



Beliefs Made Visible

Understanding South Asian Hindu and Buddhist Art

A Workshop for Educators
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Asian | Education

Acknowledgments

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Cover:
Krishna overcoming the serpent Kaliya, approx. 1400–1500
India; reportedly from Sundaraperumakoil, Tanjavur district, Tamil Nadu state, former kingdom of Vijayanagara
Bronze
The Avery Brundage Collection, B65B72

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Understanding Hinduism

Understanding Hinduism

By Brian Hogarth with contributions by Kristina Youso

Hinduism is one of the world's oldest religions. It has complex roots, and involves a vast array of practices and a host of deities. Its plethora of forms and beliefs reflects the tremendous diversity of India, where most of its one billion followers reside.

Hinduism is more than a religion. It is a culture, a way of life, and a code of behavior. This is reflected in a term Indians use to describe the Hindu religion: *Sanatana Dharma*, which means eternal faith, or the eternal way things are (truth). The word Hinduism derives from a Persian term denoting the inhabitants of the land beyond the Indus, a river in present-day Pakistan. By the early nineteenth century the term had entered popular English usage to describe the predominant religious traditions of South Asia, and it is now used by Hindus themselves. Hindu beliefs and practices are enormously diverse, varying over time and among individuals, communities, and regional areas.

Unlike Buddhism, Jainism, or Sikhism, Hinduism has no historical founder. Its authority rests instead upon a large body of sacred texts that provide Hindus with rules governing rituals, worship, pilgrimage, and daily activities, among many other things. Although the oldest of these texts may date back four thousand years, the earliest surviving Hindu images and temples were created some two thousand years later.

WHAT ARE THE ROOTS OF HINDUISM?

Hinduism developed over many centuries from a variety of sources: cultural practices, sacred texts, and philosophical movements, as well as local popular beliefs. The combination of these factors is what accounts for the varied and diverse nature of Hindu practices and beliefs.

Hinduism developed from several sources:

- Prehistoric and Neolithic culture, which left material evidence including abundant rock and cave paintings of bulls and cows, indicating an early interest in the sacred nature of these animals.
- The Indus Valley civilization, located in what is now Pakistan and northwestern India, which flourished between approximately 2500 and 1700 bce, and persisted with some regional presence as late as 800 BCE. The civilization reached its high point in the cities of Harrapa and Mohenjo-Daro. Although the physical remains of these large urban complexes have not produced a great deal of explicit religious imagery, archaeologists have recovered some intriguing items, including an abundance of seals depicting bulls, among these a few exceptional examples illustrating figures seated in yogic positions; terra-cotta female figures that suggest fertility; and small anthropomorphic sculptures made of stone and bronze. Material evidence found at these sites also includes prototypes of stone linga (phallic emblems of the Hindu god Shiva). Later textual sources assert that indigenous peoples of this area engaged in linga worship.
- According to recent theories, Indus Valley peoples migrated to the Gangetic region of India and blended with indigenous cultures, after the decline of civilization in the Indus Valley. A separate group of Indo-European speaking people migrated to the subcontinent from West Asia. These peoples brought with them ritual life including fire sacrifices presided over by priests, and a set of hymns and poems collectively known as the Vedas.
- The indigenous beliefs of the pre-Vedic peoples of the subcontinent of India encompassed a variety of local practices based on agrarian fertility cults and local nature spirits. Vedic writings refer to the worship of images, tutelary divinities, and the phallus.

WHAT ARE THE PRINCIPLE TEXTS OF HINDUISM?

While there is no one text or creed that forms the basis of all Hindu beliefs, several texts are considered fundamental to all branches of Hinduism. These texts are generally divided into two main groups: eternal, revealed texts, and those based upon what humanity has learned and written down. The Vedas are an example of the former, while the two great epics, the Mahabharata and Ramayana, belong to the latter category. For centuries, texts were transmitted orally, and the priestly caste, or brahmins, was entrusted with memorization and preservation of sacred texts.

The Vedas

The Vedas are India's earliest surviving texts, dating from approximately 2000 to 1500 BCE. These texts are made up of hymns and ritual treatises that are instructional in nature, along with other sections that are more speculative and metaphysical. The Vedas are greatly revered by contemporary Hindus as forming the foundation for their deepest beliefs.

The early Vedas refer often to certain gods such as Indra, the thunder god, and Agni, who carries messages between humans and the gods through fire sacrifices. Some of these gods persist in later Hinduism, while others are diminished or transformed into other deities over time.

The Vedas are considered a timeless revelation, and a source of unchanging knowledge that underlies much of present-day Hindu practices.

Mahabharata and Ramayana

These two great epics are the most widely known works in India. Every child becomes familiar with these stories from an early age. The Mahabharata is the world's longest poem, with approximately 100,000 verses. It tells the story of the conflict between the Pandava brothers and their cousins the Kauravas, a rivalry that culminates in a great battle. On the eve of the battle, the Pandava warrior Arjuna is distressed by what will happen. The god Krishna consoles him in a famous passage known as the Bhagavad-Gita (meaning "the Song of the Lord"). This section of the Mahabharata has become a standard reference in addressing the duty of the individual, the importance of dharma, and humankind's relationship to God and society.

A second epic, the Ramayana, contains some of India's best-loved characters, including Rama and Sita, the ideal royal couple, and their helper, the monkey leader, Hanuman. Rama is an incarnation of the God Vishnu. The story tells of Rama and Sita's withdrawal to the forest after being exiled from the kingdom of Ayodhya. Sita is abducted in the forest by Ravana, the evil king of Lanka. Rama eventually defeats Ravana, with the help of his brother and an army of monkeys and bears. The couple returns to Ayodhya and are crowned, and from that point the story has evolved to acquire different endings. Episodes of the Ramayana are frequently illustrated in Hindu art.

The Puranas

The Puranas are the primary source of stories about the Hindu deities. They were probably assembled between 300 to 1000 CE, and their presence corresponds to the rise of Hinduism and the growing importance of certain deities. They describe the exploits of the gods as well as various devotional practices associated with them. Some of the Vedic gods—Indra, Agni, Surya—reappear in the Puranas, but figure less importantly in the stories than do Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, the various manifestations of the Goddess, and other celestial figures.

Tantras

Around the same time as the recording of the Puranas, a number of texts concerning ritual practices surrounding various deities emerge. They are collectively known as Tantras or Agamas, and refer to religious observances, yoga, behavior, and the proper selection and design of temple sites. Some aspects of the Tantras concern the harnessing of physical energies as a means to achieve spiritual breakthrough. Tantric practices cross religious boundaries, and manifest themselves in aspects of Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN BELIEFS OF HINDUISM?

Common to virtually all Hindus are certain beliefs, including, but not limited to, the following:

- a belief in many gods, which are seen as manifestations of a single unity. These deities are linked to universal and natural processes.
- a preference for one deity while not excluding or disbelieving others
- a belief in the universal law of cause and effect (*karma*) and reincarnation
- a belief in the possibility of liberation and release (*moksha*) by which the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (*samsara*) can be resolved

Hinduism is bound to the hierarchical structure of the caste system, a categorization of members of society into defined social classes. An individual's position in the caste system is thought to be a reflection of accumulated merit in past lives (*karma*).

Observance of the *dharma*, or behavior consistent with one's caste and status, is discussed in many early philosophical texts. Not every religious practice can be undertaken by all members of society. Similarly, different activities are considered appropriate for different stages of life, with study and raising families necessary for early stages, and reflection and renunciation goals of later years. A religious life need not be spiritual to the exclusion of worldly pleasures or rewards, such as the pursuit of material success and (legitimate) pleasure, depending on one's position in life.

Hindus believe in the importance of the observation of appropriate behavior, including numerous rituals, and the ultimate goal of *moksha*, the release or liberation from the endless cycle of birth.

Moksha

Moksha is the ultimate spiritual goal of Hinduism. How does one pursue moksha? The goal is to reach a point where you detach yourself from the feelings and perceptions that tie you to the world, leading to the realization of the ultimate unity of things—the soul (*atman*) connected with the universal (*Brahman*). To get to this point, one can pursue various paths: the way of knowledge, the way of appropriate actions or works, or the way of devotion to God.

HOW DO HINDUS PRACTICE THEIR FAITH?

Religion pervades many aspects of Hindu life, and religious observance is not limited to one location, time of day, or use of a particular text. It assumes many forms: in the home, at the temple, on a pilgrimage, through yogic practices, dance or music, at the roadside, by the river, through the observation of one's social duties and so on.

Puja

The general term used to describe Hindu worship is *puja*—the most common forms of worship taking place in the home at the family shrine and at the local temple. Practices vary depending on location, but generally speaking, the worshiper might approach the temple to give thanks, to ask for assistance, to give penance, or to contemplate the divine. Worship is tied to the individual or family group, rather than a service or congregational gathering. Puja occurs on a daily basis, or even several times throughout the day, as well as at specific times and days at local temples, and with abundant festivities on the occasions of great festivals.

In the temple, the devotees are assisted by the priest, who intercedes on their behalf by performing ritual acts, and blessing offerings. Worship often begins by circumambulating the temple. Inside the temple, the priest's actions are accompanied by the ringing of bells, passing of a flame, and chanting. Traditionally, dance also formed an essential part of temple worship.

Darshan

A key concept in the worship of Hindu deities is the act of making eye contact with the deity (*darshan*). The activity of making direct visual contact with the god or goddess is a two-sided event; the worshiper sees the divinity, and the divinity likewise sees the devotee. This ritualistic viewing occurs between devotee and God in intimate domestic spaces, as well as in tremendously crowded temple complexes where the individual may be part of a throng of hundreds or thousands of other worshipers. It is believed that by having darshan of the god's image, one takes the energy that is given by the deity, and receives blessings.

This essential Hindu practice also demonstrates the profound importance of religious imagery to worship and ritual. While in most other religious traditions images are believed to represent or suggest divine or holy personages, or are altogether forbidden, in Hindu practice painted and sculpted images are believed to genuinely embody the divine. Appropriate ritual imbues images with authentic divine presence. Literal physical connection in the form of visual contact is essential to religious devotion, whether on a local and ongoing basis, or in the undertaking of great pilgrimages.

FESTIVALS AND PILGRIMAGES

Festivals abound throughout India, and are usually accompanied by the creation of temporary images or the procession of temple icons through the streets with much celebration. Festivals take place at a number of sites across India and are associated with various deities. There are a number of sacred cities in India, and natural sites that are considered sacred such as the Ganges river. The calendar of Hindu festivals and holidays is generally established according to the lunar calendar. Festivals vary regionally, and particular festivals are most important and spectacular depending on the regional importance of the particular god or goddess. For example, the goddess Kali is extremely popular in Calcutta, where her festival is renowned. In Mumbai (Bombay), the annual Ganesha festival is well-known for its size and fantastic clay images that are tossed into the sea.

WHAT IS THE FUNCTION OF HINDU ART?

Much of the surviving artwork from pre-modern India is religious in nature. Secular and courtly arts survive in significant quantity from the late medieval period. Most of the pre-Muslim pre-medieval sculpture in an art museum is religious in nature, associated with temples. Paintings are also broadly religious in nature until the time of the Mughals (from the 1500s to the early 1800s), when secular painting emerged as an important new development.

Most of the temple statuary that one encounters in the museum was made by anonymous artisans, who

were associated with a guild of artisans. Their work was commissioned by local rulers or wealthy patrons who commissioned the construction of temples in a particular locality. The goal of the artisan was to create statues that were compelling, and yet conformed to the prescribed attributes and other conventions. Sculptures were meant to be part of an overall architectural scheme that could be visualized in its entirety. As such, temples resemble massive works of sculpture, rather than simply buildings adorned by statues.

THE HINDU TEMPLE

Hindu temples are numerous in form, and probably evolved from a variety of sources, including the worship of natural sites, mounds, trees, due to the need for a place to conduct ritual practices and house images of deities.

Some of the most famous early Buddhist and Hindu sites were not temples, but caves hewn from the rock and shaped into pillared halls, chambers for sacred images, and cells for monastic or mendicant habitation. Early constructions created in more ephemeral materials have not survived, although rock cut constructions do reveal some details about building in wood and other materials. Gradually, from about the Gupta Period on (300–500 CE), free-standing stone structures began to replace the earlier rock-cut forms. Nevertheless, the cave-like aspect of the central chamber within a temple persisted, with vertical superstructures rising above them. Devotees entered the temple proper through a pavilion or hall area directly in front. All parts of the temple correspond with axial lines of cosmic significance. Rock-cut temple architecture also continued to evolve, both in the Hindu and Buddhist contexts, producing some of the most spectacular, ambitious, and arduously created monuments in the world.

While many styles evolved, distinctions can be made between north-Indian style and southern-Indian style temples. The differences are most apparent in the appearance of the vertical superstructure. Northern towers tend to be more curvilinear as they reach upward. Southern towers are more pyramidal, with terraced stories moving upwards in clearly defined layers. (see diagrams)

When looking at Hindu temple sculptures, the two principal media are stone and bronze. Stone sculptures generally adorned the walls of the temple, whereas bronze or stone statues could be found in the inner chambers. In an active temple, statuary would be painted, or adorned with flowers and other offerings.

WHO ARE THE PRINCIPAL DEITIES IN HINDUISM?

While there are many gods with myriad forms, those most popularly worshiped by Hindus in India are Vishnu, Shiva, the Goddess in her various aspects, and Shiva's sons Ganesha and Karttikeya. According to some interpretations, all divinities are in fact a manifestation of a single godhead, divine force, or abstraction. The Trimurti, or "triple form" explains basic beliefs about the roles of Hindu gods, but is largely a Western interpretation of the main deities that has an obvious basis in the idea of the Christian Trinity. The Hindu Trimurti consists of Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and Shiva the Destroyer.

Most Hindus are principally devoted to the god Vishnu, the god Shiva, or the Goddess. These categorical practices are sometimes described as, respectively, Vaishnavism (Vishnu), Shaivism (Shiva), and Shaktism (Shakti being another term for the female creative energy). The predominance of these three deities evolved over several centuries, crystallizing in the early part of the first millennium, when a renewed Hinduism centering on devotion made them increasingly popular. It is believed that each of these divinities incorporated elements of other or earlier deities that existed in the pre-Hindu context, and that express beliefs and practices existing at high and low levels of culture. Thus, mainstream Hindu deities relate to figures appearing in Vedic literature, as well as to worship practices involving nature spirits, fertility, local tutelary gods, shaman-

ism, malevolent spirits, and ghosts.

HOW DO WE RECOGNIZE THE PRINCIPAL DEITIES?

There are many Hindu deities, some with great and others with limited powers. Most Hindus focus their devotion primarily on one of these, whom they regard as supreme. The greatest deities have complex natures and are shown in art in a variety of forms and situations from narratives. They are sometimes attended by spouses or their particular animal mounts. They are often identified by physical characteristics and symbolic implements they hold or wear.

To outside observers, a prominent feature of Hinduism is the belief in many deities. Most Hindus believe that there is one supreme deity—beyond form, and therefore without such attributes as size, gender, or color—of whom the many individual gods and goddesses are forms existing for the benefit of worshipers. Hindu deities may be represented in semiabstract forms like the cylindrical phallic emblem of Shiva, or in animal or human forms such as the incarnations of Vishnu as a fish and as the hero Rama. In human form many deities have supernatural characteristics—for example, four or more arms or heads. Non-Hindus have sometimes been disturbed by these multilimbed forms, but for Hindus who grow up seeing them they are natural: The gods have superhuman powers so they are shown with superhuman anatomies.

WHEN DID THE FIRST HINDU IMAGES APPEAR IN ART?

As is the case for Buddhist art, there is a significant gap of several centuries between textual evidence and the emergence of surviving religious imagery. Aside from the previously mentioned artifacts surviving from prehistory, Neolithic times, and the Indus Valley civilization, there is no surviving Hindu sculpture prior to the reign of the Buddhist emperor Ashoka (272–231 BCE), when the first Buddhist imperial sculpture also appeared. The earliest images that survive from what we might consider a Hindu context are actually sculptures of nature divinities and fertility images rather than mainstream classical Hindu deities. Hindu sculpture emerges about the same time as anthropomorphic Buddhist sculpture, indicating that the cultural and political milieu had transformed to encourage creation of sophisticated and expensive stone sculpture.



Understanding Buddhism

Understanding Buddhism

By Brian Hogarth with contributions by Kristina Youso

UNDERSTANDING BUDDHISM

Buddhism is one of the world's great religions, and has deeply influenced the character and evolution of Asian civilization over the past 2,500 years. It is based on the teachings of a historical figure, Siddhartha Gautama, who lived around the fifth century BCE. As it moved across Asia, Buddhism absorbed indigenous beliefs and incorporated a wide range of imagery, both local and foreign, into its art and religious practices. Buddhism continues to evolve as a religion in many parts of the world.

Buddhism is a complex subject, a philosophy that has evolved in many different ways and various regions of Asia, and is still a living faith today. Providing simple definitions for the beliefs and art historical developments of Buddhism is therefore difficult, because so many variations occur. The student of Buddhism should be aware of these variations and points of view. Here we provide a very general overview as a foundation for looking at historical Buddhist arts, focused on the art of India.

WHO WAS THE HISTORICAL BUDDHA?

The historical Buddha-to-be, Siddhartha Gautama, was born around the 6th century BCE into royalty at Kapilavastu, which lay in the foothills of the Himalayas near the present day Nepalese-Indian border. For most of his youth, the prince led a sheltered existence within the palace, where he enjoyed court life, married a princess, and had a son. Venturing forth from the palace, he finally witnessed disturbing sights he had never before experienced: sickness, old age, death, and a mendicant ascetic. Deeply unsettled by what he had seen, the prince finally renounced his worldly life, and set out on a quest for truth, to confront human suffering and the continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (samsara). Along with other thinkers who lived during this era, the Buddha was also troubled by the caste system, which denied many the possibility of salvation, as well as by the exclusivity and abuses of the brahman priestly caste who controlled religious practices at that time.

WHAT DID THE HISTORICAL BUDDHA PREACH?

The Buddha sought to find an end to human suffering. He first engaged in extreme austerities as practiced by mendicants and ascetics of his time. After several years of these practices, Siddhartha concluded that this extreme path was not the correct route to perfect understanding (*enlightenment*). Rather, he proposed that a middle way between extreme austerity and extreme indulgence was the path to wisdom and freedom from suffering. The Buddha declared that he would meditate under a banyan tree until he achieved enlightenment. This phenomenal event occurred at Bodh Gaya in the contemporary state of Bihar, which is one of Buddhism's great pilgrimage sites.

As a result of his attainment of enlightenment, the prince Siddhartha Gautama was now truly the Buddha, the Enlightened One. He was also commonly referred to as Shakyamuni, the sage of the Shakya clan. The Buddha distilled the principles of enlightenment into a doctrine known as the Four Noble Truths. These are:

- 1) Life is suffering.
- 2) Suffering is caused by desire, and by clinging to the notion of self.
- 3) It is possible to end suffering. To end the suffering caused by desire and ego, one must eliminate the

cause.

- 4) Suffering can be ended by following the Noble Eightfold Path, a set of resolutions characterized by a concern for morality, concentration, moderation, positive action, and wisdom.

Though it evades easy definition, and it varies according to the particular branch of Buddhism, the ultimate goal of most Buddhists is to reach nirvana, a state of bliss in which human desire, ego, and suffering are extinguished.

HOW DID BUDDHISM BEGIN?

As a collective faith, Buddhism first developed in northeastern India with the historical Buddha's own followers, who formed a community of monks and laypersons during his lifetime. Those wishing to join the monastic order renounced family and worldly ties, and proclaimed their faith in the "three jewels": the Buddha, the doctrine (*dharmā*), and the monastic community (*sangha*).

After the Buddha's death, concerns arose regarding the interpretation and survival of the order and doctrine. A first council established a set of beliefs on the basis of those surviving monks who could remember what the Buddha had said. Subsequent councils added to these sayings. Debates arose over the apparent contradiction between no-self and rebirth (how could one be reborn if there was no self?), and over the questions of who could be enlightened and whether enlightenment was gradual or spontaneous. By the beginning of first millennium, there were approximately eighteen different schools of Buddhism in India.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN BRANCHES OF BUDDHISM?

