

## Symbolism in Asian Statues of the Buddha

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## ‡ SYMBOLISM IN ASIAN STATUES OF THE BUDDHA ‡

Art may have either a literal or a symbolic function; it may depict real people and places, or deified persons who are represented symbolically. Iconography—the correlation between representational characteristics and otherworldly concepts—is like a code. When the semiotics of the art is studied, deeper meaning can be excavated. Mircea Eliade notes with insight, “The iconography of the Buddha...has been transported from his human condition”<sup>1</sup> and into his spiritual hypostasis.

In Asian statues of the Buddha, each part of the statue is highly symbolic and contains physical articulations of religious ideals. In the creation of such statues, the artist is cognizant of the deeply metaphorical nuances she has created. These sculptures are done with the intention that devotees will enhance their understanding of enlightenment through the viewing and internalizing the meaning of the Buddha.

In surveying the diverse statues of the Buddha from across Asia, certain repetitious themes appear, such as the ways in which the head and parts of the head, the hands in their *mudras*, the legs of the Buddha—be it seated or standing—and the accouterments that surround the Enlightened One are created to serve a heuristic function for the devotee. Since iconography is a universal language, the artistic depictions of statues of the Buddha translate across nation and dialect. The great consistency allows meaning to be centralized to the unchangeable location of the statue itself, instead of contextualized to the country of origin or display. Once these aspects of Buddhist art are understood, additional insight into the account of Siddhartha and the way of the Buddha can be more readily assimilated into Buddhist practice.

### **Envisioning the Absolute: the Head and Face**

The head of the Enlightened One contains many aspects that are symbolic of the nature and actions of the Buddha. In such statues, although the head contains ordinary human aspects such as the

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<sup>1</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 61, 63.

hair, eyes, and ears, the deeper meaning bursts forth from statues to reveal the narrative of Siddhartha Gautama as superficial perceptions give way to a rich spiritual tradition. Within the artistic medium of the statue, the hair, *bindu*, and ears all function on a realistic and a stylistic-representational level.

Beginning visually at the pinnacle of a Buddha statue, one will observe the hair. Although this natural part of the body is unassuming, the hair in statues of the Buddha reveals the stage of the quest for enlightenment: long hair is related to the imperial man Siddhartha, and short hair corresponds to the renunciation of wealth and decadence. But there are varieties within these two hairstyles as well. The *urna* and the curls of the Buddha also have meaning in iconography.

The story of the princely Siddhartha begins in the palace, with a young man sheltered from the tribulations of the world. As a standard aesthetic, long hair, or *ushnisha*, would be the style the adolescent prince would have worn fastened on top of his head. This topknot, which is etymologically related to the word “turban,” recalls the embryonic stages of Buddha’s quest for enlightenment whereby he was still trapped in a royal and unenlightened lifestyle [see Figure 1].<sup>2</sup> The hair that was a part of the Buddha for the duration of his life was characteristic of decadence and a painless existence. Yet the long princely hair is not the only way one might recognize the stately Buddha.

Perhaps foreshadowing the imminent enlightenment, the *urna*—one single curl—on the forehead is used in conjunction with the hair atop the head to add the aspect of super-intelligence.<sup>3</sup> The *urna* represents wisdom to the devotee and confirms that the Four Noble Truths and the Eight Fold Path could only be realized by one who exudes a supernatural wisdom. With the *maha-abhiniskramana*, or great departure from his father’s palace, the *ushnisha* and *urna* disappear, just as decadence is left behind and asceticism calls to the young prince.

Enthralled by the ascetic life and dismayed by the suffering of the world beyond his regal gates, Siddhartha flees from the security of the palace and determines to follow a life of deprivation in

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<sup>2</sup> Albert C. Moore, *Iconography of Religions: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1997), 150.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

aspirations of achieving *moksha* or liberation from *samsara*. The first step in this new direction was to chop off his handsome, long locks of hair.<sup>4</sup> The shearing of this symbol of power was a drastic divorce from a life of delicacy to an existence of difficult deprivation and meditation.

