

Paths to Perfection

Buddhist Art at the Freer|Sackler

Paths to Perfection: Buddhist Art at the Freer|Sackler introduces readers to Buddhist art through the celebrated collections of the Smithsonian's museums of Asian art in Washington, DC. Written for a general audience, the guidebook shares Buddhist art and its history across cultures, from the origins of Buddhism in India to its spread eastward to China, Japan, and Southeast Asia. More than a hundred objects from the renowned Freer|Sackler collections follow, each with a full-color image and insightful description written by a museum curator or scholarly fellow. Entries are divided by type into five sections: buddhas, bodhisattvas, mandalas and ritual objects, teachers and teachings, and attendants and protectors. A map and glossary help familiarize readers with significant Buddhist sites and terms. Part of an ongoing series of guidebooks that explore the Freer|Sackler's collection areas, *Paths to Perfection* is an intriguing look at artistic responses to one of the world's great religions.

ON THE COVER:

Detail, Four great events from the life of Buddha Shakyamuni; ancient Gandhara (modern Pakistan/Afghanistan), Kushan dynasty, late 2nd–early 3rd century CE; schist; 67 × 289.8 × 9.8 cm; Purchase, Freer Gallery of Art, F1949.9.a–d



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Paths to Perfection Buddhist Art at the Freer|Sackler

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Introduction

In the history of world art, few figures are as familiar or widely depicted as the Buddha. For thousands of years, artists have shaped his image in metal and stone and painted his form on the walls of monasteries, temples, and caves. Today, we also see him represented in advertisements and serving as decoration for boutiques and restaurants.

Typically seated with crossed legs and downcast eyes in a state of calm introspection, the Buddha's form is easily identified (fig. 1). The abundance and relative consistency of his image may suggest a timeless uniformity or that representations of the Buddha hold the same meaning for all believers. History, however, tells a very different story—one in which meanings vary greatly according to period and place. The significance of the Buddha's image has never been fixed or static.

A Thai monk might recognize such an image as an empty reminder of the Buddha and his teachings (dharma) that holds no inherent connection to the teacher, who has passed into the state of nirvana. The artwork is a reminder and nothing more. Yet his fellow Thai Buddhist might travel great distances to seek out a potent Buddha image in hope of curing an illness. Certain representations of the Buddha have storied histories of miraculous and compassionate acts, offering refuge in times of need.

A Tibetan Buddhist might commission a painting of the Buddha so that she can donate it to the local monastery. The act earns her merit (good karma), which she then offers to her recently deceased father, attaining him a positive rebirth. To her, the image is the means to help a loved one. The nun who receives the painting, by contrast, might recognize the Historical Buddha as just one buddha among many through whom the dharma's eternal truths have been revealed.

For a Zen practitioner in Japan, seeing an image of the Buddha might call to mind the adage "If you encounter the Buddha, kill him." This saying is a reminder that attachments, even to the Buddha, can be a hindrance along the path to attaining enlightenment, or perfect wisdom into the nature of existence. Only personal striving can cultivate one's potential to become a buddha. By contrast, a newcomer to an

1
Great Buddha of
Kamakura; Japan,
Kamakura, Kotoku-in;
courtesy Dirk Beyer, via
Wikimedia Commons



American meditation group might encounter the same image and be surprised that it isn't the rotund, jovial figure often represented as the Buddha in popular media. In fact, such "laughing buddha" images are not traditionally understood to depict the Historical Buddha at all (fig. 2).

These examples provide just a taste of the varied ways the image of the Buddha has been used and understood. In all cases, these objects are more than just decorative: their creation and veneration is believed to provide a range of benefits, both material and spiritual. There are many more examples throughout this book of Buddhist art from the Freer|Sackler, the Smithsonian's museums of Asian art. While not encyclopedic, this collection illuminates the incredible diversity of Buddhist art across time and space.

BASICS OF BUDDHISM

To get a sense of the rich history of Buddhist art, it is best to begin at the beginning. The Buddha can be identified with a man named Siddhartha Gautama who lived in northeastern India sometime after the fifth century BCE. Born to a royal family, he renounced his wealth

as a young man to pursue a life of asceticism and to grapple with the question of suffering, or *duhkha*.