Over the centuries, two main branches of Buddhism emerged: a transmission that traveled to Southeast Asia, and a transmission that evolved in East Asia. A further offshoot of the northern transmission also developed. All three branches began in India, and developed further as they moved across Asia.

1. Theravada Buddhism

Theravada is believed to be the oldest form of Buddhism. The term itself comes into use later, but the Theravada tradition upholds the monastic path and adheres to the oldest surviving recorded sayings of the Buddha, collectively called the Pali canon. These original texts were set down in the Pali language by monks in Sri Lanka in the first century CE. Prior to this codification, teachings had been transmitted orally, and concern arose that original texts must be preserved in light of the growing heterodoxy that was developing in India.

Theravada recognizes the primacy and humanity of the historical Buddha. The Buddha was an exemplary figure. Enlightenment is an arduous task, available only to monks who explicitly pursue the path of Shakyamuni himself. Theravada is the dominant form of Buddhism today in Sri Lanka as well as Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. The subject matter of Buddhist art from these traditions focuses on life events of the Buddha.

2. Mahayana Buddhism

Mahayana is a philosophical movement that proclaimed the possibility of universal salvation, offering assistance to practitioners in the form of compassionate beings called bodhisattvas. The goal was to open up the possibility of buddhahood (becoming a Buddha) to all sentient beings. The Buddha ceased to be simply a historical figure, but rather was interpreted as a transcendent figure who all could aspire to become.

New sutras (texts) were added to the Buddhist canon, causing rifts among the various sects. Reformers called themselves the “greater vehicle” (Mahayana), and they labeled the traditionalists the “lesser vehicle” (Theravada). The bodhisattva developed as an enlightened being who postpones his own salvation in order to help others. Initially understood as companions to the Buddha, bodhisattvas are spiritual beings who compassionately vow to achieve buddhahood, but have deferred this aspiration in order to liberate all creatures in the universe from suffering. The most popular bodhisattvas appearing in sculpture and painting include Avalokiteshvara (bodhisattva of mercy and compassion), Maitreya (the future Buddha), and Manjushri (bodhisattva of wisdom).

Mahayana also spread to Southeast Asia, however its greatest impact is felt in the East Asian nations of China, Korea, and Japan. As Mahayana evolved, it continued to expand a vast pantheon of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other divine and semi-divine beings, drawing from and assimilating regional and local traditions.

3. Tantric Buddhism: a further evolution of Mahayana Buddhism

Tantric or Esoteric Buddhism, sometimes called Vajrayana (the Vehicle of the Thunderbolt), developed about 500–600 CE in India. An offshoot of Mahayana Buddhism, the origins of Tantric Buddhism can be traced to ancient Hindu and Vedic practices as well, including esoteric ritual texts designed to achieve physical, mental, and spiritual breakthroughs. Tantric Buddhism is sometimes described as offering a shortcut to enlightenment. Because some practices subverted mainstream Buddhism and Hinduism, engaging in acts otherwise considered taboo, its practitioners were secretive. Initiates worked closely with a spiritual guide or guru.

Vajrayana Buddhism is most closely identified with Tibetan Buddhism, however, it also influenced parts of Southeast Asia and East Asia.

Buddhism thrived in India for more than a millennium, reaching an expansive culmination in the Pala period in eastern India. By the 1100s CE, Buddhism had declined mainly as a result of Muslim incursions. Before this time, however, Buddhist doctrine had been transmitted to Sri Lanka, which became a further point of reference for the spread of Buddhism to Southeast Asia.

Travelers and missionaries carried the message of Buddhism by sea and land routes through Central Asia into China by the first century CE. Buddhism flourished in China between 300 and 900 CE and provided a point of reference for Buddhism as it developed in Korea and Japan. Chinese translations of Indian texts contributed to the development of printing.

Buddhism is still strong today in Bhutan, Cambodia, Japan, Korea, Laos, Myanmar (Burma), Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Tibet, and Vietnam. Throughout its history and transmission, Buddhism has been very adaptable to local beliefs and customs, and the combination of these local forms with imported beliefs and symbols is a characteristic of Buddhist art throughout Asia.

HOW AND WHY DID THE IMAGE OF BUDDHA DEVELOP?

There is significant debate concerning the development of the Buddha image—where it first occurred, why, and when. Broadly speaking, the image of the Buddha emerges during the first few centuries CE in two major centers of Indian art during the Kushana period. One center of artistic production was the ancient region of Gandhara, an area that includes northwestern India as well as parts of present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan. Gandharan images have a style that is reminiscent of Hellenistic sculpture, and artists in

the region were certainly influenced by the presence of Hellenistic colonies, and the large-scale trade and exchange that occurred in this cultural crossroads. A second area of artistic production is associated with Mathura, a city that still stands to the south of Delhi. Here, artists developed a style that can be characterized as more indigenous, less concerned with naturalistic realism in the human form, and more with the symbolic qualities of the spiritual figure. Mathura artists created other kinds of religious imagery as well. It is probable that Buddhist imagery was influenced by the development of Hindu and Jain figures, and that various communities were developing images of devotional figures simultaneously.

A very significant gap of several centuries exists between the lifetime of the historical Buddha, and the creation of the first surviving images of the Buddha in stone or any other medium. The first surviving Buddhist art in stone was actually created prior to images of the Buddha himself. During the Maurya period, in the reign of emperor Ashoka (272–231 BCE), significant monuments and other artworks in stone were commissioned, apparently for the first time.

Although stone sculpture, such as large columns surmounted by images of lions and wheels, expressed Buddhist symbolism and motifs, there are no Buddha images from this period. Many scholars have speculated that an aniconic (without idols) period existed in Buddhist art, where there was a prohibition against depicting the actual Buddha, and various symbols substituted for an explicit anthropomorphic representation. Some scholars have interpreted narrative reliefs at early Buddhist monuments to illustrate early Buddhist processions or festivals, where aniconic symbols, rather than anthropomorphic symbols, represented the Buddha. Not all scholars accept these theories, however.

It seems likely that various kinds of religious imagery, in the Buddhist, Hindu, and other contexts, were created in ephemeral materials before being created in stone. Indeed the great sophistication and high level of sculptural expertise expressed in Maurya stone sculpture implies that the sculptural tradition was already highly developed by this time.

The imperial might and Buddhist inclinations of the emperor Ashoka may have been the first great instigators of a transition to large-scale stone sculpture in India. More than three hundred years later, in the Kushana era, a strong imperial ruler bringing various outside artistic and stylistic influences to the realm, seems to have contributed to further artistic developments and a hitherto unseen profusion of sculpture created in stone.

We are not entirely sure how all Buddhist figures were used in ritual and worship. Buddhist images and sculptures originally adorned the complexes of stupas (sacred mounds containing relics) as well as monastic structures. Early Buddhist sites also incorporated indigenous imagery such as loving couples and fertility figures. Caves were hewn from rock in parts of India, creating spaces for worship rituals and community meetings, as well as monastic dwelling quarters. These rock-cut cave complexes became increasingly elaborate in terms of imagery and iconography, which was created in painting as well as carved from stone in situ. Laypersons contributed to small- and large-scale constructions as a means of acquiring merit. Votive images also developed for private use, and



The Great Stupa at Sanchi, India. Photo by Olivier Laude, 1999.

as souvenirs for pilgrims to sacred sites.

The figure of the Buddha and attendant bodhisattvas, and other divine and semi-divine beings, became the objects of devotion themselves. As these divine personages expanded in number and complexity, they required larger stupa and temple structures to house them. Over time, the proliferation of great numbers of Buddhist images, in some cases explicitly created through mass production techniques, reflected beliefs in the meritorious repetition of various names and phrases.

In Buddhist art, the image of the historical Buddha is often labeled “Shakyamuni” (sage of the Shakya clan). This distinguishes the image of the historical Buddha, the Buddha who lived on earth during this present period, from past, future, or cosmic buddhas, bodhisattvas, or other divine beings.

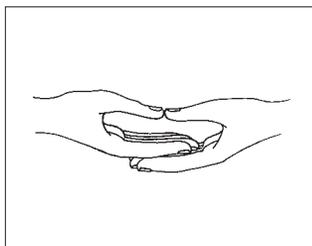
HOW DOES ONE RECOGNIZE A FIGURE OF BUDDHA?

The Buddha has thirty-two distinguishing marks (*lakshana*). These marks can be described as a set of ideal characteristics which, when combined, identify an enlightened being. Among the most common characteristics are:

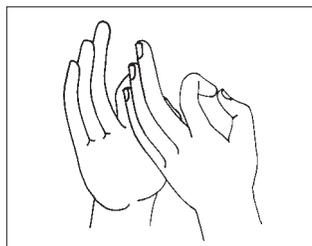
- a cranial bump, a sign of wisdom (*ushnisha*). In early Buddhist figures, the bump appears as a top-knot of hair.
- a tuft of hair between the eyes that is usually depicted as a dot (*urna*).
- a relaxed meditative pose, seated or standing. Frequently the Buddha is seated on a lion or lotus throne.
- the presence of the wheel (*chakra*), symbol of the Buddhist doctrine, or the lotus, symbol of purity.
- monastic clothing: the Buddha appears in simple monk’s robes, although in some instances he may appear crowned.
- hand positions: the Buddha teaches, meditates, and performs other important actions referring to his life story and teachings with various hand positions (*mudras*).

The most common hand positions are:

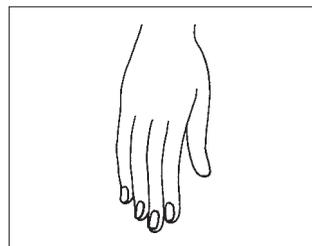
- meditating (*dhyana*)
- preaching; turning the “wheel of the doctrine” (chakra, the symbol of Buddha’s laws (*dharmachakra*))
- earth touching; that is, the Buddha’s calling the earth as a witness during his victory over the demon Mara (*bhumisparsha*)



meditating



preaching



earth touching



Slide Descriptions

Slide Descriptions

By Brian Hogarth with contributions by Kristina Youso

SLIDE DESCRIPTIONS

All slides in this packet illustrate art from the Asian Art Museum's permanent collection. We chose primarily stone and bronze sculptures, since religious concepts and iconographies are clearly identifiable in three-dimensional form. Sculptures are also generally on display longer than light-sensitive paintings and textiles, which must be rotated in and out of storage, and thus sculptures allow students the greatest chance of seeing them in the museum galleries.

The first half of the slide packet are Hindu images and the latter half are Buddhist. This packet contains slides exclusively illustrating art from India, which is the birthplace of both major religions. We have not included Buddhist art from Japan, Korea, Southeast Asia, the Himalayas, or China. Teachers should inquire about related resource materials focusing on these subjects in the Asian Art Museum's Education Resource Center.

GENERAL GOALS FOR LOOKING AT HINDU AND BUDDHIST ART:

- Students will become aware of the complexity of religious ideas and stories that underlie Hinduism and Buddhism.
- Students will understand how Hinduism and Buddhism evolved in India and how the images inspired by these beliefs were often part of religious architecture.
- Students will recognize several Hindu deities and Buddhist figures, and will be able to articulate reasons that an object reflects a certain style, time period, place, or religious belief.
- Students will apply some critical questions learned from looking at Hindu and Buddhist art to art of other religions, cultures, and time periods.

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS WHEN LOOKING AT RELIGIOUS ART:

- Start with the art object itself and list what you can see. Who is depicted in the art, what is the figure doing, what objects help you determine what is going on?
- Is there a story associated with this image? Is it connected to a scripture or sacred writing? How has the artist interpreted or changed the story? Explain that we cannot be sure whether some stories are true or not, but that believers accept the story as part of their faith, and that the story is also a vital part of the culture. Be aware of cultural sensitivities among your students.
- Discuss how the artist conveyed a religious message through the object. What did the artist wish to convey? How does the artwork's shape, form, and material support this message? How successful do students think the artist was in achieving this message?
- How does this object reflect the time and place in which it was made? What was its original function? How is it different from similar subjects made at a different time and place? Ask students to explore other religious art images and compare with the images represented here.
- Do students like this piece? Why or why not? What types of feelings, actions, or reactions does the artwork invoke?
- What kinds of religious art and imagery can students find in the present day? How do they compare in terms of materials, function, context, adornment, symbolism, etc. with what students are studying?

SLIDE 1



The river Ganges at Varanasi, India. Photo by Brian Hogarth, 1999.

WHAT IS THIS SCENE?

The photograph shows a section of the waterfront in the heart of Varanasi (Banaras), an important religious and cultural center, in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Boaters ply the sacred waters of the Ganges (Ganga) river. Pilgrims and other tourists descend to bathe in the river along the many steps and platforms called *ghats*. Umbrellas shade brahmins, or priests, who administer to the religious needs of the pilgrims. On the edge of the river are many temples and buildings housing religious associations.

WHY IS VARANASI AN IMPORTANT RELIGIOUS CENTER?

Varanasi was once known as “Kashi,” the city of light. During the Muslim and British periods, it was known as Banaras. It is believed to be one of the oldest cities in the world. The Hindu god Shiva was attracted by the beauty of the city and took up residence here. Hence there is a local saying that “the very stones of Kashi are Shiva.” Shiva, along with many other deities, is worshiped throughout the city in countless temples.

Pilgrims bathe in the river here because it is considered sacred. The waters are believed to cleanse and purify. The river is also known as the goddess Ganga. She threatened to flood the land with her waters, but the god Shiva caught her descent in his matted locks of hair, thus preventing the deluge.

The embankment is a meeting place of several rivers (Varana and Asi) but in a more religious sense it is a crossing place between this world and the transcendent realm. It is one of several sacred cities in India where heaven and earth meet, and where the gods have descended.

Varanasi is also a sacred place for Hindus to come and die. Cremations take place here on two main burning ghats. It is believed that Shiva whispers in the ear of the dead the magical phrase (*mantra*) that will allow the

deceased to make the final crossing to liberation (*moksha*). Relatives spread the ashes in the river (even from deceased that were not cremated here). In the epic text, the Mahabharata, it is said that “if only the bone of a person should touch the water of the Ganges, that person shall dwell, honored, in heaven.”

WHAT ELSE IS VARANASI FAMOUS FOR?

Varanasi is also known as a center for scholarship, in particular the study of India’s classical language, Sanskrit. It is also famous for its production of brocade silks.

On the outskirts of Varanasi is Sarnath, a park area enclosing a museum, temples, scattered ruins of stupas and monastic buildings. It was here that the Buddha preached his first sermon in the deer park.

The modern city of Varanasi is a blend of ghats, temples, hotels, and narrow lanes. It is peopled with pedestrians, pilgrims, and a mixture of cars, scooters and rickshaws. Like many cities, it must balance the needs of its long history and traditions with modern conveniences and concerns over pollution and overcrowding.

SLIDE 2



A Hindu woman gives offerings and performs prayers to Lakshmi at her home shrine, from *Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion* by Stephen P. Huyler. Photograph copyright Stephen P. Huyler, 1999.

WHAT IS HAPPENING HERE?

An image of the goddess Lakshmi, in the form of a silver mask made in the 1100s, is bedecked with multiple adornments. Lakshmi has received numerous offerings as part of an annual ritual welcoming her as the Goddess of Abundance and Prosperity. In the state of Tamil Nadu, this festival occurs on a designated day that falls between mid-August in mid-September.

This photo illustrates manifestations of the ritual that has taken place over the course of several days. The worshiper, the matriarch of the family, has purified herself with oils and recited special prayers. She and family members have procured special fruits and flowers in the early-morning markets. The house was then decorated with auspicious diagrams made of rice powder called *kolams*. The Goddess shrine has been decorated with an abundant arrangement of banana leaves and fresh flowers. The Goddess has been offered many special foods including unhusked rice, turmeric, betel leaves, palm leaves, areca nuts, a small comb, a mirror, and glass bangles. The image itself is decorated with a red vermilion dot on its forehead and black kohl under its eyes. The image is further adorned with earrings that are inserted into its ear holes, and various necklaces belonging to the worshiper herself. Numerous garlands complete the image's voluptuous adornment. Various rituals will be conducted with the image, performed by the family in its home. The lighting of the flame brings the real presence of the Goddess herself into the image. She is welcomed with song and a succession of many offerings. Ceremonial lamps and incense are lighted. A complex ritual involving the recitation of the 1,008 names of the Goddess is performed, each name punctuated with the offering of an individual blossom upon the Goddess image. The family later invites neighbors and friends to their home to celebrate the Goddess, continue in song, and partake of the blessed food.

WHAT DOES THIS TEACH US ABOUT HOW IMAGES WERE USED IN RELIGIOUS LIFE?

The images found in museums today were part of a rich and vibrant ritual context, and we can assume many of them were once adorned with varied offerings, including fruits, flowers, powder, other auspicious substances, jewelry, and garments, among others. Textual sources provide great detail about the proper worship ceremonies to be performed by priests in the temple context. In domestic spaces, individual worshipers and families follow prescribed ceremonies as well as creating their own rituals and expressions of adoration. It is customary for families and individuals to have a personal god to whom they are especially devoted.

SLIDE 3



Kandariya Mahadeva temple, Khajuraho, India. Photo by Olivier Laude, 1999.

WHAT IS THIS BUILDING AND HOW DOES IT FUNCTION?

This is a Hindu temple called the Kandariya Mahadeva, the largest and tallest of the surviving temples at the temple site of Khajuraho, in central India. It is dedicated to Shiva, who is represented by the linga in the main shrine known as the womb chamber located at the heart of the building.

Hindu temples are designed along axis points that extend from the heart of the chamber upward through the line of the main tower (*shikara*) and outward in the cardinal directions. The main deity image is located in the central shrine, and the outside of the shrine and the exterior of the temple are richly decorated with sculptures. In some design schemes, one views the entire range of existence looking upwards from bottom to top, with plant and animal life near the bottom and the gods and semi-divine beings in various sculptural registers extending towards the heavens at the temple's summit. The steeply rising superstructure, and overall mountainous form of this temple are references to the mythical source of creation, the primordial Mount Meru, around which the world came into being.

The Khajuraho temples sit on very large platforms, and it is thought that originally there may have been a lake here beneath them. An association between temple sites and water is appropriate, as an essential part of Hindu worship is ritual bathing, required by the devout in order to purify themselves before entering the sacred area of the temple.

WHEN AND HOW WAS IT MADE?

The majority of Hindu temples in north and central India were built between the Gupta period (roughly 300–700 CE) and the 1100s. The temples at Khajuraho are considered among the highpoints of classical Hindu architecture in the northern (*nagara*) style (see the diagram of a similar temple at Khajuraho in this packet). This temple and more than 80 others were built by the Chandella kings, who ruled this area of

central India between 950–1050 CE. Some temples, such as those at Khajuraho, survived because they were located in remote locations, removed from the conflict and warfare of political and urban centers. Even today, one must fly to Khajuraho, or take a full-day car ride from any other major city center.

Some of the earliest Hindu temples were carved out of living rock (see next slide), and freestanding stone temples evolved gradually after that. Western-style arches and vaults were never used, but masons carved fine sandstone in numerous pieces, which were then assembled and sometimes pinned together using metal rods.

The Khajuraho temples are famous around the world for their fine statuary, many of which depict loving couples, sometimes in erotic poses. These images were disturbing to early European visitors, and even now confound many viewers. Scholars debate the meaning of these images, offering multiple explanations. One interpretation is that they show tantric ritual symbolism. “Tantric” refers to esoteric texts and techniques used in both Hindu and Buddhist practices that offer a direct path to enlightenment or spiritual release using the body’s natural energies as a starting point. Thus, physical pleasure, and more specifically a controlled experience of physical pleasure, could be a path to spiritual achievement. Such imagery may also challenge to the viewer to move beyond the earthly experience of physical pleasure into higher spiritual goals. The location of these loving couples on the temple walls, between the meeting hall portion of the temple and the inner sanctum, seems critical to their interpretation.

Various esoteric and mainstream texts describe sexual activities and postures, including the comprehensively categorical *Kama Sutra*. It is likely that these erotic sculptures take such texts as the source of their subject matter. Aesthetically, these sculptures are highly sophisticated, expressing virtuosity in their rendering of human figures, expression and interaction, and an extremely imaginative vision of physical acrobatics.