Legend states that after the Buddha decided to lop off his mane with a sword, the hair curled tightly around his head at two fingers breadth in length; it stayed that way permanently, along with his equal length beard. It is said he never had to trim his hair or beard again.<sup>5</sup> Although most statues of the Buddha do not picture him with a beard, the short, curly hair is readily identifiable [see Figure 2] and the peppercorn hairstyle is always indicative of the Buddha after his departure. Whereas the long hair on top of the Buddha's head depicts the moments prior to his sojourn into enlightenment, his short hair represents his foray into asceticism. In addition to hair, features of the faces of the Buddha in Asian statues also uncover symbolism.

As the story of the quest for enlightenment unfurls, devotees learn that neither the life of luxury nor the mendicant lifestyle would engender enlightenment. Rather, the Middle Way was the true path to Nirvana. The meditation that was necessary for this realization manifest in the statues of the Buddha through accessories of the Buddha's face. The *bindu* on his forehead and his elongated ears both have distinct roles in the representational qualities of the Buddha.

A teardrop shaped bump in the middle of the forehead is one of the most recognizable features of Buddhist statues [see Figures 2 and 4]. The *bindu* is placed where the third eye is, in the center of the forehead, symmetrically above the actual eyes. When the *bindu* is positioned on the Buddha, it demonstrates the Absolute being imagined by the dot or as a vanishing point. The meditative visualizing of the Absolute—which maintains and sustains the material world—cannot actually be depicted because it is beyond time and space. The Absolute must only be contemplated and its invisibility considered. To add a *bindu* to the face of the Buddha is to imply intense deliberation on the

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<sup>4</sup> Heinrick Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* (Washington D.C.: Bollinger Foundation, 1946), 161.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

unfathomable.<sup>6</sup> This utilization of a small artistic addition to sculptures of the Buddha compounds the symbolism in a drastic way by adding spiritual depth.

Another striking formation of sculptures of the Buddha is the unnaturally long and droopy ears [see Figure 1]. The ears, which were stretched, represent the nobility of the Buddha before he avowed to find the passageway to enlightenment. Gautama's princely circumstance were conducive to affluence; with this wealth came jewels, which, when worn in the ears as earrings, stretched the lobes of the ears out and down because of their weight.<sup>7</sup> The utterly physical, yet enormously symbolic ears on the Buddha statues—recognizable by their protracted, hanging lobes—reveals a deeply human truth: people may reinvent themselves into compassionate beings, yet they remain tied to their past. Even as the path to Nirvana is undertaken, some small visage of the former life may remain but does not have to define Being.

Depicting the Buddha with protracted earlobes signifies the hopes of transformation. The Buddha was a prince with great prosperity who lived a life of opulence, without enlightenment. Once he had forsaken his former life, including the accessories he would have been accustomed to in and on his body, and began meditating unto enlightenment, his corporeal existence still bore the marks of a life lived in darkness—the ears that had been stretched by the jewels.

Contained within the sculpted head of the Buddha are many indications of the ontological morphology of one man who achieved the highest state. Through the various stages of his hair and the additions to his face and ears, a disciple could take solace in an objective achieved and conjecture an appropriate approach to following the Buddha. In the same way, the arms, hands, and fingers of the Buddhist statues are important for elucidation of the Buddha's life and taught principles. Signs of the body and arms are semiotic: when a certain motion is made, a corresponding emotion or idea is evoked.

### **Gestures of Compassion: the Hands**

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>7</sup> Moore, *Iconography of Religions*, 150.

Because the Buddha remained on earth as a Bodhisattva, he is limited to a human body. Yet because of his enlightened status, he is also beyond mere human posing. In Asian statues of the Buddha, the hands signify a higher spiritual meaning. Among the various ways to depict the hands of the Buddha, the use of *mudras* contextualizes the Buddha and his teachings. “The enormously formalized and cultivated language of gesture, in which the worshipper might read not only the special powers and attributes of the god, but also the particular ecstatic mood that the deity personified” is the role of *mudras* in statues of the Buddha.<sup>8</sup> These *mudras* are a development of the meditative Buddha in his quest for enlightenment and the responsibility that came with his amassed insight. While there are variations on the hand *mudras*, six basic types dominate artistic depictions of the Buddha.

