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Author: Beltz, Johannes  
Title: "Understanding Religion through Art"  
  
Published in: The Buddha up lose.  
Prague: National Gallery in Prague  
Editor: Hánová, Markéta; Klimtová, Zdenka (Eds.)  
Year: 2021  
Pages: 28-39  
ISBN: 978-80-7035-786-6

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# UNDERSTANDING RELIGION THROUGH ART

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This exhibition offers a general introduction to Buddhist art and culture aimed at anyone with an interest in cultural history and religion. It presents works of art from South, Southeast, East, and Central Asia, that represent almost 2,000 years of artistic achievement. Through these individual pieces the exhibition explores the different manifestations of Buddhism as reflected in their teachings, histories, myths, and religious practices.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. THE SPREAD OF BUDDHISM

Since it originated around 2,500 years ago, Buddhism has spread to many regions of Asia and ultimately to every continent. It travelled along various routes and in multiple waves. Sometimes Buddhist communities were supported by those in power; at other times they were politically suppressed. In some cultures, these communities died out; in others they became, and remain today, a present and integral part of society.

### 1.1 The Origins and Consolidation of Buddhism in India

Siddhartha Gautama is regarded as the founder of Buddhism. He is believed to have been a prince who lived and taught in the late fifth and early fourth century BCE in the borderlands where northern India meets modern-day Nepal. He is better known by his honorific name, the "Buddha", which means "the awakened one". His teachings were disseminated by his disciples and quickly attracted many followers.

Buddhism received strong state support in the third century BCE from the powerful Emperor Ashoka, who ruled over a large part of the Indian subcontinent. This support was closely tied to Ashoka's political and imperial ambitions. Across the land he had inscriptions carved into stone that portrayed him as a just ruler. Legend has it that he erected more than 84,000 stupas – monuments containing the relics of the Buddha – to honour the religion's founder. Ashoka is also said to have taken part in a gathering of monks in Pataliputra, the capital of his empire, where there were extensive discussions on how the Buddha's teachings should be interpreted. A rift in opinion eventually led to the division of the Buddhist community into the Theravada and Mahayana branches of Buddhism. These are also known, respectively, as "the Teachings of the Elders" and "the Teachings of the Great Vehicle".

### 1.2 Buddhism Arrives in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia

Buddhism is said to have been brought to Sri Lanka in the third century BCE by Mahinda, the son of Emperor Ashoka. Mahinda's father sent him to the island as a missionary.

There are many well-grounded introductions to Buddhism. Among the most important are Freiburger – Kleine 2011, Harvey 1990, Landaw – Bodian 2006, Prebish – Keown 2006, Trainor 2001 (ed.), and Bechert – Gombrich 1984.

The new teachings quickly caught on. In the fifth century, Buddhism steadily cut a path for itself with the help of Buddhaghosa, a famous teacher who reworked the texts of the Pali Canon and added important commentaries to make the Buddhist teachings accessible to as many followers as possible. Sri Lanka remains to this day one of the most important centres of Theravada Buddhism.

The influence of Buddhism continued to spread across Southeast Asia into the third century CE. The kings of Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia, who were highly influenced by Indian culture, adopted many aspects of Indian art and architecture as well as the religious ideas of Buddhism and Hinduism. A flourishing maritime trade carried these ideas as far as Indonesia. Large temples lavishly decorated with figures were constructed all across Southeast Asia, among them the monumental Borobudur Stupa in Java (8th–9th century) and the impressive Angkor Wat in Cambodia (12th–15th century).<sup>2</sup>

### 1.3 The Rise and Fall of Buddhism in the Land of Its Birth

In India, Buddhism flourished during the first century CE and became a major source of inspiration for art and culture. Large monastic universities, such as Taxila (in modern-day Pakistan) and Nalanda (in modern-day Bihar, India), were founded in this period. In the following centuries, these universities attracted thousands of students from all over Asia, who came to study not just philosophy but also medicine, astronomy, and the natural sciences.

When the Guptas gained control over a vast territory in central India and established an empire (ca 320–550), their kings supported both Hinduism and Buddhism. A style of art evolved in this period that would influence visual culture throughout Asia.

In the eighth century, however, the first signs of the decline of Buddhism in India began to emerge. Buddhism lost the support it had previously enjoyed among prominent ruling families, and it was increasingly displaced by Hinduism and Islam. One by one, the temples and monasteries were suppressed or dissolved. In the 12th century, the monastic university at Nalanda was destroyed, and Buddhism ceased to exist in India until its resurgence in the 20th century.

