

# THE FIVE TRANSCENDENT BUDDHAS

The five Transcendent Buddhas are also called Celestial or Meditation (Dhyana) Buddhas, but these terms were coined in the twentieth century and are not really appropriate as they are never used as such in the cultures still adhering to Mahayana Buddhism, where, for example, they are referred to as 'Buddhas of the Five Families' (Tibetan: Sangray Rig Ngas). In Tantric Buddhism, their role is extremely important and goes to the very heart of tantric structures.

The concept of the five families of Vajrayana, those of the Wheel, the Crossed Vajra, the Jewel, the Vajra, and the Lotus, developed after the fourth and fifth centuries. The Transcendent Buddhas who head these five families, and their directions, are, respectively, Vairocana (centre), Amoghasiddhi (north), Ratnasambha (south), Akshobhya (east) and Amitabha (west).

The manner in which these families developed and why they adopted the forms, the accoutrements and the vehicles they did is complex. It may be said that they arose from ideas inherent in several Mahayana texts which suggested the possibility that there were a variety of means to attain Enlightenment, and a number of buddha forms to implement them. In Vajrayana, the most expanded form of Buddhism and the last to develop in India, a belief arose which regarded both the early Theravada and the later Mahayana views as precursors to its own. Vajrayana Buddhism sought to use the negativities and psychological flaws of beings as the very tools by which to gain Enlightenment, neither wishing to negate or even to disassociate from them as Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism had sought to do. The Vajrayana aimed to immerse the seeker so deeply into the realms of the senses and the dangers of the world itself that he or she could exhaust the possibilities in worldly activities and thereby reach the end of their sufferings directly and swiftly.

Each of the five Transcendent Buddhas possesses a gesture, colour, symbol, syllable, element and specific consort. The five Buddhas

also represent the five basic types of human personality and demonstrate the absolutely perfected form of those personality types. Most importantly each of the families of Buddhas represents a negative quality (generally referred to as a 'poison') as well as the completely transformed aspect of that failing, manifested as a glorious wisdom. It is part of the genius of Tantric Buddhism that these weaknesses are not denied or suppressed, but instead are worked with until their illusory nature is understood and they become aspects of one's inherent wisdom. As we all have various types of personality limitations we can see that the five Buddha families represent a totally integrated 'us', in which all the limitations are transcended and in which we are empowered to express our gloriously radiant selves in exactly the same way the Buddha did. Moreover the totally integrated person is a microcosm of the perfected universe, hence bringing new meaning to phrases such as 'the omniscience of the Buddha' which suggests a cosmic and universal integrated awareness.

The five Buddhas are also emblematic of the radiations of perfection from the central point of a person into the five directions, each of which becomes purified. Ultimately these radiating perfections include the very elements from which we are made - solidity, liquidity, heat, air and the etheric. In the meditation process the five Buddhas are evoked from the consciousness and are recognised and acknowledged as part of the fully integrated human being. Then they are re-submerged back into the consciousness. As a result of this process the person comes to experience a small fraction of the integral majesty of the world as it really is. Repeated meditations enhance this experiential view of the world and its inhabitants as a divine and perfect mandala contained within the mediator's own mind. After several thousands of repeated experiences the mediator sees, with his or her developed, discriminating wisdom, that the world as it is here and now is the heavenly realm, the perfected world. It is not to be sought elsewhere or regarded as in any way external to one's own mind. This in brief is the

# THREE THOUSAND BUDDHAS OF THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

from the time of the Northern Wei (386–535) and Northern Liang (395–439) dynasties in China it was common to cover the walls and ceilings of temples with rows of Buddha images, the so-called 'thousand Buddhas.' This convention, first practiced in the cave temples of Central Asia and West China, was adopted throughout East Asia, where Mahayana temples frequently have 'thousand Buddha' halls dedicated to the worship of the thousand Buddhas.<sup>1</sup>

The covering of surfaces with Buddha figures in this manner is not merely a decorative device, but relates to sutras that give extended lists of the names of Buddhas and prescribe devotional practices associated with them, such as writing or writing the names, painting the images, making offerings, and performing rituals in their honor.<sup>2</sup> These practices are performed in order to aid suffering and avoid calamities.

