

Which Buddha Is This Anyway?

Notes on Identifying the Enlightened Ones

By Frank L. Chance

For most American educators, the imagery of Christian, Jewish, and, to a lesser extent, Muslim religious art is relatively familiar. Not only are angels and devils instantly recognized, even when they appear in the context of *Saturday Night Live*, but many of us heard Bible stories growing up, and some could recite a whole litany of saints and other holy beings. However, in our globalizing times, images from other religions also appear more frequently than ever—particularly in museums and galleries. Though we may think we know a Buddha when we see a Buddha, there is, in fact, a whole hierarchy of beings represented in Buddhist art, some of them familiar and some much less so. This essay should serve as an aid to identification of Buddhist imagery commonly exhibited in many museum collections. Moreover, the notes will help us place each image within the taxonomy of the Buddhist pantheon. Each figure has a name in Sanskrit, and those were translated into Chinese and then transformed into Korean, Japanese, Mongol, and other languages used by the cultures into which Buddhism was carried; for the sake of simplicity, I will refer to the Sanskrit terms below except when there is another name commonly recognized in English.

Perhaps the most straightforward of images is that of the Buddha *Shakyamuni*, the historical personage known as Gautama Siddhartha before leaving his home and family for a life of austerity and meditation in the late sixth century before the Common Era. Most images show him after complete spiritual awakening, typically as an ageless male dressed in priestly robes and exhibiting the signs of a superior being (i.e., a Buddha) (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Meditating Shakyamuni, gilt wood, Yuan dynasty China, now in the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Courtesy of the Penn Museum, Image #150417.

These marks include a protrusion on the skull called an *ushnisha*, a tuft of hair between the eyebrows called an *urna*, and extended earlobes resulting from the heavy stone earrings Siddhartha wore as a young prince living in his father's palace. After he discarded the earrings as part of giving up the rich life of his youth, the stretched earlobes remained; they also serve as a mark of his nobility. These marks reflect an underlying assumption that the physical body reflects the spiritual qualities of the person, made explicit in the *Lakkhana Sutta*, thirtieth chapter of the *Digha Nikaya* section of the Pali Canon, the oldest version of the Buddhist scriptures that survives.

Shakyamuni spoke of other Buddhas, beginning with seven Buddhas of the past and one of the future in the *Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta*. In other texts, such as the *Avatamsaka-Sūtra*, the Buddha speaks of hundreds or even thousands of other awakened beings. We don't need to recognize all of them, but among the most common Buddhas represented in East Asia, we should surely include the future Buddha *Maitreya*, the Buddha of the West *Amitābha*, and perhaps a few others. Unless there is an inscription or other document identifying the image, there is no completely foolproof method of distinguishing an image of Shakyamuni from one of Maitreya, Amitābha, or one of the other Buddhas, but there are often clues. Shakyamuni is often shown touching the earth with his right hand, a reminder of the moment of

his awakening when he called the earth as witness to his achievement. Maitreya may be shown with flames springing from his shoulders or with swirling hair adorning his ushnisha, as in the small-standing bronze in the University of Pennsylvania Museum (Figure 2).

Amitābha, described at length in the *Amitābha Sūtra*, the *Lotus Sūtra*, and the *Sūtra of Infinite Light*, is typically shown with one of his fingers touching the thumb on each hand, forming triangles (Figure 3). He promised, according to the sutras, to help anyone calling on him to be reborn into *Sukhavati*, his land in the distant west, a land free from all defilements and hence known as a



Figure 2: Standing Maitreya, gilt bronze, Eastern Wei dynasty China, now in the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Courtesy of the Penn Museum, Image #172502.



Figure 3: Meditating Amitābha, bronze, Kōtoku-in, Kamakura, Japan. Photograph by Dirk Beyer, licensed from the Creative Commons.



Figure 4: Standing Avalokiteshvara, stone, Tang dynasty China, now in the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Courtesy of the Penn Museum, Image #184975.



Figure 5: Acalanātha Vidyarāja, painted wood, Edo period, Japan, now in the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Courtesy of the Penn Museum, Image #152625.

to as such, but most representations of Bodhisattvas are based on other personages, including disciples of Shakyamuni, personifications of the sun and the moon, and others. Maitreya, the Buddha of the future mentioned above, is also frequently depicted as a Bodhisattva, wearing the elaborate robes and scarves of a prince, with necklaces and other jewelry and a crown on his head. But the most commonly seen Bodhisattva in East Asia is without a doubt *Avalokiteshvara*, Bodhisattva of compassion and companion to Amitābha. Known as *Guanyin* in China, *Kwannum* in Korea, and *Kannon* in Japan, this figure is often misleadingly identified as the “Goddess of Mercy,” a double mistake as it is not a goddess, and mercy is not synonymous with compassion. And though the most typical form again wears princely robes with a figure of Amitābha in the crown (Figure 4), Avalokiteshvara can appear in any guise that makes compassion real, from white-robed visions of purity to angry manifestations and even seemingly monstrous creations with multiple heads and arms.