### 1.4 Buddhism in Central Asia

The Buddhist teachings soon spread to the Northwest and into Central Asia. In the first century CE, an important centre of Buddhist culture emerged in Gandhara, a region located in what is today parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan. In the time of the Kushan dynasty (1st–3rd century CE), a great many monasteries and other structures were built in this region and richly decorated with narrative reliefs (cat. nos. 11, 12, and 14). The first images of the Buddha in human form were created in the late first and early second centuries in both Gandhara (cat. no. 2) and Mathura, south of Delhi. These images became the model for artistic representations of the Buddha in Central and East Asia (cat. no. 3). Around this time the first Indian monks journeyed across northern India, the Hindu Kush, and Central Asia and brought the Buddhist teachings to China. They travelled with caravans of traders along the different branches of the Silk Road, spreading the teachings to the oasis towns that lay to the north and south of the Taklamakan Desert.

Buddhist monasteries soon began to thrive in these regions as well. Evidence of this is provided by the rock temples that have survived throughout the area. These were lavishly decorated with sculptures and wall paintings from the third through the tenth centuries.

The monasteries were places of religious learning. Some of these institutions also became major centres of translation, where Buddhist texts were translated from Indian languages into local tongues. Today, the most comprehensive collections of early Buddhist writings are preserved in the Chinese and Tibetan languages.

### 1.5 Further to the East: China, Korea, and Japan

When the first Buddhist monks arrived in China, the country was in a state of political chaos. After the fall of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), China had split up into numerous short-lived states. The rulers in the north of China, descendants of nomadic tribes from the Central Asian steppes, welcomed the foreign religion as a tool to establish the legitimacy of their rule. The emperors of the Wei dynasty (220–265 CE) thus portrayed themselves as the ideal Buddhist sovereigns and had numerous monasteries built and

2 Cf. Krishnan 2007.

statues of the Buddha erected, some of them in monumental proportions.

The Buddhist teachings were disseminated further by Chinese monks who introduced them to the Korean Peninsula, where they were quickly embraced by local rulers. In the fourth century the kingdoms of Paekche (18 BCE–660 CE), Goguryeo (37 BCE–668 CE), and Silla (57 BCE–668 CE) made Buddhism the state religion.

Around 552 CE a monk from the Paekche kingdom brought the new teachings to the island empire of Japan. Fifty years later Buddhism was incorporated into the constitution promulgated by Prince Shōtoku (574–622). Not long after, Japan sent monks to China for the first time. They risked their lives making this dangerous journey so that they could study the Buddhist teachings directly in China.

### 1.6 The Further Development of Buddhism in East Asia

By the sixth century, Buddhism had taken hold throughout Chinese society. More than 30,000 temples and monasteries were built as either state or private initiatives, and the number of monks and nuns grew to 200,000. Patrons from every stratum of society commissioned countless Buddhist objects, ranging from simple, cheaply produced prints, to small clay tablets pressed from moulds, to religious scenes and sculptures rendered in minute detail (cat. no. 3). More elaborate projects included figural stone steles (cat. no. 24), lavishly furnished cave sanctuaries (cat. no. 23), and temple halls.

Buddhist masters from northern India and Central Asia were welcome guests in China. They brought with them new ideas and impulses, sparking much interest and intense debates. Different Buddhist schools thus emerged in which practices were centred on different concepts and rituals.

Many of these new ideas also travelled to Japan. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, for example, the teachings of the Pure Land School (Jōdo-shū in Japanese) (cat. nos. 37–40), and Zen Buddhism (Chan in Chinese) arrived in Japan and gave rise to a distinct form of artistic expression (cat. nos. 58–60).

By the ninth century the Buddhist clergy in China had acquired great wealth and power. This was likely the main reason why the emperor ordered many monasteries to be destroyed and put the Buddhist community under state control.

Similarly, in Korea, where the religion exerted a strong political influence, Buddhism was significantly reined in by the imperial court in the 13th century. In Japan, by contrast, the monasteries maintained strong ties to political power centres right up to the 16th century.

### 1.7 Buddhism on the Rooftop of the World

Despite their proximity to India, the people of the Himalayas encountered Buddhism comparatively late. After the kings of the Yarlung dynasty (7th century–842) united the various Tibetan principalities and established one large empire, they embraced Buddhism in order to strengthen their power. According to legend, they invited the Indian master Padmasambhava (8th–9th century) to Tibet, where he tamed the local gods and converted them to Buddhism. He founded the first monastery in Tibet around the year 775 in Samye.