The sutras also describe meditations in which the adherent visualizes one, three, ten, three ten, and finally 'a whole chamber completely filled with Buddha images, so that no space remains between them.'<sup>3</sup> Not only does the successful practice of the visualization develop the practitioner of the vow committed during sixty million of kalpas, but, 'in time to come the awareness of the magical power will permit him to create the Thousand World Thousand Buddhas of this (kappa kalpa) (see below), and they will be his teachers.'

In accordance with these prescriptions, not only are walls covered with images to serve the purpose of visualization practice, but in many cases the name of each Buddha is written in an accompanying columnar or double columnar by the devotee. With smaller names, scrolls from Dunhuang and elsewhere show the Buddha in a long row, with their names written below (see no. 102). Each name is prefaced by two Chinese characters which, in the Buddhist readings, are *ni mo* or *na mo*, which translates as *homage*, *hail*, *praise*, *refuge* or 'I take refuge in,' which is the common formula for opening invocations (*homage*) to a Buddha or bodhisattva.

The chanting of the names of the thousand

Buddhas was a common practice from early times, not only in Central Asia and China, but also in Korea and Japan. The first records from Japan describe the performance of potential vows, the 'Vow-practice for invoking the names of the Buddha' (*honzang*) or 'Vow-practice by way of the Buddha's names' (*honzang sangi*), held at the Imperial palace at the end of each year in order to purify the court and the country from sin. These rituals consisted of the recitation of the names of the three thousand Buddhas of the past, present and future.<sup>4</sup>

The thousand Buddha relate to the Buddhist doctrine of the three kalpas. The names of various Mahayana texts that mentioning is situated after three kalpas, which are immeasurable spans of time, during which the practitioners pass through fifty-two bodhisattva stages. The three kalpas are those of the past, called the 'era of obscuration' (*zatsa* *yojaku* kalpa); the present, the 'era of virtue' (*gyōyōgan* *shōka* kalpa); and the future, the 'era of the confluence' (*gyōgata* *shōka* *kyōka* kalpa). A thousand Buddha appear in each of these eras: four Buddhas, namely, Kāśyapa, Śākyamuni, Kṛtānanda, and Kṛtavarman, have appeared so far in the present era of virtue, and together with the last three of the thousand Buddhas who appeared in the kalpa of the past, namely, Vipaśyin, Shālini and Vairocana, form the group known as the seven Buddhas of the past, a frequent motif in Buddhist art from early times. This group is often accompanied by an eighth figure, that of Maitreya, the next Buddha to appear in the world, and representing all the Buddhas of the future.

The central and main materials of the nine materials that comprise the Thousand World Materials, the so-called *Perfected Body Assembly*,<sup>5</sup> show the thousand Buddhas of the present kalpa in a band surrounding the eight-petalled flower that contains the materials (see 96). There are two hundred and fifty Buddha shown in each of the four directions.

The thousand Buddhas are here to be taken as representing the three thousand Buddhas of

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**Thousand World Materials**  
Invitation, 1982  
• Double-sided  
• Ink 100 (cotton)  
Shanghai Art Museum  
200.2.1.17.1.2  
From collection



The light of the Buddha irradiates the total cosmos; likewise it irradiates the world in miniature, the micro-cosmos, contained within each person. There is an equivalence of the inner and outer worlds. Awakening lies at the central core of each being, and shines through each of the levels of being.

The mandala is simultaneously a diagram of the world composed of the body, speech and mind of each being; the forms, sounds and varieties of consciousness making up the external world; and the Cosmos made up by the Body, Speech and Mind of the Buddha. The ritual practices associated with a mandala have a twofold purpose, one contingent and circumstantial, such as the averting of calamities or the removal of illness, and the other directed at the attainment of Awakening by the fusion of the physical forms, sounds and language, and types of consciousness of the three worlds of the adherent, external phenomena and the Buddha.