For six years, Siddhartha Gautama practiced harsh austerities as a hermit, but they failed to bring him enlightenment. After taking food, he sat under a tree, determined to acquire insight. He came to realize that *duhkha* is tied to our desires and attachments to worldly things—including our own egos—which all inevitably decay. This realization, and his decision to share it with others, earned him the title of Buddha, or "Awakened One." He is also known as Shakyamuni, the Historical Buddha.

For Shakyamuni, not even death would end suffering. Like most South Asians of his time, he believed in the relentless cycle of life, death, and rebirth (*samsara*) and the power of karma to determine one's fate. Through karma, which literally means "action," selfless deeds lead to good results and malicious intentions produce negative consequences. The accrual of karma determines into which realm of existence an individual is reborn: among humans or animals, hungry ghosts or demigods, the hosts of heaven or those suffering in the hells. Yet none of these states is permanent, so even the best of existences is tinged with sorrow and the knowledge that it will one day end.

Shakyamuni overcame this suffering by attaining enlightenment and, ultimately, nirvana—a state beyond dualities, including that of life and death. In his first sermon, the Buddha expounded on the Four Noble Truths: (1) life is suffering; (2) suffering is caused by ignorance and desire; (3) ignorance and desire can be overcome; (4) the way to overcome them is by following the eightfold path: right view, resolve, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. These precepts are the foundation of all forms of Buddhism.

Even though Shakyamuni accepted the existence of gods and regional deities, he recognized that they too were trapped in the cycle of rebirth and could therefore benefit from his teachings. Many deities and spirits did convert to Buddhism, often becoming protectors of the faith. For humans, this means that while gods may help with worldly concerns, enlightenment can be achieved only through personal commitment to the dharma.

SCHOOLS OF PRACTICE

Within a generation or two of the Buddha's death, disagreements developed over how best to pursue the spiritual goals he had established. And as the monastic order (sangha) of monks and nuns formed and grew, divisions began to emerge and new schools developed. While we cannot delve into the full history of this complex process, it is helpful to classify these schools within three broad categories of Buddhism: Nikaya, Mahayana, and Vajrayana.

Scholars often describe Nikaya (sometimes called Theravada or Hinayana) as the most conservative branch of Buddhism because it focuses on nirvana and the monastic community. Nikaya currently predominates in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, where it has replaced other traditions.

Mahayana schools typically identify buddhahood, rather than nirvana, as their ultimate aim. Unlike Nikaya Buddhists, most Mahayana schools believe that buddhas remain active in the world even after they die. Therefore, devotees often make room for practices honoring both buddhas and bodhisattvas. Bodhisattvas are future buddhas who have attained advanced spiritual states and, out of compassion, vow to stay in the world to help all other beings. Mahayana Buddhism has been practiced in many locations, but traditionally its presence has been strongest across East Asia.

Vajrayana or tantric Buddhism also holds buddhahood as the ultimate spiritual goal, but practitioners attain it through specialized techniques transmitted from teacher to pupil. This training involves special initiations and teachings not typical of the other branches of Buddhism. Vajrayana Buddhists honor buddhas and bodhisattvas as well as a complex array of teachers, guardians, and deities. These initiatory or esoteric (secretive) schools took root in many parts of the world; today, they are found predominantly in the Himalayas and, to some degree, Japan.

BEGINNINGS OF BUDDHIST ART

The earliest Buddhist centers developed in India around monastic residences and large burial mounds (fig. 3) containing relics of the Buddha or of his important disciples. Devotees frequently decorated



3
Sanchi Stupa no. 3;
India, Madhya Pradesh,
Sanchi; 2nd century BCE;
courtesy Suyash Dwivedi
via Wikimedia Commons

these structures, known as stupas, with sculptural ornamentation, often including regional deities that had been converted into Buddhist guardians. The decoration also featured narrative scenes detailing the Buddha's life and past lives (jataka tales).

