

*All of the slide descriptions were prepared by Molly Schardt, for "Unity and Diversity in the Art of India," A Teacher Workshop presented by the Education/Outreach Department, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.*

## Buddhist Art Images and the Defeat of Mara

### Standing Buddha; Gandhara, Northeast Pakistan, Kushan period, 2nd-3rd century

Some of the earliest images of the Buddha were made in the northernmost part of ancient India, in an area that was called Gandhara, now part of modern Afghanistan. Because Greek and Roman colonies had existed in Gandhara after the invasion of Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C., Buddha sculptures from there resemble Greek or Roman statues. Although this sculpture was made several centuries later when the area was ruled by semi-nomadic steppe people from the northwest of China called the Kushans, artists there still worked in a modified Greco/Roman style.



We know this statue is of the Buddha by the topknot on his head (his *ushnisha*), the spot between his eyes (his *urna*), and his long, pierced earlobes that once held rich, heavy jewelry. The halo behind him indicates his divinity. He wears a simple garment similar to a Roman toga, a large piece of heavy cloth draped over both shoulders that falls in pleats to his mid calf. The figure stands in a gentle contrapposto pose with the weight on his left leg and the bent right knee barely visible beneath the robe. Also characteristic of Gandharan style, the face is strong, modeled in crisply cut features. The halo may be based on Iranian prototypes.

Gandhara was an area of multiple international contacts. The Chinese had sent expeditions into Central Asia to enlist the aid of the Kushans, known to them as the Yueh Chih, in battling the Huns on the northern border of China. Having been exposed to Buddhism through contact with the Kushans, the Chinese returned home, helping to spread Buddhism through Central Asia and into China.



### Carved stone relief of the Buddha with Yashoda and Rahula, Gandhara, Northeast Pakistan, 3rd century

This small relief sculpture, also from Gandhara, illustrates a scene from the life of the Buddha shortly after his enlightenment. Here we see a frontal view of the Buddha seated cross-legged on a platform in a meditation pose; his heavy monk's robe falls over his knees and his hands are held in the gesture meaning "fear not" (*abhaya mudra*), the lesson the Buddha was teaching. Yasoda is on his right (the left side of the scene). She twists her body to gaze at the Buddha while holding Rahula, who is perched on her lap, out towards a female servant who is about to cut his hair with a large curved knife. Another maidservant holds a jar of water for ablution. The story continues on the right side of the composition where a standing monk welcomes the young boy into the order. Rahula, on bended knee, raises his hands in prayerful greeting (*anjali mudra*) towards his elder.

Narrative, realistic images were popular in this area. Stories from the life of the Buddha were told and illustrated in an almost journalistic way. Although particular events or stories were chosen and were depicted with a set iconography, at the same time the settings, costumes, and poses of the figures generally are naturalistic and document the local customs of the time. Expressions of religious content were made in the iconography and scale of the figures, with the Buddha shown larger than ordinary people.

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Many of these narrative panels were produced in the Buddhist art of the northern Kushan domain. They were placed on stair risers, the plinths, and the drum bases of stupas to be read by worshippers as they performed the ritual of circumambulating (walking around) the holy monument. These northerners preferred the concrete stories of the Buddha's life to the more speculative, metaphysical, philosophical approach of the Indic mind.

**Stele of the Earth-Touching Buddha; Bihar, Northeast India, Pala period, c. 9th century**

Further south in India, in the area around modern-day Delhi, another style of Buddhist art had evolved. Following a manner begun in the 2nd and 3rd centuries under the Kushans in their southern capitol at Mathura, and further developed in the east at Sarnath in the Gupta period (4th-6th centuries), this Pala period image reflects this different, the Indic, point of view. The human image is abstracted and idealized, and not realistically rendered as in Gandhara (see 2 previous images). The robe is thin and transparent, clinging tightly to the body as if it were wet, revealing the form of the idealized body beneath, and it is visible only at the ankles and over his left wrist, and from the pleated end draped over his left shoulder. Although the body is thus more revealed it is less bound to the natural world than its Gandharan predecessor; the muscles have been smoothed over, the parts seamlessly joined. The body is, in fact, created from idealized parts. The Indian artist looked at the magnificence of the natural world around him and extracted elements he thought best expressed certain qualities like power, flexibility, or grace. So he said that the ideal torso should be like that of a lion, the shoulder and arm like an elephant's trunk, and the downcast eye curved like a lotus petal.