After the fall of the Yarlung dynasty, Buddhism lost its significance, but it experienced a revival in the 11th century. The main influences again came from India: monastic traditions were introduced into Tibet, along with Tantric teachings and meditation techniques (cat. no. 53). These became the foundation for various new schools, which absorbed local gods and traditions over time.

When the Mongols controlled a large part of Asia in the 13th century, they posed a threat even to the high plateau of Tibet. Buddhist monks were able to ward off invasion by officially submitting to the Mongols. In exchange, the representative of the most important Buddhist school in Tibet was installed as regent. The close intertwining of religious and secular power has remained a feature of Tibetan Buddhism. In the 16th century the head of the Gelug School, Sōnam Gyatso, was able to claim the highest authority in Tibet with the support of the Mongols. The Mongol leader Altan Khan granted him and his successors the honorary title of Dalai Lama, “teacher (lama) with an ocean of wisdom” (cat. no. 32). A century later, the Dalai Lamas were officially made the rulers of Tibet.

The Mongols’ military engagement in Tibet left its mark on Mongolian society. Altan Khan converted to Buddhism and introduced the religion into his own empire (cat. no. 35).

Tibetan Buddhism came to exert an influence in China. A number of rulers from the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) maintained diplomatic ties with Tibetan Buddhist masters,

and some of the most beautiful bronze statues produced in China were made for temples in Tibet (cat. no. 52). Under the subsequent Qing dynasty (1644–1911), founded by non-Chinese Manchu rulers who considered themselves the successors to the Mongols, Tibetan teachers were held at high esteem at the imperial court.

### 1.8 Buddhism in Asia in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

Buddhism progressed in various directions in Asia in the modern era as well. Under the influence of Western thought and modern philosophy, a reform movement emerged that emphasised certain aspects of the Buddhist teachings, such as the individual path to salvation, the responsibility of individuals for their own actions, mindfulness, social responsibility, and meditation practices. At the same time, important schools focusing on devotion and veneration have continued to exist and are firmly anchored in the local societies. In some countries, Buddhism has continued to have a constitutional role in the state: even today the king of Thailand is the head of the Buddhist order there.

The political upheavals of the mid-20th century led in some countries to the brutal suppression of religions, including Buddhism. For example, during the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror in Cambodia (1975–1979), Buddhist monks and nuns were murdered and temples were demolished. During the Cultural Revolution in China (1966–1976), monasteries were closed or destroyed, and the Chinese army's invasion of Tibet forced many Buddhists into exile in northern India. Today Buddhism is flourishing again in Asia. Old schools and traditions have adapted to the demands of the modern world, and new branches and interpretations of the Buddhist teachings have emerged.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. THE BUDDHA AND THE LEGEND OF HIS LIFE

The Buddha is venerated as the founder of the Buddhist religion, as a teacher, and as the one who “showed the way”. He was a man, not a god, who – as though awakening from a dream – cast aside false views and realized the supreme truth. He was thus given the honorific name Buddha, which means “the awakened one”. He is seen as the embodiment of perfect wisdom. Buddhism also recognizes a number of other buddhas who have appeared and taught in this and in other worlds in different eras.

Today we refer to the man who lived around 2,500 years ago and passed on the teachings about supreme truth as the “historical Buddha”. He is also often called Buddha Shakyamuni, meaning “Sage of the Shakyas”. This name relates to his origins, as it is said that he was born a prince of the Shakya royal family. When speaking of the Buddha as a historical figure, we sometimes use his personal name, Siddhartha Gautama.

### 2.1 The Buddha as a Historical Figure

In Buddhism, as with the two other major religions that look to a founding figure – Islam and Christianity – no direct evidence exists about the life of the founder. Each of these three communities acquired a religious dimension after their first teachers had died. What we know about Jesus, Mohammed, and the Buddha comes from reports and statements from people who spoke *about* Jesus, Mohammed, or the Buddha as archetypes. While we cannot rule out that the Buddha was a real historical person, there are no statements about him that can be substantiated. From various sources, however, we can reconstruct what people of a certain time thought about the Buddha and how they interpreted his life.

