

FACES OF BUDDHISM

FAMILY GUIDE



Chinese, 19th c., Buddhist Temple Hanging (Thangka). (detail), painting on silk.
Gift of Nancy J. Powell. 2000.14.

Binghamton University Art Museum
Through December 16, 2013

CAN YOU READ THE BUDDHA'S MUDRAS?

Answers on the back.



Thai, possibly 13th–15th c., Walking Buddha, bronze. Gift of Pat Christian; 1997.8



Chinese, 19th c., Standing Buddha, gilded bronze. Gift of Nancy J. Powell; 2000.21

This exhibition shows diverse representations of Buddha in sculpture and painting, as well as a variety of objects associated with Buddhism. In addition to enjoying masterful works of art, after seeing this exhibit you will be able also to:

- Recognize the Buddha
- Read the hand gestures of Buddha figures
- Name other objects associated with Buddhism
- Understand how Buddhism began and spread around the world



Chinese, early 20th c., Incense burner, red amber. Gift of Nancy Powell; 2000.3.

A brief introduction

Who was Buddha?

Buddhist texts tell us that the man who became known as the Buddha (enlightened one) was born Prince Siddhartha Gautama in northeastern India (now Nepal) in the 6th century BC. After seeing human suffering around him, he renounced his privileged class in favor of an ascetic life — a life without worldly or physical pleasures. For six years Siddhartha traveled as a monk across northern India seeking the meaning of life and the end of human suffering. After much thought and meditation, the prince attained wisdom one day while sitting under a tree. The Buddha had attained nirvana, a complete peace of mind. After his enlightenment, Buddha traveled around India for 45 years, teaching others what he had learned and suggesting a code of living. He brought his message to people of all castes, regardless of social position.

What did Buddha teach?

In speeches to his followers, Buddha introduced his understanding of Four Noble Truths:

- Suffering is the problem, unenlightened life can never be free from suffering
- Suffering is caused by desire
- To eliminate suffering, eliminate desire
- To eliminate desire, follow the Noble Eightfold Path

The Noble Eightfold Path, promoting wisdom, ethical conduct and mental development, is a guide for all people to live by. The Buddha's teachings, including this path, are known as the dharma.

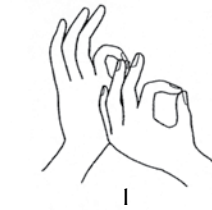


Thai, possibly 15th–16th c., Seated Buddha, bronze. Gift of Pat Christian; 1997.10.

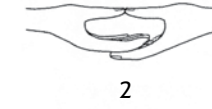
How to recognize Buddha in art

The first visual representations of Buddha appeared in the first century AD in the area known today as Pakistan and Afghanistan. Gradually art helped to spread Buddha's teachings over thousands of miles, throughout the world. Artists from different schools and cultures have created a standard way of showing the Buddha. Here are some features to look for in various representations:

- Ushnisha — prominent bump on the top of Buddha's head, symbolic of his enlightenment (1)
- Short curly hair (2)
- Urna — a tuft of hair between Buddha's eyebrows, represented as a dot or jewel, which signifies his wisdom (3)
- Elongated ear lobes (because he had been a prince in his youth and had worn heavy, expensive earrings) (4)
- The monk's robe, a long cloth draped over the left shoulder and around the body (5)
- Hand gestures (mudras) (6)



1



2



3



4



5



6

Mudras or “signs” are ancient, symbolic hand gestures. These are the most common mudras seen in Buddhist art:

Dharmachakra mudra (1)

The gesture of teaching, setting the chakra (wheel) of dharma (doctrine) in motion.

Both hands are held at chest level, the thumbs and index fingers form circles.

Dhyana mudra (2)

A gesture of meditation and balance.

Both hands are in the lap with palms upward. The right hand is on top of the left hand.

Vitarka mudra (3)

This variant of dharmachakra mudra stands for teaching and intellectual debate. A circle is made with the right hand index finger and the thumb. The palm is facing outward.

Abhaya mudra (4)

The gesture of reassurance, blessing and protection, this mudra means “do not fear.” One hand is raised and the palm is facing outwards, fingers extended pointing upward. The wrist is bent at right angle with the forearm.

Bhumisparsha mudra (5)

This gesture calls the earth to witness Buddha's enlightenment. A seated figure's right hand reaches toward the ground, palm inward.

Varada mudra (6)

The gesture of charity, symbolizing the fulfillment of all wishes. The hand is extended downward, palm out.

Graphic printed in: Marilyn Stokstad et al. *Art History*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1995.

What else to look for:

Other important Buddhist images include the Bodhisattvas. These great saintly beings on the brink of achieving Buddhahood were motivated by love and compassion to stay on earth and help others reach enlightenment. Also, do not miss the thangka — an embroidered (or painted) banner that depicts Buddha and other deities. Thangkas hang in monasteries or over family altars to help meditation. Because these are scroll paintings, they can be easily rolled and travel with monks.



Chinese, 19th c.
Buddhist Temple Hanging (Thangka)
Painting on silk (originally scroll)
Gift of Nancy J. Powell. 2000.14



Indian style, possibly Chinese, late 19th c.
Bodhisattva
Ivory
Gift of Nancy J. Powell. 1998.15

Answers: (left) Abhaya mudra (right) Vitarka mudra

Binghamton University Art Museum

Museum hours: Tuesday – Saturday, noon – 4 p.m. Thursday, noon – 7 p.m.
For more information visit our website: binghamton.edu/art-museum

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