The *Dhyana-mudra* depicts concentration in yogic meditation, where the hands are positioned palms up, with one hand inside the other, so the fingers overlap and the thumbs are just touching. The hands are resting on the lap. This arrangement signifies not only the way the Siddhartha was situated when he was meditating for many days, it is also a position still used by yogis and those meditating. The thumbs circulate energy as a closed system and the practitioner is able to focus on non-attachment with their hands in a resting pose.

Once this meditation has achieved enlightenment, the *Bhuumisparsha-mudra* is used, with the right hand hanging over the right knee, touching the ground [see Figures 1 and 2]. The hand touches the ground in attestation of the attainment of Nirvana. After the long meditation, Gautama beckoned the earth as a witness to his awesome achievement by touching the firmament with his hand (*Bhuumisparsha-mudra*) from the position of meditation he was seated in.<sup>9</sup> When this gesture is recreated in iconography, it confirms the accomplishment of the Buddha and possibility for those seeking the release of *samsara*.

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<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Rowland, *The Art and Architecture of India* (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1967), 197.

<sup>9</sup> Moore, *Iconography of Religions*, 150-151.

Upon achieving enlightenment, the Buddha may then teach the *Dharma*, or eternal law. The *Dharmachakra-mudra* shows the Buddha turning the wheel of the *Dharma*. His fingers imitate a circle and his forefinger and thumb connect in an enclosure on both hands. These two wheels touch at the intersection of all four nails on the four fingers emulating the infinite line that has no beginning and no end: the circle. The hands are raised to chest height, with one hand pointing up while the other, with palm up, is parallel to the ground. In this manner, it appears as if a wheel is turning, giving the illusion of continuity. The noble teacher shares his insight with his followers and beckons them to come and learn; this gesture has come to stand for the first preaching at Sarnath.<sup>10</sup>

After the laws are taught, the Buddha stands and invites devotees to learn the Four Noble Truths. A very important gesture for the intellectualization of Buddha's quest is the *Vitarka-mudra*, which has usually the left hand palm towards the audience and fingers pointing skyward, while the other palm is facing the audience, but the fingers are pointing down [see Figure 3]. This *mudra* is symbolic of explaining and expressing *Dharma*. The left hand facing up is a symbol of peace—an open palm that bears no ill intent. The right hand facing down is a motion of bestowal—the *Dharma* can be given to those who seek it. In an almost mirror image positioning, the *Abhaya-mudra*, the right hand is held with the palm towards the audience and the fingers towards the sky while the fingers on the left hand point towards the ground [see Figure 4]. To followers of Buddha, this *mudra* equates to protection, reassurance, and serenity. It is the most common of all the gestures in iconography of the Buddha.<sup>11</sup>

From here, the statues of the Buddha may be placed with both hands emphasizing blessing or both hands emphasizing endowment. If the former is the object of the artist's desires, than both hands will be fashioned facing up, palms towards the audience [see Figure 5]. Other religions, such as Christianity, also depict saints or other religious figures in the same gesture of benediction. When the

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<sup>10</sup> Rowland, *Art and Architecture*, 93.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

intent is of the latter sort and giving is the main emphasis, the *Vara-mudra* will be shown with both hands facing downward and the palms towards the followers.<sup>12</sup> This position is representative of compassionate allowance of favors and fulfillment of vows.

All six of the most commonly observed *mudras* have their own connotations. The range of meanings in Buddhist statues would be seriously diminished if even one *mudra* were not utilized. Although the function of the *mudra* originated in the Hindu tradition and they are apparent in pan-Asian features of Buddhist art, the symbolism of the meditative (*Dhyana*) and teaching (*Dharmachakra*) *mudras* are distinctly Buddhist, demonstrating to the onlooker of the statue an essential aspect of the instructions of the Buddha.<sup>13</sup>

### **Meditation: the Body, Legs, and Feet**

Moving visually from the head to the hands, the devotee, now inspired by such concepts as the Absolute and divine compassion, seeks to understand the orator Buddha. Both the seated and the standing Buddha represent correlative aspects of the mission of the One who remained on earth so others may achieve enlightenment. The seated Gautama is deep in contemplation; thus he has either begun to meditate, or has just achieved enlightenment. The actual phase of his meditation must be determined by other indications of the statues, such as *mudras*. Once enlightenment has been achieved, the Buddha arises and travels to preach the Four Noble Truths to fellow human creatures, indicating a sojourn of kindness. Both the sitting and the standing Buddha have much to disclose to the iconodule.

