

PART 2 • CHAPTER 8 *Mark L. Blum*

# MAHAYANA BUDDHISM



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## THE GREAT VEHICLE

After the Buddha's death, Buddhism began to take shape as a multi-ethnic religion, spreading throughout south Asia (see pp.47–9). During the first century CE, a new movement arose that opposed many of the prevailing orthodoxies. It became known to its followers as the Mahayana, or “Great Vehicle” (a term first recorded in the sixth century CE), as opposed to other schools of Buddhism, which were disparagingly referred to by Mahayanists as the Hinayana, the “Lesser” or “Inferior Vehicle.”

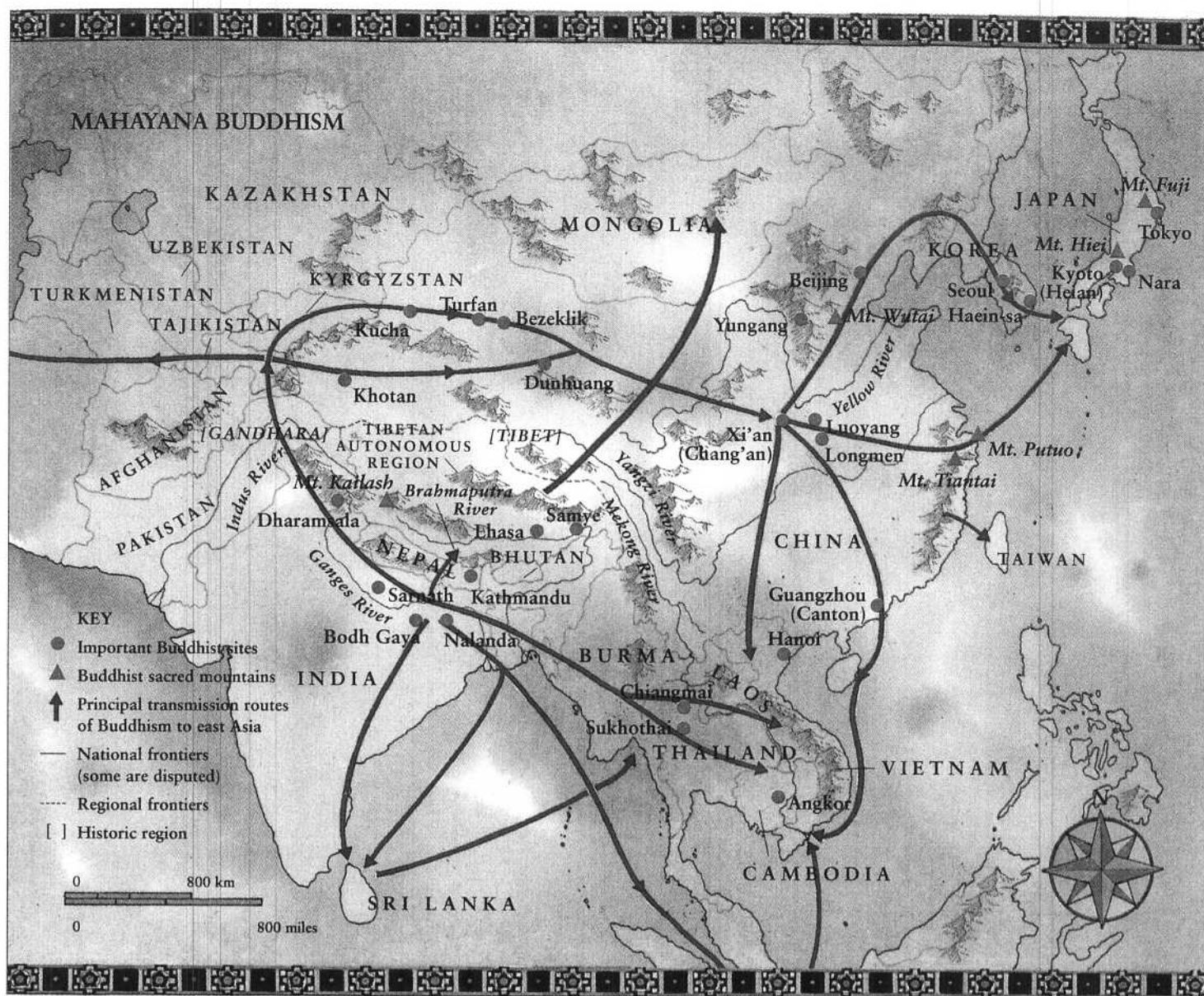
The Mahayana offered a new path to a newly defined goal and some strikingly new philosophical and psychological assertions. It presented a number of very different understandings of the Buddha's message, based on a body of scriptures which, it was claimed, had been uttered by the Buddha, but had lain undiscovered for centuries. The Mahayana became prominent in northern India, and as a consequence, when Buddhism spread from the subcontinent into central Asia and beyond, it was almost exclusively Mahayana missionaries that penetrated Tibet, Mongolia, China, and Japan.

When a disciple of the Buddha had attained enlightenment he received the title of *arhat* (“worthy one”). In the Mahayana *sutras*, monks who devote their lives solely to the pursuit of *nirvana* for themselves are referred to as *shravakas* (“listeners”), because they only pursue the letter, rather than the spirit, of what they have been taught. In the Mahayana, such individuals are criticized for self-centeredness in ignoring the sufferings of others in their withdrawal from the world, which in turn means that they are striving for what, at best, can only be an illusory liberation. In the Mahayana, everyone—monastic and lay person alike—is encouraged to strive for the ultimate goal of becoming not an *arhat*, but a *buddha*.

Thus *buddhahood* is expounded as the actual goal of Shakyamuni's message, and one pursuing it is called a *bodhisattva*, meaning “enlightenment being” or “future *buddha*.” Prior to the emergence of the Mahayana, the word *bodhisattva* was used mainly to refer to the Buddha before his attainment of *buddhahood*. In the Mahayana view, the path to *nirvana* was impossible without the inclusion of the perfection of others as well, an ideal expressed in the twin virtues of wisdom and compassion, which *bodhisattvas* need in equal measure to attain their goal. Liberation in the Mahayana is thus *buddhahood*, and the Mahayana is also called *Budhayana* or *Bodhisattvayana* (words which may be rendered as “*buddha* path” and “*bodhisattva* path”). It is commonly believed that *bodhisattvas*, embodiments of compassion, vow to postpone their own final emancipation until all other sentient beings have been emancipated.

### THE TWO TRUTHS

The Mahayana doctrine of the Two Truths, postulated by Nagarjuna, refers to “conventional truth,” in the sense of measurable facts, and “ultimate truth,” in the sense of the higher, absolute nature of things beyond normal linguistic description. When a *bodhisattva* progresses to where he or she sees things in a non-dualistic way, realizing that good and bad are not wholly different, this reflects the higher nature of things. This is the point of the statement in the Diamond Sutra, that in order to practice the perfection of charity one should give without any sign of giving. That is, charity in which all accompanying identities are empty of any inherent reality produces merit that is “immeasurable,” but charity that presumes the reality of giver, gift, beneficiary, or reward reflects a worldly understanding of things and produces minimal merit. The doctrine is also a critique of language as embodying a set of cultural presumptions that unavoidably conditions our understanding of the world. For this reason even the Dharma itself can only be considered as a collection of provisional statements and in the final analysis must be recognized only as “conventional truth.”