4
The "Great Departure"
of Shakyamuni from
Sanchi Stupa no. 1;
India, Madhya Pradesh,
Sanchi; 2nd–1st century
BCE; Huntington Archive,
1306

For approximately four hundred years after his death, the Buddha was not represented directly in art. Rather than emerging from strictly Buddhist prohibitions, this intentional omission seems to have derived from the idea that figural art could influence the individual who was depicted. Such imagery was therefore deemed inappropriate for religious figures. Instead, artists indicated Shakyamuni's presence with a notable absence, such as an empty throne or a riderless horse (fig. 4), or with a symbol, such as a spoked wheel.



By the first century, South Asia had experienced a tremendous burst of artistic innovation, catalyzed by the arrival of kings with cultural ties to other regions. These rulers embraced portrayals of themselves and a wide variety of religious figures in sculpture and on coins (fig. 5). It is in this context that the first images of the Buddha appeared.

Although the style of these first-century images varies by region, they share a great deal of iconography. The Buddha is immediately recognizable by his simple monastic robes and distended earlobes, the result of the heavy golden earrings he wore before abandoning his life as a prince. His body also displays a range of unique marks (*lakshana*), among which the cranial bump (*ushnisha*) and the mark or swirl of hair between his brows (*urna*) are the most common. Artists also used postures and hand gestures (*mudras*) to indicate specific actions, such as teaching or meditating, or to reference particular events in his life.

While these iconographic traits are typical of Shakyamuni, the Historical Buddha, they are associated with other buddhas as well. In fact, all schools of Buddhism acknowledge, to varying degrees, the existence of multiple buddhas.

BUDDHAS AND BODHISATTVAS

One concept that Buddhism borrowed from wider South Asian

5
Gold coin with King Kanishka and the Buddha; South Asia, ca. 127–50; The British Museum IOC.289



tradition is that the world passes through ages (*kalpas*) lasting billions of years. At the close of each age, the world ends, and after a time, a new one is formed. Early Buddhist thinkers postulated that buddhas had existed in past ages and revealed the dharma to their respective worlds (fig. 6). In this system, Shakyamuni did not technically invent his teachings; rather, he was the first in our age to rediscover timeless truths.

This concept of time also allows for the existence of a Future Buddha, who is waiting for the next age to arrive. This figure, known as Maitreya, generally is depicted in a pensive pose and richly adorned, residing in heaven until his next and final rebirth. Of the alternate forms of Maitreya, the most notable is a plump, plainly dressed, wish-granting sage. This so-called “laughing buddha” gained popularity in parts of East Asia and in the West.

Whereas buddhas typically wear simple monastic robes, we can easily distinguish bodhisattvas by their rich garments and jewels. Artists often include symbols or traits to identify particular bodhisattvas. For example, Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, frequently holds a lotus blossom or medicine flask and wears a small buddha image in his headdress. Such attributes allow us to distinguish him from other important bodhisattvas such as Manjushri, Kshitigarbha, and Samantabhadra.

6
Row of past buddhas; Pakistan, ca. 100–299 CE; blue schist; American Institute of Indian Studies, Varanasi; 51572



7
Cave 26; India,
Maharashtra, Ajanta;
courtesy Dey.sandip, via
Wikimedia Commons

8
following pages [removed
in preview]

Although buddhas and bodhisattvas are the most prominent, Buddhism has other categories of advanced spiritual beings. For example, arhats are figures who have attained nirvana—or come close to it—based on a buddha’s teaching. While Nikaya texts often praise such individuals, some Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions view the arhats as having fallen short of true buddhahood. At times, they are therefore depicted as eccentric or outlandish figures. Nevertheless, all Buddhist traditions acknowledge arhats as defenders of the dharma, particularly when no buddha is actively teaching in the world. Fortunately, arhats’ spiritual attainments assure that they have the immensely long lifespans necessary to accomplish this task.

THE SPREAD OF BUDDHISM

It is hard to say if the visual arts helped Buddhism to spread or if the religion’s growing popularity encouraged artistic patronage. Regardless, both dynamics contributed to Buddhism’s success. From the third century BCE to the fifth century CE, kings and commoners in South Asia increasingly supported the faith. Eventually, however, competition from Hinduism—together with political, military, and religious pressures from within South Asia and abroad—led to a decline. By the twelfth century, Buddhism had all but disappeared from the Indian subcontinent.