In the most common statues of the Buddha, he is seen in a seated position—perhaps because seeking enlightenment through meditation was the fulcrum for the Buddhist tradition, and the achievement of Nirvana was attained while seated. When the Buddha is placed in the meditative lotus position, his legs are crossed and both soles of his feet are upturned and revealed. The contemplative posture is an ancient yogic position [see Figures 1 and 2], symbolic of the perfectly trained body and

<sup>12</sup> Moore, *Iconography of Religions*, 150-151.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

breath which enables the contortion of oneself into an uncommon position. In the lotus pose, the back is straight, but not rigid, and the legs are closely locked. The knees and buttocks form a tight triangular base that is much sturdier than if one crossed their legs in the Western fashion. In the lotus position, the body has three contact points; in the Western position, only the buttocks and locked ankles are in contact with the ground. Thus the ancient lotus pose has both physiological and religious components.

Contemplation is the conduit through which the Buddha achieved Nirvana, and it is the position that is still used for meditation. The Buddha, as an example to all, is shown meditating as a guide for the followers. It is interesting to note that although the yogic meditation position is highly symbolic of the achievement of enlightenment, sometimes the statue was carved in this manner for the sake of convenience. For example, in Ceylon statues of the Buddha in the lotus position from the early Singhalese period were often depicted sitting because the granulites did not allow for much fine detailing or spaces that would support a standing Buddha.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, the seated Buddha's significance is not diminished, for it is this position that the Buddha preaches his first sermon.

One will notice that although the legs are piled atop each other, the feet are visible and turned up towards the sky. This too, has meaning. In these vestiges, much can be deduced about the circumstances of the Buddha by looking at the artist's rendition of his feet. The Buddha's feet, both by statue or by a hollow depression in the ground, are important to the Buddhist tradition. In statues where the Buddha is seated in the lotus position, though the feet are exposed, they are not a means of shame even though feet are vehicles of the body and suffer much wear. Indeed, the feet of the Buddha are holy—once he untangles his body and places his feet on the ground, Siddhartha is prepared to begin his preaching.

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<sup>14</sup> Rowland, *Art and Architecture*, 219.

Traveling through countries and liberating the people from hindering notions of attachment caused Buddhism to flourish. In fact, most nations that revere the Enlightened One make claim to the impression of the Buddha's feet, either by a depression or imprint in stone or by aggrandized sculptures of his feet.<sup>15</sup> These markings are kept in shrines and placed next to relics. The synecdoche of the feet and impression that the Buddha has walked and preached in a certain spot is as much a reminder of the goal of enlightenment as an actual statue. In one other depiction of note, when Gautama is standing the bottoms of his feet are concealed [see Figure 4], yet in one slight variation there is the walking Buddha, where one foot is raised from the ground, implying motion.<sup>16</sup> Both the standing and walking Buddha are symbolic to the observer and conjure strong feelings of regard to the devotee.

Chronologically, as the Buddha moves from the long period of seated meditation to the realization of Nirvana, he then takes his place as a Bodhisattva who aids others in the journey to enlightenment. This is done through teaching, traveling, and preaching. It is no surprise, then, that there are many perpendicular statues of the Buddha. Beyond this functional use of immortalizing the migratory Buddha is the deeper reading of lifestyle that may be gleaned from the statues.

One of the most striking differences of the standing Buddha is that the figure and shape of his body are revealed because he is elongated rather than seated. In statues, the form of the Enlightened One is always made with fluidity and is identifiable by "the smoothly round attenuation of body and limbs and in the way that the drapery entirely reveals the form beneath."<sup>17</sup> The drapery, of course, is simple the robe he would have been wearing on his passage to illumination. In typical ascetic style, the right shoulder is often exposed, showing Buddha's commitment to realize enlightenment through forgoing worldly gratification. The minimal raiment that the standing Buddha displays is

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<sup>15</sup> Moore, *Iconography of Religions*, 144.

<sup>16</sup> Simone Gaulier, Robert Jera-Bezard, and Monique Maillard, *Buddhism in Afghanistan and Central Asia*, 2 vol. *Iconography of Religions* XIII, 14 (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 6-7.