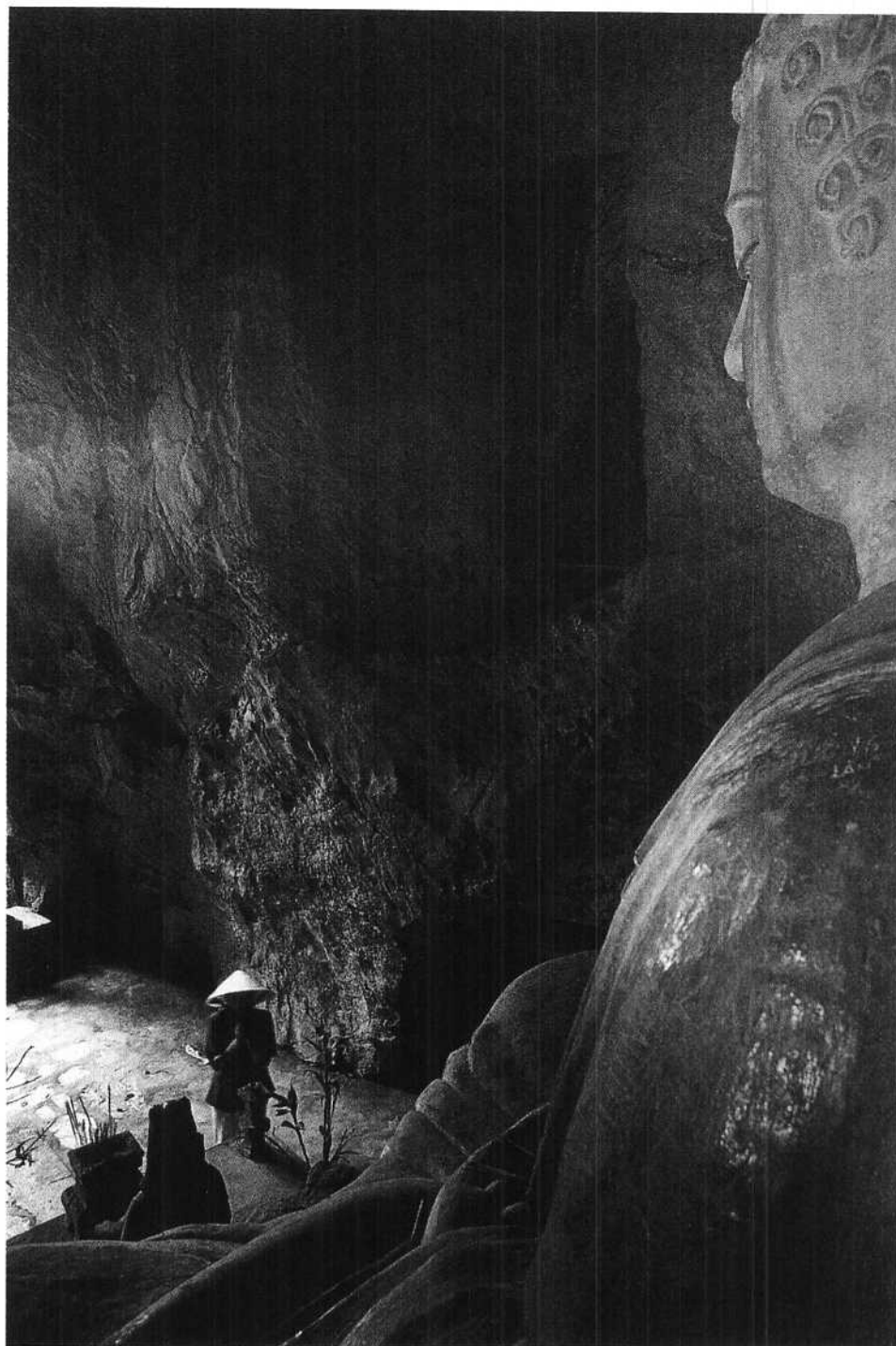
The new path was defined in various ways, but most commonly the adept was encouraged to cultivate the six “perfections” (*paramitas*): generosity, morality, patience, vigor, meditation, and wisdom. At times, this list was expanded to ten, each perfection described as commensurate with one of ten “stages” of spiritual attainment (*bhumi*), such as joy, purity, and so on (see sidebar, p.136).

The Mahayana produced a number of distinctive philosophical doctrines, notably the concept of Emptiness (see pp.140–41). Another striking feature was the new conception of the Buddha as having three forms or “bodies” (*kayas*) (see pp.91–2).

In the Mahayana, faith in the power, omniscience, and eternal spiritual assistance of the Buddha assumed a new sense of importance and Buddhism now took on a decidedly more devotional form. Such Mahayana scriptures as the Lotus Sutra, the Pure Land Sutras, the Garland Sutra, and so on, all describe a *buddha* of cosmic stature. There remained, however, several cosmic *buddhas*: Shakyamuni, Amitabha (see pp.144–7),

The paths of transmission for Mahayana Buddhism. The route into east Asia through central Asia was a particularly important development for the new teachings, making Mahayana the dominant form of Buddhism in a number of countries, including Tibet, Mongolia, China, and Japan.

*A woman worshipping at a statue of the Buddha in Hoa Nghiem cave. The Marble Mountains, near Danang, Vietnam, contain a number of such caves which have been used as Buddhist sanctuaries for centuries—since the Chinese form of Buddhism was adopted in Vietnam from the sixth century onward (see box, opposite).*



#### PERIOD OF THE FINAL LAW

History is not a drama in Buddhism in the sense that it has a definite beginning, a purposeful development, and a climactic dénouement. Even in Buddhist cosmology, beginnings and endings are relative as opposed to absolute. It is true, however, that there was a strong Mahayana belief in east Asia that the world was inevitably headed toward a period of dark decline called the Period of the Final Law (known as *mofa* in Chinese and *mappo* in Japanese) because too much time had elapsed since the death of the Buddha and fewer and fewer people understood his teachings. Depending on the *sutra* propounding such views, calculations were made as to when the final period was to begin, usually either in the sixth or eleventh century. This final period could last up to ten thousand years and all sorts of dire consequences were described, such as increases in corruption, conflict, and even a shortening of human life. But the end of this age was unambiguously marked by the advent of a new *buddha*, Maitreya, who will usher in a new era of peace and enlightenment.

Vairochana, Vajradhara, Akshobhya, Bhaishajyaguru, and more, and their accomplishments were beyond imagination. This compared with the early tradition in which the Buddha was a compassionate teacher revered for having destroyed all the anxieties and sufferings within himself, thereby reaching the end of his participation in the cycle of rebirth. But herein lies the basic paradox of Mahayana thought: on the one hand, the concept of *buddha* has been brought closer to the devotee, with the promise that everyone can attain this goal; on the other hand, *buddhas* are described in such expansively cosmic terms—beyond the experience and imagination of most people—that the concept of *buddha* is almost impossible to grasp, thus magnifying the divide between *buddha* and humankind.

The worlds described in the Mahayana *sutras* are full of wonders that bear little resemblance to this world. Much of this literature presents an idealized cosmos of “*buddha* realms” or “pure lands” into which the faithful may be born if they pursue certain devotional practices; in these paradisaical



realms, conditions are perfect, a *buddha* is present to guide the devotee, and progress to complete enlightenment is thereby swift (see pp.144–7).