Yet long before this recession, merchants and monks had carried Buddhism abroad along with the luxury goods of the Silk Road, the overland trade networks stretching across Central Asia. In the form of texts and images, the religion had journeyed from the ancient region of Gandhara to Afghanistan and into western China.

In many oasis towns along these trade routes, monasteries were carved into the mountainsides that encircled the desert. This tradition of rock-cut architecture had begun in India (fig. 7) before reaching Central Asia and parts of China (fig. 8). Today, these caves, decorated with Buddhist murals, are among the earliest remaining examples of Buddhism’s eastward expansion.

BUDDHISM IN CHINA

The exact date of Buddhism’s arrival in China is difficult to pin down. Buddhist texts were being translated into Chinese as early as the mid-second century, whereas the earliest dated Chinese-made



9
Seated Buddha; China,
338; gilded bronze;
The Avery Brundage
Collection, Asian Art
Museum of San
Francisco, B60B1034

buddha image dates to 338 CE (fig. 9). The Northern Wei dynasty (386–535 CE) may have been the first regional state to legally recognize Buddhism as an official religion.

Buddhism developed a stronger hold in the area over time, but it had a tumultuous relationship with the Chinese courts. Imperial powers alternated between supporting and persecuting the faith. As a foreign import, some people viewed Buddhism and its emphasis on monasticism as corrupting and hostile to Confucian notions of family. This turbulent history influenced Chinese Buddhist art, which fluctuates between grandiose, public displays and modest objects intended for private use.

As sutras and other texts representing diverse South Asian Buddhist schools entered China, scholars struggled to reconcile their contradictory perspectives. The challenge gave rise to the Tiantai school, which ranked the Buddha's teachings based on the premise that audiences heard different sermons depending on their level of spiritual attainment. According to Tiantai scholars, the *Lotus Sutra*, which presents a sermon as a conversation between two buddhas, is at the apex.

Another school of Buddhism that emerged in China focused on Amitabha, the celestial buddha of infinite light. Followers of the Pure Land school of Mahayana Buddhism believe that Amitabha took a special vow to create the Western Paradise, or Pure Land (Sukhavati). Those who call upon Amitabha are reborn from lotuses into this heavenly realm, where they perpetually practice the dharma. Images of Amitabha and his palace-like monastery are especially popular in China, Korea, and Japan.

After death, devotees are guided to the Pure Land by Avalokiteshvara (in Chinese, Guanyin), the bodhisattva of compassion. Attentive to those in need, Avalokiteshvara holds a central place in many East Asian Buddhist traditions. Many of this bodhisattva's forms are male or ambiguously gendered. Over time, however, the female form of Guanyin, a healer and provider for children, became preeminent across East Asia.

Chan Buddhism existed alongside these devotional traditions in China, but it differs from them in significant ways. Chan, better



10
Bodhidharma; Japan,
Edo period, 17th cen-
tury; ink on paper; Gift
of Peggy and Richard
Danziger in honor of Kurt
Gitter; Freer Gallery of
Art, F1997.12

known in the West by its Japanese name, Zen, is attributable to the Indian master Bodhidharma (fig. 10). He traveled to China in the fifth or sixth century and shocked people with practices that greatly contrasted with mainstream Buddhism. Instead of relying on texts, he advocated a direct “mind to mind” transmission of the dharma, in which teachers, considered living buddhas, lead pupils to a moment of insight.

Although Chan practitioners venerate the school’s patriarchs (leaders of the monastic lineage), they eschew traditional depictions of important figures in favor of monochrome, abbreviated, and often-unflattering portraits. Such images emphasize the patriarchs’ mundane humanity. Their visual imperfections remind viewers of both the accessibility of enlightenment and the need for non-attachment, even to revered religious teachers.