<sup>17</sup> Rowland, *Art and Architecture*, 143.

representational of a simple life without the encumbrance of fashion to dictate social status or the need of protection from the elements—the fierce sun, bitter snow, or whipping wind. Also, as clothing may conceal flaws of the body, the well-trained Buddha has nothing to hide as he has been subjugating his body to his will.

When the Buddha is standing, his torso—the center of his body—is often revealed. If the robe only covers his lower extremities, the chest and waist are revealed and the itinerant is depicted as lean and athletic. The wiry frame would be typical of one who, giving up comforts like excess food, found himself delicately formed and lithe. Often the body will be shown tilted from the hips, implying action.<sup>18</sup> The energetic motion of the Buddha with the torso moving on the axis of the hips may depict the motion of preaching—also a lively activity.

The position of the body—seated or standing—along with the feet of the Buddha have great representational meaning, especially when viewed in conjunction with the head, face, and hands of Siddhartha. Yet symbolism in Asian statues of the Buddha is not limited to his physical body. Other creatures, flora, and ornamentation accompany the Buddha. These also reveal important stories and lessons from the life of Gautama.

### **The Perfect Buddha Mind: Accouterments**

The Buddha taken as a whole is sublime, yet the particular aspects of the Buddhist statues such as head, arms, and legs are likewise illustrative to the iconographer. Garnishes surrounding the Buddha—like the flora, fauna, and accessories incorporated into sculptures of the Buddha such as the snake, lotus, halo, and Bodhi tree—are widely recognizable and highly figurative in Buddhist statues. These additions to Buddhist statues reveal a further dimension to the story of the prince Siddhartha, his journey to enlightenment, and the path to Nirvana. Without the addition of the aforementioned

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

accoutrements to the statues of the Buddha, the story of Gautama would not be as full and the symbolism not as rich.

Otherworldly apparitions may appear in various forms, but when serpents are depicted in Buddhist art they represent the life-force completing the cycle of life, i.e. birth, death, and rebirth. A snake sheds its skin in a type of death, yet remains the same snake. When they slither out of their old body, they emerge reborn, a new being, yet with a vestige of the old. When the serpent image is harmonized with the Buddha, the snake emerges as the protector, guardian, and defender as well as the being of renovation. The crux of Buddhism lies in the enlightenment. Had the Buddha not attained this perfection, there would be no Buddhism; had supernatural forces not been watching over Gautama, the path to illumination may never have been found.

Legend tells that prior to the Buddha's enlightenment, he went through a series of meditations, each a week long and under a different tree. While under the third tree, he came upon the abode of the serpent king Muchalinda [see Figure 6]. The benevolent snake-ruler perceived that once Gautama had entered a state of blissful ecstasy, a squall approached and the Enlightened One was in peril. In response, the protective serpent king coiled himself around the Buddha seven times. Upon the cessation of the storm, Muchalinda unwound himself and became a youth.<sup>19</sup> Had it not been for the refuge of the snake, the Enlightened One may have been injured or fallen ill; therefore Muchalinda became immortalized in Buddhist art as a protector. In addition to the snake, the tree appears as an aspect of the natural world which has emerged in Asian statues of the Buddha. Like the snake, the tree is more than what it appears to be.

Of all the accessories the Buddha is depicted with, perhaps the Bodhi tree is the most significant. The Bodhi tree has a special place in the corpus of Buddhist imagery, as it is the location where the Buddha was sitting upon achieving his enlightenment, and it represents both his mental

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<sup>19</sup> Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols*, 67.

state and his enlightened mind.<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that the ordinary tree would have no mystical representation alone, but when placed within the context of Buddhist art, it becomes an indicator of the divine place in which the Buddha had his moment that spawned enlightenment.

Yet the mere appearance of the Bodhi tree is not suggestive of the Buddha in a post-enlightened state if the other symbolic aspects of the statues do not also point to the attainment of Nirvana. That is, the *mudras* are the definitive declaration on the station to the path of enlightenment of the Buddha—either before, during, or following his illumination. Whereas a Bodhi tree with a long haired Buddha in the meditative posture denotes the quest for illumination, the tree with the Buddha beckoning the earth as witness conveys the moment of enlightenment, and the Bodhi with the Buddha in the preaching gesture (*Vitarka-mudra*) assures the viewers that the Dharma is elucidated. The tree therefore is secondary in terms of symbolism to the construction of the person of the Buddha.