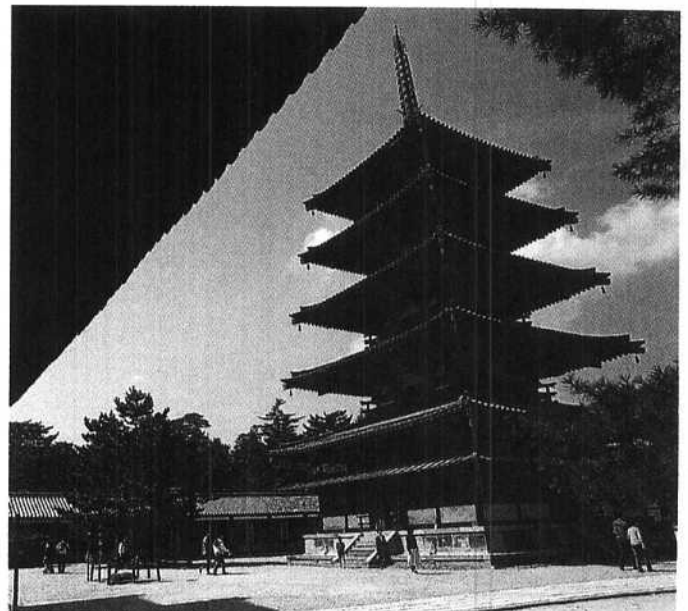
The Buddha's omniscience permits him not only to know what others are thinking, and why they act in the way they do, but also to see their past lives and their future lives. This enables him to fashion a message or activity tailored to an individual's spiritual condition (see also pp.142–3). But no *buddha* is a creator of the universe or of life within it. The Great Vehicle may have salvific characteristics, but a *buddha* is not accompanied by any sense of the testing, punitive, and forgiving aspects of god, as depicted in the Christian Bible. While there are metaphorical references to the Buddha as "father," this alludes to his commitment to save all sentient life, rather than a sense of responsibility for "his creation." The Buddha bestows the Dharma upon humanity, but it is centered on psychological health and spiritual transformation rather than moral standards. *Buddhas* are also said to be encounterable through practices such as meditative exercise. In the Pure Land tradition, the *buddha* Amitabha invites everyone to seek rebirth in his world so they may practice assiduously under his supervision and thereby reach *buddhahood* themselves without fail. While Amitabha Buddha's land is a paradise, it is not heaven but, like all *buddha*-lands, a unique environment especially conducive to religious realization because it is purified by a *buddha*'s presence. And there are many such lands, indeed all *buddhas* inhabit them (see pp.144–7).

### THE GROWTH OF EAST ASIAN BUDDHISM

**T**he spread of Buddhism to east Asia began with the first missionaries to China, who arrived in the first century CE. China had a sophisticated culture with centuries-old traditions of government bureaucracy, literature, philosophy, and so on, and almost immediately translation teams were created to render the *sutras* into Chinese—a process that continued for eight centuries. By the seventh century, Chinese Buddhism was so fully realized, with its own philosophical schools, traditions of art and architecture, and so on, that it became the form adopted by Vietnam, Korea, and Japan as well.

From at least the third century, the port of Hanoi had served as a stopover point for boats traveling between India and China. In the sixth century, northern Vietnam adopted Chinese Buddhism and this form spread to the south when the country was unified in the fifteenth century.

Although not yet unified politically, all three rival kingdoms in Korea welcomed the arrival of Chinese Buddhism in the second half of the fourth century. From Korea, Buddhism spread to Japan in the sixth century, but in form and language it was thoroughly Chinese.



The pagoda of the Horyu-ji temple at Nara, Japan, founded by Prince Shotoku shortly after the Japanese imperial family had accepted Buddhism as a state religion in 592CE.

# THE *BODHISATTVA* PATH

The concept of *bodhisattva* ("enlightenment being") is at the heart of how the Mahayana defines itself. The word is not uncommon in early Buddhism, where it indicates someone with a relationship to the enlightenment of a *buddha*, either as one destined for enlightenment, or one seeking enlightenment. In the early Pali literature, the only *bodhisattvas* are those who became *buddhas*, namely Shakyamuni in our time. For example, in the Theravada tradition, which counts as many as twenty-four or twenty-seven previous *buddhas*, Siddhartha Gautama is said to be the fourth *buddha* of this epoch, and Maitreya will be the fifth (see p.91). Every epoch, or *kalpa*, lasts for millions of years, and the appearance of a *bodhisattva* or *buddha* is an exceedingly rare occurrence. All *buddhas* have similar careers as *bodhisattvas* who make formal vows to attain *buddhahood* under the *buddha* of their epoch and receive prophecies from that *buddha* as to when and where their goal will be accomplished. Over the course of many lifetimes they then strive to perfect themselves until they succeed. The life of the Buddha is taken as the model of the *bodhisattva's* career, and there are many *jataka* ("birth") tales of his exemplary behavior in former lifetimes.

With the emergence of the movement within Buddhism that came to be called Mahayana (see pp.132–5), the concept of *bodhisattva* took on a new meaning. It is apparent from the early *sutras* that the students of the Buddha who became fully enlightened were called *arhats* ("worthy ones") rather than *buddhas*, but the distinction between the two was not an issue, for they realize the same Dharma. At a council believed to have been held one hundred years after the Buddha's death (see p.47), a disagreement is thought to have occurred over whether the *arhat* ideal was sufficient. From what was to become the Mahayana perspective, the *arhat* path involved different practices and beliefs from the *bodhisattva* path. Becoming an *arhat* was designated as the mundane goal of the mere "listeners" (*shravakas*) who could do no more than follow what they heard the Buddha preach. This is criticized by Mahayana thinkers as a self-centered path in which individuals are so committed to their own liberation that they lose touch with the world around them and the sufferings of others. By contrast the path of the *bodhisattva* is upheld as ethically and spiritually superior because of its supreme emphasis on the cultivation of compassion toward others who need help. Only the *bodhisattva* path can lead to the transcendental, cosmic status of a *buddha*. Mahayana theorists claimed that the way of the *bodhisattva* was the only complete path that the Buddha had actually taught, labeling the *arhat* path as only a temporary construct meant to prepare his disciples for the final teaching.

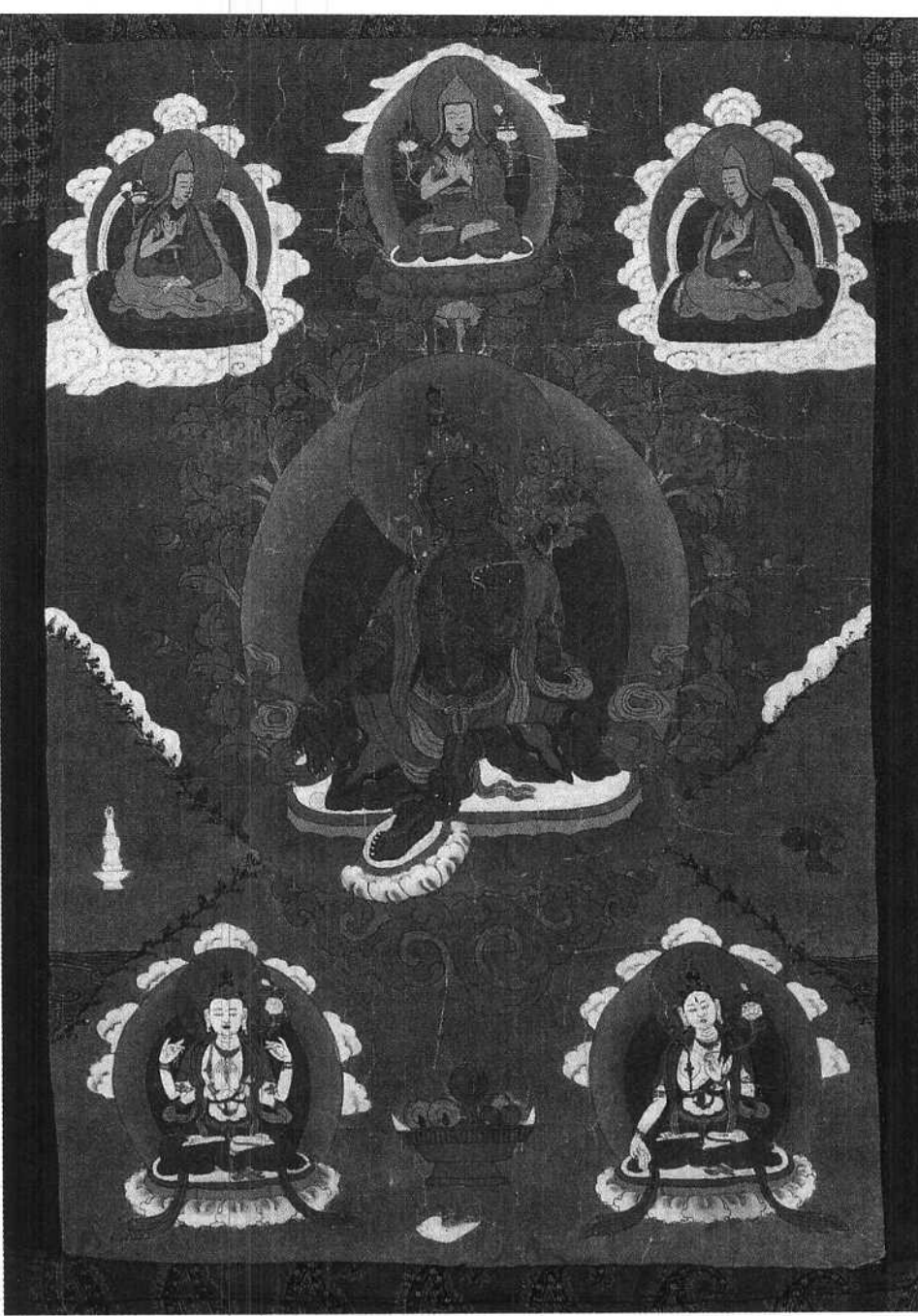
In Mahayana culture, all Buddhists who are committed to attaining complete emancipation for themselves and others are deserving of the label *bodhisattva*. Because the concept of personal enlightenment attained without the enlightenment of others would appear, from the Mahayana perspective, not to be a true enlightenment, the *bodhisattva* path is characterized by a rig-