BUDDHISM IN KOREA

Chinese monks introduced Buddhism to the Korean peninsula in the late fourth century CE. Within two hundred years, the faith was flourishing under court patronage that lasted nearly a millennium. Many of the most remarkable examples of Korean Buddhist art are the result of this elite support. Though some were inspired by Chinese subjects and compositions, these works are distinctly Korean achievements.

The Future Buddha Maitreya (in Korean, Mireuk), who pensively waits to be reborn as a buddha, quickly became a popular subject in Korean art (fig. 11). Images of the Future Buddha gathered new meaning in the sixth and seventh centuries with the rise of social movements that identified Maitreya’s heaven, Tushita, as a model for social harmony and an idealized state. Such images reveal the growing connections between Buddhism and political power in Korea.

The Korean imperial court and its powerful officials often sponsored elaborate temple complexes and monasteries. In the eleventh century, the Goryeo court turned its attention and wealth to a new art form: lavishly decorated woodblock-printed editions of Buddhist texts. Requiring a massive commitment of time and money, these compilations were considered valuable religious resources that could protect the state from misfortune. They still serve as important resources for both devotees and historians.

BUDDHISM IN JAPAN

Although merchants and travelers had already brought Buddhism into Japan, in the mid-sixth century it arrived formally as an official “gift” from a Korean kingdom. Under the nurturing guidance of the powerful Soga clan, Buddhism developed close ties to the Japanese state. Over time, the connections between monastery and palace became very close, and the imperial family initiated large-scale Buddhist projects.

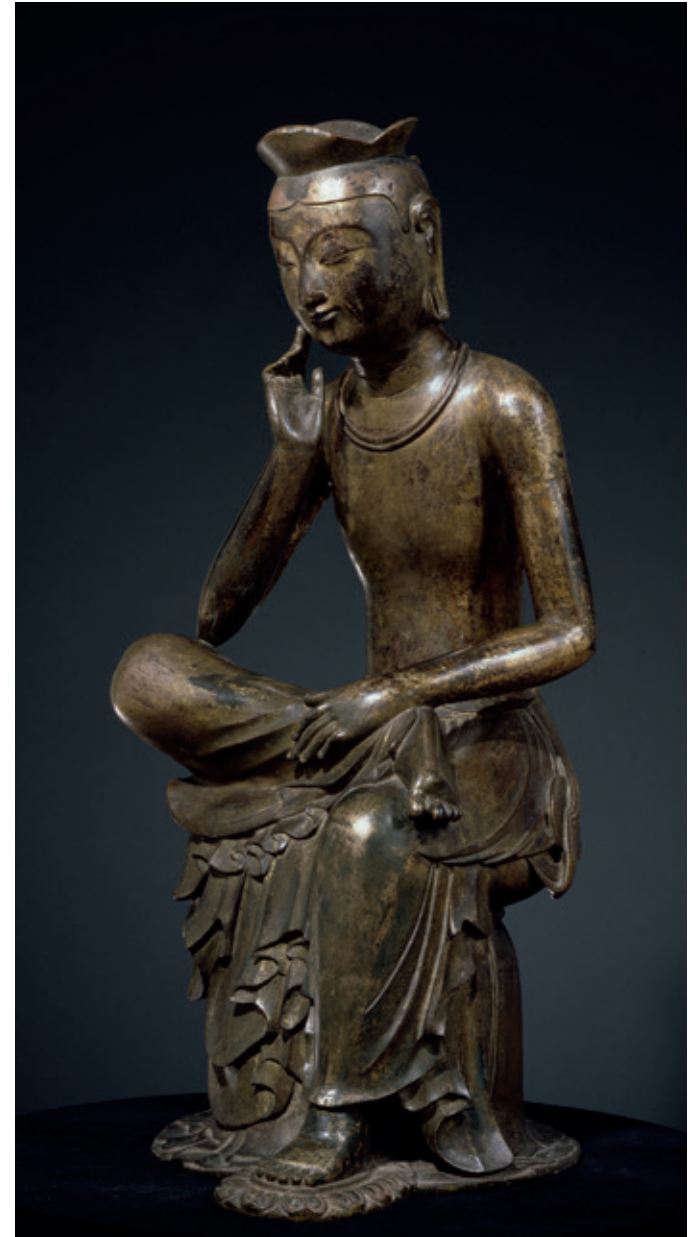
However, Buddhist influence on the court eventually attracted criticism. When the imperial capital was relocated, monasteries were outlawed within the capital city of Heiankyo (modern Kyoto). Still, support flourished for the Shingon (a Vajranaya sect) and Tendai (the Japanese form of Tiantai) schools, which built monasteries in the hills outside the city.

