



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.*