Various aspects of nature are important to Buddhism, and the depictions of trees as well as flowers reinforce the connection to nature, *ahimsa* [non-violence], and the story of the Buddha. The *Padma*, or lotus flowers, are one of the more familiar aspects of Buddhist sculptures depicting Gautama [see Figures 1 and 2]. The lotus, which is tied to the Hindu pantheon of iconography, is deeply meaningful as

the Enlightened One [is] proclaimed Vishnu's ninth incarnation. His throne is with its lotus base or backdrop or canopy parallels the Preserver's iconography, as do the likeness of the Bodhisattva *Avalokiteshvara* –*Padmapani*, the "All Observing Lord with the Lotus in his hand."<sup>21</sup>

Additional insights into the water flower's symbolism are dependent on how the lotus is sculpted or viewed. The lotus represents a complete manifestation; the true essence of all. At the center of the flower is the nucleus of the universe. From an aerial view, the lotus is a circle which looks like the *mandala*. The construction of a temporary sand *mandala* is, of course, a ritual practiced by monks and

<sup>20</sup> Donald Swearer, *Becoming the Buddha: The Ritual of Image in Consecration in Thailand* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 37.

<sup>21</sup> Eliade, *Symbolism*, 79.

devotees to engage in the exercise of non-attachment. This too has meaning, yet the *padma* takes on additional symbolism when examined from its botanical function.

Expanding elegantly, the lotus is a picturesque flower that has emerged from murky fluid. This corresponds to the victory of the Buddha achieving enlightenment despite the world of attachment and suffering. When the Buddha is seated upon a lotus, it is his throne; and like an incarnation of the god Vishnu, only a magnificent representation will suffice.<sup>22</sup> The splendid lotus has meanings as varied as its petals. Sometimes embossed to enhance their majesty, they reveal what is hidden; but often these excavated mysteries are difficult to understand.<sup>23</sup> Yet the One seated upon the lotus throne has comprehended such inexplicable concepts such as eternity or the universe.

The *padma* reaches to the center of the intellectual nature of Buddhism. A cerebral affiliation with the pure mind of the Buddha is key. Siddhartha Gautama was not a man stagnant in belief. From his time in the palace he sought the truth, and after leaving his comfort he turned to asceticism. This lifestyle of the monk was steeped in meditation and concentration. Only the vast dedication of introspection could manifest in the attainment of Nirvana.

The illumination of enlightenment as a spiritual event cannot be created literally, so often the images of the Buddha are accompanied by a light or halo surrounding the head [see Figure 2]. The halo is mystical and powerful, and the beam can also be called the Buddha light. It is emblematic of the awesome wisdom that is so pervasive; it radiates from above Siddhartha's mind and into his surroundings. The attainment of such enlightenment cannot be contained in his psyche alone, but bursts forth into the world. The spectrum of artistic interpretations of this beam has been as abstract as a ray of light, or as concrete as flames. The symbol of spiritual knowledge can be intensified when it surrounds the body as well as the head.<sup>24</sup> These themes appear in other religious art; holy flames

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<sup>22</sup> Curt Maury, *Four Origins of Indian Art* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1969), 120.

<sup>23</sup> Moore, *Iconography of Religions*, 144.

<sup>24</sup> Tetsujiro Inouye, *History of Buddhist Art in Japan* (Tokyo: The International Buddhist Society, 1940), 13.

indicative of super knowledge would later surround the prophet Mohamed in Islam. And like the intention of Islamic iconographers, when the ray light is present upon Buddha an aspect of beatification is added to the image of the figure.