Many stories about the Buddha have emerged over the centuries, some of which are considered more significant than others. The earliest written sources in which the Buddha is mentioned that we know of today are the inscriptions and edicts that the Emperor Ashoka had carved on rocks in northern India in the third century BCE. For example, he visited the village of Lumbini and erected a pillar with an

3 The Indian social reformer and politician B. R. Ambedkar saw Buddhism as a path to a deep and lasting transformation of society, especially of the Indian caste system and its treatment of so-called “untouchables”. Born as an “untouchable” Hindu, he converted to Buddhism towards the end of his life; cf. Beltz 2005.

inscription, where he mentioned that it was the Buddha's birthplace. He granted tax relief to Lumbini in order to honour the Buddha. The Pali Canon, which was probably written down for the first time in the first century BCE, contains biographical passages that focus on the Buddha as a teacher and founder and narrate the end of his life; however, they do not describe his birth or the time of his youth. The first biography devoted entirely to the Buddha's life story is the *Buddhacarita* (Acts of the Buddha), an epic poem written in classical Sanskrit from the second century CE. Over the course of 28 chapters, the poet Ashvaghosha describes the life and work of the Buddha, from the time of his birth to his death. The hagiographic elements and miraculous events in this life story were further embellished in later centuries. The Buddha increasingly came to be portrayed as a supernatural being, a manifestation of supreme wisdom in human form.<sup>4</sup>

The stories of the Buddha's life that have been passed down to us may have little to do with who the Buddha was as a real person, but in the words of Axel Michaels, a retired professor of religious studies from the University of Heidelberg and an expert on Indian religions, they became "historical facts through writing, artistic interpretations, and practices of religious worship".<sup>5</sup>

It was not just the life of the Buddha as a teacher that was of great importance for art, but also his many previous lives. These stories, which read like parables, describe how the Buddha performed selfless acts in each of his incarnations, whether he was in the form of an animal or a human: he helped creatures in need, sacrificed himself for others, or exhorted others to engage in good moral behaviour (cat. no. 1, first scene). These stories were depicted in the earliest stage of Buddhist art, for example on the gate of the stupa at Sanchi, India, from the first century CE.

## 2.2 The Story of the Buddha

The story of the Buddha's life continues to be told today as a guide on the path of religious learning. It is not supposed to be a true retelling of his fate, but is rather a means to explain the basic ideas of the Buddhist teachings and to enable an experience of them. In the following pages, we present the

life of the Buddha in this traditional spirit, both visually and in simple words.

### 2.2.1 Birth

Before the Buddha became "the awakened one", he had already been born many times and lived countless lives. In each of these life cycles he performed good deeds. He was then ready to accept his final birth as the son of the king of Kapilavastu in the north of the Indian subcontinent. One night, Queen Maya had a dream in which a white elephant entered her womb, and soon after she became pregnant. Shortly before she gave birth, the queen was travelling through a grove in Lumbini, when she suddenly started to feel labour pains. The trees lowered their crowns so that Maya could grab hold of the branches, and the child emerged from her side. As soon as he was born, the child stood up and took seven steps. He looked around in all four directions and said: "I have been born to become the Buddha" (cat. no. 10).

### 2.2.2 Asita's Prediction

When the queen returned home, her husband invited the sages to the court to predict the child's future. One of them was the sage Asita. He immediately recognised that they were in the presence of an extraordinary person, and he predicted that Siddhartha would become either a powerful ruler or a religious teacher. Siddhartha's father wanted him to become a great king. He therefore saw to it that his son never left the palace and never learned about the unpleasant sides of life. The aim was that Siddhartha should never have any doubts about his future as a king (cat. no. 11).

### 2.2.3 The Four Sights

As a young man Siddhartha expressed the wish to see more than just the interior of the palace. He therefore took three trips into the city where he met an old man, a sick man, and a dead man. These encounters had a powerful effect on him, as he had never known pain, illness, sadness, or poverty. He came to understand that human life is full of suffering. Then, on his fourth trip out of the

4 Cf. Klimkeit 1990; Waldschmidt 1982.

5 Cf. Michaels 2011, p. 12.





**Fig 1**  
*The Secret Escape of Prince Siddhartha*, Gandhara, 3rd–4th century, stone, 20 × 25 × 4.5 cm, Museum Rietberg Zurich, inv. no. RVI 28



**Fig. 2**  
*The Buddha Fasts*, Gandhara, 3rd–4th century, stone, 17 × 9.5 × 12 cm, Museum Rietberg Zurich, long-term loan from the Werner Coninx Stiftung, inv. no. CNX 79

palace, he caught sight of a monk who was begging and who possessed nothing but a patched robe and a beggar's bowl. He nevertheless appeared to be happy and contented. This made a great impression on Siddhartha (cat. no. 13).