## TEN PERFECTIONS

Generosity  
Morality  
Patience  
Vigor  
Meditation  
Wisdom  
Skill in Means  
Conviction  
Strength  
Knowledge

## TEN STAGES OF ATTAINMENT

Joy  
Purity  
Brightness  
Radiance  
Difficult to Conquer  
Facing Nirvana  
Far-going  
Immovable  
Spiritual Intelligence  
Dharma Cloud



## TARA

One extremely important *bodhisattva* for Tibetans is Tara, who is the feminine aspect of compassion or loving-kindness (*maitri*). The cult of Tara was introduced into Tibet by the Indian master Atisha in the eleventh century CE and has probably gained importance in Tibetan Buddhism due to his own fervor for this deity. Tibetan legends recount how Tara was born from a teardrop of compassion that Avalokiteshvara shed when confronted by the enormity of the task of helping suffering beings. Tara, who has a variety of forms, is said to be the mother of all *buddhas* and her eyes (in the forehead, palms and soles) allow her to see all human pain.

A Tibetan thangka showing the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (bottom right); Green Tara (center), who represents divine energy; and White Tara (bottom left), who embodies transcendent wisdom. Also depicted is the Gelugpa school's founder Tsongkhapa (top, center), who is flanked by two lamas.

orous standard of compassion, called *karuna*, in which the devotee makes the “*bodhisattva* vow” and promises, according to some Mahayana texts, that his or her final liberation will be postponed until all others can achieve the same. This explains why there are no *buddhas* in our midst, but instead there may be many *bodhisattvas* who are sensitive to an individual’s cry for help.

Since a great many beings are far from liberation, there must also be a number of *bodhisattvas* who, like *buddhas*, are active in this world trying to help. *Bodhisattvas* are directed to cultivate a list of six virtues, or “perfections” (*paramitas*), later expanded to ten. The *bodhisattva* path also entails ten stages of spiritual attainment or *bhumi*, which loosely correspond to these virtues (see box, opposite). After progressing to the seventh stage, the *bodhisattva* is capable of becoming a *buddha* if he or she so chooses and has similar supernatural abilities to a *buddha* that allow an appearance anywhere at will. This is the doctrinal basis of faith in the power of what are often called celestial *bodhisattvas*, such as Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri, Kshitigarbha, and Maitreya (see p.91), who have the ability to manifest themselves simultaneously in more than one place.



ART AND ARCHITECTURE *Michael Willis*

## THE MAHAYANA PANTHEON

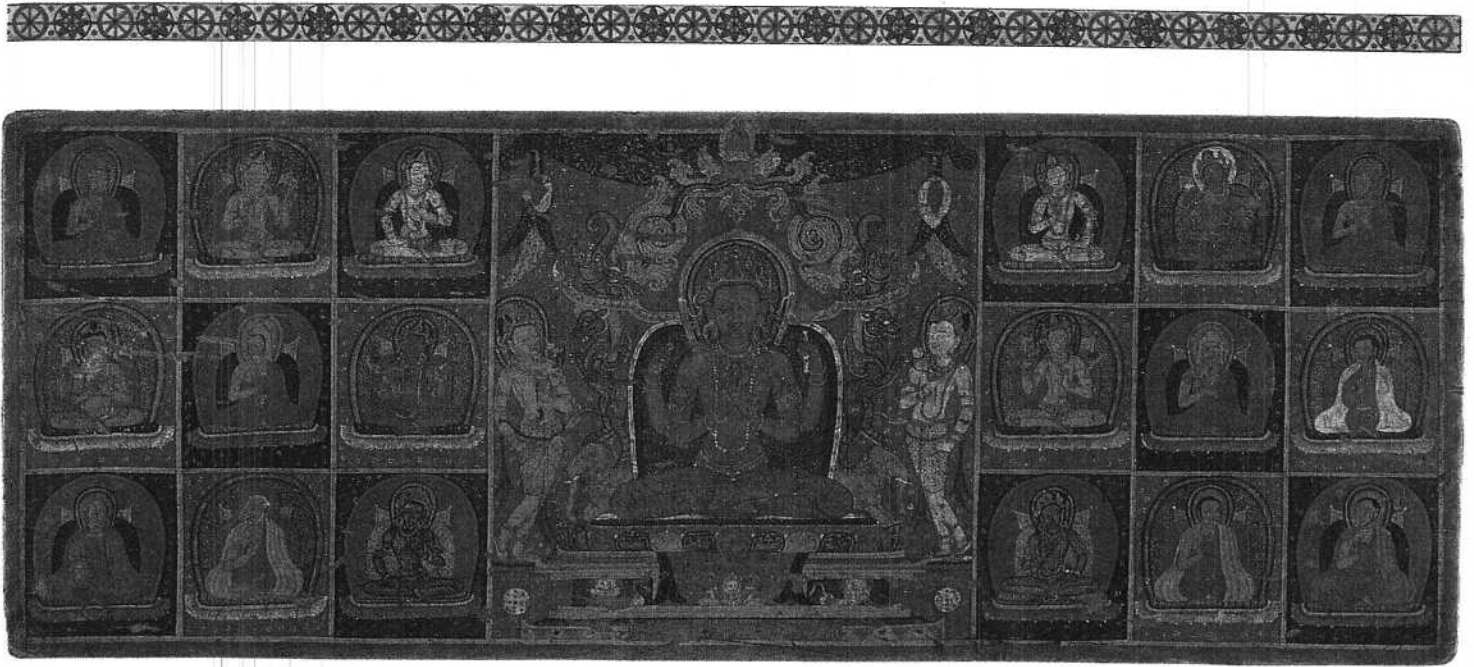
Mahayana Buddhism places special emphasis on *bodhisattvas* or “future buddhas” (see pp.132–7). Foremost among the *bodhisattvas* is Avalokiteshvara, whose name means literally the “Lord who looks down in compassion.” The earliest sculptures of Avalokiteshvara from India, China, Korea, and Japan portray the *bodhisattva* with his eyes looking serenely downward. Sculptures in India dating to ca. 700CE show him surrounded by panels depicting the Eight Great Perils. Four of these stem from human agency—shipwrecks, wrongful imprisonment, thieves, and conflagrations—and four

### HAND GESTURES: MUDRAS

Images of the *buddhas*, *bodhisattvas*, and attendant deities are always shown holding symbolic attributes or with their hands held in special positions (*mudras*). The attributes and positions are numerous and complex, but certain basic gestures are found in all parts of the Buddhist world. Particularly common is the Buddha touching the earth just prior to his enlightenment (see illustration, p.79). When he is shown teaching, both hands are usually raised in front of his chest. Another common gesture, especially in early sculpture, is the right hand raised in salutation, denoting reassurance or freedom from fear (see illustration, p.147).