SLIDE 4



Ganesha in a temple niche, Khajuraho, India. Photo by Olivier Laude, 1999.

WHO IS DEPICTED HERE?

This is an image of dancing Ganesha, a Hindu deity. Ganesha is the elephant-headed son of Shiva and Parvati. In one version of his mythology, Ganesha was fashioned by Parvati to guard her private chambers. Ganesha did not know who Shiva was and when confronted by him did not allow Shiva to enter Parvati's room. The god became angry and decapitated the young boy. Parvati was distraught and demanded that Shiva replace Ganesha's head with that of the first living creature they could find. This turned out to be the head of an elephant, and hence he has become known as elephant-headed god. Ganesha is the god of beginnings, and he is also credited with writing the Mahabharata. He is a god of learning and of students. He is also the remover of obstacles, and is commonly invoked by devotees to make undertakings auspicious and to solve problems. Ganesha is greatly adored in India, his charms enhanced by his jolly appearance and his sweet tooth and pot-belly. He dances here joyfully in reference to his father Shiva's cosmic dance.

WHERE IS THIS SCULPTURE LOCATED AND WHAT IS ITS FUNCTION?

The photograph shows the figure of Ganesha in a niche on the side of one of the temples at Khajuraho in central India. There is a similar figure on display in the Asian Art Museum galleries. Many such figures were depicted on the exterior of Hindu temples, as the whole temple was conceived as the abode of the gods, an axial point where humans met the divine. The many-faceted layers of the temple itself were like a palace, where the gods faced out in the various directions. Ganesha is usually found to the left of the entrance to the temple. He is the god of beginnings, and he is the first major image that the devotee sees as he or she circumambulates the temple. Circumambulation, or walking around the central part of the temple in a usually clockwise direction, is an essential part of both Hindu and Buddhist practice.

WHAT GOES ON AT THE TEMPLE?

Worship (puja) can take many forms. At a Hindu temple, worship does not necessarily take place at set times before an entire congregation, but may occur in the presence of a priest and individual, or among small groups early or later in the day. Temple priests are on hand to oversee ritual offerings and prayers that the worshiper brings or requests as part of the visit. Large pujas also occur at major temples at particularly scheduled times, which may draw hundreds or thousands of worshipers. Temples are dedicated to a principle deity, represented by a main figure that is located within the central chamber, although a wide range of deities from the Hindu pantheon may be depicted both inside and outside the temple.

This temple is the Lakshmana temple, dedicated to Vishnu. It was built around 950 CE. Of the original 85 temples built in this area by the Chandella kings, only 25 survive. This temple is no longer in active use, but like the others, it has become a major tourist site, noted for its fine statuary.

SLIDE 5



The Hindu deity Shiva as destroyer of the three cities of the demons, 1000–1100
Central India
Sandstone
The Avery Brundage Collection, B6356+

WHO IS DEPICTED HERE?

This is an image of the Hindu god Shiva. The image appears in a complex narrative scene. Shiva is standing in the pose of an archer, having just released a single arrow that is destroying three cities occupied by demons. He is surrounded by weapons and his lower left hand touches his elephant-headed son, Ganesha, who peers out gingerly behind him.

The apparently frenetic, chaotic scene suggests the urgency and drama of the narrative. The complete name of this subject is Shiva the Destroyer of the Three Cities. It refers to the three indestructible cities of earth, air, and sky that a group of demons created after receiving boons from the gods. In Hindu mythology, whenever a boon is granted, a corollary counteracts the boon, to protect the world from unchecked power. In this case, the demons and their cities could be destroyed by a single arrow once in a thousand years, when all three cities were aligned. The scene shows the moment when Shiva draws back his bow and releases his single arrow to destroy the demons and their domain.

HOW CAN YOU RECOGNIZE SHIVA?

Shiva is a powerful deity, and like other powerful Hindu deities, he is depicted with many arms carrying weapons. His two main arms are shooting the bow. In his other hands are the body of a serpent, a trident, a sword, the end of the serpent's tail, a shield, and a skull club.

Shiva's lower left hand rests on his son, the elephant-headed God, Ganesha. True to his nature, Ganesha is undisturbed by the battle as he enjoys a bowl of sweets. Another figure is bent over and supports Shiva's bent leg. Yet another figure holds a shield and sword. Shiva is often seen accompanied by armies of attendants.

When not engaged in battle or other mythic struggles, Shiva is an ascetic figure who meditates in the Himalayas. As an ascetic, he smears ashes over his body from the cremation grounds (since he is associated with the cycle of birth, death and rebirth). His hair is unkempt, styled into a crown of matted locks and ornamented with a crescent moon. He usually carries a trident, an hour-glass drum, and an axe. He is also lord of the animals, and is sometimes seen with an antelope or deer. He often has a snake wrapped around his neck. The artist here has chosen to depict those attributes that reflect the image of Shiva in battle.

HOW WOULD THIS SCULPTURE HAVE BEEN USED?

This sculpture was made of sandstone in central India around 1000 to 1200. Sandstone allows for detailed carving, but also has a soft, malleable appearance as compared to harder stone.

The sculpture would have been placed above the viewer on the wall of a temple, and may have been painted in bright colors or otherwise decorated. Worshipers to the temple would have seen this sculpture from below and been reminded of the heroic deeds of Shiva. What effect do you think this would have had on people?

SLIDE 6



The Hindu deity Shiva in the fierce form of Bhairava,
approx. 1300–1500
India; Karnataka state
Chloritic schist
Gift of the Connoisseurs' Council, 2000.6

WHO IS DEPICTED HERE?

Individual Hindu gods manifest themselves in many forms, in some cases including the ferocious and terrifying. Among his many guises, Shiva is an ascetic and mendicant who renounces conventional earthly existence to pursue extreme practices and austerities. This manifestation of Shiva as ascetic is the fearsome Bhairava form, who is accompanied by a dog and shown wearing a garland of severed heads. A common story about Bhairava is that he cut off the fifth head of the unruly god Brahma, and he was thus cursed to wander the earth with this severed head in his hand. Brahminicide, the killing of a brahman, is a tremendous crime whose penance involves years of mendicant life, living on alms, and carrying a staff and a skull. Bhairava can also be identified through his fangs and bulging eyes, which indicate his ferocity, his matted ascetic locks which have been sculpted into a headdress, his ascetic's begging bowl in the form of a skull cup, and the string of heads curving around his lower body. In some versions of the story, Bhairava's skull cup is formed from the skull of Brahma whose head he severed. The sculpture's right hand would have held a club surmounted by a human head. Bhairava wears a hissing serpent in the place of a loincloth. This form of the god Shiva, said to be the most terrifying, induces worshipers to confront their own fears.

The god's physical form is sensual and well proportioned in the same manner and precise dimensions of other South Indian figures, including those in stone and in bronze. The dog portrayed with Bhairava, considered his vehicle, may be explained by the association of funerary grounds with the presence of wild dogs. Cremation grounds were frequented by scavenger animals. In some textual accounts, animal and human sacrifices were also offered to the god.

HOW WAS THE SCULPTURE USED?

The sculpture may have been worshiped in a temple dedicated to Bhairava, or it may have functioned as a significant image in the context of a larger Shiva temple. Due to the transgressive, fierce, and terrific nature of Bhairava, in worship he received conventionally forbidden offerings such as alcohol and meat. The surface of this image is covered with boot black, a substance similar to shoe polish, which British collectors during the Raj often chose to apply to stone sculpture, apparently for aesthetic reasons. The image has been further modified by being rubbed with red-brown dirt, perhaps to enhance sculptural details.

SLIDE 7



The Hindu deity Vishnu, 1100–1200
India or Bangladesh; northern Bengal
Phyllite
The Avery Brundage Collection, B62S4+

WHO IS DEPICTED HERE?

This stone stele depicts the Hindu god Vishnu, attended by two consorts, Lakshmi (lower left) and Sarasvati (lower right - slide 5). Vishnu is the god of Preservation, the great maintainer who often appears in various incarnations (*avatara*) to provide salvation for humanity. Some of his best-known avatars, who are tremendously popular and beloved throughout Hindu India, are the gods Krishna and Rama. While the god Shiva may appear as ferocious and terrifying, the god Vishnu generally appears as a princely and benevolent being, sometimes even in a charming and playful childlike form. Vishnu, like Shiva, is capable of conquering tremendous adversaries and is likewise armed with various weapons.

Here Vishnu appears as a kingly god, standing erect on a double lotus pedestal. Lakshmi is the goddess of beauty and good fortune. Sarasvati is the goddess of learning, music, and poetry. Vishnu is accompanied by his vehicle, the bird Garuda, seen here beneath Lakshmi as a bird-like human with a hooked nose and small wings.

HOW DO YOU RECOGNIZE VISHNU?

Vishnu can be identified by the attributes he holds in his four hands. His two raised arms hold a mace or club and a discus. His lower hands hold a conch shell and seed; his lower right hand is in the gift-giving gesture (*varada mudra*). More lotuses are visible beneath his lower hands

As a kingly figure, Vishnu is adorned with an elaborate crown and jewelry, including a necklace, earrings, armbands and a girdle. The long garland flowing in front of his body and crossing at the knees is called a mala. Some of his attributes are weapons of war. The conch shell is blown during battle. The discus has a sharp, jagged edge and is hurled through the air to cut like a knife.

Compare this Vishnu with a sandstone sculpture of Vishnu from central India, and another from the Hoysala period in southern India in the Asian Art Museum galleries. What similarities and differences can you identify?

HOW DO YOU RECOGNIZE THE GODDESSES?

Lakshmi is the usual consort (or female aspect or partner) of Vishnu, and is recognized by the fly whisk and lotus. The lotus is associated with life-giving waters and abundance. In another form, she is usually depicted on a lotus with attendants and elephants bathing her. Sarasvati is often seen on her own, or with Brahma, and can be identified by the musical instrument she carries, a *vina*. The vina symbolizes the beauty of the mind in speech, song and wisdom. She is often seen with a peacock. In this sculpture, both female figures stand on lotus pedestals in a three-bend posture (bending at the waist, hips and knees), which gives the figures a graceful appearance. See if you can find other representations of these goddesses in the galleries.

HOW WOULD THIS SCULPTURE HAVE BEEN USED?

This sculpture was made during the Pala period (1000–1200 CE) in northeastern India. The gray black stone stele is typical of the region. The combination of the deeply three-dimensional central figure raised from a rigorously incised, detailed background is also typical of the period. The stele shape indicates that the piece was meant to be viewed from the front. No complete structural temples have survived from this time. However, we can assume that this sculpture would have been placed in a niche in a temple devoted to Vishnu.

SLIDE 8



Krishna overcoming the serpent Kaliya, approx. 1400–1500 India; reportedly from Sundaraperumakoil, Tanjavur district, Tamil Nadu state, former kingdom of Vijayanagara
Bronze
The Avery Brundage Collection, B65B72

WHO IS DEPICTED HERE?

This is a bronze statue of the god Krishna dancing on the body of the serpent Kaliya. Krishna is the eighth descent (*avatara*) of the god Vishnu, fulfilling Vishnu's ongoing role as maintainer of the universe. Krishna is very popular in India, and is often seen as a youthful cowherd figure playing a flute, as a child stealing butter, as a lover of Radha, or as the guide and mentor of the warrior Arjuna before the great battle in the epic poem, the Mahabharata.

Scenes of Krishna's life and deeds are drawn from many epic, Sanskrit, and vernacular texts. In this episode, Krishna is still a young village cow herder, and has been called upon by the villagers to subdue the serpent king Kaliya, whose family is polluting the Yamuna River. We know Kaliya is a king because of the seven hoods surrounding his head. Krishna plunges into the river, and with his superhuman powers, subdues the serpent. Here he is seen dancing on the body of the serpent, who shows respect for Krishna by raising his hands in a gesture of submission and adoration.

HOW DO WE RECOGNIZE KRISHNA?

Krishna is shown here as a vigorous youth in a scene which would be immediately recognizable as one of the classic episodes from his life. Krishna always has a handsome, pleasing demeanor, as befits a beloved god. His ability to contain evil, and his delight in sustaining the cosmos, is shown in the effortless manner in which he dances on the body of the serpent. His right hand gesture offers reassurance to worshipers. The Southern Indian artisans who produced this statue enhanced the god's appeal with a profusion of jewelry, fluttering garments, and flowers on his shoulder. In addition, Krishna wears a tall crown, much like Vishnu.

HOW WAS THIS SCULPTURE MADE?

This sculpture, along with other bronzes in the India gallery, was made using the lost-wax technique. A wax model of the statue was covered by a clay mold and then heated. The wax melted, leaving an empty core that was filled with liquid bronze. The clay mold was then broken, leaving a bronze sculpture. Devotional sculptures, both for temple and private use, are still fashioned in southern India today, using this method.

HOW WAS THIS SCULPTURE USED?

This bronze was cast during the Vijayanagar period , around the 1400s in Southern India. The Vijayanagar period was the last great Hindu kingdom of South India. Continuing in the path of their Chola predecessors, the Vijayanagar rulers were vigorous patrons of the arts. At this time, the image of Kaliya Krishna became popular. Lugs, or handles on the base of the bronze , indicate that it was made to be carried in processions.

SLIDE 9



The Hindu deity Durga victorious over the buffalo demon, 1000–1100
India; Tamil Nadu state
Granite
The Avery Brundage Collection, B64S10

WHO IS DEPICTED HERE?

This is an image of the goddess Durga. She is shown in a triumphant pose as the slayer of the buffalo demon, Mahisha. Durga is a manifestation of the Goddess, who can also appear as the consort Parvati or as a destructive figure Kali. Durga is a powerful manifestation of Parvati and as such appears on her own rather than as a consort of Shiva.

Durga appeared when the gods were unable to subdue a demon who was threatening the entire world. Individually, the gods were unable to defeat the demon. They summoned Durga and gave her all their weapons. The battle went on and on, prolonged by the fact that Mahisha continually changed shapes. Finally, Durga was able to cut off his head as the demon emerged from a buffalo. In this scene, the struggle and violence of the combat between Goddess and demon is only subtly suggested. Durga stands victorious over the head of the buffalo, alluding to the famous story but focusing most of the viewers' attention on the powerful goddess herself.

In Hindu imagery, many divine figures are often portrayed with their vehicles, animals associated with them such as the eagle Garuda earlier seen portrayed with the god Vishnu. In the visual arts, gods' vehicles will often be seen to physically support and transport them. In this sculpture, as well as in other South Indian renditions of the subject, the artist has creatively subverted the idea of vehicle to create a deft suggestion of a mythic story, using a basic iconographic device.

HOW DO WE RECOGNIZE DURGA?

The goddess Durga is usually depicted with many arms, and sometimes rides on a lion or tiger, her conventional vehicle. Her weapons include a sword, shield, bow and arrow, club and trident. Durga is a powerful figure, and she is usually depicted standing above the buffalo demon, or riding a lion with raised weapons.

Another manifestation of the goddess is Kali, who appears as a terrifying and destructive, sometimes having fangs and wearing a garland of severed heads. (The wrathful goddess Kali is similar in nature to Bhairava, the fierce form of Shiva who was discussed earlier.)

The artisans who created this statue of Durga have combined an image of victory with an image of beauty. The figure is richly adorned with jewelry, a tall crown and has a slender waist and graceful pose. In this sense, she reflects the ability of most goddess figures to act courageously in the world, and at the same time be subjects of devotion and beauty.

HOW WAS THIS SCULPTURE USED?

This sculpture might have been placed in a niche of a wall on a southern Indian temple during the Chola dynasty, around the 1000s CE. The graceful, slender, elongated form of the figure is typical of the period. Her image communicates the idea of triumph over adversity, and the ability to conquer adversaries unvanquishable by the gods.

SLIDE 10



Goddess and Buffalo Demon, Shiva temple, Chidambaram , Tamil Nadu. Photograph by Kalpana Desai, 2004.

WHO IS DEPICTED HERE?

As in the previous slide, the Goddess Durga appears in an episode involving her defeat of the buffalo demon. The Goddess image appears in a niche on one side of the main structure of the great Shiva Nataraja (Dancing Shiva) a temple in Chidambaram, in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. This celebrated temple complex was created during the Chola dynasty and completed in the 1200s. The god Shiva is the main deity worshiped at this temple, while images of other important and related duties are found in principle locations around the temple structure, as well as in sculptural freezes and other decorative motifs.

In this image, the multi-armed Goddess is portrayed with her enemy the buffalo demon in a subject commonly depicted in sculptural relief. The sensual looking and serene Goddess is framed by a cascade of multiple arms, each once holding a separate weapon or attribute.

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT THIS IMAGE?

Elsewhere in narrative sculpture and painting, this story is often depicted through an image of graphic violence. In the previous slide, the beheading and conquest of the buffalo demon is subtly alluded to by the fact that the Goddess stands upon his head. This rendering at the great Shiva temple expresses a sense of harmony, and a victory that is satisfying to both parties in the drama. The buffalo demon Mahisa is portrayed here in an unusually anthropomorphic and sensuous form, his curvaceous thigh and garment echoing those of the Goddess herself. His charmingly realistic face, including bovine eyes and drooping ear, speak to the persistent talent of Indians artists in rendering lifelike animal forms. The buffalo has so acquiesced to his defeat that also equates with his own spiritual liberation, that he is licking the foot of the Goddess which rests upon the shoulder.

The Goddess image is adorned with a gorgeously radiant silk sari, and also decorated with strands of flowers. The sari was probably draped by temple priests, although various image adornments may be left as well by passing worshipers. This region of south India is celebrated for its consummate perfection of silk saris, and thus the adornment seen here expresses a regional artistic strength.

SLIDE 11



Mahabodi Temple, Bodh Gaya, India.
Photo by Olivier Laude, 1999.

WHAT IS THIS BUILDING?

The photograph shows the Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya, in the state of Bihar in eastern India. This temple stands next to a descendent of the bodhi tree under which the Buddha achieved enlightenment. This site is the most important pilgrimage site in the Buddhist world, similar to Varanasi for Hindus or Mecca for Muslims.

The building we see here is a fairly modern restoration, carried out by the Burmese and English in the 1800s. The foundations and inner core of the temple, however, are much older, and they give us one of the few surviving examples of a northeastern Indian temple structure. There are two levels of shrines at the temple, on top of which rises the 54 meter tower. The tower consists of many stories, which become more compressed towards the top. The four small towers were added in the 1800s.

The most important place at the site is the tree shrine, located at the back of this photograph. The present tree is believed to have come from a cutting from a tree in Sri Lanka, itself brought to Sri Lanka from the original tree by the son of the emperor Ashoka (272–231 BCE). Ashoka, who was a great imperial patron of the arts, erected a shrine here, and his platform still exists between the bodhi tree and the present temple structure.

HOW DID ART FUNCTION AT THIS SITE?

Eastern India was the last stronghold of Buddhism before it was largely eradicated in India around the 1100s. A number of sites in the area, such as Bodh Gaya and the university at Nalanda, became important pilgrimage centers and were visited by Buddhists from around Asia. Images from this site were copied or carried back in the form of souvenirs to places such as Burma, Tibet, and beyond. We have a famous account by the Chinese monk, Xuanzang (602–664) who traveled through this area as part of a fifteen-year

journey into the heartland of Buddhism.

Statues from this area, and might have stood in one of the niches on the walls of temples such as Mahabodhi temple, or at university complexes such as Nalanda. Images showing the Buddha touching the earth to witness his claim of enlightenment became very popular, both as ephemeral pilgrimage images that were widely reproduced, as well as in the form of much more costly stone sculpture.

WHAT GOES ON AT THIS SITE TODAY?

Bodhi Gaya is located within a very poor region of India. Despite this fact, pilgrims from around the world continue to visit the site. Buddhist nations have set up their own temples and lodgings around the town in order to accommodate visitors. Many Tibetans can be seen here in the winter months. Visitors remove their shoes at the main entrance to the temple (as at any Buddhist or Hindu place of worship) and walk clockwise around the temple on one of the many paths that surround it. Some visitors chant or meditate at the site. Monks pray by carrying out prostrations facing the temple. The bodhi tree is covered in vibrant textiles. Votive candles are lit. Flowers are placed on the Asokan platform. Hindus visit the site as well, and some consider Lord Buddha to be one of the incarnations of Vishnu.