Since the mandala incorporates the various aspects of the Body, Speech and Mind of the Buddha, it functions to concentrate the powers of the Buddha and bodhisattvas invoked in the ritual. The mandala is a cosmos peopled with the embodied powers of the Buddha. It is also the focus for meditation practices involving visualisation. There are four types of visualisation, and each has a corresponding form of mandala: 'Ceren' mandalas (*mantra-mandala*), which are made up of coloured, anthropomorphic images, the colours representing the Elements that comprise the interfused bodies of the adherent, the Buddha and the world; Dharmic mandalas, showing the images in the form of seed syllables ( *bija*), which are the concentrated essences of invocations (*dharmic* or *mantra*) of the divinity; Yantra mandalas, representing the images in the form of symbols; and Karma ('Action') mandalas, comprising unpainted three-dimensional figures, which represent the actions of the Buddha and bodhisattvas throughout the world. The usual form of visualisation practice involves successive stages, in which the Buddha or bodhisattva that is the focus of the meditation is first visualised as a seed syllable, which is then changed into the *anagata* form, which in turn is transformed into an anthropomorphic image in colour.

There are many types of mandala, varying

according to the particular Buddha or bodhisattva occupying the centre. Each has its own accompanying rituals, performed for the attainment of some specific purpose. [AS]

1. For a fuller discussion of the end other points, see Tsongkhapa (1989) and (1990).

2. *Mahāvairocana Sutra* (*Great Sun Sutra*) 7: 36, no. 438, p. 5, p. 10; for the meaning of the mandala, see Tsongkhapa (1989), pp. 104-5; see Grossman, *Mandala* (1988), Japanese Mandala University of Hawaii Press, Tokyo and Thomas (1987), *Mandala*, Kyoto, (1979) *Art of the Japanese Zen Garden*, London. See also, *Yogi, Giuseppe* (1998), *Ultimate Sacred Symbols: Sacred Geometry*, New York/Groinger Press (1993), *The Theory and Practice of the Mandala*, London, India.

# THE MANDALA

The Sanskrit word 'mandala' means 'circle.' The circle is the form of completion and perfection and therefore signifies the perfection or complete fruition of Buddhahood. In the Vajrayana the Buddha's body is a mandala or 'circle' since it encompasses the total universe; it is described as an 'all-encompassing totality' that circumscribes and includes all the forms and essences of the cosmos. A mandala is also a circle in the sense of a gathering, as when we speak of a circle of friends, or a literary circle. The mandala gathers together the totality of the virtues and qualities of the perfected Buddha. In the graphic forms of the mandala, these virtues and qualities, so many aspects of the Wisdom and Compassion of the Buddha, are personified as the figures that are arranged around the Buddha at the center.

The mandala is a 'circle' in the sense of a bounded and centred area. It is a ritual enclosure from which all disordered and distracting influences have been expelled so that rituals can be performed without hindrance or danger. Thus the Chinese translators, when they did not merely transliterate 'mandala' as *man-ta-lo* (Jap. *mandara*), rendered it as *tan* (Jap. *dan*), an area laid out for the performance of rituals, or as *dao chang* (Jap. *daiji*, lit. 'place of the Way'), referring to the place where Awakening is attained, that is, the seat beneath the bodhi tree where Shakyamuni became a Buddha, and by extension, any area that is ritually marked out as a place for the performance of Buddhist practices. In this connection it is to be understood that mandalas are intended to be laid out on the ground, and to be entered for the performance of rituals. Mandala paintings, mounted and hung vertically, are vertical representations of these sacred precincts.