As we saw on the Gandhara Buddha, there are marks that indicate the Buddha's special status. On this image, besides the ushnisha, urna, and long earlobes, the Buddha has webbed fingers and imprints of the wheel of the law (symbol for the teachings) on the soles of his feet and the palms of his hands. Hand gestures (*mudras*) are visual clues or symbols that identify the activity of a religious figure. Notice that the Buddha has one hand in his lap with the palm up in the gesture of meditation. The other hand is held down over his knee and touches the ground, or pedestal, on which he sits; this is called the earth-touching mudra. It indicates the moment of the Buddha's enlightenment. Challenged by the demon Mara to prove that he was entitled to become enlightened, the Buddha touched the ground, calling upon Mother Earth to be his witness, which she did. This great moment in the Buddha's life happened when he was sitting under a Bodhi (enlightenment) tree which is indicated here by the branches of heart-shaped leaves above his head.

Behind the Buddha is a perfectly round halo, bordered by the softly rounded forms of twisted strands of pearls and curling vegetation, expressions of India's lush beauty and abundance. The architecturally bejewelled throne is ornamented with a carved pair of rampant horned lions spouting pearls. The Buddha, called "the Lion of the Shakya clan," sits on a "lion throne" symbolized by the two lions at the base. The urgency and power of his teaching was also sometimes likened to the "roar of the lion." The donor of the stele is shown as a devotee to the right of the lions, gazing up at the Buddha with hands in *anjali mudra*.

All of this symbolism has been integrated into a very satisfying and naturalistic image. Pala style preserves the classic forms and proportions of the Gupta style and enriches it with fine, but not overwhelming, detail. The dark chlorite of the region permitted the smooth polish and fine detail work.

## THE DEFEAT OF MARA

The story of the Buddha, whose name means "the Enlightened One," is part history and part myth. The real Gautama Siddhartha was born in the 6th century B.C.E., a prince in the Shakya Kingdom of Northern India (now Nepal). Because he became a very great teacher of religious wisdom, his life story was reinterpreted in symbolic terms emphasizing his extraordinary nature.

Before he was born, his mother dreamed of a radiant white elephant descending from heaven and entering her right side. Because of this dream, the positions of the stars at the time of his birth, and the unusual marks on his body, the holy men at the palace foretold that this child would grow up to be a great leader of men. He would be either a powerful and influential king or a wise religious teacher. His father, a king himself and member of the warrior caste, wanted his son, of course, to be a king.



The Buddha being born painlessly from his mother's side.

Therefore, from the time he was old enough to learn, Siddhartha's father gave him everything he needed to become a great king. He was given lessons in history and government and was trained in all the arts of warfare. When the proper time came, the king arranged a marriage for Siddhartha with the most beautiful and gentle princess in the land. The prince enjoyed his life in the palace, loved his wife, and for many years never questioned his father's rule, which forbade him to go outside the city walls.

Then, one day when he was twenty-nine years old, he became restless and, disobeying his father, ordered his charioteer to drive him outside the city walls. For the first time in his life he encountered the suffering of mankind. He saw three things, each of which made him increasingly distressed and confused. He saw an old man bent over and barely able to shuffle along with his cane; a sick man moaning and groaning on his cot; and a corpse being carried off to the burning grounds. Each night he went home and thought about the things that he had seen. He realized then that he and his family could become sick, and that surely someday they would all become old and die. This made his heart sad and he began to worry about the suffering in the world.



Siddhartha leaving his father's palace.

On a fourth trip outside the city gates, he met a man with a shaved head who was dressed in a simple rough cloth and was carrying a begging bowl. When asked, the man answered that he was called "a homeless one." He had given up the world and its ways, his home and family, to seek freedom from the miseries of the world. The prince then decided that he would give up his palace life, his wife and newly born son, his jewels and silken clothes, and would become himself "a homeless one." That night he silently bid farewell to his sleeping wife and son and departed from the rich comforts of palace life.