SLIDE 12



Great Stupa at Sanchi, India. Photo by Olivier Laude, 1999.

WHAT IS THIS BUILDING AND HOW DOES IT FUNCTION?

This is the Great Stupa at Sanchi, located on a hill in the countryside of central India just north of present-day Bhopal. It is the largest of several stupas at the site, which also includes the remains of several monastic buildings, including dining halls and pilgrim rooms.

Stupas are dome-like structures, originally mounds honoring the relics of great leaders or princes, which later became associated with the relics of the Buddha. When the historical Buddha died, his physical remains were said to have been distributed among ten burial mounds. Several centuries later, during the reign of the emperor Ashoka (272–231 BCE), these remains were subdivided into even more sites, one of which was Sanchi.

Early Buddhist stupas were mounds surrounded by a fence—not unlike the sacred trees and other village shrines found throughout India—that became objects of worship. Devotees walked around the stupa in a clockwise fashion. As stupas became more elaborate, they were crowned with a platform and a series of disks derived from umbrellas (originally used to shade royalty). The dome itself was garlanded with flowers, and gateways were added at the cardinal points. Stupas were venerated as a symbol of the Buddha's final release. The presence of relics or texts rendered the site sacred, similar to the bishop's throne or reliquaries at the heart of European cathedrals. As Buddhism developed across Asia, the stupa evolved into a pagoda form, and as the image of the Buddha developed, it began to appear inside the stupa or in separate image halls.

WHEN AND HOW WAS IT MADE?

The original stupa at Sanchi was probably a modest burial mound of mud and clay. This stupa was repaired and doubled in size around 150 BCE. The dome was encased in masonry, and a walking terrace was constructed 16 feet off the ground. The elaborate stone fence was added on ground level. The Great Stupa

achieved its present state around 75–50 BCE, most notably with the addition of the four elaborately carved gateways, carved in a finer sandstone, perhaps by ivory carvers as indicated in an inscription on one of the panels. Between around 1100 and 1900, Sanchi lay deserted. Today, it remains the best-preserved example of an Indian stupa.

HOW DO ART IMAGES FUNCTION IN THIS TYPE OF BUILDING?

As stupas became more elaborate, their complexes developed narrative spaces in which to carve stories of the life of the Buddha, as well as to create images of the patrons who commissioned the work. The image of the Buddha in human form does not appear at Sanchi, but the Buddha's presence is honored symbolically with images of footprints, riderless horses, umbrellas, an empty seat, and so on, thus providing evidence for an aniconic phase in Buddhist art according to some scholars. His previous lives (*jatakas*) are told in rich narrative detail, and there are numerous scenes of people and animals worshipping the bodhi tree, the wheel, and other sacred sites associated with the Buddha. One explanation for the missing figure of the Buddha is that, having attained nirvana after so many previous lives, it would be inappropriate to show him in the physical form that he has left behind.

Almost all the carving on the Great Stupa appears on the four gateways, each facing one of the four cardinal directions. This photograph has been taken near the southern gateway (right) where the original entrance path would have been.

The two pillars on each gateway support three crossbeams. The images on these pillars and crossbeams give us great insight into ancient beliefs and customs. They also indicate Buddhism's readiness to incorporate indigenous, local beliefs into the Buddhist practice. Several gateways, for example, are adorned with female fertility spirits (*yakshis*) who bring auspiciousness to the site. A similar figure of a yakshi from a railing pillar can be found in the Indian galleries at the Asian Art Museum.

SLIDE 13



Railing pillar with female figure beneath a tree,
approx. 100–200
India; Mathura area, Uttar Pradesh state
Sandstone
Gift of the Asian Art Museum Foundation, B69S13

WHO IS DEPICTED HERE?

This stone sculpture depicts a female figure holding on to the branches of a tree. She stands in what is known as a triple bend position. Part of her arms and one leg have broken off. She has a pleasant expression on her face. She wears heavy earrings and anklets. Her full hips, narrow waist and ample breasts are signs of beauty and abundant fertility. Covering her hips is an elaborate, jeweled girdle. She stands on a crouching, dwarflike figure.

The branches of the tree, possibly an *ashoka* tree, spread over her head like a backdrop. On the reverse side of the pillar are shown open lotus flowers.

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS FIGURE?

This is not a portrait of a real person, but a type of figure known as a yakshi a semi-divine spirit referring to a fertile woman whose touch brings certain kinds of trees to blossom. The image conveys a sense of blossoming fertility.

The image of a voluptuous woman of childbearing age has a long history in India, and many such images predate Buddhism (see example inset). Nature itself is considered feminine, and trees are sometimes worshiped with female spirits or local deities appearing to spring forth from their trunks.



Female figure, approx. 100 BCE to 100 CE
Northern or Eastern India
Terracotta
*Gift of Gursharan and Elvira Sidhu,
1991.256*

Trees are important in Buddhism since it was under a bodhi tree that the Buddha achieved enlightenment. On the railing decorations at Sanchi stupa is a depiction of worshipers paying homage to a tree, in front of which a platform has been erected.

It seems likely that this voluptuous figure would have welcomed worshipers, and imparted an auspicious element to the space enclosing the stupa. It may have also eased the transition of those worshipers who were accustomed to the worship of nature spirits and divinities to the relatively newer Buddhist practices and beliefs symbolized at this time by the stupa.

WHERE WAS THIS FIGURE ORIGINALLY PLACED?

This sculpture is a piece of architecture. The figure backs on to a pillar that originally supported the railing surrounding a stupa (see slide 12). Thus worshipers at ancient stupas would have encountered this figure as they passed through the gates into the stupa enclosure.

Enclosing a stupa with a railing helps to demarcate the sacred area of the stupa. One precedent for this may have come from the ancient practice of enclosing sacred trees and other objects, something that can still be encountered in villages and towns throughout India.

SLIDE 14



Interior of Cave 26, Ajanta, India. Photo by Olivier Laude, 1999.

WHAT IS THIS BUILDING?

This is one of a series of caves excavated out of the volcanic rock that extends along a cliff overlooking the Wagora River at Ajanta, about two hours north of the present-day city of Aurangabad, in Maharashtra state in western India. The Ajanta caves predate the caves equally famous at Ellora, but they are entirely Buddhist. There are early caves at Ajanta, from about the same time as the stupa at Sanchi (approx. 200–100 BCE), and later caves, dating from around 450 to 500 CE. This cave is numbered 26, and dates from the later period—around the 470s.

WHY DID BUDDHISTS USE CAVES?

Early Buddhists worshiped at stupas containing relics of the Buddha, as well as at other sites associated with his earthly existence. Buddhist monastics gained the support of some of India's ancient rulers. These rulers offered tracks of land and financial support to Buddhist monks as a way to gain the loyalty of their subjects. Buddhism also appealed to merchants and laypersons. Buddhist monasteries began to appear along trade routes, usually within one day's journey from each other. Merchants and travelers could rest or stay at the monasteries, in return for a financial offering. Caves offered practical shelter during the rainy (monsoon) season in India. They were cool during the dry, hot season, and they were durable.

WHAT ARE THE ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENTS REPRESENTED BY THIS CAVE?

The Buddhist and Hindu rock caves scattered throughout western India help us to chart artistic developments in ancient India, since most other buildings from that time were made of materials that have not survived. The caves at Ajanta also contain the earliest surviving group of paintings from ancient India (other than prehistoric evidence). We know from incomplete caves at Ajanta that masons and sculptors worked from top to bottom to excavate the caves and create architectural and sculptural forms.

There are two main types of cave structures at Ajanta. One is the square-shaped cave that contained cells where the monks resided. Over time, these became more elaborate and incorporated secondary shrines. The other main structure was the worship hall or shrine, called a *chaitya*. The early chaitya halls at Ajanta are carved into the rock in a bullet shape with a rounded end called an apse. The vaulted ribs at the top were carved to simulate wooden beams. At the centre of the apse was the stupa shape. The hall itself is lined with pillars, and behind the pillars and apse is an ambulatory passage, allowing the worshiper to walk around the stupas as a form of worship. We know the chaitya represented in this slide (cave 26) is a later development, because the rock-cut image of the seated Buddha appears, as if emerging out of the stupa (in the lower center part of the photograph). In contrast to the earlier caves, this cave is also much more elaborately decorated. This is important, because we know that Mahayana Buddhism was becoming more popular at this time, and with it, multiple images of the Buddha in human form, as well as images of supporting figures known as bodhisattvas, appear abundantly in Buddhist art.

The Ajanta caves provide direct evidence of early Buddhist art, patronage, and architectural forms that would influence the spread of Buddhism and Buddhist imagery across Asia.

HISTORICAL FOOTNOTE:

At the time this cave and others at Ajanta were excavated, India was ruled by the Gupta dynasty and in the western Deccan region by the Vakatakas, whose king Harishena (reigned 460–478 CE) was a follower of the Brahmanic (Hindu) traditions. Some of Harishena's ministers, however were followers of Buddhism and it was principally these individuals who commissioned the later caves at Ajanta. Cave 26 in fact contains an inscription stating that the donor was a powerful monk by the name of Buddhabhadra, and it was dedicated to a former minister of a rival group who were about to overrun the Vakataka dynasty. Commissioning this cave, therefore, may have been both an act of merit as well as a political maneuver among ministers jostling for power. Part of the inscription reads, "A man continues to enjoy himself in paradise as long as his memory is green in this world. Why should one therefore not set up a memorial in the mountains that will endure as long as the moon and sun shine in the skies?"

SLIDE 15



Seated Buddha, approx. 200–300
Pakistan; perhaps Jamalgarhi, Peshawar valley,
ancient region of Gandhara
Schist
The Avery Brundage Collection, B60S393

WHO IS DEPICTED HERE?

This is an image of the preaching Buddha. He is seated in a full lotus position on a dais or throne, portions of which can be seen in the corners of the statue. Two smaller figures below the throne are shown in a position of reverence.

HOW DO WE RECOGNIZE THE BUDDHA?

As a result of his enlightenment, the historical prince Siddhartha Gautama became the Buddha (the enlightened one), and thereafter acquired various marks (*lakshana*) that identify him as the Buddha. These markings became formalized over several centuries as sculptors refined the image of the Buddha and adapted that image to local cultures.

One of these marks is the wisdom bump or protuberance on the head. The Buddha's hair is gathered in a top knot, in keeping with the fashion of the times and similar to the way ascetics (spiritual people who renounce the comforts of material life) gather their hair in India even today. The depiction of the top knot in sculpture became more formalized over time as a bump, and the hair developed into tiny stylized curls. Another mark is the *urna*, a tuft of hair between the eyebrows. The Buddha's earlobes are extended in reference to the heavy jewelry he wore previously as a prince. He wears a simple monk's robe, in keeping with his spiritual purpose, and sits in a lotus position. If his hands were lying flat in his lap, he would be meditating, but in this sculpture his hands are raised in a teaching position. The Buddha is also identified as an exceptional person by the addition of a halo behind his head, which may have derived from a sun disk, and may also refer to the wheel of the Buddhist law, a symbol for the Buddha's teachings.

WHAT IS THE STYLE OF THIS PIECE AND WHERE DID IT COME FROM?

We don't know exactly where this image came from, but many objects like it originate in the region near the border of present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan. During the early centuries of the Common Era, this region was called Gandhara, and was part of the Kushana empire. The Kushana rulers, who had migrated from western and central Asia, ruled a large part of central Asia and northern India. This area was crossroads of trade and cultures between Rome in the West and China in the East. It was during this time—centuries after the historical Buddha had lived—that images of the Buddha and related figures began to appear in large numbers. Many similar to this one were produced in Gandhara, and others were produced in the urban center of Mathura, south of present day Dehli. Such figures would have filled the niches on the exterior of stupa and monastic complexes.

Gandharan style has been described as expressing Greco-Roman influence. This is because Western art historians and archaeologists have drawn connections between the style of these figures and those seen in Hellenistic statues and friezes. Gandhara was an outpost in the Hellenistic world since the fourth century BCE, as well as a major crossroads of commerce and travel. There existed a great diversity in imagery and material culture in the region. Now, however, scholars tend to characterize this art as showing a mixture of influences—Western, Indian, and West Asian—since this area was very cosmopolitan and tolerant of many different belief systems at the time this statue was created.

SLIDE 16



The Bodhisattva Maitreya, 100–300
Pakistan; ancient region of Gandhara
Schist
The Avery Brundage Collection, B605597

WHO IS DEPICTED HERE?

This statue depicts the bodhisattva Maitreya. Bodhisattvas are enlightened beings who postpone their own salvation in order to help all sentient beings. The bodhisattva is an ideal type, not a depiction of an historical person like the Buddha. Bodhisattvas have some of the characteristics of Christian saints. They are compassionate figures who help worshippers. Unlike saints, however, they are not associated with historical persons, hagiographies, or martyrdom.

There are many bodhisattvas. Maitreya is the Buddha of the future, who will be born to teach enlightenment in the next age. According to Mahayana teachings, a Buddha is first born as a bodhisattva, and then after many lifetimes, progresses on to Buddhahood. The historical Buddha was himself referred to as a bodhisattva before becoming the Buddha. Another common bodhisattva to appear in Buddhist art is Avalokiteshvara, who is known by different names in different parts of the Buddhist world (for example, Guanyin in China and Kannon in Japan). Many images of this bodhisattva are found throughout the Asian Art Museum, represented in the galleries of various national traditions.

HOW DO WE KNOW WHO THIS FIGURE IS AND WHERE IT CAME FROM?

Bodhisattvas tend, as a whole, to be more richly attired than figures of buddhas. Where many Buddha figures (except crowned buddhas) have only a simple monk's robe draped over one shoulder, bodhisattvas are adorned with flowing robes, bracelets, necklaces and threads containing amulet boxes, elaborate hairdos, and sometimes a moustache. Bodhisattvas are often represented as princely figures, alluding to the historical Buddha's life as a prince before he renounced his kingdom, and distinguishing them from the Buddha who is attired as a mendicant monk. The bodhisattva Maitreya is identified here by the small flask he holds in his left hand, filled with a liquid of immortality.

The style of the sculpture is similar to the previous image, and the sculpture also comes from the region of Gandhara. The schist stone allows for detailed carving, especially in the deeply carved lines of the drapery, the hairdo, and jewelry. Gandharan sculpture is reminiscent of Hellenistic sculptures in the naturalistic attention to anatomical details. There are also direct references to Greco-Roman imagery, for example, in the centaurs holding the central amulet on the main necklace. A centaur is a classical mythological animal that is half-human, half horse.

The bodhisattva figure is carved realistically, with enough attention to detail to make one suspect that local princes in the area probably were adorned this way. By combining local styles and characteristics with messages having universal appeal, Buddhist art effectively helped spread the faith into central Asia and beyond.

WHEN DID BODHISATTVAS EMERGE IN BUDDHIST ART?

We do not know for sure when the first Buddhist image was created, but historical evidence provides examples of Buddha images within several centuries of his lifetime (approximately 560–480 BCE). The earliest Buddhist imagery was probably created in ephemeral materials. By the first century CE, we find Buddhist images and stone in the North Indian center of Mathura, and in the northwestern region of Gandhara.

This sculpture dates from about 100–300 CE, the same time as object in slide 15. Sculpted images of the Buddha and of bodhisattva figures are prolific in this period.

The concept of the bodhisattva is, in philosophical terms, associated with the rise of Mahayana, a branch of Buddhism that offered the possibility of Buddhahood to everyone. Other branches of Buddhism presented a more arduous path to Buddhahood through the monastic order, with less hope of individual salvation. In the Mahayana path, having compassionate figures to work on behalf of the worshipers' spiritual goals served to make the faith more accessible to larger numbers of people.

SLIDE 17



The Conception of the Buddha-to-be in Queen Maya's dream, approx. 100–300
Pakistan; ancient region of Gandhara
Phyllite
The Avery Brundage Collection, B6455

WHO IS DEPICTED HERE?

This relief scene from around 100 to 300 CE depicts the dream of Maya, the mother of the historical Buddha. Queen Maya is asleep in her palace under a full moon. An attendant stands guard outside. In her dream, a white elephant enters her side. This is a miraculous conception that results in the birth of the future Buddha. This scene, along with others from the life of the Buddha, would have been recognizable to viewers at the time it was made, as the scenes from the life of Christ on the walls of a cathedral would have been familiar to medieval European viewers.

WHAT OTHER SCENES OF THE LIFE OF THE BUDDHA ARE IMPORTANT?

Several scenes from the life of the Buddha are shown together in the galleries at the Asian Art Museum. There are scenes of the Buddha's birth in the Lumbini gardens, his departure from the palace at night (symbolizing the renouncement of his princely life), his defeat of Mara at the time of his enlightenment (slide 18), his sermon at the Deer Park in Sarnath, and his death surrounded by his disciples, and subsequent attainment of Nirvana. In some works of art, you can see many of these scenes surrounding a central image of the Buddha.

WHAT WAS THE FUNCTION OF THESE OBJECTS?

Fragments that are sculpted on one side like this are called friezes. They would have decorated the wall of a Buddhist monument or monastic building, at the foot of a pedestal or along a stair riser. These images told a story to worshipers, essentially reminding them of key moments in the life of the Buddha. They reinforced concepts in visual form for a largely illiterate population. Can you think of a story that is shown today in a visual medium that has no need for words or text that is immediately recognizable to most people?

WHAT IS THE STYLE OF THIS PIECE AND WHERE DID IT COME FROM?

It is likely that this piece, like the previous two images, came from the region of Gandhara, part of the Kushan empire. The Kushana rulers had migrated from central Asia, and ruled parts of central Asia and northern India. This area was a crossroads of trade and cultures. It was during this time that the first images of the Buddha and related figures appear in large numbers.

The figural style, attention to anatomy, and interest in drapery revealing forms of the body recall Hellenistic sculpture. Centuries of trade and the exchange of artistic ideas resulted in a unique aesthetic that fused influences from the Indian, Greek, and West Asian worlds.

SLIDE 18



The Buddha triumphing over Mara, 900–1000
India; probably Kurkihar, Bihar state
Stone
The Avery Brundage Collection, B60S598

WHO IS DEPICTED HERE?

This is an image of the historical Buddha. We can tell it is the Buddha because of the many distinguishing marks (*lakshana*) visible in the sculpture. He has a cranial bump on his head (*ushnisha*), a tuft of hair between his eyes (*urna*), and the sign of the wheel (*chakra*) on his hands and soles of his feet. This wheel signifies the teaching of the Buddha, as well as his righteousness as a leader. He is dressed in a monk's robe, typically with one shoulder bare. He is seated on a lion throne. Above his head are branches of the bodhi tree, a reference to Bodh Gaya where the Buddha sat under the bodhi tree and achieved enlightenment.

WHAT WAS THE BUDDHA'S ENLIGHTENMENT?

The Buddha sought answers to the problems of suffering and the continual cycle of birth, death and rebirth which he witnessed all around him. He rejected the path of complete self-denial (asceticism), and also rejected the comforts and indulgences of his former life as a prince. He resolved to sit under the bodhi tree and meditate on these issues until the answer to these problems became clear. His revelation has been called the Four Noble Truths, a summation of the cause of human suffering, and the possibility and pathway to enlightenment for all beings.

WHO TEMPTED THE BUDDHA?

In the course of his meditations, the Buddha was tempted by the demon Mara. Mara sent his armies, various temptations, and finally (as depicted here) a challenge that the Buddha must defend his claim of enlightenment. The Buddha touched the earth, and called the earth to witness his achievement. This "touching the earth" is seen as a significant gesture (*mudra*) in this sculpture. This iconography of the Buddha became very popular throughout Asia.

Mara can also be understood not only as a figure in a story, but also as a representation of inner temptations—mainly one’s ego—that obstruct the path to enlightenment. Therefore, overcoming Mara is equivalent to overcoming the self.

WHEN WAS THIS MADE AND HOW WAS IT USED?