*A figure in a vitarkha mudra pose—that of “exposition”, with the thumb and forefinger forming a circle to symbolize the “wheel of law”—from a fresco in the ca. 6th-century CE Buddhist cave monasteries at Bamiyan, western central Asia.*





from dangerous forces in the natural world—lions, poisonous snakes, wild elephants, and disease. Throughout Asia, Avalokiteshvara is invoked by the faithful to protect them from these very real and ever-present threats.

In China, Avalokiteshvara's serenity was accentuated and, because compassion was understood as a feminine quality, the *bodhisattva* was transformed into Guanyin, the goddess of mercy (called Kannon in Japan). In Tibet, Avalokiteshvara (Chenrezi) remained male, but the female aspect of his personality was manifested in the Taras (see p.137), goddesses who were born, according to traditional accounts, from lotuses which grew in the pools formed from Avalokiteshvara's tears of compassion.

Another popular *bodhisattva* is Maitreya, who, many ages in the future, will incarnate himself into the world, meditate at Bodh Gaya, and become a *buddha* to teach the Dharma anew for the good of living beings (see p.91). This great line of *bodhisattvas* and *buddhas* embodies a key Mahayana ideal, namely that while the "*buddha*-nature" or "*buddha*-essence" seems to come and go in the mundane world it is an unbreakable reality that is always present in the heavenly realms, where the *buddhas*, in their celestial bodies (*sambhogakaya*), reside forever. The *buddhas* and *bodhisattvas* are also associated with particular colors and special attributes (see p.78) which allow them to be identified when they are shown in painting. Maitreya, for example, is identifiable from the water-pot and flower which almost always flank his image.

After Avalokiteshvara, who is universally worshipped and has even found his way into Theravada countries, the next most popular *bodhisattva* is Manjushri ("Pleasing Splendor"), considered to be the *bodhisattva* of wisdom. Manjushri is normally shown holding a book and wielding a sword—the book is emblematic of knowledge and the sword represents the power of knowledge to sever the fetters of ignorance. As a result, Manjushri is venerated by scholars in order to improve memory and the ability to master Buddhist texts.

*Buddhist manuscripts in the monasteries of Tibet were enclosed between wooden book covers, often painted on either or both sides. This 13th-century example is decorated inside with a triple panel showing Prajnaparamita, goddess of Wisdom, at the center, holding a book and making the mudra of teaching, flanked by attendant bodhisattvas. The nine squares of the adjacent panels each contain either a lama or a bodhisattva.*



## “EMPTINESS”

### ISSUES OF RIGHT AND WRONG

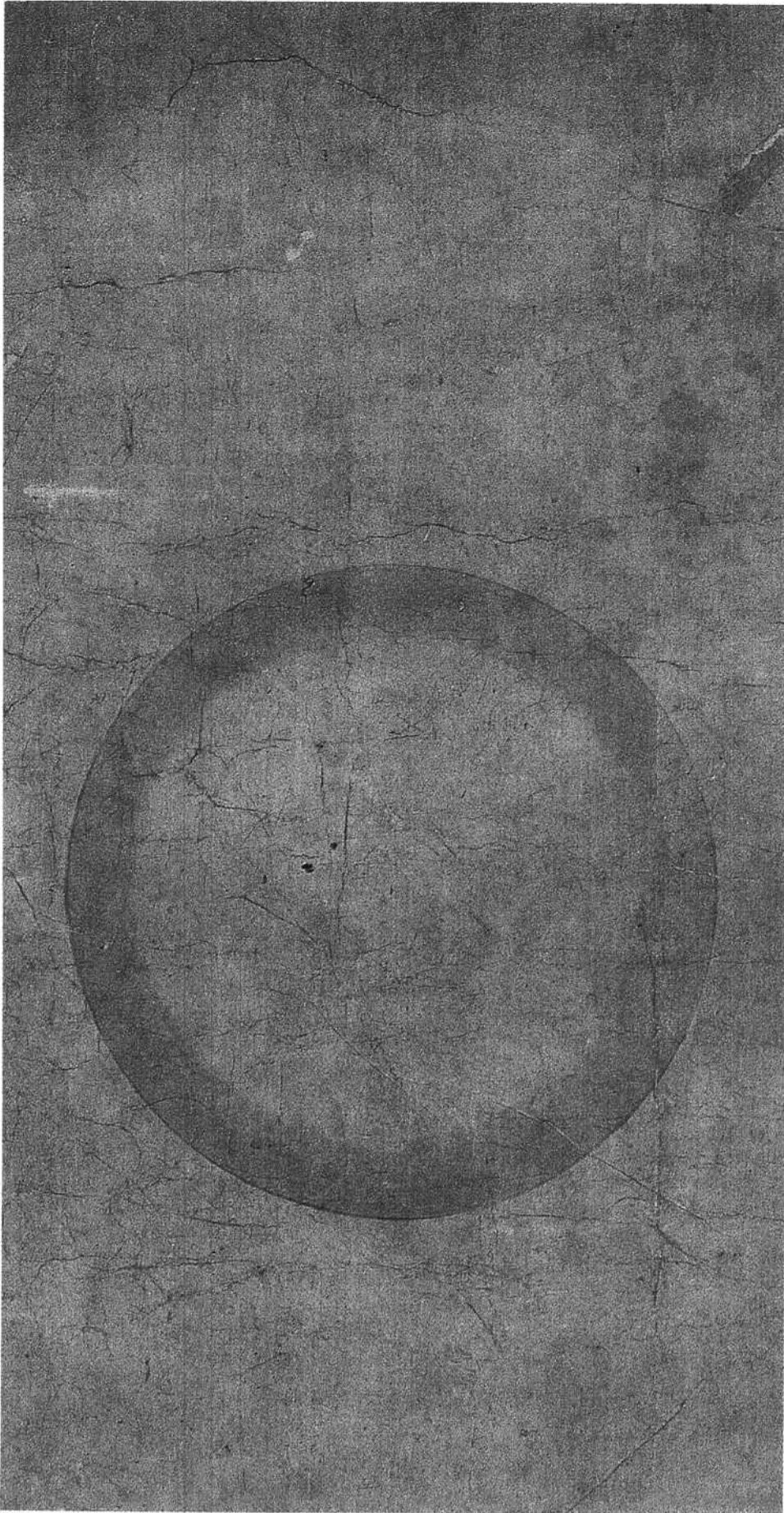
As one might expect, the Emptiness doctrine resulted in a profound change in Buddhist values. No longer could one blithely accept the prevailing interpretation of the Eightfold Path (see pp.70–71), that right views or right speech meant adhering to certain well-defined standards of what constituted a right opinion and a wrong opinion. Insofar as right and wrong opinions are both empty of any inherent nature or knowable essence, they are empty of any inherent reality. From the perspective of Emptiness, the only “right view” is no view at all. Yet to cling to Emptiness as the ideal doctrine or “answer” is no less a mistake, for this assumes that Emptiness itself represents the “right view” that transcends all others. Emptiness is not a substance in the philosophical sense, it is not anything. In other words, Emptiness is also empty. Belief in a “non-Emptiness” also misses the point. But from a Mahayana perspective this “no-thing” is the defining element of the world and everything within it.

No idea better defines the uniqueness of Mahayana thought than that of *shunyata* or “emptiness,” a notion at once alarming, confusing, and mysterious. The concept can be found in nascent form in early Buddhism with the doctrine of non-self, or *anatman*, which holds that each individual is empty of any permanent, fixed identity. In the Mahayana, the adjective *shunya* or “empty,” is expanded and considered as a religious quality in itself, expressed by adding the abstract suffix *ta*, resulting in the word *shunyata*, which translates as “emptiness” or “void.” The profound conclusion was reached that all phenomena, even the very concept of such things as “phenomena,” are characterized by this quality of “lacking”—“being empty of” any unambiguous, permanent, identifying mark. And it is this “lack” that is the actual key to understanding the religious truth about phenomena. Thus did Emptiness come into being, a new expression of the ultimate truth of existence.

