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**"Understanding Buddhism and Buddhist Art"**  
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Siddhartha, the prince who was to become the Buddha, was born into the royal family of Kapilavastu, a small kingdom in the Himalayan foothills. His was a divine conception and a miraculous birth, at which sages predicted that he would become a universal conqueror, either of the physical world or of men's minds. It was the latter conquest that came to pass. Giving up the pleasures of the palace to seek the true purpose of life, Siddhartha first tried the path of severe asceticism, only to abandon it after six years as a futile exercise. He then sat down in yogic meditation beneath a banyan tree until he achieved enlightenment. He was known thenceforth as the Buddha, or "Enlightened One."

His is the Middle Path, rejecting both luxury and asceticism. Buddhism proposes a life of good thoughts, good intentions, and straight living, all with the ultimate aim of achieving *nirvana*, release from earthly existence. For most beings, *nirvana* lies in the distant future, because Buddhism, like other faiths of India, believes in a cycle of rebirth. Humans are born many times on earth, each time with the opportunity to perfect themselves further. And it is their own *karma* -- the sum total of deeds, good and bad -- that determines the circumstances of a future birth. The Buddha spent the remaining forty years of his life preaching his faith and making vast numbers of converts. When he died, his body was cremated, as was customary in India.

The cremated relics of the Buddha were divided into several portions and placed in relic caskets that were interred within large hemispherical mounds known as *stupas*. Such *stupas* constitute the central monument of Buddhist monastic complexes. They attract pilgrims from far and wide who come to experience the unseen presence of the Buddha. *Stupas* are enclosed by a railing that provides a path for ritual circumambulation. The sacred area is entered through gateways at the four cardinal points.

In the first century B.C. India's artists, who had worked in the perishable media of brick, wood, thatch, and bamboo, adopted stone on a very wide scale. Stone railings and gateways, covered with relief sculptures, were added to *stupas*. Favorite themes were events from the historic life of the Buddha, as well as from his previous lives which were believed to number 550. The latter tales are called *jatakas* and often include popular legends adapted to Buddhist teachings. In the earliest Buddhist art of India, the Buddha was not represented in human form. His presence was indicated instead by a sign, such as a pair of footprints, an empty seat, or an empty space beneath a parasol.

In the first century C.E. the human image of the Buddha came to dominate the artistic scene, and one of the first sites at which this occurred was along India's northwestern frontier. In the area known as Gandhara, artistic elements from the Hellenistic world combined with the symbolism needed to express Indian Buddhism to create a unique style. Youthful Buddhas with hair arranged in wavy curls resemble Roman statues of Apollo; the monastic robe covering both shoulders is arranged in heavy classical folds, reminiscent of a Roman toga. There are also many representations of Siddhartha as a princely bejeweled figure prior to his renunciation of palace life. Buddhism evolved the concept of a Buddha of the Future, Maitreya, depicted in art both as a Buddha clad in a monastic robe and as a princely *bodhisattva* before enlightenment (figure 1). Gandharan artists made use of both stone and stucco to produce such images, which were placed in niche like shrines around the *stupa* of a monastery.



Figure 1 (Left): *Standing Bodhisattva Maitreya*. Pakistan (ancient region of Gandhara), Kushan period, ca. late 2nd-early 3rd century. Gray schist. Purchase, Lita Annenberg Hazen Charitable Trust Gift, 1991 (1991.75)



Contemporaneously, the Kushan-period artists in Mathura, India, produced a different image of the Buddha. His body was expanded by sacred breath (*prana*), and his clinging monastic robe was draped to leave the right shoulder bare.

A third influential Buddha type evolved in Andhra Pradesh, in South India, where images of substantial proportions, with serious, unsmiling faces, were clad in robes that created a heavy swag at the hem and revealed the left shoulder. These southern sites provided artistic inspiration for the Buddhist island of Sri Lanka, off the southern tip of India, and Sri Lankan monks regularly visited the area. A number of statues in this style have been found as well throughout Southeast Asia.