The Mahāvairocana Sutra defines a mandala as 'what gives birth to all Buddhas,' and in his commentary on the sutra, the monk Shubhakarasiṃha (c. 637-735), who translated it from Sanskrit to Chinese in the early eighth century, explains that the mandala is so described because it represents stages in the process by which perfected Buddhahood is attained, starting from the quickening of the bodhicitta, that is, the seed of Awakening innate

in every being, through to the actions of the Awakened to alleviate the sufferings of beings. Thus the Buddhas shown on the petals in the cardinal directions of the eight-petalled lotus that centres the Matrix Mandala (see 96a) represent the quickening of bodhicitta, personified as the Buddha of the East; the growth of bodhicitta when cultivated by Practice, embodied in the Buddha of the South; the attainment of Awakening as the result of Practice, represented by the Buddha of the West; Entry into Nirvāṇa, which is the attainment of the highest, perfect Awakening (*anuttara samyakt sambodhi*), shown by the Buddha of the North; and, finally, the working of the Buddha's Method to bring all beings to Awakening, represented by the Buddha Mahāvairocana on the central calyx of the lotus. This, or a similar progress through stages to Awakening, is embodied in every mandala. The mandala thus embodies the stages whereby Buddhahood is attained, that is to say, the stages that give birth to Buddhas.

The Mahāvairocana Sutra also says that the mandala is of incomparable and most excellent flavour; and Shubhakarasiṃha explains that this refers to a metaphor that is recurrent in the Buddhist literature, namely the churning of milk to make butter, curds and ghee. The word 'mandala' comprises *manala*, 'ghee' and *la*, 'composed of,' and just as ghee is the concentrated essence of milk, so the mandala represents the essence of the most perfect and most excellent Awakening.

Since Awakening is the perception of the essential reality of the universe, the mandala is also the pure and concentrated essence of the universe. The mandala represents a cosmos, an ordered world, centred by the Buddha as the embodiment of Awakening. The nature of Awakening, the Buddha Nature, permeates the worlds. The layers of the mandala are the levels of being; the figures surrounding the center are aspects of the Buddha Nature present in every phenomenon making up the universe. In mandalas centred by Mahāvairocana (Great Sun) the symbolism is explicit. Such mandalas show the Buddha as radiance, at once a shining and a radiating emanation.

## Standing Buddha flanked by two bodhisattvas

CHINA; Eastern Wei period (534–550), c. 545; grey limestone; 61 cm

Art Gallery of New South Wales. Purchased 1988

An exquisite image of the Buddha, composed and serene, and flanked by two bodhisattvas of similar confident serenity. The most apparent feature of this stele is the refinement of the carving and meticulous fluency of the detail from the elegant and mildly ferocious dragons at the base, to the facial features of the principal figures, the formalised cascades of draperies and the small image of a seated buddha carried aloft by *apsaras* at the apex of the halo. The finely textured stone and the sweet refinement of the carving are strongly reminiscent of similar sculptures recently recovered from the site of the Longxing temple at Qingzhou in Shandong province.<sup>1</sup>

It is possible the main figure represents the Historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, flanked by two bodhisattvas, most likely Avalokiteshvara (Ch.: Guanyin) and Samantabhadra (Ch.: Puxian), the two most closely associated with Shakyamuni. Similar compositions with Shakyamuni as the central figure generally include at the top of the halo a small stupa representing the Buddha of the Past, Prabhutaratna, who vowed to be present whenever the *Lotus Sutra* was invoked. This became a favoured theme in early Chinese Buddhist art when the Lotus Sutra was the dominant doctrine, usually showing the two Buddhas Shakyamuni and Prabutaratna in discussion (nos 114, 116). [EC]

1. Refer National Museum of History, Beijing (1999). *Masterpieces of Buddhist Statuary from Qingzhou City*; and Hong Kong Museum of Art (2001). *Buddhist Sculptures: new discoveries from Qingzhou, Shandong province*.

# THE FUTURE BUDDHA

In this auspicious aeon  
Three leaders have there been:  
Kakusandha, Konagamana  
And the leader Kassapa too.

I am now the perfect Buddha;  
And there will be Metteya too  
Before this auspicious aeon  
Runs to the end of its years.