Spirits of the earth held up the horse's hooves so no one would be awakened as he rode out of the city. When he was well outside the city walls and at the edge of the forest, he stopped and got off his horse. Using his sword, he cut off his long, flowing hair. Then he took off his heavy jewels and rich clothes. He gave these things to his charioteer and asked him to deliver a message to his father and family, saying that he had departed from his worldly life. He was going to live with the other hermits and yogis to seek liberation from the miseries of this world.



Fasting Siddhartha

Siddhartha studied with various Brahman wise men in the forest, but he became dissatisfied with their theories and talk. Then, he moved to another area and with the yogis he there underwent great trials. He would sit for long hours under the sun in uncomfortable positions. He fasted for days and weeks, becoming very thin and feeble, but still he did not become enlightened. Just as the teachings of the Brahmins had led him into greater confusion, now the pain he felt from these trials distracted him from his meditations. He decided to leave the yogis' mountain retreat because it was disconnected from the life of men and the problems he was trying to solve.

As Siddhartha walked near a town a young girl with a bowl of rice cooked in milk saw him. Her heart went out to this weak and hungry-looking person, and she offered him her food. Gratefully he took it and knew as he felt this food nourish his body that this was the right path to take. To deny the body, to deny the life force itself, was not the way to bring understanding or relief from suffering. Feeling stronger, he became determined to sit in quiet meditation until he understood the cause of worldly misery.

With resolution as his only companion and support, he set his mind firmly toward the task of enlightenment and went to the foot of a Bodhi tree. Sitting on some fresh grass, he adopted the cross-legged position and vowed that he would not rise from that place until he had achieved his purpose. It is said that the world rejoiced when he made this vow and that the birds circled in the clear sky above him.

But Mara, the demon King of Passions, trembled and was afraid. His sons and daughters asked Mara why he was distressed. He answered: "Over there sits a great holy man. He has no weapons but is armed only with his vow and resolution, and he intends to destroy me. But I shall go to him and, as a swollen current breaks the banks of a mighty river, so shall I cause him to break his vow."

First, Mara sent his lovely daughters to tempt the meditating Siddhartha. But when their beauty and seductiveness did not stop him, Mara sent his army of horrid-looking demons. Some had animal heads; some had extra eyes and arms. They were equipped with weapons of all kinds: spears and arrows, swords, clubs, and stones. Hurling these weapons and making fearsome noises they charged the meditating Siddhartha, but he did not stir and the power of his concentration turned their weapons into flowers that dropped harmlessly to the ground.



The temptations of Mara's hosts and Siddhartha touching the Earth, asking her to be his witness.

Then Mara sent whirlwinds and earthquakes, but Siddhartha sat firm and cross-legged beneath the tree.

Finally, Mara called out to Prince Siddhartha, "If you are indeed so good and worthy of enlightenment, give me some proof." Siddhartha put out his hand and touched the earth, and Mother Earth herself spoke in an earth-shaking voice, saying, "I am his witness." At that moment Mara's power was weakened.

No longer bothered with doubt or sorrow, anger, fear, or desire, Siddhartha's mind grew clear and a great peace came over him. Seeking one last time to break the Buddha's concentration, the demon called forth torrential rains; the serpent king, wanting the prince to succeed in his task, curled himself underneath the prince and raising him up out of the mud, spread his broad hood over the meditating prince to protect him from the falling rain. Siddhartha never broke his concentration. He sank into a deep trance that lasted for forty-nine days. In this time the meaning of all things became clear to him. He had reached the state of perfect enlightenment. However, with this enlightenment there came upon the Buddha a sense of great isolation: how could it be possible to share this wisdom with men less wise than himself? Would anyone understand what he had to say? But, no sooner had this thought occurred to him than he felt great compassion for all mankind. He knew he must try to the best of his ability to teach his understanding of the Four Noble Truths {the causes of suffering) and the Eight-fold Path of Salvation to all who would listen. So, once again he set off with resolution, this time to the Deer Park of Sarnath, where he would preach his first sermon.

**Story adapted from the version in *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists* by Ananda Coomaraswamy and Sister Nivedita.**