Based on an analysis of the style, medium and subject, this sculpture is dated to around the 800s CE and comes from eastern India. At that time, Pala dynasty rulers were generous supporters of the Buddhist religion, and many famous monasteries and universities existed in what is now the state of Bihar. Unfortunately, most of these buildings are now in ruins, as Buddhism succumbed to Muslim incursions and seriously declined around the 1100s CE. This sculpture was probably placed in a niche in a temple made of brick. We believe from the inscription on the base that the tiny figure on the lower right represents the donor.

Typical of the Pala style is the tendency for the central figure to stand out against a very decorative background. The dark schist gives the statue a dramatic, crisp appearance.

SLIDE 19



Standing crowned Buddha with four scenes of his life, approx. 1050–1100
India; southern Magadha region, Bihar state
Stone
The Avery Brundage Collection, B65S11

WHO IS DEPICTED HERE?

This is an image of a crowned and bejeweled Buddha, standing on a lotus pedestal, surrounded by four other figures representing four famous scenes from the life of the historical Buddha. It dates from approximately 1050–1100 CE.

The central figure stands in a fairly rigid fashion, in contrast to the mid-sized figures to his lower right and left, who appear in a more relaxed posture. The central figure's right hand is in a gesture (mudra) of "fear not," his left hand grasps the stem of a lotus bud. He wears a long robe that delineates the forms of the body. The figures are idealized in their conception. For example, the torso of the central Buddha figure is said (in ancient texts) to resemble the head of a bull. The legs and arms of the larger figures are sculpted in a buoyant, geometrically abstracted style. The dark grey chlorite stone used here allows for both high polished, smooth areas such as the limbs of the larger buddha figures, and the intricate details surrounding all the figures, and along the borders of the piece.

The two tiny figures at the viewer's bottom left may be depictions of donors who financed the creation of the sculpture, or they may simply be worshipers. Nearby are two cone-like bowls filled with offerings.

The four subsidiary figures are:

- (viewer's upper left) the Buddha calling on the earth goddess to witness his claim to Buddhahood (see previous slide); the earth goddess can be seen below the figure
- (upper right) the Buddha accepting an offering from a monkey (the monkey seen below the figure)
- (lower right) the Buddha taming a wild elephant; from the Buddha's outstretched hand spring lions, representing his teachings

- (lower left) the Buddha's descent from heaven after preaching to his mother in Indra's heaven (Indra, a Vedic/Hindu god that also appears in Buddhist texts)

WHY IS THE BUDDHA CROWNED AND BEJEWELED?

All the Buddha figures seen here have crowns, earrings and necklaces that seem out of keeping with previous images of the Buddha from this packet, where he is depicted in monk's robes with little or no adornment. Here the central figure wears a five-point crown, and above him is a parasol topped by stupas, a symbol of royalty and respect.

As Buddhism evolved, it developed greater complexity, and this is reflected in artistic imagery. The central buddha here is an abstract figure representing the cosmic buddha principle, rather than the historical figure who lived in a certain time and place. This cosmic buddha encompasses other buddhas, including the historical one. This is indicated artistically by the fact that the central figure dominates all the others in size. The five points on the crown may refer to five insights, personified as five buddhas (*jinās*) each representing one of the cardinal directions.

A majestic form of the Buddha, embodying universal principles, was one that even earthly monarchs could follow. The Pala kings who ruled eastern India at the time this sculpture was made were the last great patrons of Buddhist art in India. They probably imagined that they could aspire to the universal Buddha principle that encompassed their own and other earthly realms.

Susan and John Huntington wrote in their catalogue, *Leaves from the Bodhi Tree: The Art of Pala India (8th–12th centuries) and Its International Legacy* (Dayton: Dayton Art Institute, 1989):

The crown and jewelry emphasize the aspect of the Buddha as a universal sovereign, drawing a visual analogy between the attainment of Buddhahood and coronation as a king. Unlike the monk's robes, which signal his renunciation, the royal adornments evoke the king's majesty, kingly qualities, and omniscience.

Note: Compare this statue with the statue of Vishnu, slide no. 7

SLIDE 20



The Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, approx. 900–1000
India; perhaps Nalanda, Bihar state
Stone
The Avery Brundage Collection, B63S44+

WHO IS DEPICTED HERE?

This is an image of the compassionate and merciful bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, made about a century before the previous crowned Buddha, yet from the same region. Bodhisattvas are enlightened beings who are destined to become buddhas but postpone that final state in order to help humanity. The name Avalokiteshvara means “Lord who looks down with compassion.” Avalokiteshvara is shown here sitting on a lion throne and arrayed in jewels like a prince. Above his head is a parasol, an ancient symbol of royal status. Beside his head are lotus-borne stupas, topped with sun and crescent moons.

Avalokiteshvara’s right hand is in the gesture of gift granting, and in his left hand he holds a long-stemmed lotus. In his elaborate hairdress is an image of the Buddha Amitabha. (Amitabha presides over the western Pure Land, a kind of Buddhist paradise. The worship of Amitabha became very popular in East Asian Buddhism.)

WHO ARE THE VARIOUS SMALLER FIGURES DEPICTED HERE?

At Avalokiteshvara’s left knee crouches his protective attendant who holds a thunderbolt, or *vajra*. This figure can also appear in Hindu art as a minor incarnation of Vishnu. He typically has a fat body, disheveled hair and bulging eyes. In this context, an angry appearance can be a form of protection, rather than evil. The thunderbolt is often seen in tantric Buddhist art (sometimes called “Vajrayana” Buddhism). It alludes to the indivisible, impenetrable nature of enlightenment.

At the base of the sculpture a needle-nosed starving ghost kneels drinking nectar dripping from Avalokiteshvara’s gift-granting hand. A hungry ghost is one who suffers insatiable appetites, resulting from accumulated greed in previous lives. His presence confirms the compassionate nature of the bodhisattva. Near the middle of the base, a monk holds the stem of the lotus on which the deity rests his foot. Behind

this monk, another monk and a layperson (perhaps a woman) sit in worshipful postures. They could be the donors of the sculpture.

The base of this sculpture is inscribed with the “Buddhist creed,” a saying commonly inscribed on Buddhist artworks. The creed can be translated as:

*The Buddha has explained the cause of all things that arise from a cause.
He, the great monk, has also explained their cessation.*

HOW DOES THIS FIGURE COMPARE WITH THE PREVIOUS IMAGE?

Both are sculpted from similar stone. The crowned Buddha stands erect and still, somewhat remote in its resplendent crown and jewelry. The Avalokiteshvara sits in a more relaxed position, and appears open and accessible to the viewer, with an outstretched arm. The crowned Buddha stands out from his background in slightly higher relief. The Avalokiteshvara image, while appearing to be more flat relief, is crisply carved and no less intricate. Both images were likely placed in interior or exterior niches of Buddhist temple walls. The depiction of each figure conforms to their function in the spectrum of Buddhist practices at the time they were made.

Both come from a period of late Indian Buddhism in eastern India. Art of the Pala and Sena periods is notable for the great influence that it had outside of India, in Nepal, Burma and beyond. Art such as this, therefore, had a lasting influence elsewhere in Asia, even while it declined in its homeland.



**Lesson Plans, Activities,
and Student Worksheets**

A Labyrinth for Lakshmi: The Ritual Tradition of Threshold Art

Written and illustrated by Stephanie Kao, School Programs Coordinator

In the hour before dawn, as night transforms into morning glow, a young woman in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu quietly sweeps the threshold of her home. According to Hindu tradition, it is at this time of the day that the gods and goddesses gaze upon the earth from the heavens. In this holy moment, the young woman will perform the religious art of *kolam* (ritual floor painting). First, she cleans the entryway, which marks the boundary between sacred family life and the outside world. To sanctify the ground, she sprinkles a mixture of water and cow dung (believed to have purifying properties) on the earth. Next, she assesses the freshly prepared “canvas” and visualizes what the day’s artistic creation will look like. Drawing from a mental book of designs (passed down from her mother, aunts, and elder sisters), she decides upon an elaborate *kolam* that will invite the divine presence of Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity and abundance, into her home.

With graceful hand and body movements, the young Hindu woman begins to construct the *kolam* with rice flour as an artistic medium. Using her right hand, she gathers a portion of the finely ground white grain from a flour-filled bowl and holds the contents just above the earth. In a fluid motion, she lets a bit of flour fall to the ground by moving her thumb downward against the index and middle fingers. In this fashion, the threshold ground is deftly covered with an array of evenly spaced white dots. In a dance of devotion, she maneuvers herself through space applying amounts of rice flour to form a white line that swirls in interlocking fashion around the matrix of dots. All the time careful not to step on her creation, she embellishes the *kolam* that gradually develops into a mysterious labyrinth embedded with lines, geometric shapes, and symbolic motifs. By sunrise she completes the *kolam*, knowing that in the subsequent hours, this lace-like pattern that blankets the ground will be lifted away under the feet of passing family members and neighbors who will carry with them the power of her devotion and her blessings.

Throughout the subcontinent of India, women of all ages, castes, and professions, perform this traditional art of threshold painting. It is known as *muggu* in Andhra Pradesh; *rangoli* in Maharashtra and Gujarat; *chowk purana* in Uttar Pradesh; *mandana* in Rajasthan; *alpana* in Bengal; *chita* in Orissa; and *kolam* in Tamil Nadu. Although the styles of design and frequency with which it is painted vary from region to region, the symbolic meaning of this art form is the same: it links Hindu women to the goddess Lakshmi whom they invite to depart her heavenly abode and rest momentarily at their thresholds upon an intricate rice flour diagram. In this manner, the goddess brings good fortune, enveloping the home in an auspicious sphere of protection.

Women pride themselves on a vast repertoire of designs from simple geometric patterns to complex diagrams comprised of floral and symbolic motifs. Threshold art also serves to commemorate events occurring within the home. For example, general festive designs may be used to welcome a special visitor, or vibrant colors along with prescribed symbols and diagrams may be used to signify a holiday, marriage, or childbirth. Just as threshold art has celebratory functions, its absence may indicate a period of grieving due to illness or death.

In a variety of ways, threshold art reflects the Hindu concept of the interconnectedness of the universe. This is symbolized even in the use of rice flour as an artistic medium. It is said that the *kolam* is the “feeder of a thousand souls” providing nourishment to the smallest of insects throughout the day. Also central to Hinduism is the experiential act of devotion. The painting of a *kolam* is correspondingly devotional. It is an act of creation, in which one’s personal relationship with the gods is most important. For in a fleeting moment the creation will disappear, vividly remaining only in the memory of the one who created it.

Threshold Art: A Classroom Greeting

Elementary School

Lesson written by Stephanie Kao

Subject Area:

History-Social Sciences and Visual Arts

Objectives:

Students will:

- examine the Hindu tradition of threshold art
- discuss the importance of the home in India as a symbol of family life
- observe how threshold art is composed of designs inspired by nature
- create an auspicious wall painting inspired by nature to welcome guests visiting the classroom

Materials:

Pencils, white tempura paint, paper, large sheets of cardboard, bowls, examples of Indian threshold art (see suggested resources and websites), and pictures of plants, and animals native to the area.

Lesson Introduction:

Locate India on a map. Explain to students that the country is geographically and culturally diverse—each region exemplifying a unique set of styles and customs. Describe the ritual of threshold painting and discuss how Hindu women of all castes have traditionally participated in this form of worship throughout India. Ask students, “How do you feel when you are with family and friends at home?” Discuss how the home in India is a symbol of family: the center of one’s social and religious life. Next, discuss how the threshold of a home represents a boundary, separating the sacred space of family and the “outside world.”

Explain to students that in the state of Orissa (located on the eastern coast of India), threshold art is called *chita*. Hindu women dip their fingers in rice flour paste to paint intricate designs onto the walls and floors of their home. Comprised of religious symbols and motifs inspired by nature, these patterns are believed to keep out negative forces and bring good fortune to the family. In Orissa, *chita* is painted for daily worship and for special events. It is also created to welcome special guests into the home.

Procedure:

1. Show students photos of Orissan *chita* (see the illustration “Orissan Chita”).
2. Examine line, shape, symmetry, and repetition found in *chita* paintings.
3. Collect pictures of animals, plants, and flowers that are indigenous to the area. Next, draw with pencil a *chita* design inspired by these sources on a sheet a paper.
4. Work in teams to combine designs and lightly sketch with pencil a final drawing on a large sheet of cardboard. Tip: Teachers may want to pre-cut sheets of cardboard to line the perimeter of the classroom.
5. Cover the floor with a tarp. Large garbage bags cut open and placed onto the ground also work well.
6. Use packaging tape to secure the sheets of cardboard to the wall.
7. Pour white tempura paint into a bowl. Add a little water until it has a cream-like consistency.
8. Using your fingers, paint directly onto the cardboard.
9. Once everyone is finished, paint a border on the cardboard sheets to unify the different designs into a complete classroom wall painting.

Making Rangoli: A Celebration of Color

Middle School

Lesson written by Stephanie Kao

Subject Area:

History-Social Sciences and Visual Arts

Objectives:

Students will:

- examine the Hindu tradition of threshold art
- discuss how Indian values are expressed in the ephemeral art of threshold painting
- draw traditional connect-the-dots threshold art designs
- make colored rice flour and create an auspicious floor painting

Materials:

Rice flour (denser than wheat flour; sold at Indian food markets), food dye, zip lock bags, cups, large sheets of brown butcher paper, water, photos of Indian threshold floor and wall paintings (see suggested resources and websites), and the worksheets: *Threshold Art: Connect the Dot Designs and Template of Dots: Four Points Forming a Rhomboid*.

Lesson Introduction:

Locate India on a map. Explain to students that India is geographically and culturally diverse; each region exemplifying its own unique set of styles and customs. Have students perform research on the Hindu belief system. Discuss how the gods are honored through acts of devotion. Examine how Hindu worship is experiential: the practitioner uses touch, chants, incense, vibrant colors, and movement to invoke the gods. Describe the tradition of threshold painting and ask students to analyze how Indian values are expressed in this ephemeral medium. Ask students, “Why are threshold paintings made if the artists know they will be



Left: A six-pointed star kolam made with colored powder in Tamil Nadu, India, from *Painted Prayers: Women’s Art in Village India* by Stephen P. Huyler (1994). Photograph copyright Stephen P. Huyler.

Right: A kolam design incorporating a variation of the six-pointed star and heart shapes in Tamil Nadu, India, from *Painted Prayers: Women’s Art in Village India* by Stephen P. Huyler (1994). Photograph copyright Stephen P. Huyler.

erased soon after?” and “How is this act of devotion different or similar to other religions?”

Show students examples of threshold designs. Explain to students that in the Indian states of Maharashtra and Gujarat (located on the western coast of India) threshold art is called rangoli and is created with vibrant colored powders. This is in contrast to other states such as Tamil Nadu where white rice flour is the primary medium; colored powders being used only on special occasions such as festivals. Traditionally, rangoli was made by coloring rice flour with vegetable dye. Today, women use commercially made powders. Explain that threshold art designs are based on a grid of dots. These guide the composition so that it is balanced and symmetrical.

Drawing a Rangoli Design

Procedure:

1. Give students the worksheets: *Threshold Art: Connect the Dot Designs and Template of Dots: Four Points Forming a Rhomboid*.
2. Start by drawing a basic six pointed star (a symbol of the Goddess Lakshmi). Next, incorporate curving lines, repetitive shapes, and borders.
3. Lastly, experiment drawing abstract and representational subject matter such as animals, flowers, figures, and architectural structures.



In Tamil Nadu, kolams made for daily worship are painted with white rice flour. On special occasions vibrant colors are used such as in this kolam made in celebration of Pongal, from *Painted Prayers: Women's Art in Village India* by Stephen P. Huyler (1994). Photograph copyright Stephen P. Huyler.

Making Rangoli Colored Flour

Procedure:

1. Scoop one half cup of rice flour and pour it into a zip-lock bag.
2. In another cup, mix two tablespoons of water with a drop of food dye (your color of choice).
3. Pour the mixture into the flour-filled bag, zip it up, and shake!
4. Add more dye with water for a deeper hue.
5. Use a different zip-lock bag for each color to be used in the design.
6. Using pencil, draw a grid of dots on a large sheet of brown butcher paper. Tip: the larger the area, the easier it is to “paint” using rice flour.
7. Take a pinch of colored flour and begin painting by moving the thumb downward against the index and middle finger. Create a vibrant design by filling in the shapes with a range of colors.
8. At the end of the class session, fold the butcher paper and pour the colored flour back into the zip lock bags to be used again during the next session.

Diwali: Labyrinth of Lights

High School

Lesson written by Stephanie Kao

Subject Area:

History-Social Sciences and Visual Arts

Objectives:

Students will:

- examine the Hindu tradition of threshold art
- research how Diwali (Festival of Lights) is commemorated in India
- draw traditional labyrinth threshold patterns
- work in teams to create a large labyrinth floor painting in celebration of Diwali

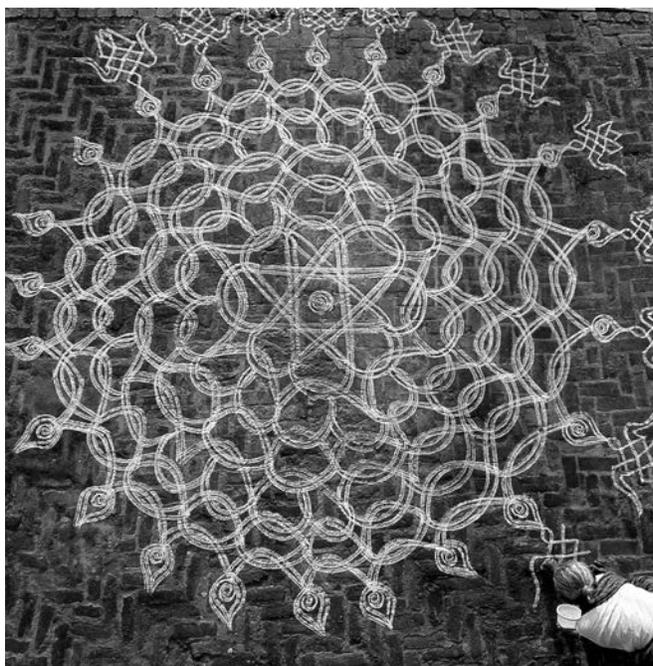
Materials:

Rice flour (denser than wheat flour; sold at Indian food markets), pencils, paper, tea candles, lighters, photos of Indian threshold floor and wall paintings (see suggested resources and websites), and the worksheets: *Threshold Art: Around the Dots Designs and Template of Dots: Four Points Forming a Square*.

Lesson Introduction:

Locate India on a map. Explain to students that India is geographically and culturally diverse; each region exemplifying its own unique set of styles and customs. Have students perform research on the Hindu belief system and how the gods are honored through acts of devotion such as threshold painting. Examine how Hindu worship is experiential: the practitioner uses touch, chants, incense, vibrant colors, and movement to invoke the gods. Have students perform research on the harvest festival of Diwali (lit. “row of lights”), a three-night celebration in honor of the goddess Lakshmi, that takes place throughout India in October–November.

Show students examples of threshold designs. Explain to students how Hindu women create intricate threshold art to welcome the goddess Lakshmi into their home. Describe how during Diwali, these elaborate



A woman creates a complex labyrinth kolam in Kanchipuram, India, from *Painted Prayers: Women's Art in Village India* by Stephen P. Huyler (1994). Photograph copyright Stephen P. Huyler.

designs are illuminated with ghee (clarified butter) filled lamps—the twinkling lights guiding the goddess into the home. In Tamil Nadu, threshold art is called *kolam* and is created using a template of dots around which rice flour is applied to form a complex lace-like labyrinth.