The Perfect Buddha, Metteya  
By name, supreme of men.<sup>1</sup>

Thus is Metteya, or Maitreya in the Sanskrit language, introduced by Buddha Shakyamuni to one of his chief disciples Shariputra in an 'apocalyptic' Buddhist text in the Pali language called the *Anagatavamsa*. Each Buddhist aeon (*kalpa*) is calculated as cosmic time, and Maitreya, literally the friendly one, will be the Buddha of the aeon that will follow the decline of the faith five thousand years after Shakyamuni's death. Like Shakyamuni, Maitreya too has had previous existences, but is now on a holding pattern in a heaven called Tushita, engaged in continuous preaching.

One of the interesting features of the Maitreya legend is that when he does appear on earth, he will be born in a brahmin family at a place called Ketumati, generally identified with Benares or Varanasi, close to where Shakyamuni himself preached his sermon. By the time the Maitreya legend was invented, generally in the northwest extremities of the subcontinent around the birth of Christ, Varanasi had become a bastion of Brahmanical (= Hindu) culture and learning, which may have influenced the choice of the site as well as of the caste. It may be recalled that Shakyamuni was born some five centuries earlier further east in a kshatriya (warrior) family. Maitreya's name too resonates with Vedic association as it is a derivative of Mitra, the deity par excellence of cosmic order in Vedic religion composed several centuries before the birth of Shakyamuni (sixth to fifth century BCE). Thus, one need not seek Maitreya's origins in the West Asiatic deity of Mithras, as was done by Alexander Soper in a brilliant essay on the early history of Maitreya.<sup>2</sup>

Very little of Mithras' militancy relates to the character of Maitreya. Rather, the Hindu Kalki, the sword-bearing avatar of Vishnu, who will appear at the end of the current Kali age of Hindu cosmogony, seems conceptually and iconographically closer to the saviour Mithras. However, the idea of a 'messiah' that prevailed across a wide landmass extending from the Mediterranean to the Hindukush in the last centuries before the Common Era and of which Jesus Christ is the most well-known survivor, may well have contributed to the emergence of the concept and cult of Maitreya in the polyglot society of the northwest frontier of the Indian subcontinent.

If indeed the cult of Maitreya did develop in the Gandhara region, it spread quickly to Khotan in the north and Kashmir. At least one book on the future Buddha, *The Book of Zambasta*, was written there and Buddhist traditions have preserved memories of two early kings who claimed to be reincarnations of Maitreya.<sup>3</sup> While no early image of Maitreya has survived in Kashmir, as noted by Soper, 'Chinese monks' biographies in several instances name Kashmir as the country in which Maitreya was particularly accessible to human worshippers by the route of mystic ecstasy.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the Mahasanghikas, who ushered in the Mahayana, were a strong presence in Kashmir as they were in Gandhara and their text, the *Mahavastu*, composed early in the first millennium CE, includes discussions about both past and future Buddhas including Maitreya. Kashmir is where Kumarajiva (350–409) obtained his education and more monks from Kashmir went to China than from any other region of the subcontinent.

The brilliant Kumarajiva wrote two books on the Future Buddha which tell us that he lives as a bodhisattva in the Tushita heaven where the deserving deceased will go to join countless others to hear him preach. At the appropriate time the entire heavenly congregation will again descend to earth to hear the new master continue the teachings at Ketumati/Varanasi. Having been born in the chosen brahmin family and undisturbed by Mara, the evil genius of Buddhist mythology, Maitreya will preach under a 'dragon flower tree,' about which more will be said presently.

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## Altarpiece: Maitreya

CHINA, Hebei  
Province; Northern Wei  
dynasty, c. 525; gilt  
bronze; 59.1 cm  
The Metropolitan  
Museum of Art, New  
York. Rogers Fund,  
1938



meditation, we come to the experience that that very same world is in fact Nirvana, perfected and diamond-like in its purity.

