel Discourse,” Access to Insight, n.d., <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.2.01.piya.html>

<sup>16</sup> Osmund Bopearachchi, *From Bactria to Taprobane* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2015).

symbol reached a wider audience than manuscripts or monastic sermons ever could. In line with Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) principles, the repetition of the Triratna on coinage represents a form of **knowledge dissemination**, transforming abstract doctrinal principles into material signs accessible to both literate and non-literate populations. Much like the literary tradition that declared the Three Jewels to be peerless and supreme, the visual tradition on coins distilled the essence of Buddhist refuge into an instantly recognizable emblem, enabling the Triratna to become one of the most enduring symbols of Buddhist identity across South and Central Asia.

### Symbol of Knowledge in the Indian Knowledge System (IKS)

In the framework of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), knowledge is understood as both spiritual and practical, inseparable from lived experience and societal function. Unlike a purely textual or scholastic approach, IKS emphasizes the embodiment of knowledge in objects, art, architecture, and ritual, recognizing that learning and ethical understanding are most effective when encoded in visible, tangible forms. Within this epistemological paradigm, the Triratna—the Three Jewels of Buddhism comprising the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha—emerges as an exemplary case of knowledge materialised, functioning as both a spiritual signpost and a practical instrument for societal guidance. The Triratna's symbolic presence in ancient Indian coinage demonstrates the fusion of intellectual philosophy with technological ingenuity. Coins, as portable, widely circulated objects, provided a medium through which abstract Buddhist teachings could transcend the confines of monasteries, textual manuscripts, or ritual practice, entering the hands of common people across diverse social, linguistic, and geographical contexts. By doing so, the Triratna on coins exemplified the IKS principle that knowledge is most enduring and socially effective when it is simultaneously accessible, actionable, and aesthetically resonant.

The material presence of the Triratna on coins represents a deliberate act of **epistemological translation**, transforming textual doctrine into visual form. In canonical texts such as the *Ratana Sutta*<sup>17</sup> and the *Dīgha Nikāya*<sup>18</sup>, the Three Jewels are articulated in complex philosophical and moral terms: the Buddha as the embodiment of perfected wisdom and liberation, the Dhamma as the ultimate truth and ethical law., and the Sangha as the sustaining community that preserves and enacts this knowledge in the world. While these texts provided the intellectual blueprint, their reach was naturally limited to those capable of reading and interpreting them. Coinage, in contrast, functioned as a democratizing medium. Early Mauryan and Śuṅga punch-marked coins often bore abstract representations of the Triratna, sometimes combined with other sacred motifs such as the **Dharma Chakra**, **Bodhi tree**, or **nandipada**, offering a visual shorthand for Buddhist teachings. These simple yet evocative forms encoded the essence of philosophical ideas, allowing them to be recognized and interpreted by individuals regardless of literacy. In this sense, coins acted as portable carriers of knowledge, embedding moral, social, and spiritual guidance into everyday transactions. The repeated handling of coins bearing the Triratna reinforced the recognition of Buddhist ethical and philosophical precepts, subtly shaping collective consciousness over time.

As Buddhist art evolved, so did the sophistication of Triratna imagery in numismatics. Under the Indo-Greek and Kushana rulers, coins integrated Buddhist symbols with Hellenistic artistic conventions, creating visually compelling and intellectually resonant motifs. Bopearachchi's scholarship<sup>19</sup> demonstrates how Kushana emperor Kanishka's coinage, for instance, often depicted the Buddha with a

<sup>17</sup> Ratana Sutta: The Jewel Discourse,” *Access to Insight*, n.d.

<sup>18</sup> Maurice Walshe, trans., *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: Dīgha Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> Osmund Bopearachchi, *From Bactria to Taprobane* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2015).



halo shaped like a Triratna, accompanied by the Dharma Chakra, effectively merging narrative, iconographic, and symbolic elements. Such integration illustrates a remarkable convergence of philosophical content and technical execution: the coin was not merely a medium of economic exchange but also a vessel of intellectual and spiritual transmission. The visual form of the Triratna on these coins distilled the complex interrelations between the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha into a single, instantly recognizable emblem, capable of communicating doctrinal principles in the absence of words. This phenomenon underscores a key IKS insight: knowledge is most effective when encoded in forms that allow immediate recognition, emotional resonance, and ethical reflection.

The **preservation of Buddhist teachings in visual form** through coinage also contributed significantly to the continuity of knowledge across time and space. Whereas manuscripts were susceptible to decay, destruction, or restricted circulation, coins were durable, portable, and repeatedly encountered in daily life. As Marshall<sup>20</sup> notes in his study of Gandharan art and Sharma<sup>21</sup> emphasises in the Mathura context, visual culture served as a repository of meaning, enabling philosophical concepts to survive beyond textual transmission. The Triratna, as a repeated motif on coinage, reinforced a continuous thread of Buddhist identity and thought, making abstract teachings materially present and cognitively retrievable across generations. Moreover, by combining sacred imagery with tangible, practical objects, the Triratna bridged the gap between metaphysical principles and worldly experience, demonstrating that spiritual knowledge could be integrated into everyday practice, commerce, and governance.