**2.2.4 The Great Departure**

The Four Sights led Siddhartha to ask about the origins of illness, old age, and death. He decided that he wanted to find the answers to these questions, and he wanted to become a monk. His family did not want him to go, so he left the palace secretly in the night (Fig. 1). According to legend, heavenly beings lifted up his horse's hooves so they would not make a sound and no one would waken. Siddhartha gave up everything he owned, dressed himself in a simple garment, and surrendered himself to the solitude of the forest. He lived for a time as an ascetic and chastened his body until he became emaciated (Fig. 2). These torments, however, got him nowhere, and

Siddhartha realised that it is only possible to find release from the sufferings of life when the body and the mind are in harmony.

**2.2.5 The Long Years of Practice**

Siddhartha devoted himself day and night to meditation. He understood that nothing in the world is eternal or permanent, and that whatever comes into existence will also cease to exist. Nothing can be owned or preserved, whether it be objects, human beings, or pleasant situations. But because humans long for these things and do not want to give them up, they inevitably suffer. Siddhartha thus came to see that suffering is caused by cravings and desires and that it is only by ceasing to desire anything that one can be freed from suffering.

**2.2.6 The Buddha is Awakened to Supreme Wisdom**

Siddhartha tried to bring this awareness to his body and mind. One day, after exercising and meditating for a long





**Fig. 3**  
*Parinirvana*, China, Qing dynasty, 18th century, gilded copper alloy, 11.7 × 7.5 × 5.7 cm, Museum Rietberg Zurich, long-term loan of the Berti Aschmann Stiftung, inv. no. BA 17

time, he had almost reached his goal when Mara, the embodiment of ignorance, delusion, and false notions, tried to break his concentration and prevent him from achieving awakening. First, he tempted Siddhartha with wealth. But Siddhartha had given up all possessions and wished for nothing, so he had no interest in wealth. Mara then sent his three beautiful daughters to seduce the young man. But this, too, failed. Then Mara sent his demon army to attack him. But Siddhartha was aware of the impermanence of the body, which in the cycle of all things exists for only a short time, so even the demon army did not frighten him. It was shortly thereafter that he attained awakening and became the “Buddha”. As a sign of victory over Mara, he touched the ground with the tips of his fingers to summon the Earth goddess as a witness.

### 2.2.7 The Teaching Years

The Buddha, “the awakened one”, then began to share his knowledge with other people. He travelled the land.

Disciples, both male and female, gathered around him and he shared his teachings with them. Some of his followers also left their homes and became monks or nuns. Others continued to live a secular life and supported the Buddha and his followers with alms and gifts.

### 2.2.8 The Buddha Attains “Complete Extinction”

The Buddha died at the age of 80. For him physical death meant he was able to achieve the highest goal: *parinirvana*, or complete extinction. This meant he was forever liberated from the endless cycle of birth and death and from all human suffering (Fig. 3). While *nirvana* can be reached during one’s lifetime, *parinirvana* is only attained after death, as the ultimate level.

His body was cremated and his ashes were divided among his followers (cat. no. 19), who enshrined them in a tomb, or “stupa”. The stupa then became a symbol for the Buddha, the awakened teacher, as well as his teachings and the ultimate wisdom (cat. nos. 20 and 21).

### 3. THE BUDDHA'S TEACHINGS

#### 3.1 The Main Ideas of Buddhism

The Buddha's life story elucidates some of the basic ideas of Buddhism. Of central importance is the idea of impermanence. All things come into being from certain causes; they then change and pass away again. Coming into being, changing, and passing away are in turn causes for the coming into being of other things. This teaching, known as dependent origination (Skt. *pratityasamutpada*), was already expressed in the earliest Buddhist texts. From the second century onwards it was articulated with the words *ye dharma hetu*, a phrase that appears on countless clay tablets, miniature stupas, statues, and images in South and Southeast Asia and in the Himalayas.<sup>6</sup> According to tradition, in the very first sermon he gave the Buddha summed up his teaching in the Four Noble Truths. The first truth is that all life is suffering. The second truth names the causes of suffering, which are hate, cravings, and ignorance; these bind all creatures to the cycle of rebirth. The third truth offers the hope of a release from suffering, and the fourth truth marks the way to escape suffering: the Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path sets out eight rules that guide a person's thoughts, actions, and religious practice. They are: right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.<sup>7</sup>

#### 3.2 The Emergence of Different Branches of Buddhism

Students of the Buddha soon formed different opinions as to what actions and religious practices would lead them to their goal. In particular, the role of monks and the austereness of their discipline were the subject of much debate. Different approaches led to the formation of different schools, and in the first century CE, Buddhism split into two main branches: the Theravada tradition and the Mahayana tradition. The Theravada tradition held that one had to be a monk in order to attain the supreme wisdom and saw the Buddha as a teacher and role model. This tradition spread primarily

through Sri Lanka and into Southeast Asia and gained influence there.