It may be said that the seeker who accomplishes the totality of the Wisdoms (represented in this exhibition as icons in the forms of the five Buddha families) also sees all the Buddhist paradises, the cosmos in its ultimate nature as well as possibly the most important truth of all, that of the ultimate perfection of all things, places and beings. [17]

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#### Musical Instrument

INDIA, 1877, gilt copper set with coloured stones, Victoria and Albert Museum, London



	CARDINAL	AMULGATION	SPURIOUSNESS	ACQUAINTANCE	ADDITION
DIRECTION	Centre	North	South	East	West
WEIGHT OR SPAT	Balance	Infinite power	Just form	Incomparable	Boundless light
COLOUR	White	Green	Yellow	Blue	Red
ATTITUDE	Openness (accepting a lotus wheel)	Double eyes	Outward (flaming jewel)	Upper (diamond crystal)	Palatine (lotus)
WEIGHT	Strong like	All accomplishing	Exhausting	Real	Overcoming
POWER	Evolution	Emp	Profit	True	Good
DESIGN	Water	At	Earth	Ether	Fire
WEIGHT	Soft	Genial	More	Coherent	Harmonious
WEIGHT (SOUND)	Whisper (the)	Exhausted	Beginning	Self-sustaining	Meditation
WEIGHT OF SOUL	Top of the skull	Eyes	Heart	Between the eyebrows	Heart

The combinations listed in this chart can offer striking parallels with existing windows to be seen in mandala.





#### ▲ 11

#### **Shakyamuni Buddha in Vajrasattva**

CENTRAL, Asia Minor Khata late 12th - early 13th century.

Height: 60 cm; width: 40 cm; 10 x 10 cm.

The Great Vajrasattva Mandala, 10th century.

This painting is one of the exceptional finds of the Khata (see page 123). The five transcendental Buddhas along the top differ only in their mudras, and can be identified (from left to right) as Amoghasiddhi, Vajrasattva of the the North, holding his right hand in the businessness gesture; Akshobhya, Vajrasattva of the East, with his right hand in the earth-touching gesture and his left hand in the contemplation gesture; Vairocana of the Centre, his hands in the Wisdom Fiat gesture; Amitayus, of the West, with both hands in the meditation gesture; and finally Ratnasambhava of the South. (20)

'magic' of the Vajrayana - we are surrounded by unbounded perfection and the Vajrayana merely teaches us how to recognise it.

The combination of the five Buddhas is a metaphor for the complete Universe, in which all things are in a state of balance and perfection. Hence, too, in every mandala, there is a representation of a perfect world, one in which all the elements are in harmonious balance.

The central Buddha family is that of Vairocana, 'Radiance', whose gesture is the *mudra* known as the Wisdom Fiat. He transforms delusion and ignorance into a Mirror-like Wisdom which allows things to be seen in their ultimately perfect form. His colour is white, and his vehicle is the lion.

Amoghasiddhi works with our aversion to generate an all-accomplishing Wisdom which ensures our success on the spiritual path. In a manner of speaking he is the summation of the other four Buddha families. He is green in colour, holds crossed vajra-sceptres in his hands, and a garuda is his vehicle. Amoghasiddhi inhabits the northern section of a mandala.

The poison associated with Ratnasambhava is pride which is transcended into the Wisdom of Equality in which things are unified in their essential nature. He is golden in colour and holds the jewel that grants all wishes. His vehicle is the horse, and he inhabits the southern section of a mandala.

Akshobhya is blue in colour, his attribute is the vajra-sceptre, and his vehicle the elephant. Akshobhya inhabits the eastern section of a mandala and he transforms hatred into the Total Wisdom which impartially reflects all things as they really are.

Amitayus (sometimes referred to as *Amitayus*) is red in colour; lotuses are the symbol of his family, and his vehicle is the peacock. Amitayus inhabits the western section of a mandala and transforms the weakness of uncontrollable passions and craving into the Wisdom of Discernment.

As a metaphor for the resolution of the apparent duality of being a human in an unsatisfactory world, the Buddhas of the five families are the ultimate reassurance that the Buddha's ideas are absolutely true. They are the exemplars of one of Buddhism's most profound truths, that of the identity of *samsara* and *Nirvana*. As humans we are forced to deal with worldly existence (*samsara*). Ultimately through