In addition to preservation, coinage facilitated **dissemination**, expanding the reach of Buddhist knowledge to the general populace. Unlike monastic teachings or ritual chanting, coins circulated widely, crossing political boundaries, regional dialects, and socio-economic classes. Each transaction with a coin bearing the Triratna became a subtle form of knowledge transmission, familiarizing ordinary people with the Three Jewels and embedding Buddhist ethical and philosophical norms into the routines of public life. This function aligns closely with Ambedkar's interpretation in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*<sup>22</sup>, where the Triratna is not only a spiritual refuge but also a practical framework for guiding ethical action and promoting social justice. By appearing on widely used objects, the Triratna created a shared cultural and moral vocabulary, transforming the abstract ideas of Buddhism into lived experience.

The widespread circulation of the Triratna also contributed to the **formation of a shared civilizational identity** across India and beyond. As coins travelled along trade routes connecting South Asia with Central and Southeast Asia, they carried with them a consistent visual lexicon of Buddhist knowledge, reinforcing the universality of the Three Jewels. The repeated exposure to these symbols helped cultivate a collective understanding of ethical, spiritual, and social values, fostering cohesion across diverse populations. Within the IKS framework, such visual and material dissemination exemplifies the capacity of knowledge systems to encode complex philosophical concepts into socially accessible forms, thereby integrating individual moral development with collective civilizational consciousness.

Ultimately, the Triratna on coinage functioned as a **cognitive tool within the Indian Knowledge System**, encoding layers of ethical, social, and spiritual knowledge. By bridging textual philosophy with technological application, the symbol allowed abstract doctrines to be experienced as part of everyday life. It preserved Buddhist teachings for posterity, disseminated moral and intellectual values to the public, and created a shared symbolic framework for civilizational identity. The Triratna's integration into coins

<sup>20</sup> John Marshall, *The Buddhist Art of Gandhara* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960).

<sup>21</sup> R. C. Sharma, *Buddhist Art of Mathura* (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1984).

<sup>22</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1956).

exemplifies the IKS principle that knowledge is most enduring and effective when it is both intellectually rigorous and materially present, spiritually meaningful yet practically engaged, accessible to the learned and the layperson alike. Through this sophisticated interplay of doctrine, artistry, and technology, the Triratna became not merely a religious emblem but a dynamic instrument of knowledge, shaping thought, action, and identity across centuries and regions, embodying the essence of Indian epistemological practice and cultural continuity.

### Discussion and Analysis

The interplay between textual interpretations of the Triratna and its material manifestations on coinage reveals a remarkable continuity and adaptability of Buddhist knowledge across time, space, and social strata. Canonical texts such as the *Ratana Sutta* and the *Dīgha Nikāya* articulate the Three Jewels—the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha—as supreme refuges, embodying wisdom, ethical guidance, and communal harmony. These literary descriptions provided the conceptual blueprint for Buddhist symbolism, emphasising the moral and spiritual dimensions of the Jewels, as well as their role in guiding individual and societal conduct. When juxtaposed with numismatic evidence from regions such as Mathura, Gandhara, and Andhra, the continuity of this symbolic framework becomes evident. Early Mauryan and Śuṅga coins display abstract forms of the Triratna, often simplified into three-pronged emblems or motifs combined with the Dharma Chakra, Bodhi tree, lotus pedestal, or nandipada, echoing the sanctity and conceptual unity described in texts. Later Kushana and Indo-Greek coins, exemplified by Kanishka's issues, integrate Buddhist motifs with Hellenistic artistic conventions, portraying the Buddha alongside a Triratna halo or incorporating the Jewels into elaborate decorative schemes, thereby demonstrating the adaptability of the symbol to diverse artistic and cultural milieus.

This cross-regional and diachronic continuity suggests that coins functioned as more than economic instruments; they were “**miniature manuscripts**”, translating textual knowledge into the civic and public sphere. Just as the *Ratana Sutta* repeatedly extols the Jewels as incomparable treasures, coinage distilled these teachings into visual language that could be perceived, remembered, and cognitively processed by a wide audience. The repetition of the Triratna across coins and dynasties transformed ephemeral textual ideas into durable, tangible forms, accessible to literate and illiterate populations alike. In effect, each coin became a compact repository of spiritual, ethical, and social knowledge, functioning as a mobile locus of Buddhist instruction within everyday civic life. Handling these coins, whether in marketplaces, trade routes, or administrative transactions, enabled ordinary people to engage with the values encoded in Buddhist thought—echoing the IKS principle that knowledge is most effective when it intersects with practical, lived experience.