Figure 2 (and cover): *Standing Buddha*. India (Mathura), Gupta period, 5th Century. Mottled red sandstone. Purchase, Enid A. Haupt Gift, 1979.

The succeeding Gupta period, from the fourth to the sixth century C.E., in North India, sometimes referred to as a Golden Age, witnessed the creation of an "ideal image" of the Buddha (figure 2). This was achieved by combining selected traits from the Gandharan region with the sensuous form created by Mathura artists.

Gupta Buddhas have their hair arranged in tiny individual curls, and the robes have a network of strings to suggest drapery folds (as at Mathura) or are transparent sheaths (as at Sarnath). With their downward glance and spiritual aura, Gupta Buddhas became the model for future generations of artists, whether in post-Gupta and Pala India or in Nepal, Thailand, and Indonesia. Gupta metal images of the Buddha were also taken by pilgrims along the Silk Route into China.

Over the following centuries there emerged a new form of Buddhism, which involved an expanded pantheon and more elaborate rituals. This later Buddhism introduced the concept of heavenly *bodhisattvas* as well as goddesses, of whom the most popular was Tara. In Nepal and Tibet, where exquisite metal images and paintings were produced, an entire set of new divinities was created and portrayed in both sculpture and painted scrolls (figure 3). Ferocious deities were introduced in the role of protectors of Buddhism and its believers. Images of a more esoteric nature, depicting god and goddess in embrace, were produced to demonstrate the metaphysical concept that salvation resulted from the union of wisdom (female) and compassion (male). Buddhism had traveled a long way from its simple beginnings. -Vidya Dehejia **The Metropolitan Museum of Art**



Figure 3 (left): *The Buddha Amoghasiddhi Attended by Bodhisattvas*. Tibet, Purchase, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Philanthropic Fund Gift, 1991 (1991.74)

## Buddhist Deities

The Buddha is usually portrayed wearing a monastic robe draped so as to cover both shoulders or to leave the right shoulder bare. The Buddha is said to have had thirty-two marks of superhuman perfection. The *ushnisha*, a cranial bump that signifies his divine knowledge, was transformed by artists into a hair knot, while the *urna*, a tuft of hair between the eyebrows, was depicted as rounded mark. Elongated earlobes, indicating divine or elevated status, are given not only to the Buddha but also to all Hindu and Jain deities and to saintly figures. Images of the Jain *tirthankaras* (Jinas) are similar to the Buddha; however, they have a *shrivatsa* emblem on the chest, are often unclothed and without the *ushnisha* or *urna* (**figure 8**).

By the first century C.E., a new category of deity was introduced—a series of elevated beings known as *bodhisattvas*. They were on the threshold of Buddhahood but chose to remain in this world in order to help all beings toward salvation. *Bodhisattvas* became exceedingly important in the Buddhism of the Himalayan regions of Kashmir, Nepal, and Tibet and in the art of Southeast Asia. Each is recognized by his identifying attributes. Thus Avalokiteshvara (the *bodhisattva* of Infinite Compassion) carries a lotus and has a small Buddha image adorning his crown (**figure 9**), and the *bodhisattva* Maitreya (the Buddha of the Future) carries a water vessel and has a *stupa* in his crown. Goddesses, too, were introduced into this later Buddhism, and Tara, who holds a lotus, is one of the most deeply venerated.



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

Himalayan Buddhism, especially that of Tibet, introduced some unique imagery. Ferocious deities are protectors of the Buddhist faith and of devout Buddhist believers. Esoteric images in embrace are known as *Yab-Yum*, or "Father-Mother." They represent the union of wisdom (female) and compassion (male), which results in supreme wisdom leading to salvation. Also popular in the medium of painting are *mandalas* intended for meditation; these esoteric diagrams of the cosmos center around a deity upon whom the devotee has chosen to meditate. -*Vidya Dehejia*