The Mahayana tradition offered new paths to achieve awakening: they considered that awakening is available to all humans, even lay people, and that they are aided by bodhisattvas. A bodhisattva is an "awakened being" who has attained supreme wisdom but who delays his own entrance into *nirvana* in order to help and stand by other beings amidst the troubles of worldly existence.<sup>8</sup> The bodhisattva is characterised by compassion and promises support in any situation in life. This new ideal shifts the emphasis towards the lay followers of Buddhism, who can rely on the compassionate help of the bodhisattvas. The shift occurred hand in hand with the idea that all creatures are endowed with Buddha-nature and carry the seed of Buddhahood inside them. Mahayana Buddhists view the Buddha himself not as a human being but as the embodiment of supreme and perfect wisdom, which has no form and therefore cannot be visualised. This led to the notion of "cosmic" or "transcendent" buddhas that manifest certain aspects of this principle of supreme wisdom. These purely conceptual, ethereal buddhas can be depicted in their "emanation body" (cat. nos. 36, 37, and 40). The Mahayana tradition spread through northern India and across Central Asia into East Asia, where it led to the formation of a considerable number of schools that are centred on different concepts and practices.

The third major Buddhist tradition is Vajrayana, the "Diamond Vehicle". It developed out of the Mahayana tradition in the sixth and seventh centuries in northern India. Vajrayana Buddhists adopted the ritual practices and secret esoteric teachings of the Indian religious movement known as Tantrism. It is characterized by intricate rituals that involve the body, mind, and emotions. In its imagery, it encompasses a multitude of deities who manifest certain religious or philosophical concepts and serve as aids on the path to awakening. Vajrayana had a formative influence on religious life primarily in Tibet and in the neighbouring Himalayan lands, from where it then spread into Mongolia. It is still prevalent in these religions, but Vajrayana schools can also be found today in Japan.

6 Cf. Boucher 1991, pp. 1–27; Strauch 2000.

7 Cf. Mylius 1988; Glasenapp 1994; Mehlig 1982; Conze (ed.) 1967.

8 Williams 2017, pp. 109–110.



The various schools or communities of interpretation can differ considerably in their religious practices and orientation. What they nevertheless have in common is that they all consider their teachings to be interpretations of the word of the Buddha.<sup>9</sup> The source of this diversity is the notion that the highest truth lies beyond the reach of conceptual thought and so cannot be expressed in words. Everything the Buddha taught is therefore understood as a means to an end; a guidepost. Each individual has to make that last step on the path to enlightenment on his or her own. That is why there is no authority in Buddhism who decides whether any teaching is correct or incorrect. Even very early on in the transmission it was told that the Buddha refused to name one of his students to succeed him in the role of teacher and that he exhorted his followers to find their own path. Differing opinions on the Buddhist teachings were not viewed in hostile terms, and it was even common for monks and nuns of different schools to live together in one monastery.<sup>10</sup> This does not mean, however, that conflicts did not arise between the various schools and monasteries. In most cases, they were motivated by a struggle for power and political influence.

### 3.3 The Textual Transmission

For centuries the Buddhist teachings were transmitted orally. It was not until around the first century BCE that they were recorded in writing. The reciting and memorising of the written teachings continued to be common practices, and even today remain important religious exercises.<sup>11</sup> With the spread of different schools of Buddhism, the number of Buddhist writings also grew, and these were divided into “Three Baskets” (*Tripitaka*): *sutras*, the Buddhist teachings themselves; *vinayas*, the rules of monastic life for monks and nuns; and *abhidhamma*, analysis and commentary by teachers and masters. The sutras are all formulated as sermons by the Buddha, even though many of them were composed several centuries after the Buddha’s death and expound concepts that were developed in a later stage of Buddhism. Presented as the words of the Buddha, the sutras lay claim to a certain authenticity and authority.

The oldest surviving collection of Buddhist texts is known as the Pali Canon, a group of Theravada scriptures in the Pali language that was probably set down in writing in the fourth and fifth centuries in Sri Lanka. Pali became the language of Theravada Buddhism and it continues to be used in Buddhist rituals to the present day, not just in Sri Lanka but throughout Southeast Asia.