The concept of Emptiness was first developed in the Prajnaparamita (“Perfection of Wisdom” *sutras*) (see pp.196–7), where it was argued that the truth of the world is beyond dualistic distinctions. These texts refuted the position taken in the canonical Abhidharma (see pp.192–3), which explained the lack of an unchanging self in the individual by positing a temporary conglomeration of individual components that are themselves substantial and identifiable. The conceptual mistake of the Abhidharmists was to replace the essence, or self, of a person with a multitude of minute essences, which still implied that the world as perceived should be accepted as real. To Mahayana thinkers, these individual components, called *dharma*s (not to be confused with the Dharma, the body of the Buddha’s teachings), are as devoid of any unchanging essence as the individual.

It is further argued that the analytical thinking in which we habitually engage will produce ideas, interpretations, opinions, and so on, that we will cling to because of their plausibility. From the point of view of Emptiness, these “realities” are not entirely false, but they are not entirely true either. In the terminology of Nagarjuna, they are “conventionally true,” and clinging to conventional views of individual identity only prevents one from grasping what is “ultimately true” (see sidebar, p.132). This notion of Emptiness thus reflects a renewed understanding of the basic Buddhist doctrine of Dependent Origination, which concludes that all known realities are constructed realities whose identities are merely intellectual conveniences used to order the world so that it can be understood.

When the truth of the empty nature of all identities or categories of identity is realized, then ordinary distinctions such as pure/impure, good/ bad, attractive/unattractive, even me/you become meaningless (see sidebar, left). The Emptiness doctrine liberates us from the distorting impact of the prejudices which accompany opinions. Liberation is found at the point at which identities disappear, where there are no interpretations or judgments, where the self and the world are seen for what they are, not for how they relate to our preconceived categories of how we think things are or should be.

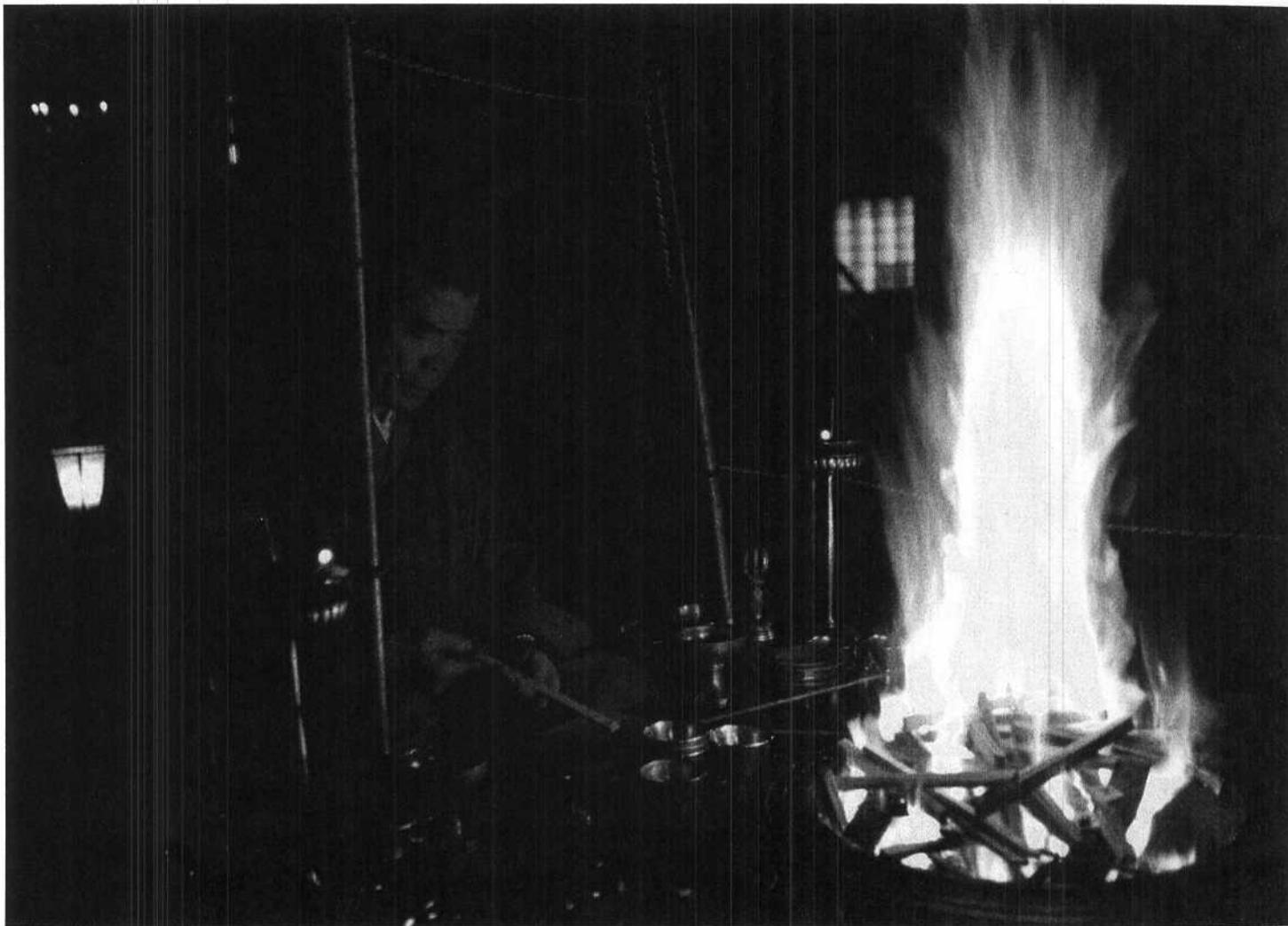


Both Ox and Self Forgotten, one of the ten paintings from the Zen tradition's Ox-herding sequence, a series of works by the 15th-century Japanese monk Shubun which represents the individual's path from ignorance—the illusion of self—to enlightenment. The circle may be interpreted as representing two seeming opposites: ignorance and full realization or non-attachment, according perfectly with the Mahayana notion of ultimate emptiness.

## “SKILL IN MEANS”

One of the distinguishing characteristics of Buddhism is the principle of *upaya*, or the “skill in means” to teach or lead others to truth. This idea was most clearly developed in the Lotus Sutra, a Mahayana scripture (see pp.198–9), but Buddhism in all its forms assumes that an enlightened teacher will use whatever means are available to communicate truths that are often counter-intuitive. In part this reflects the Buddhist view of language as an imperfect medium of communication; it also indicates a fundamentally flexible approach to doctrine or dogma. In Buddhism, there is no shame in admitting that a lecture which is an inspiration to one person will fall on deaf ears for someone else. There are examples in the early literature of individuals who heard the Buddha preach and simply left when the lecture ended, unmoved; there are even stories of people who sought him out for religious discussion but departed unconvinced by his answers. The Buddha explained that when a crowd gathered to hear him speak, those present all heard different sermons because each listener comprehended only what

*A Japanese monk engaged in a tantric ritual in which the flames of the fire, which symbolize wisdom, consume the wooden sticks, which represent the mental afflictions of attachment and ignorance believed to be obstructing an individual's path to truth.*





## KISA GOTAMI AND THE MUSTARD SEED

The remarkable ability of the Buddha to convey his message to individuals (see main text) is illustrated by the story of a young woman called Kisa Gotami, who, after an arranged marriage, found that her in-laws regarded her as a less than ideal bride. She was desperate to win their approval by producing a male heir, but she and her husband had difficulty conceiving.