Fortunes changed again in the late twelfth century, when the shogunate, or military government, rose to power. The shogunate’s martial ideals matched well with Zen Buddhism, the Japanese version of China’s Chan Buddhism, which emphasizes austerity and self-control. Zen monasteries attained new levels of support and popularity. The school’s focus on human effort also inspired artists to represent traditional Buddhist subjects, such as teachers and guardian deities, with elevated drama and intensity.

Just as Buddhism had appropriated ideas from the indigenous religions of India and China, it also drew on Japanese concepts, which inspired innovative artwork. For centuries, some Japanese devotees believed that Buddhist deities and certain native gods were manifestations of one another. In 1868, however, the Meiji court, seeking to separate Buddhism from indigenous faiths, challenged and ultimately outlawed this coexistence. This decision and a later one forbidding the government from favoring any religion profoundly impacted Buddhism’s connections to the state. Despite these setbacks, Buddhism retains a prominent role in Japanese society.

BUDDHISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Texts tell us that Buddhism traveled to parts of Southeast Asia in the third century BCE. This is certainly possible given the region’s



11
Pensive Bodhisattva;
Korea, Three Kingdoms
Period; gilt bronze;
National Museum
of Korea, Bongwan
-002789-000



12
 Buddha Preaching;
 central or northeastern
 Thailand, 8th–early 9th
 century; silver alloy, Gift
 of Enid A. Haupt; The
 Metropolitan Museum
 of Art, 1993.3876

13
 following pages
 Potala Palace; Tibet
 Autonomous Region,
 Lhasa; courtesy
 Coolmanjackey, via
 Wikimedia Commons

proximity to the Buddha's homeland. The earliest artistic evidence of Buddhism in Southeast Asia, however, dates to much later: the sixth century CE, when Buddhist artworks first appeared in the Malay Peninsula and in what is now central Thailand. These small images appear to be based on portable bronze prototypes that seafaring Indian traders carried across the Indian Ocean.

Buddhism gained regional prominence in the royal courts of such places as Ayutthaya in Thailand (fig. 12), Angkor in Cambodia, and Srivijaya in Indonesia. The faith's fortunes at these courts rose and fell over the centuries according to royal preferences. Eventually, a more durable and consistent dedication to the Buddha's teachings developed and thrived among non-elite Southeast Asian communities.

BUDDHISM IN THE HIMALAYAS

Although the Himalayas also are located near the Buddha's birthplace, the region's challenging topography led Buddhism on a circuitous journey to the Tibetan plateau. The initial wave of Buddhism did not arrive until the seventh century. By that time, later Vajrayana schools predominated in India, and these esoteric traditions took root in Tibet.

Although the ninth-century collapse of the Tibetan empire caused Buddhism to lose imperial backing, the tradition survived and even thrived on the periphery. New teachings from India caused a second dissemination of Buddhism in Tibet beginning in the eleventh century. Over time, Tibetan Buddhism developed four lineages or schools: Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyu, and Geluk. The oldest, Nyingma, is linked to the eighth-century arrival of the great Indian teacher Padmasambhava. But Geluk, which originated in the fifteenth century, became the most politically powerful due to the support of the Mongol khans, who granted a Geluk leader regional authority and the title of Dalai Lama (fig. 13).

THE COLLECTION

The preceding paragraphs have offered a brief overview of the rich diversity and complexity of Buddhism and its art. The discussions that accompany the objects in this volume will provide more specific insights. We hope this guidebook enables you to explore the history of Buddhism and to engage with the ideas that have inspired, and continue to inspire, Buddhist art across the globe.