Moreover, the use of the Triratna in numismatics illustrates how ancient Indian rulers leveraged coinage as a **knowledge management system**, a concept particularly significant within the IKS framework. By embedding Buddhist symbols onto currency, rulers simultaneously affirmed their piety, aligned themselves with the moral authority of the Sangha, and facilitated the preservation and dissemination of philosophical teachings across their territories. This strategic deployment of numismatic symbolism ensured that the central doctrines of Buddhism—compassion, ethical conduct, and communal responsibility—were not confined to monasteries or elite literati but circulated widely across society. Archaeological and numismatic studies, including those by Marshall on Gandharan art, Sharma on Mathura sculpture, and Bopearachchi on Kushana coinage, underscore the deliberate interplay between aesthetic form, ideological content, and public circulation, demonstrating that rulers actively managed

knowledge by shaping its material and visual transmission. Coins, in this sense, were not only economic instruments but instruments of cognitive and cultural governance, embodying the intersection of text, symbol, and social practice.

The continuity and adaptation of the Triratna across regions further highlight the resilience and versatility of Buddhist knowledge within Indian epistemological traditions. In Mathura, coins and sculptures favored more abstract and stylized forms of the symbol, consistent with the region's sculptural conventions and its emphasis on symbolic abstraction. In Gandhara, Hellenistic influences led to more naturalistic representations, integrating the Triratna into figural compositions and narrative reliefs. Andhra region coinage, particularly under the Satavahanas, demonstrates a blend of symbolic clarity and ornamental detail, reflecting both local aesthetic preferences and the imperative of legibility for public recognition. Across these regions, the Triratna maintained its epistemic core while adapting its form to local artistic idioms, underscoring the dynamic interplay between textual philosophy and material culture in sustaining Buddhist knowledge over time.

## Conclusion

The Triratna symbol exemplifies the profound interconnection between Buddhist philosophical literature and visual as well as material knowledge systems. Rooted in canonical texts such as the *Ratana Sutta* and the *Dīgha Nikāya*, the Three Jewels—Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha—embody the core intellectual, ethical, and spiritual principles of Buddhism. Their translation into visual forms, particularly through coinage, demonstrates how abstract doctrinal concepts were made tangible, intelligible, and accessible to diverse audiences across South Asia. Coins, as portable and widely circulated objects, functioned not merely as instruments of economic exchange but as dynamic mediums of cultural communication, integrating ethical instruction, aesthetic expression, and epistemic content into everyday civic life. By imprinting the Triratna on currency, ancient rulers and Buddhist communities preserved, disseminated, and reinforced core teachings, fostering a shared civilizational identity and creating a system in which knowledge was materially embodied, socially circulated, and culturally institutionalized. The enduring presence of the Triratna, from ancient inscriptions and art to contemporary Buddhist practice, underscores its lasting significance as an emblem of Indian intellectual and spiritual tradition. It continues to serve as a cognitive and cultural touchstone, reminding us that knowledge within the Indian Knowledge System is not confined to texts alone but thrives at the intersection of philosophy, visual symbolism, and lived human experience.

## List of Figure

### Plate 1.

**Figure 1:** Stupa 2 sandstone balustrade upright with Dharma Chakra symbol on Triratna, Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India, ca. 2nd B.C. Carving from Sunga period. Photographer Gairola, C. Krishna <https://digitalcollections.lib.washington.edu/digital/collection/ic/id/7666/>

**Figure 2 :** Silver coin of the Apracaraja Vijayamitra in the name of Azes II. Buddhist triratna symbol in the left field on the reverse. coin of Azes II. Personal photograph, personal coin. Of <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:AzesIITriratna.jpg>

**Figure 3:** Silver coin of king Amogh, c. 1st century BC. Obv: Deer standing right, crowned by two cobras, attended by Lakshmi holding a lotus flower. Legend in Prakrit (Brahmi script, from left to right): Rajnah Kunindasya Amogh maharajasya ("Great King Amoghabhuti, of the Kunindas").

Rev: Stupa surmounted by the Buddhist symbol triratna, and surrounded by a swastika, a "Y" symbol, and a tree in railing. Legend in Kharoshti script, from right to left: Rana Kunidasa Amogh Maharajasa, ("Great King Amogh, of the Kunindas").

## Plate 2

**Figure 4** Taxila (local coinage). Unit (22mm, 7.93 g, 12h). Plant above voided cross and hill above Indra-dhvaja. Srivatsa above nandipada and hill above swastika. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Post-Mauryan\\_coinage#/media/File:Taxila\\_\(local\\_coinage\)\\_Symbols.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Post-Mauryan_coinage#/media/File:Taxila_(local_coinage)_Symbols.jpg)

**Figure 5** Lesser Satavahanas of Banavasi - Uninscribed lead coin, (c.200-250 AD), Unlisted in major publications, Weight : 2.59 Grams Obv: ornamental Nandipada/Triratna symbol on a pedestal. Rev: tree in railing. Extremely fine, Rare <https://www.instagram.com/p/C2jhWB-Lx8W/@vintageindiancoins>



**Figure 1**



**Figure 2**





**Figure 3**

**Plate 2**



**Figure 4**





Figure 5

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