As preparations began to find a more "suitable" wife, she became pregnant and bore a son. For a time, her troubles seemed to be over, but then the infant became ill and died. Completely beside herself, she ran into town to seek someone who could bring her baby back to life. Taking pity on her, the townspeople suggested the Buddha, who they described as a "miracle worker" living in

a forest outside of town. She found him and begged him to restore her son's life. The Buddha promised to do so if she could bring him one mustard seed from a home where no one had ever died.

Although mustard seeds were common enough, Kisa Gotami found that every household had experienced a death in the family. Slowly, the truth dawned upon her that what had seemed to be a simple request was actually impossible. Returning to the Buddha, she confessed her error and deep appreciation for the "truth of impermanence." Without any explicit statement from the master, she now realized the profound implications of the First Noble Truth of *dukkha*, and joined the community of nuns.

he or she was able to comprehend at that moment. In Mahayana thought, one of the supernatural abilities ascribed to a *buddha* is the ability to preach a different message to everyone in the room at the same time, tailoring each message to fit their individual approaches to life. But even without such displays of the paranormal, the Buddha was always seen as possessing an uncanny ability to discern the best way to instruct an individual, based on an assessment of their mental situation. At times this consisted of communicating a religious truth without any explanation at all (see box, above).

In east Asia, the doctrine of Skill in Means led to a host of new interpretations of the scriptural material. The fountainhead of this movement was the Lotus Sutra, which enjoyed much greater influence there than in the rest of the Buddhist world. This *sutra* categorizes the Dharma into teachings of expediency and teachings of truth. The common division of the community into several "paths" or approaches to faith and practice is explained as a formula constructed merely for convenience. The *sutra* explains that the Buddha at times uses skillful means to help his followers progress step by step, but the truth is that there is only a "single path," the *buddha* path, to *buddhahood* for everyone.

Beginning in late sixth-century China, this model of expedient versus actual was used throughout east Asia to make sense of the many disparate teachings found in the hundreds of scriptures within the region's canons. Scriptures and doctrines were classified on the presumption that the Buddha used his "skill in means" to guide his followers from concrete to abstract truths, from moral to metaphysical understandings. Perhaps the most revolutionary use of this doctrine came with the Pure Land school in China, when Daochuo labeled all teachings and practices devoted to reaching Amitabha's Pure Land as the Buddha's true intent, and all other religious activities as expedients that were to be abandoned (see pp.144–7).

## PURE LANDS

By convention, the general term “pure land” denotes the so-called “purified field” that surrounds all *buddhas*, who by virtue of their great compassion and wisdom naturally create a space without defilements. The phrase “pure land” derives from an abbreviation of a line from a Chinese *sutra* translation, wherein Amitabha Buddha (“Infinite Light”; known in China as Amituo Fo and Japan as Amida Butsu) is described as vowing to purify his realm for others who desire to venture there. Although there is no such term in Sanskrit, there were doctrines in India which stated that *bodhisattvas* would transform this world and that such idealized *buddha*-fields (*buddhakshetra*) existed in each of the four directions as goals for the next life.

In his sixth-century CE commentary on the Lotus Sutra, Zhiyi, a prominent member of China’s Tiantai school (see also p.200–201), wrote of an “absolute” purification of this world through the salvific light of the Dharmakaya (the Buddha’s “Dharma Body,”—see sidebar, p.100). At that time, there were many popular practices devoted to the *buddha* in the east, Akshobhya (“Imperturbable”, known in China as Achu), and the *buddha* in the west, Amitabha. Rituals developed that were directed toward rebirth in the purified realms of the transcendental *bodhisattvas* Maitreya (Mile Fo) in the Tushita heaven and Avalokiteshvara (Guanyin), either in his own land or in residence with Maitreya or Amitabha. Maitreya, as the prophesied future *buddha*, and his Pure Land proved especially attractive to a wide range of

### RECITING A SACRED NAME

Daochuo’s student, Shandao (613–681CE), further clarified two essential points made by his master: the acceptance of one’s own spiritual limitations and the role of Amitabha as an agent of salvation. Shandao’s unique vision concluded that among the many diverse and difficult practices directed toward the goal of rebirth in the Pure Land, the *buddha* Amitabha had already suggested one practice as superior to all others—the simple recitation of his sacred name in the formula “*Nianfo Amituo Fo*” (“Take refuge in Amitabha Buddha”).

Called *nianfo* in Chinese (and *nembutsu* in Japanese, from “*Namu Amida Butsu*”), it was a practice that anyone could perform, requiring only sincerity and a minimal amount of concentration to be effective. Shandao asserted that Amitabha was unique in that he sought to help everyone, not only the most adept,

thereby reversing traditional Buddhist notions which equated difficult practice with higher attainment. The ritual recitation of Amitabha’s name, along with the ritual chanting of Pure Land *sutras* (see also pp.84–5), gave rise to a range of elaborate and moving musical ceremonies still practiced today.

In twelfth-century Japan, Honen developed several important effects of Shandao’s doctrine, among them the recognition of the equal status of women and lay people, including those of the lowest social classes. Honen’s writings (see box, p.147) were taken by some to mean that there was no point in monasticism, that the established monastic orders had been undermined, while Amida Butsu had been raised to the role of savior through whom devotees could attempt to reach the Pure Land. However, Honen continued his monastic status, as did his lineage for a further 700 years.

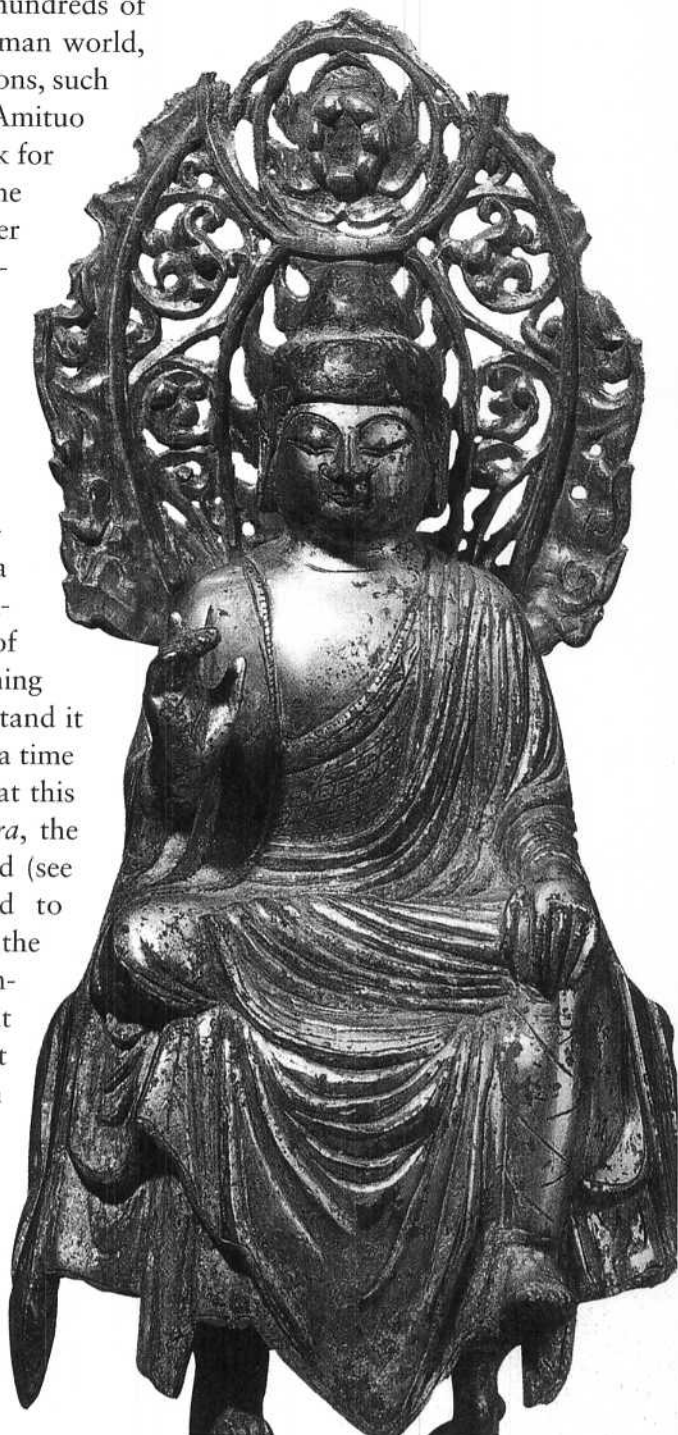
devotees, ranging from monks to the empress Wu Zetian (reigned 690–705CE), who declared herself to be his incarnation (see also p.91).