The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are at the top of the Buddhist hierarchy, but two other types of awakened beings are right below them. One type, primarily from Vajrayana, the ritualistic branch sometimes called “esoteric Buddhism,” is the *vidyaraaja*, or “bright king.” These beings are the enlightened form of Hindu gods and are linked to magic and other powerful practices. In Japan, the most famous of them is *Fudō myōō*, the Unmoving Bright King, a Buddhist manifestation of the ancient fire god Acalanātha (Figure 5). He is the facilitator of fire rituals in Japan, fiercely active with a sword in his right hand

“Pure Land.” This should not be confused with *nirvana*, the state (or nonstate) into which the Buddha passed when he left his body; rather, it is a paradise where one spends a last long lifetime clearing one’s karma before achieving final awakening and eventual nirvana. Amitābha can usually be recognized by his *mudra* hand position, with one finger touching his thumb.

In addition to speaking of Buddhas, Shakyamuni also spoke of other awakened beings called *Bodhisattvas*. Bodhisattvas remain active in the world of human birth, death, and rebirth, while Buddhas are in nirvana, a state of nonbeing, after giving up their bodies. The historical Buddha was, of course, a Bodhisattva until he entered nirvana and is sometimes referred

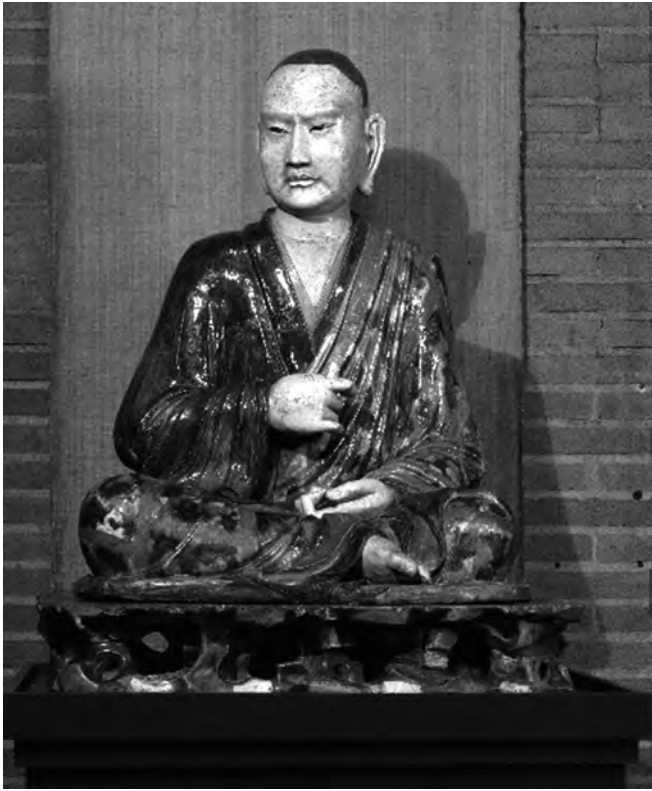


Figure 6: Arhat, glazed terra-cotta, Liao or Jin dynasty, China, now in the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Courtesy of the Penn Museum, Image #152267.

and a lasso in his left, with dark skin charred by his fiery nature. He became a protector deity as well and was the object of devotion for many medieval samurai, among others.

The final category of awakened beings are *arhats* (*luohan* in Chinese and *rakan* in Japanese), humans who have achieved awakening but not nirvana. Based on the disciples of the historical Buddha, they are sometimes depicted as attendants of another figure but may also appear in groups of eight, ten, sixteen, 108, or even 500. The example here, now in the University of Pennsylvania Museum, is from a set discovered in a cave in northeast China, made from terra-cotta decorated with low-fired lead glazes that give the figure a startlingly realistic appearance. Seated cross-legged in the simple robes of a priest, the figure could be mistaken for a Buddha, except that the head has no protrusion, and there is not the faintest mark between the eyebrows (Figure 6).

Of course, Buddhist art includes many figures that have not yet achieved spiritual awakening, from guardian gods to guardian lions, from hungry spirits to heavenly attendants, and from ordinary humans to extraordinary warriors. To explore this area in greater detail, try one of the excellent published guides to Buddhist art, such as Meher McArthur's *Reading Buddhist Art*, published by Thames and Hudson. ■

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Buddha Art Resources Online

One of the many excellent resources to learn more about Buddhist imagery is the Asia Society's website, titled *Pilgrimage and Buddhist Art*. After renouncing his princely life for spiritual pursuits, Buddha began a physical and spiritual journey that ultimately led to his enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree in Bodhi Gaya. Before his death, the Buddha instructed his disciple Ananda that followers could continue to seek him in places that resonated with important events in his life—the sites of his birth at Lumbini, his enlightenment at Bodhi Gaya, his first sermon at Sarnath, and his death at Kushinagara. Representations of the Buddha produced across Asia reference these and other sacred sites associated with him, and Buddhists from all over the world continue to make pilgrimages to these sacred sites. Among the resources on the site is an interactive map that shows the spread of Buddhist sites across Asia.

There is also a link in the right column to *The Buddha*, a 2010 David Grubin film narrated by Richard Gere for PBS. The film, available in its entirety, tells the story of the Buddha's life and features the work of some of the world's greatest artists and sculptors who have depicted the Buddha's life through art. The PBS site offers the story and teachings of the Buddha, a timeline and interactive map, educational resources, a link to an online art exhibition, *The Art of the Buddha*, and a Mahjong game with Buddhist symbols.

Resources that link from The Asia Society website



The Asia Society: *Pilgrimage and Buddhist Art*, <http://pilgrimage.asiasociety.org/>.



PBS: *The Buddha* (documentary, 113 minutes), <http://www.pbs.org/thebuddha/>.



PBS Arts: *The Art of the Buddha*, <http://www.pbs.org/arts/exhibit/buddha/>.