Procedure:

1. Give students the worksheets *Threshold Art: Around the Dot Designs and Template of Dots: Four Points Forming a Square*.
2. On a piece of paper, practice drawing kolam diagrams starting from a basic grid of 3 lines and 3 dots. As they become more familiar with the process, have them try drawing more involved patterns by gradually increasing the number of lines and dots.
3. Work in teams to create a large kolam design.
4. Make photocopies of the chosen design for each team member.
5. Have each team choose a large area outside to paint their kolam.
6. Distribute small cans filled with rice flour.
7. Using the rice flour, create a grid of dots evenly spaced (at least 2 feet between dots) on the ground.
8. Encourage one student to act as the director to guide others in the painting process. Begin painting with the rice flour around the grid of dots. Tip: Gently swinging the forearm in a back-and-forth motion about a foot above the ground while allowing the rice to fall gradually from the fingers creates an even white line.
9. Once the kolam is complete, light the tea candles and place them strategically throughout the diagram.
10. Take pictures of the candle lit kolams.

Athapoovidal: A Kaleidoscope of Flowers

All grade levels

Lesson written by Stephanie Kao

Subject Area:

History-Social Sciences, Mathematics, and Visual Arts

Objectives:

Students will:

- examine the Hindu tradition of *athapoovidal*—a three-dimensional threshold art using flowers
- research the harvest festival of Onam celebrated in the southwestern state of Kerala, India
- create an auspicious flower decoration in celebration of Onam

Materials:

Variety of flowers, lentils in a diversity of shapes and colors (may be purchased at an Indian food market), Masonite board, compasses, string, rulers, push pins, hammer, white chalk, and baskets.

Lesson Introduction:

Locate India on a map. Explain to students that India is geographically and culturally diverse; each region exemplifying its own unique set of styles and customs. Have students research the ten-day harvest festival of Onam celebrated in Kerala in August-September. Discuss with students how the women of Kerala commemorate the annual return of the legendary king Mahabali to his kingdom by creating fantastic three-dimensional floor decorations called *athapoovidal*. Show students examples of these designs that are comprised of flower blossoms, stamens, and petals. Describe how women sketch a design using white chalk. These are often geometric shapes within a series of concentric circles (onto the ground at the entrance of their home). On the first day, one type of flower is used to ornament the design. On the second day, another type of flower is added. In this fashion, the design gradually builds in color and complexity culmi-



Children making *athapoovidal* at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. Photo by Kaz Tsuruta, 2003.

nating on the 10th and final day of Onam. Similar to threshold art using rice flour, athapoovidal is a transitory art form.

Procedure:

1. Sketch an athapoovidal design on paper using a compass to draw concentric circles. Using a ruler, draw horizontal, vertical, and then diagonal lines through the center. Measure the angles between these lines to make sure your composition is symmetrical.
2. Using white chalk, replicate the design drawn on the paper on a 4 x 4 ft. Masonite board. In the center of the board, hammer in the pushpin. Tie one end of a string to the pushpin and the other end to a stick of white chalk. Using this as a compass, draw a circle. Adjust the length of the string for the desired radius of the circle.
3. Draw in geometric shapes and free-form designs using white chalk.
4. Separate a variety of flowers by species. Gently take the flowers apart and further categorize them by petals, leaves, flower buds etc. Place the flower parts into separate baskets.
5. Pour lentils into bowls and separate them by color and size.
6. Fill in the design with your choice of flowers and lentils.



An athapoovidal in its beginning stages created at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco comprised of a mix of flowers and colored lentils. Photo by Kaz Tsuruta, 2001.

Threshold Art: Around the Dot Designs

Illustrated by Stephanie Kao

These examples of threshold designs are created by drawing around a series of dots. They demonstrate a progression of basic patterns using a limited number of dots to more complex ones using increasingly varied numbers of dots. To practice drawing these kolams, use the worksheet *Template of Dots: Four Points Forming a Square*.

Fig. 1

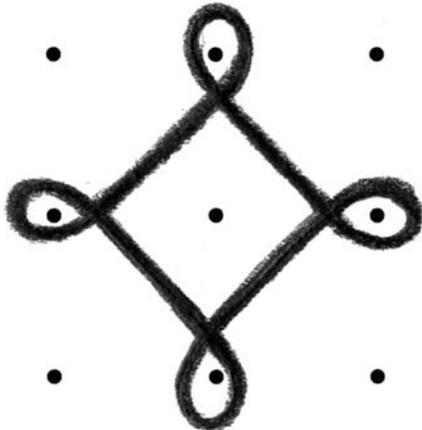


Fig. 2

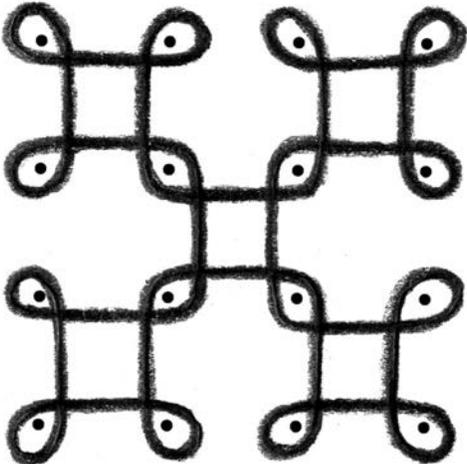


Fig. 3

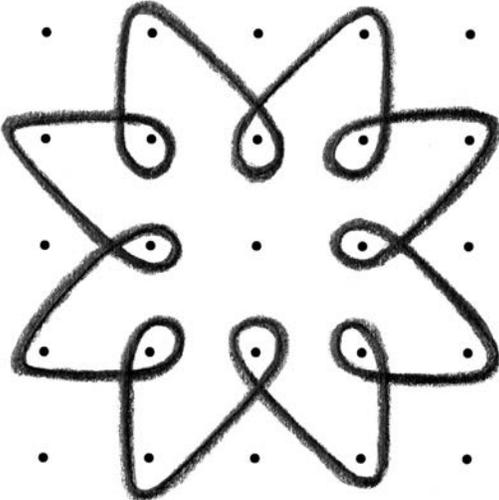
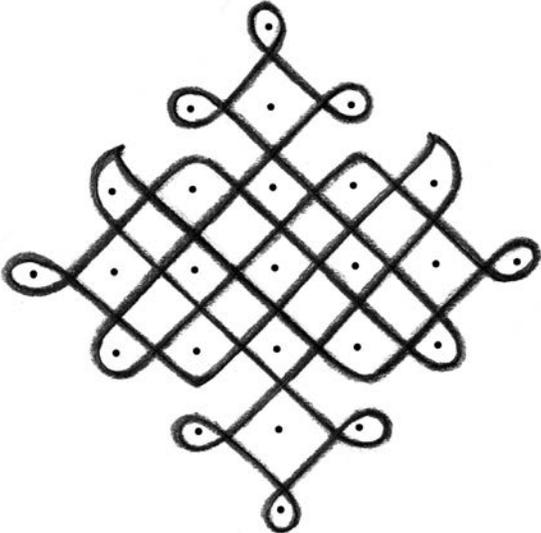


Fig. 4



- Fig. 1: (3 lines; 3 dots)
- Fig. 2: (4 lines; 4 dots)
- Fig. 3: (5 lines; 5 dots)
- Fig. 4: (1,3,5,7,5,3,1 dots)

Threshold Art: Connect the Dot Designs

Illustrated by Stephanie Kao

These examples of floor painting designs are created by connecting a series of dots. They demonstrate how the basic shape of the six-pointed star, a symbol of Lakshmi, can be embellished using repeated motifs and borders. To practice drawing these kolams, use the worksheet *Template of Dots: Four Points Forming a Rhomboid*.

Fig. 1

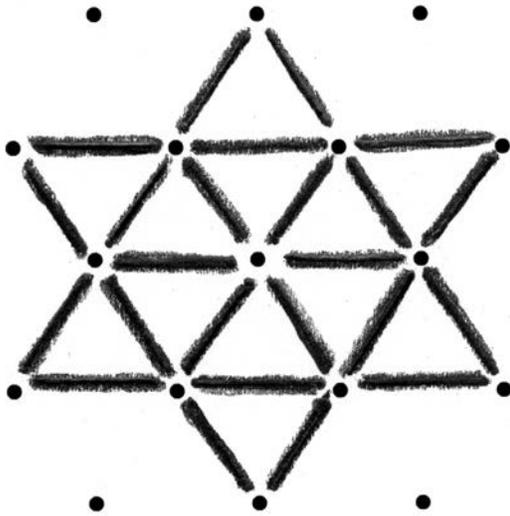


Fig. 2

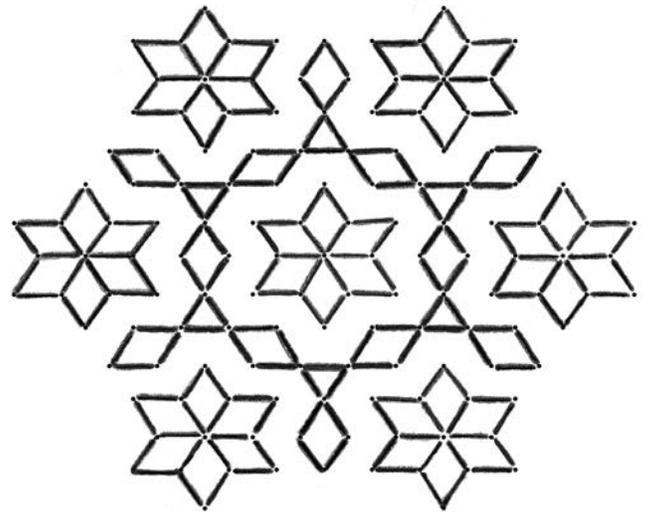


Fig. 3

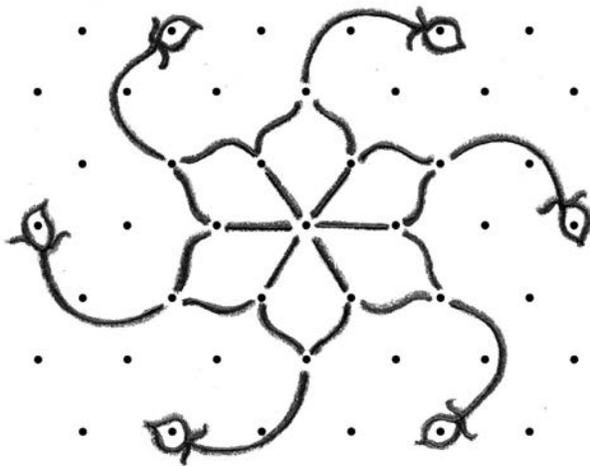


Fig. 4

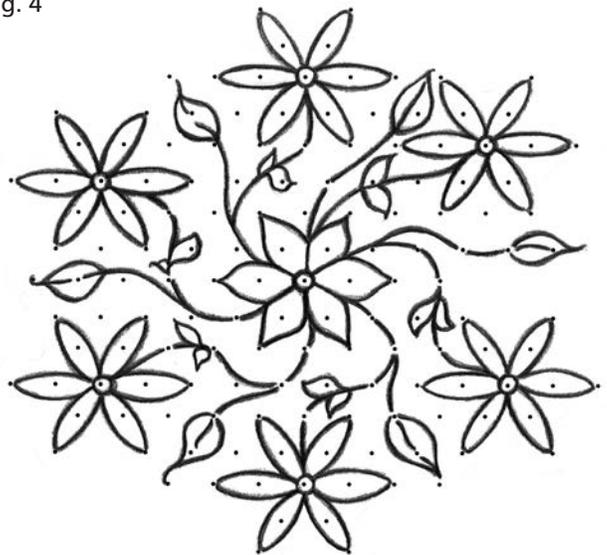


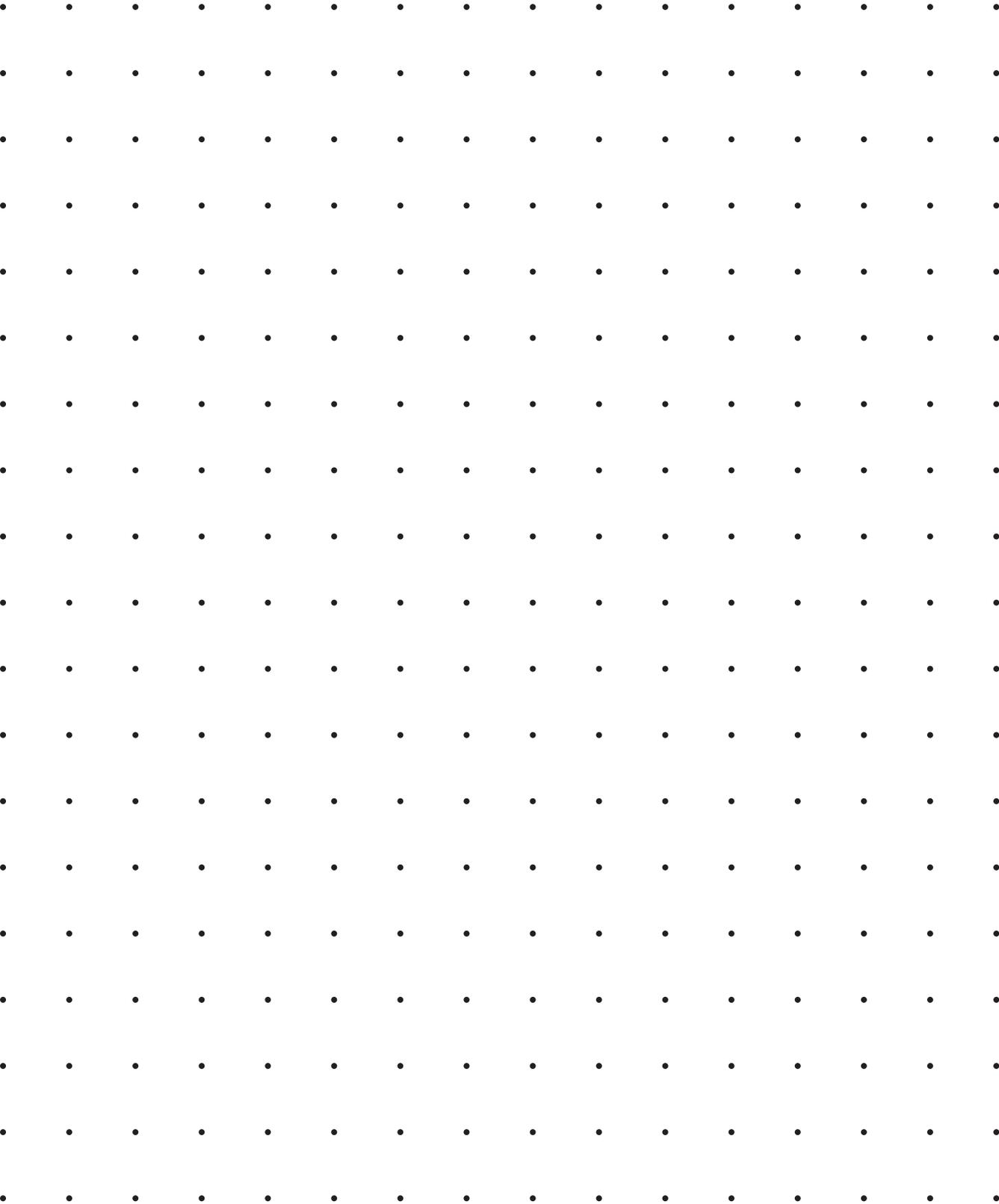
Fig. 1: Six-pointed star

Fig. 2: Variation of six-pointed star with border. Drawing based on a pattern used in an Antal festival in Madurai, India, from *Hosting the Divine: The Kolam as Ritual, Art, and Ecology in Tamil Nadu, India* by Vijaya Rettakudi Nagarajan, 1998.

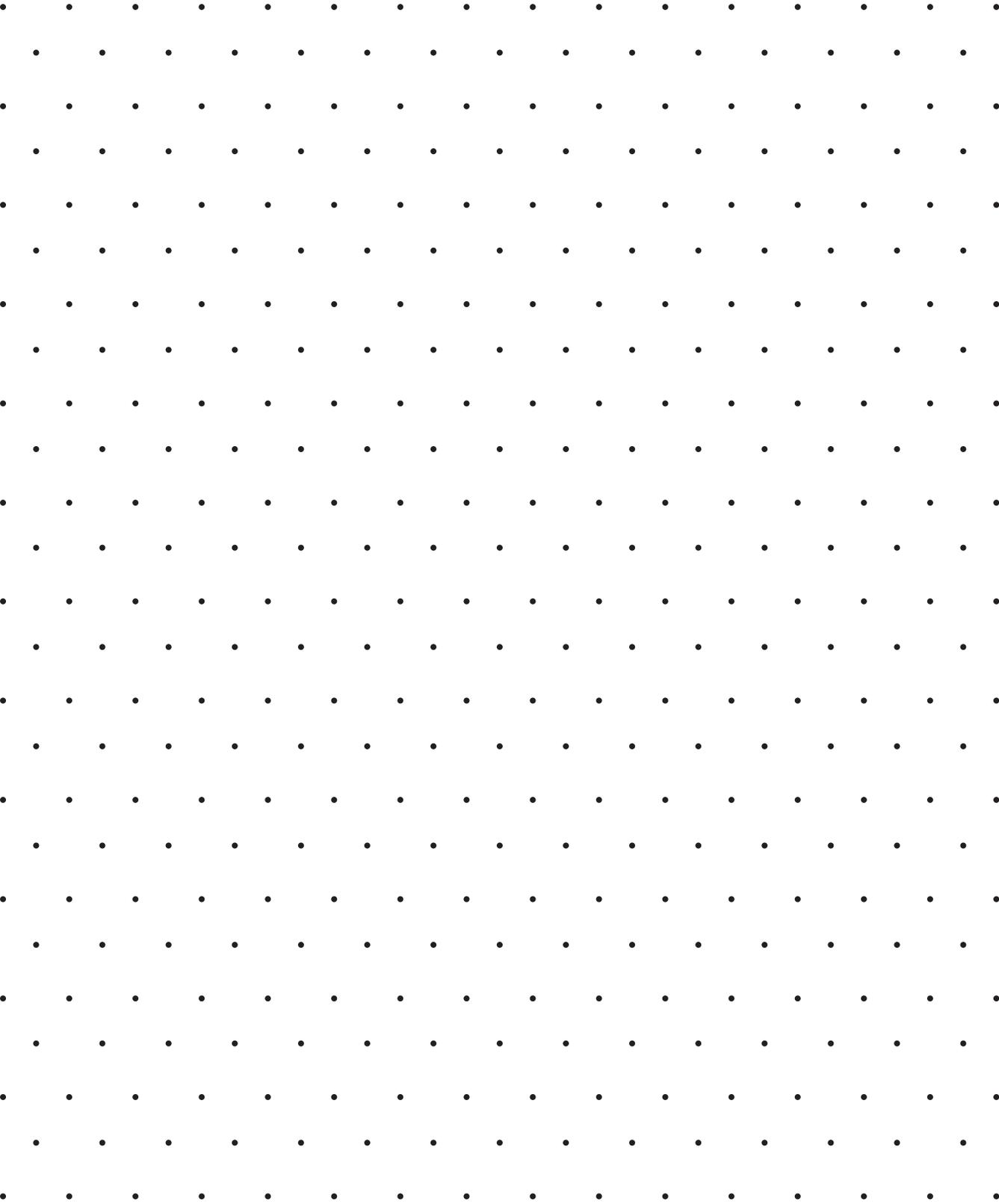
Fig. 3: Six-petaled flower

Fig. 4: Variation of six-petaled flower with vines. Drawing based on a pattern used in a Pongal festival from *The Language of Symbols: A Project on South Indian Ritual Decorations of a Semi-Permanent Nature* by Archana, 1980.