The Mahayana texts were recorded in writing in northern India, mostly in Sanskrit. Only a small number of these texts have survived to the present day in their original versions. Many have been preserved in Chinese or Tibetan translations that date back to the second century in China and the eighth century in Tibet. As a result, the most comprehensive collections of Buddhist writings today are found in the Chinese and Tibetan languages.

## 4. BUDDHIST ART

### 4.1 The Beginnings of Buddhist Art

The Buddha’s disciples and the first Buddhist monks and nuns were usually itinerant and only came together in monastic communities during the rainy season. Since they owned nothing but a robe and a beggar’s bowl, it is likely that there were no devotional images in this early period. It is impossible to say whether and in what way the Buddha was venerated at that time.

The oldest known objects of ritual veneration are stupas (cat. nos. 20, 21, and 22): monuments that contain the Buddha’s ashes or other relics associated with the Buddha. According to tradition, after his cremation the Buddha’s ashes were divided among his followers and then enshrined in stupas. These burial mounds were then continuously rebuilt. The most important stupas, like the first monasteries and temple structures, date from the reign of the powerful Emperor Ashoka (3rd century BCE). The first stupas took the form of undecorated clay mounds or brick structures, but over time they increasingly came to be ornamented with scenes in relief. Around this same time, the first Buddhist

9 Dalai Lama 1995.

10 Cf. Michaels 2011, p. 101.

11 Dachs – Stephan (eds.) 2005.

structures were built of stone, and chambers with lavish figural decorations were carved into rock walls.

To this day, throughout the Buddhist world, stupas represent the presence of the Buddha. They have been constructed in various materials and sizes – from huge monuments to miniature shrines.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4.2 The Origin of the Buddha's Image

It is remarkable that during the earliest stage of Buddhism in India there were no representations of the Buddha in human form.<sup>13</sup> Narrative reliefs instead used symbols to highlight events in the Buddha's life story. The Bodhi tree, for example, symbolises the Buddha's awakening, the wheel his teachings, and footprints the presence of the Buddha as a revered teacher in this world.

The first figural representations of the Buddha emerged in the first century CE in both Mathura, located south of Delhi, and the Gandhara region, where there was an intersection of influences from India, the Near East, and the Mediterranean. The Gandharan type of Buddha spread to Central and East Asia, while the Mathuran type continued to develop in the art of the Gupta Empire (ca 320–550 CE) and determined the appearance of early images of the Buddha in Southeast Asia. From the first through the third centuries, it seems, key scenes from the Buddha's life became part of the standard repertoire of relief decorations applied to temple and monastery buildings in the Kushan Empire in Gandhara (cat. nos. 11, 12, and 14).<sup>14</sup> These scenes feature, for example, in the reliefs and wall paintings found in the early cave temples, such as Ajanta in central India (2nd–7th century), Kizil on the northern Silk Road in what is now the Chinese province of Xinjiang (3rd–8th century), and Dunhuang in the Chinese province of Gansu (4th–12th century). They appeared throughout the Buddhist world in all manner of media and materials: from reliefs, steles (cat. no. 18), and sculptures to impressive narrative scrolls (cat. nos. 1 and 9), popular prints, detailed *thangkas*, simple figures (cat. nos. 13 and 19), and votive tablets stamped in clay.

These first Buddha figures already followed fixed rules. Buddhist writings enumerate 32 major and 80 minor

characteristics (Skt. *lakshana*) that describe the Buddha.

The main features of the Buddha established in art are the protuberance on the top of his head (Skt. *ushnisha*), the long earlobes, the curly hair, the circular dot on the forehead (Skt. *urna*) – described as a curled strand of hair or an emanation of light – three folds on the neck, and sometimes also webbing between the fingers. The Buddha is always depicted wearing the simple garment of a monk and without jewelry. Moreover, he is said to possess a body of ideal beauty. Because standards of beauty differ considerably from place to place and from one era to another, the Buddha may be depicted as slim or stout, with an oval face or a long face, with a short nose or a long nose, and so forth. The style of his garment may likewise reflect local traditions.