The artist's translation of the rich traditions of the Buddha into sculptures and statues are as diverse as the artists themselves. Yet comprehension of the symbolism is contingent on the perception and intellectual dexterity of the devotee. To one who can read the statue that has been written [the literal meaning of "iconography"], great depth and detail is gleaned. To those who merely see a piece of art, only superficial conclusions can be made. Iconography, therefore, is not just a practice for the artistic elite, but a ritual of devotees in all stages of spiritual journeying. It is "not only the conception of the figure in terms of mass and simplified planes, but the manner in which the forms appear to emerge from the plain background of the rock" that make an inanimate object become worthy of devotion and study.<sup>25</sup>

At first glance, the image of the Buddha may seem one-dimensional: just a man seated and possibly adorned or accompanied by some other symbol like a flower or tree. But in fact the many permutations of the Buddha, from his head, hands, legs, feet, and additional ornaments, are very specific in significance and are not fashioned haphazardly. Studying the representations of hairstyle or hand *mudras* speak to both the literate and the illiterate. The separate understanding of each characteristic of the Buddha exponentially enhances the understanding that comes from deciphering the symbolism of Buddhist sculptures. The attraction of Buddhist statues is the mystery that can be uncovered with insight into the culture and stories of Buddhism. Influential scholar Mircea Eliade explains:

In Buddhism the various hypostases of the Buddha have its own special color, gesture and symbol. And not only that, but in each ritual...the symbols are varied. As a result, iconography

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<sup>25</sup> Moore, *Iconography of Religions*, 149.

knows an infinite number of nuances, each indicating a certain step, a state well established on the spiritual ladder of ascent.<sup>26</sup>

The significance of the Buddha statue for the perfect Buddha mind is singular: that there is one essence, or *sattva*, which is the Buddhahood or enlightenment. To gaze upon a statue of Buddha, observe the representational details of the head, arms, and legs is to look at that essence, understand the cycle of *samsara*, and diligently pursue Nirvana.

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<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Rowland, *The Art and Architecture*, 251.

LIST OF FIGURES



Figure 1<sup>27</sup>

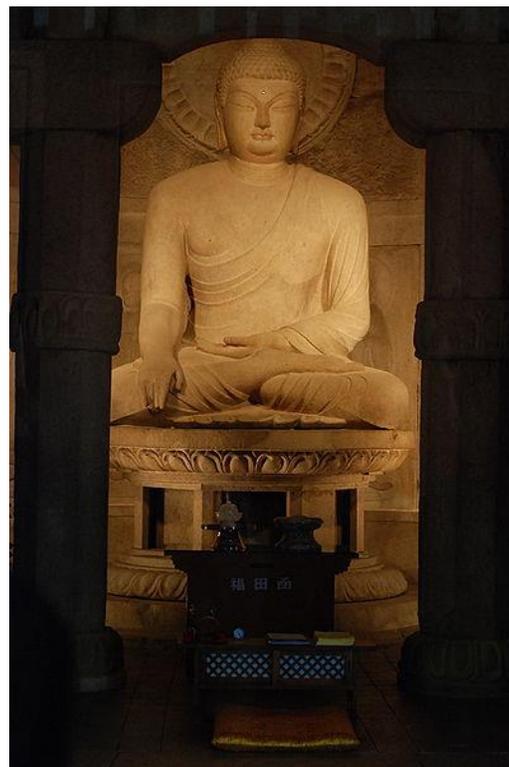


Figure 2<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> [www.publicdomainpictures.net/view-image.php?image=11892&picture=buddha-in-sky](http://www.publicdomainpictures.net/view-image.php?image=11892&picture=buddha-in-sky)

<sup>28</sup> [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Korea-Gyeongju-Seokguram-Buddha\\_statue-04.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Korea-Gyeongju-Seokguram-Buddha_statue-04.jpg)



Figure 3<sup>29</sup>



Figure 4<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> [www.freedigitalphotos.net/images/search.php?search=buddha&cat=&page=2&gid\\_search](http://www.freedigitalphotos.net/images/search.php?search=buddha&cat=&page=2&gid_search)

<sup>30</sup> [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Korea-Yeongcheon-Sudosa-Standing\\_Buddha\\_statue-01.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Korea-Yeongcheon-Sudosa-Standing_Buddha_statue-01.jpg)



Figure 5<sup>31</sup>



Figure 6<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> [www.freedigitalphotos.net/images/search.php?search=buddha&cat=&page=2&gid\\_search](http://www.freedigitalphotos.net/images/search.php?search=buddha&cat=&page=2&gid_search)

<sup>32</sup> [picasaweb.google.com/lh/view?q=buddha%20snake&psc=G&filter=1#5347903499908071266](http://picasaweb.google.com/lh/view?q=buddha%20snake&psc=G&filter=1#5347903499908071266)

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