Template of Dots: Four Points Forming a Square

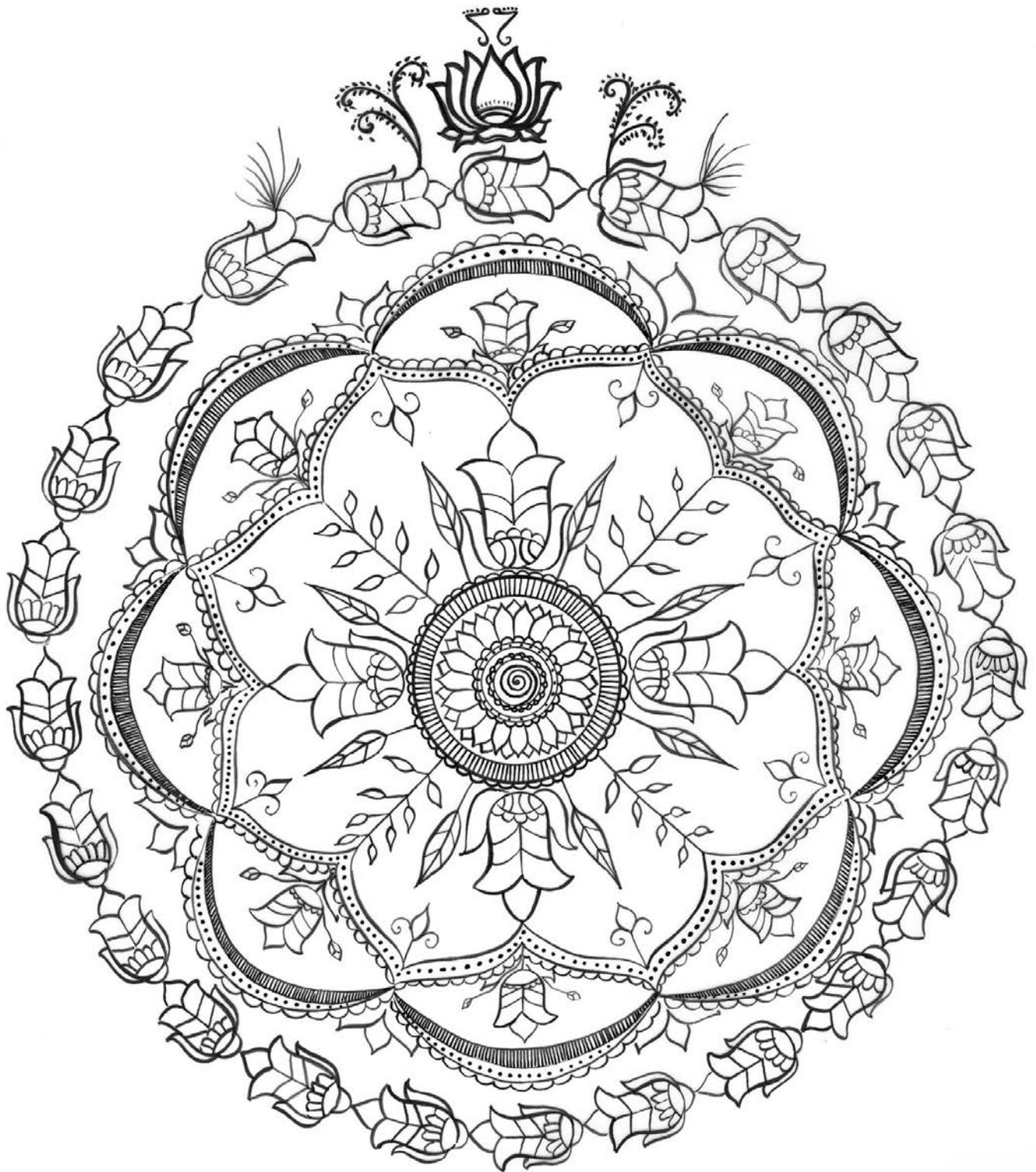


Template of Dots: Four Points Forming a Rhomboid



Orissan Chita

Illustrated by Stephanie Kao



This auspicious threshold art design (known in the eastern coastal state of Orissa as *chita*) is called Dalimba Padma and may adorn the courtyard or walls of a home during any festival. This illustration is based on a design from *Chita* by Padmavati Mahapatra, 1999.



**Buddhism Student
Handouts and Worksheets**

Eight Scenes of the Buddha's Life

The Buddha—that is, the “Enlightened One”—lived nearly 2,500 years ago in northern India. His followers have always seen his life as a shining example to all, but what “really happened” is now impossible to know for certain. Even the earliest stories of his life include miraculous events that may seem hard to take literally. Later versions are even more elaborate, and they differ from one another in many details. The outline of the story usually runs something like this: The Buddha-to-be had passed through hundreds of previous lives, perfecting himself with the eventual goal of achieving buddhahood and gaining release from the unhappy cycle of death and rebirth. He determined that he was finally ready for his last life and was born miraculously as the son of a king and queen. The king had been warned that the boy might someday abandon his royal destiny to follow a spiritual path, so the king surrounded him with luxury and tried to shelter him from awareness of the world's suffering. When he was a teenager, however, the prince, sensing his own isolation, left the palace four times and saw three sad sights and one hopeful one: an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and then a wandering truth seeker. The prince was deeply disillusioned with his artificially happy life. He left his home and family, threw off his royal finery, and set out to discover why people suffered so much and how suffering could be avoided. After long and intense self-searching he achieved a breakthrough into perfect understanding: the enlightenment. He then spent many decades traveling from place to place preaching and performing miracles. Thanks to his enlightenment he had freed himself from further rebirths, and so, on his death, he passed into the condition of blissful peace known as nirvana.

Images of the Buddha frequently illustrate eight particular episodes of the Buddha's life. Presumably these standard scenes are so familiar that many Buddhists can recognize them from only one or two clues.

The following are key moments of the Buddha's life, the sites where they took place, and a description of each event:

BIRTH OF THE BUDDHA (LUMBINI)

“There was a pleasure grove of sal-trees called Lumbini Grove. . . . And going to the foot of the monarch sal-tree of the grove, Queen Maya wished to take hold of one of its branches. Then she reached out her hand and seized hold of the branch, and immediately her pains came upon her.

. . . So her delivery took place while she was standing up and keeping fast hold of the sal-tree branch. At that very moment came four pure-minded Maha-Brahma angels bearing a golden net, and receiving the Buddha-to-be on this golden net, they placed him before his mother and said, ‘Rejoice, O queen! A mighty son has been born to you.’ ” (Adapted from Henry Clark Warren's 1896 translation of an ancient Buddhist text)

THE VICTORY OVER THE DEMON MARA (BODH GAYA)

After many lifetimes of spiritual and intellectual preparation, the Buddha-to-be neared the achievement of enlightenment, and thus of buddhahood, as he sat meditating under a tree. The demon Mara, an embodiment of violence and uncontrolled passions, approached at the head of a monstrous army, intending to put a stop to the enlightenment.

Mara and the Buddha-to-be repeatedly challenged each other's power and past accomplishments. Finally, the Buddha-to-be said, “ ‘Mara, who is witness to your having given donations?’ Said Mara, ‘All these,’ and he stretched out his hand in the direction of his army. Then Mara said, ‘Who is witness to your having given donations?’ The Buddha-to-be replied, ‘I have no animate witnesses present. However, the great

seven-hundred-fold donation I gave in my immediately previous existence will be testified to by the solid earth.’ And drawing forth his right hand from beneath his priestly robe, he stretched it out towards the mighty earth. And the mighty earth thundered, ‘I bear you witness’ with a hundred thousand roars. And the followers of Mara fled away in all directions.”

THE FIRST PREACHING (SARNATH)

After the enlightenment, the Buddha resolved to teach to others the understanding he had achieved. He decided to address first a group of five monks with whom he had once practiced severe austerities: “Then I thought, ‘Where do the five monks dwell?’ And with my divine vision, I saw the five monks dwelling at Benares in the deer park. So I made my way to Benares.

. . . The five monks saw me coming from afar, and decided among themselves, ‘This, friends, is Gautama coming, who lives in abundance, who has given up exertion. We must not greet him. But the five monks were not able to hold to their decision. I said ‘Give ear, monks, I instruct, I teach the Doctrine. If you walk according to the teaching . . . you will learn, realize, and attain the goal of a religious life and abide in it.’ ” (Adapted from Edward J. Thomas’s 1927 translation of an ancient Buddhist text)

THE MIRACLES OF SHRAVASTI (SHRAVASTI)

The king at Shravasti heard that a group of heretics were planning to perform miracles. The Buddha promised the king that he too would perform miracles, and would do so under a certain mango tree. When the Buddha found that the heretics had destroyed the mango tree, he made another tree grow to full size instantly from a seed. Then he performed other miracles such as manifesting multiple appearances of himself, all preaching the doctrine simultaneously.

THE DESCENT FROM INDRA’S HEAVEN AFTER THE BUDDHA HAD PREACHED TO HIS DECEASED MOTHER (SANKASHYA)

The Buddha’s descent from Indra’s heaven is depicted here. The Buddha went to this heaven, ruled over by the king of the gods, to preach to his deceased mother and the other inhabitants. When the Buddha was ready to return to earth, Indra and another powerful god, Brahma, honored him by attending him as would high-ranking servants.

THE MONKEY’S OFFERING (RAJGIR)

While residing in the Protected Forest, the Buddha was attended by a noble elephant that provided him with water and wild fruits. After observing these propitious deeds, a monkey decided that he too would give the Buddha an offering. One day, the monkey spied some honey. He broke off a branch of honey-comb which he gingerly placed on a plantain leaf and offered this gift to the Buddha. The Teacher received the honey and sat down, but did not eat it. Concerned as to why the Buddha would not consume it, the monkey lifted and rotated the stick revealing tiny insect’s eggs on its underside. The monkey tenderly removed the eggs one by one, and gave the honey-comb back to the Buddha. To the monkey’s delight, the Buddha ate the sweet honey thereby accepting the monkey’s offering. The monkey joyously leaped among the trees. As he did this, however, a branch broke beneath him causing the monkey to fall upon a tree stump that pierced and killed him. Due to his faith in the Buddha, the monkey was reborn in paradise with an entourage of celestial nymphs. (Adapted from *Buddhist Legends [Dhammapada Atthakatha]* by Eugene Watson Burlingame, Part 1, p. 180).

THE TAMING OF THE ENRAGED ELEPHANT (VAISHALI)

The Buddha's evil cousin sent an enraged elephant to attack him. The Buddha held his ground and is said to have suffused the elephant with loving-kindness of mind. The elephant knelt in submission. This story can be understood as symbolizing our need to subdue our uncontrolled and violent animal instincts.

DEATH (KUSHINAGARA).

After having spent many decades traveling from place to place preaching and performing miracles, the Buddha became ill at the age of eighty. In a forest, he lay on his deathbed sheltered between two blossoming trees. Surrounded by hundreds of mourning disciples:

“Then the Blessed One addressed the priests: ‘And now, O priests, I take leave of you. All the constituents of being are transitory; work out your salvation with diligence.’

And these were the last words of the Blessed One. . . . Thereupon, the Blessed One [after progressing through a series of trance states] passed into Nirvana.” (Adapted from Henry Clark Warren's 1896 translation of an ancient Buddhist text)

The Buddha Image

The earliest surviving representations of the Buddha date from hundreds of years after his death, so they are not portraits in the usual sense. Buddha images vary greatly from place to place and period to period, but they almost always show these conventional features:

- **Symbols of radiance.** Among these may be a halo around the head or whole body, a flame at the top of the head, or a gold-covered surface.
- **Superhuman physical characteristics** such as very large size, a lump on the top of the head sometimes said to indicate extraordinary wisdom, a tuft of hair between the eyes that is usually depicted as a dot, fingers all the same length, or special markings on the palms and on the soles of the feet.
- **Long earlobes,** stretched during the years when the Buddha-to-be, as a prince, wore heavy earrings.
- **Monk's robes.** Monks wore a sarong-like lower garment and one or two upper garments, each made of a sheet of cloth wrapped around the upper body, sometimes leaving the right shoulder bare.
- **Special positions and gestures.** The most common position is seated with the legs crossed or interlocked in meditation on a lotus throne. Other positions include sitting with legs pendant, walking, standing, and reclining.

Common symbolic hand positions (mudras) are:

- right hand over right knee (symbolizing the Buddha's calling the Earth as a witness during his victory over negative forces)
- right hand held up with palm out (symbolizing giving reassurance)
- hands held at chest with fingers turning invisible wheel (symbolizing setting in motion the "wheel of the doctrine"—that is, preaching)
- hand held down with fingers extended and palm turned upwards (symbolizing gift giving)

The Visual Language of Buddhist Art

Illustrated by Stephanie Kao

For centuries as the Buddhism spread throughout Asia, the visual arts were critical in conveying the teachings of the Buddha to diverse audiences. By reading a visual vocabulary of physical characteristics, body postures, and hand gestures, individuals could learn the story of the Buddha's life. Although there are a standard set of symbolic features and gestures buddha images from different times, cultures, and places often have their own distinctive styles.

Examine the similarities and differences between the illustrated buddhas from the Asian Art Museum. Using the hand-outs *The Buddha Image* and *Eight Scenes of the Buddha's Life*, identify the characteristics, poses, and symbolic gestures of each buddha. Next, look for meaning behind the large illustrations of buddhas provided (also from the Asian Art Museum) by first locating and labeling as many visual clues you can find.