Representations of the Buddha depict him standing, walking, seated, or lying down. The positions of his hands correspond to symbolic gestures (Skt. *mudra*) that refer to certain events in the Buddha's life and thus also to certain religious ideas. The historical Buddha, for example, is often depicted with his legs crossed in the lotus position, while his left hand rests palm up in his lap and the tips of the fingers on his right point to the ground. These two gestures, the gesture of meditation (Skt. *dhyana-mudra*) and the gesture of touching the earth (Skt. *bhumisparsha-mudra*), refer to the practise of contemplation while also capturing the moment of the Buddha's awakening, when he called the Earth goddess as a witness to his victory over Mara.

#### 4.3 The Diverse Functions of Buddhist Works of Art

Every religious work of art – no matter how much aesthetic pleasure it offers – has a function. Each has been produced for a particular purpose and plays a role in the cult as well as in religious life. Many are instrumental in helping practitioners attain spiritual goals.

In the monastic context, pictorial works serve as meditation aids. They guide the mind in the process of concentration. The practitioner envisions the image's symbolic content and identifies with aspects of the deity that is portrayed in order to create a holy image in his own mind. This practice is known as visualisation.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Behrendt 2019; Plaeschke 1971; Seitz 2006; Uhlig 1979.

<sup>13</sup> Krishan 1996.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Chandra – Lohia 2010.



Statues and images are venerated in temples and household shrines. Because the Buddha, bodhisattvas, and other sacred figures in Buddhism are not considered to be material but representatives of an idea, they can manifest in different forms. Even an image can be considered one such manifestation. Images and sculptures are infused with “life” in different ways. All Buddhist devotional images are ceremonially consecrated upon completion and only then does the given piece of stone, wood, or other material become a functional sacred object. Some figures contain within their hollow centres smaller sculptures, images, or texts considered to express the essence of the teachings. A few sculptures are even stuffed with replicas of internal organs sewn from fabric to make them come “alive”.

As objects of veneration, sacred images guide the faithful on the right path. By turning to the Buddha, or another sacred figure, with honesty and respect and setting aside all negative thoughts and feelings, the faithful attain the correct state of mind. In addition, by offering sacrifices the faithful can earn merit, which will influence their next cycle of life.

The donation of sculptures and images, like the transcribing or reciting of sutras or the donation of offerings to a monastery, is considered a meritorious act. This kind of merit can help the donor atone for past misdeeds and achieve rebirth into better circumstances. In China and Japan especially we find a great number of statues and images with inscriptions that record the name of the donor and his or her wish to be reborn into a positive realm of existence (cat. no. 24). Donors often express the wish to transfer their merit to another person, usually to their deceased parents, in an effort to save them from rebirth in a negative realm.

Buddhist works of art also served a secular function. Because they were usually created for temples and monasteries and exhibited publicly, they demonstrated the social status of the donor. An accompanying inscription preserved the donor’s name for posterity. The size or magnificence of the donated object could thus bring the donor great prestige.

Large donations often had a political motivation behind them. Monumental works of art, temple buildings, or cave sanctuaries could be used to glorify a ruler or strengthen

political power. Emperor Ashoka portrayed himself as a *chakravartin*, an ideal Buddhist ruler, and many later regents in various parts of Asia adopted this persona as a tool to legitimise their power. Even in lands where Buddhism was one of several religions, rulers made use of it to achieve political aims. Emperor Taizong of the Tang dynasty (who ruled from 626 to 649), for example, had Buddhist temples erected at the sites of his great military victories, where ceremonies were regularly conducted for the benefit of the state.

## 5. A LOOK INTO THE FUTURE: BUDDHISM IN A MUSEUM

By presenting a wide range of Buddhist artworks from across Asia and from different eras, *The Buddha Up Close* seeks to illuminate for visitors the complex and multifaceted world of Buddhism.

As we were designing the exhibition *Next Stop Nirvana* for the Museum Rietberg in Zurich, we asked ourselves what actually happens when people look at and reflect on these objects. What we see in the object, how it speaks to us, and how we respond depends on multiple factors. During their “lifetime” these objects do not possess just one specific meaning or function; their meaning and function transform depending on the observer and the context. What are the consequences of putting sacred religious objects in a museum of art? How should we communicate the multiple, simultaneous, and interwoven meanings and functions of those objects? What consideration should be given to the various interests and expectations of the visitors? How do the space and the presentation affect the viewer’s response? How does the way the curators discuss the objects affect the visitor? These were the key questions that we asked ourselves and that we continue to wrestle with on the occasion of the exhibition in Prague!

We wish all the visitors a pleasant experience as they immerse themselves in the world of Buddhism. There are many ways to encounter Buddhism and Buddhist art. We hope that you, too, find your own personal approach.