Pakistan



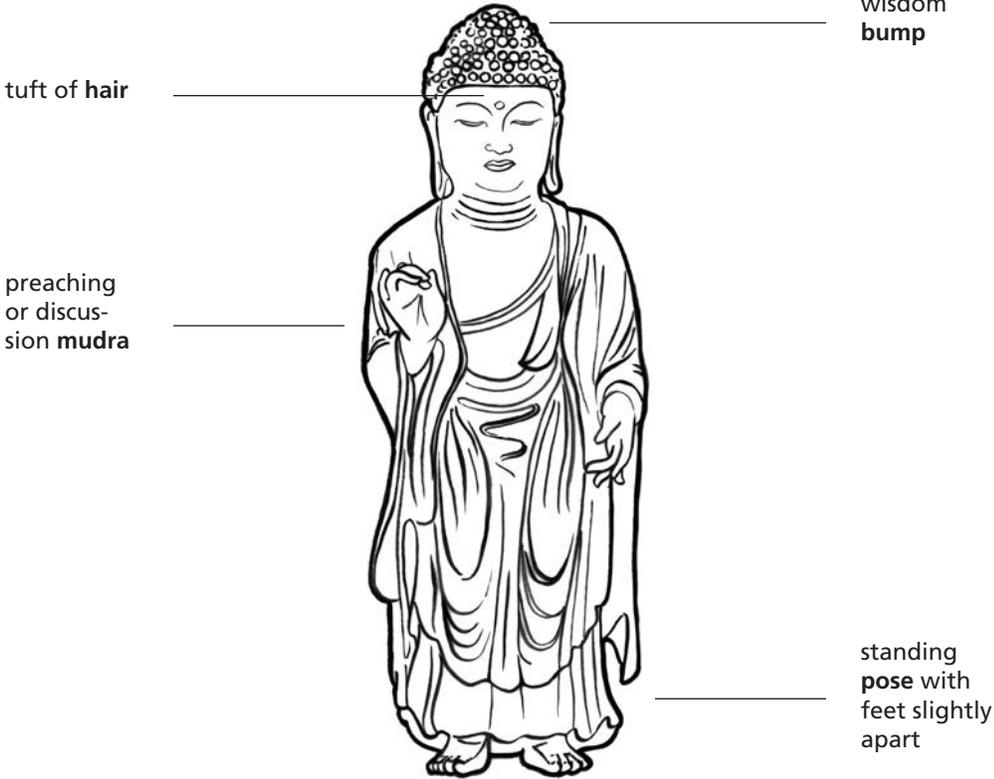
China



Japan



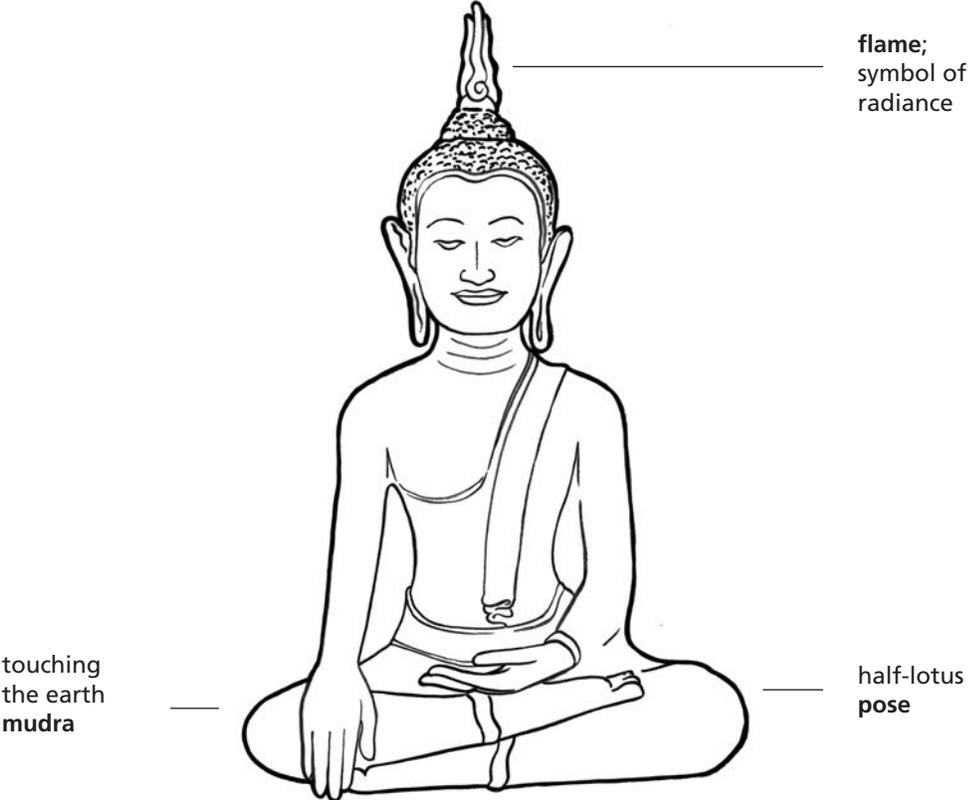
Korea



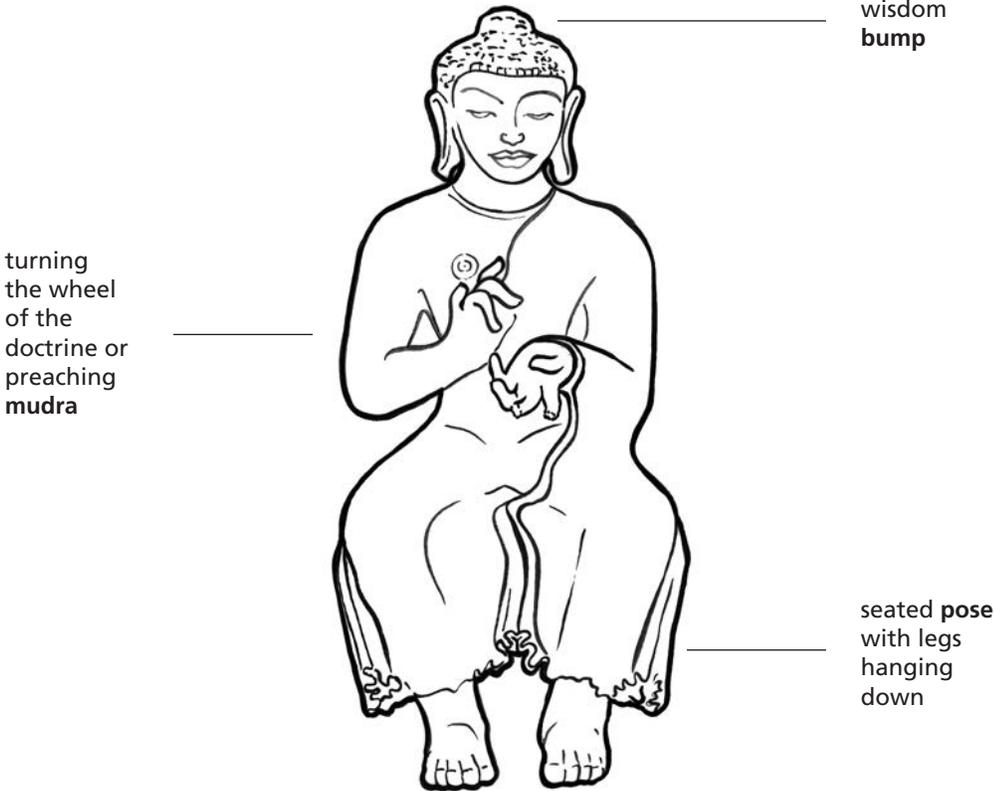
China,
Dolonor,
Mongolia



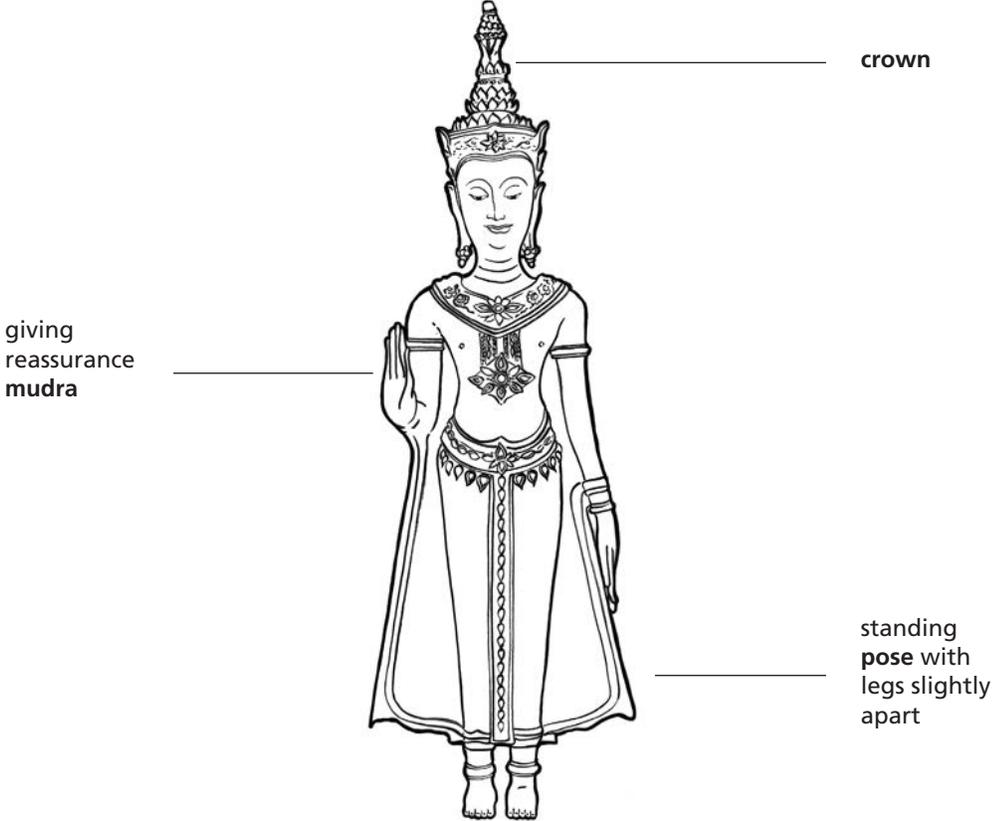
Thailand



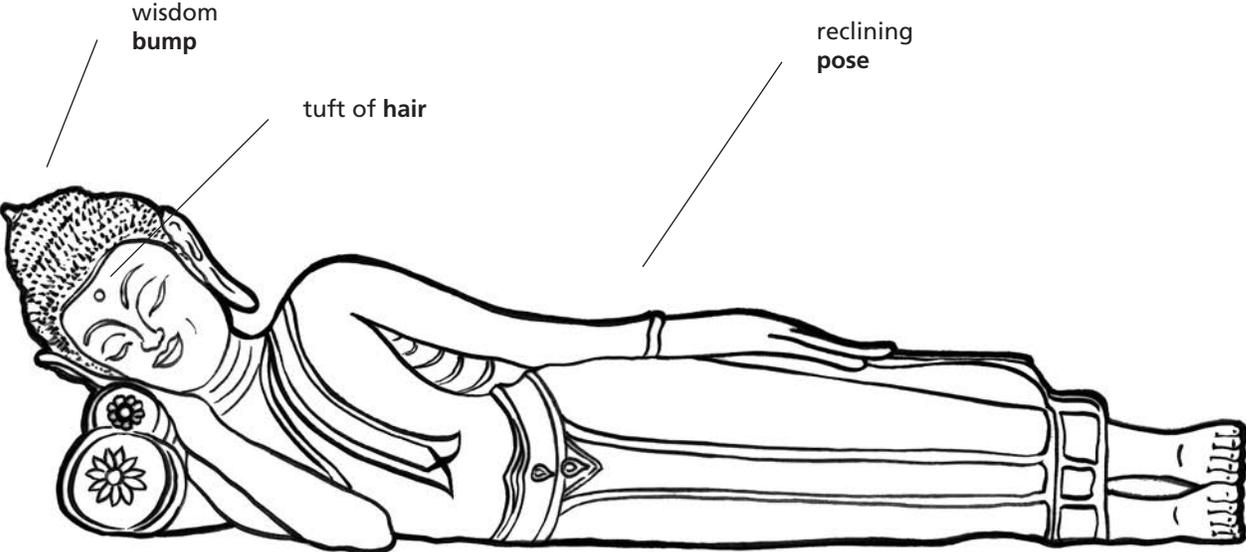
Indonesia



Thailand



Thailand





Buddha; India, approx. 975–1025



Buddha; India, approx. 900–1000



Temple Illustrations



Buddhist and Hindu Terms

Buddhist and Hindu Terms

Note: Unless otherwise noted, the non-English terms are Sanskrit. Sanskrit words that have entered the English language (such as mantra) and Sanskrit proper names are not shown in italics.

| | |
|----------------|---|
| <i>agama</i> | Popular scriptures dealing with the worship of an aspect of God, including prescribed courses of discipline for the worshiper. |
| ascetic | One who leads a life of contemplation involving self-denial and physical and mental austerities. |
| <i>avatara</i> | (literally, “descent”; English: avatar) Manifestation of a deity on earth, (that is, the ten forms of Vishnu: Krishna, Rama, and so on). Each avatara has a unique task in fulfilling the divine intention in the world; each leads toward the unfolding of ever-higher potencies. |
| Bhagavad Gita | (The Song of the Lord) Popular text within the Mahabharata (see below) that describes a conversation between Krishna and the warrior Arjuna on the eve of battle concerning duty and the nature of the cosmos. |
| Brahma | God as creator, evolver, emanator; considered the author of the Vedas (see below). |
| brahman | One of the four major castes of Hindu society; priests, scholars, and administrators are derived from this caste. |
| bodhisattva | (<i>bodhi</i> = wisdom + <i>sattva</i> = essence) A spiritual being who has compassionately vowed to achieve buddhahood but has deferred this aspiration in order to liberate all creatures in the universe from suffering. |
| chakra | (literally, “wheel”) A symbol of Buddhist dharma (see below); in yoga, chakras are nerve centers or areas of spiritual consciousness in the body. |
| <i>darshan</i> | (literally, “vision,” “sight”) The beholding of a divine image through direct eye contact. |
| <i>deva</i> | A higher being, a god, a being of light. |
| dharma | (literally, “sustain,” “carry,” “hold”) Righteousness, divine law, the way, truth: also the fulfillment of a proper destiny. The term is used in both Buddhist and Hindu context. |
| karma | (<i>kri</i> = to act, do, or make) The law of action and reaction, or the consequence of action; an impersonal law of the universe whose results can be interpreted as either positive or negative in the future of the present birth or in births to come. An individual is the sum-total of the results of previous thoughts and acts, and at every moment is the builder of his future. |

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| <i>lakshana</i> | Characteristic symbol or sign; in Buddhism, the identifying marks of the Buddha, believed to be 32 in number (see <i>urna</i> , <i>ushnisha</i>). |
| linga | A phallic emblem of the god Shiva. Shiva's association with the phallus derives from his asceticism. In the Indian cultural sphere, ascetics were thought capable of attaining extraordinary powers—sometimes rivaling those of the gods—through meditation, austerities, and strict self-denial. Shiva, the foremost of ascetics, possesses powers vast enough to generate creation. The linga refers both to this ability and to asceticism's potential rewards, which include escaping rebirth. |
| the Mahabharata | (Great Chronicle of the Bharata Dynasty) The epic story of the struggle of the five Pandava brothers to regain their kingdom from their cruel Kaurava cousins. |
| Mahayana | (literally, "great vehicle") A branch of Buddhism, stressing universal enlightenment; emphasizing role of Bodhisattva and a more cosmic Buddhology; found in Nepal, Tibet, China, Korea, Vietnam, Japan. |
| mantra | A word, sound or phrase endowed with spiritual power, used to invoke the deity being worshiped, such as a prayer or song of praise to the Gods or God; Vedic hymns are considered mantras, as words of power for attaining one's desires. |
| Mara | A personification of evil and inner temptations that attempt to disrupt the attainment of enlightenment; sometimes applied to the whole of worldly existence as opposed to nirvana. |
| Meru | The mythical mountain at the center of the Hindu universe, the primordial epicenter of the world. |
| <i>moksha</i> | (literally, "liberation") The ultimate goal in Hinduism; release from samsara, the bonds of material existence; the realization of the individual soul's union with the cosmos/Absolute. |
| mudra | A symbolic hand gesture used in both Hindu and Buddhist art. |
| nirvana | (<i>nir</i> = out + <i>va</i> = to blow) self-extinction; blowing out (as in a candle); cessation of earthly existence as characterized by samsara; a state of bliss; the major goal of Buddhism. |
| Pali | Language of Theravada Buddhist canon, believed to be the spoken language of the Buddha; closely related to Sanskrit. |
| <i>puja</i> | (literally, "worship") Performed in the temple, home or shrine; purpose is purification, invoking the divine and making offerings which are then blessed. |
| Puranas | (<i>pur</i> = to go before, proceed) Ancient tales of creation, cycles of history, involving Siva and Visnu; the Goddess and their interactions in the world. |
| the Ramayana | (Life of Rama): The epic story of Prince Rama's struggle to regain his wife, Sita (Sinta), from the demon king Ravana (Rawana). |

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| samsara | The cycle of the phenomenal world, marked by the continual progression of birth, death and rebirth; transmigration. |
| Sanskrit | The classical language of India, the language of much of the sacred scriptures, philosophy and religion; an Indo-European language. |
| Shakti | (literally, “power” or “energy”) The active female principle/creative power; can be used to refer to the Divine Mother, the Goddess, or as a way to describe the male God in his female form. |
| stupa | (literally, “mound, crest) A round burial mound. In Buddhism, a stupa is a structure meant to contain holy relics or relics of the Buddha; a symbol for the Buddha. |
| sutra | (literally, “thread) Religious saying, aphorism, or literary verse on philosophy, arts and sciences, often accompanied by commentaries; basic text for a philosophical system. Sutras are short and concise in order to be easily memorized, and are cryptic rather than expository in nature. |
| Tantra/Tantrism | Rule, ritual, scripture; religious treatise; texts and related practices that are esoteric, usually in the form of a dialogue between Siva and Shakti, concerning five subjects: creation, destruction, worship of gods and goddesses, attainment of the six powers, and the four modes of union with the Divine in meditation; terms can apply to both Hinduism and Buddhism. |
| Theravada | (literally, “doctrine of the elders”) A school of Buddhism, with an emphasis on the exemplary life of the historical Buddha, the Pali canon and the monastic order; found mainly in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. |
| <i>urna</i> | One of the symbols (<i>lakshana</i> ; see above) of the Buddha, a circle or curl of hair between the eyes. |
| <i>ushnisha</i> | A symbol of Buddha’s wisdom, a knot of hair on the head, a reminder of the Buddha’s asceticism in the form of uncut, matted, knotted hair. |
| <i>vahana</i> | (literally, “vehicle”) An animal mount that transports Hindu deities (e.g. Shiva’s vahana is Nandi the bull). |
| Vajrayana | (literally, “vehicle of the thunderbolt”) A branch of Buddhism, related to Mahayana, involving esoteric ritual practices associated most strongly with Tibetan Buddhism (see tantrism). |
| Veda | (literally, “knowledge,” “wisdom”) Sacred scriptures of Hinduism, possibly composed before 2000 BCE., consisting of thousands of verses and prose. The four Vedas (as arranged by Vyasa) are: Rg, Yajur, Sama, Atharva Veda. Each contains hymns, priestly manuals, ‘forest treatises’ and enlightened discourses. |
| <i>yaksha, yakshi</i> | Ancient male and female nature spirits, auspicious guardian figures often seen near entrances and gateways of temples and stupas. |



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Further Reading**

References and Further Reading

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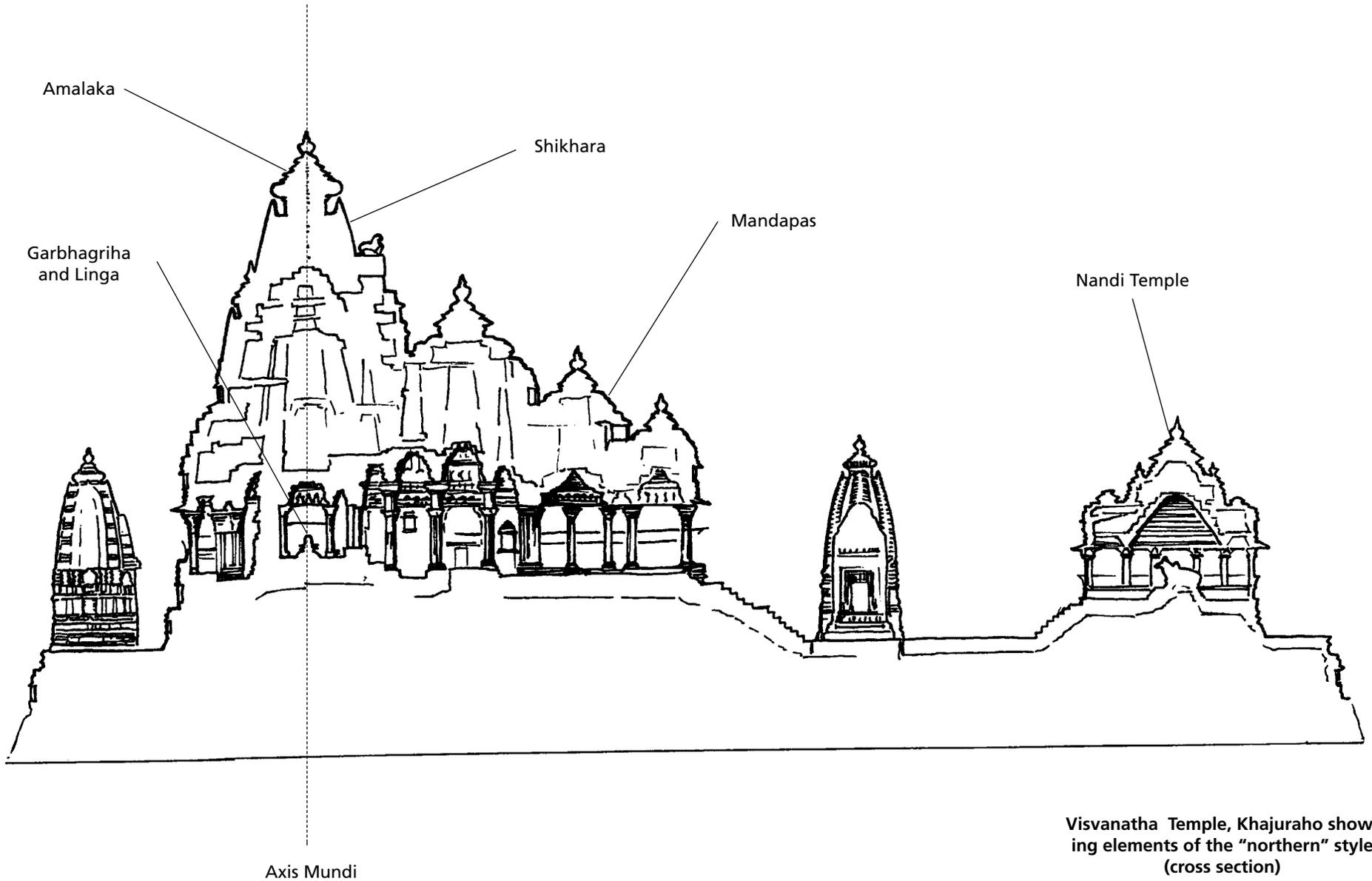
Map of India

Map of India



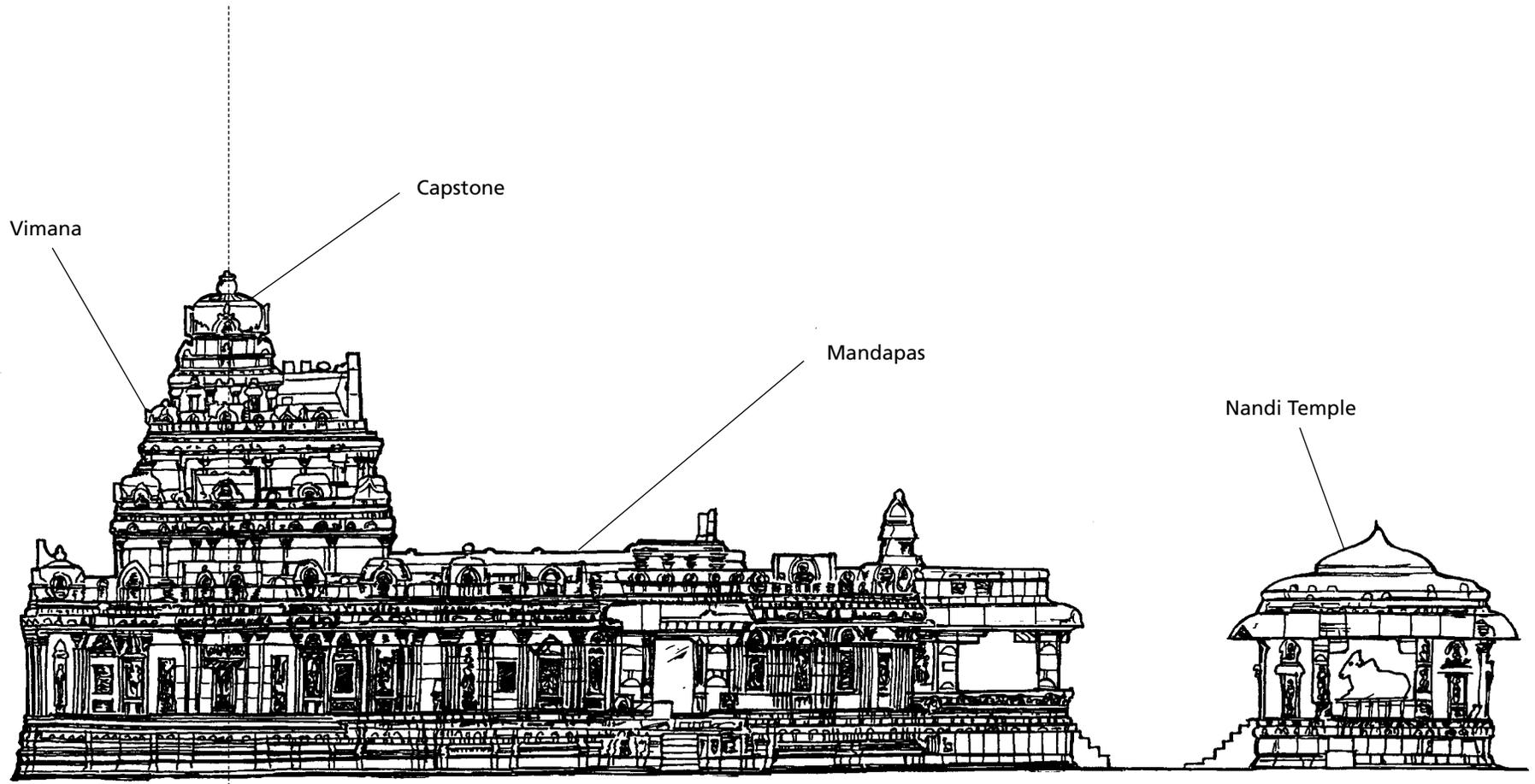
Temple Illustrations

Illustrated by Brian Hogarth



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Vimana

Capstone

Mandapas

Nandi Temple

Axis Mundi

Virupaksa Temple, Pattadakal
Showing elements of the
"southern" style