Eventually, a belief in the so-called Pure Land, also called Sukhavati (“Abode of Bliss”), created by Amitabha Buddha or Amitayus came to overshadow all others, so that by the medieval period—that is, the seventh century in China and the thirteenth century in Japan—terms like Pure Land Teaching and Pure Land School clearly designate this tradition exclusively. It is likely that the names Amitabha and Amitayus originally denoted two different figures (referring to “light” and “life” respectively), but when the common element *amita* (“infinite” in Sanskrit) was transliterated into Chinese as Amituo, this name came to represent a single conflated *buddha*. Under one of these two names this *buddha* occurs in literally hundreds of Mahayana *sutras* and other texts. In contrast to the defiled human world, the Pure Land is described as a kind of paradise devoid of diversions, such as women and conflict, and superior to any heaven because Amituo resides there, prepared to preach the Dharma to all those who ask for assistance. There is strong evidence that devotees throughout the Indian Buddhist world strove to attain rebirth in Sukhavati after death, and this conception also took root in the Chinese imagination. The fundamentals of the philosophical system that underpins Pure Land teachings (see also pp.200–203) were laid down in China during the sixth and seventh centuries CE by a series of monks now considered to be the Chinese patriarchs of the Pure Land tradition: Tanluan, Daochuo, Shandao (see box, opposite), Jiazai, and Huaikan.

Tanluan (474–542CE), a student of Nagarjuna’s Madhyamika tradition (see p.197) and devotee of the Nirvana Sutra (see pp.206–7), had become despondent after learning of the Buddhist doctrine of historical decline, which described an age of increasing social chaos in which the quality of Dharma teaching would decrease along with the capacity of individuals to understand it and hence to attain enlightenment (see sidebar, p.134). Living at a time of warfare and political disunion in China, Tanluan believed that this degenerate age had arrived. However, he found hope in a *sutra*, the Sukhavativyuha Sutra, on Amitabha Buddha and his Pure Land (see pp.202–3), which described how individuals who aspired to Amitabha’s presence could actually attain it. Tanluan made the important contribution of aligning Pure Land ideas with mainstream Mahayana notions of the *bodhisattva* path, arguing that those who were reborn in the Pure Land to attain enlightenment would subsequently return from there in order to assist others, in fulfillment of the *bodhisattva* vow (see p.137).

Daochuo (562–645CE) also began as a devotee of the Nirvana Sutra before his “conversion” to the Pure Land Teaching. In his treatise Anleji (“Collection [of Passages] on [the Land of] Peace and Joy”), Daochuo laid out for the first time a systematic framework of doctrines and practices for the Pure Land. He adroitly explained how the path to the Pure Land was parallel to, and of equal value to, the traditional *bodhisattva* path

*Seated gilt-bronze Chinese figure of Amitabha Buddha (Amituo Fo), eyes downcast in contemplation, and with one leg crossed underneath the flowing robes. Early Tang dynasty, ca. 7th–8th century.*



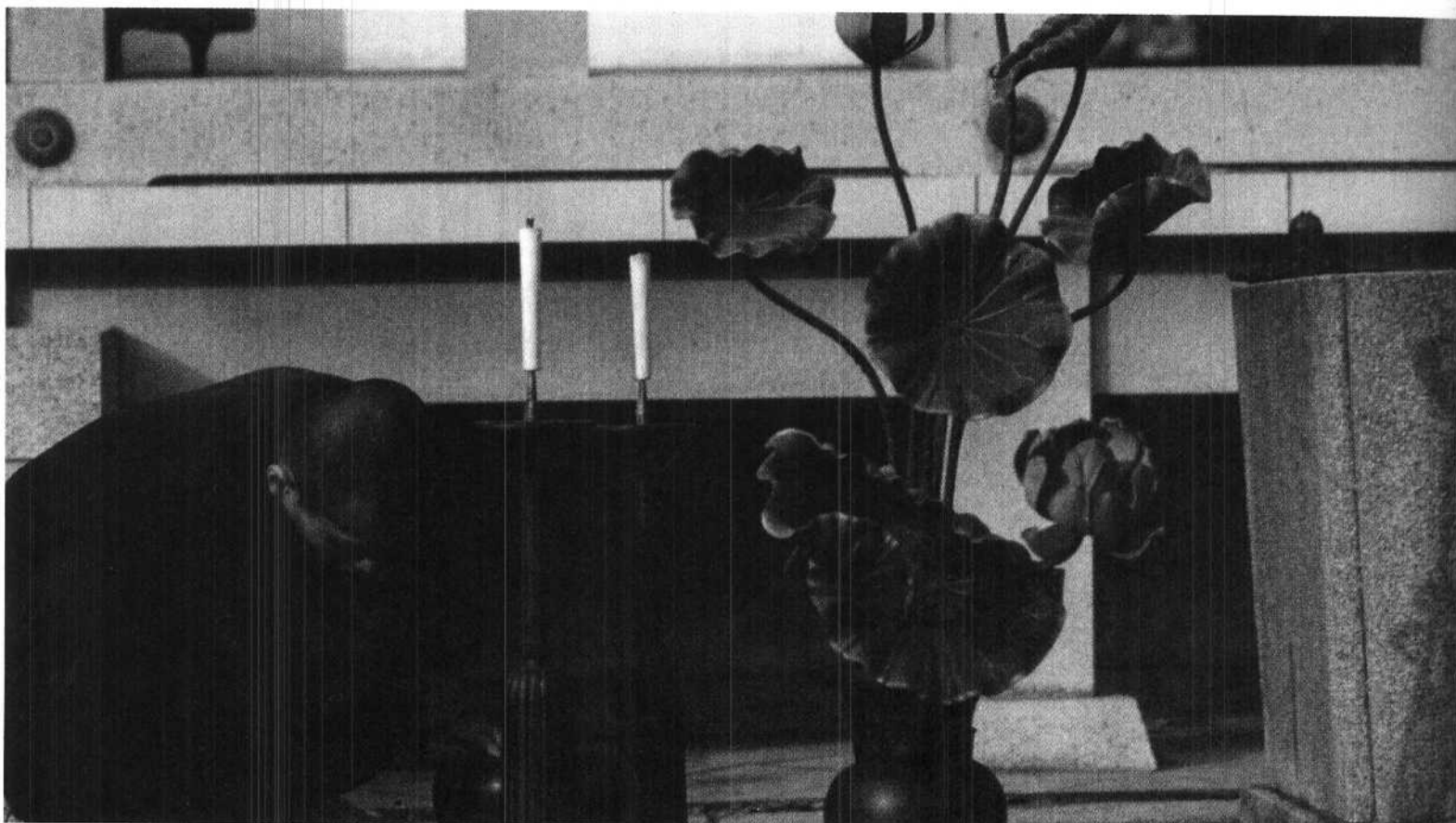


(see pp.136–7), but offered a much higher chance of success in this degenerate age because Amitabha Buddha actively aided the devotee. Daochuo asserted that the traditional *bodhisattva* path, which he labeled the path to personal sainthood, though deserving of esteem, was essentially hopeless for most devotees because it was too rigorous.

Not long after the creation of the ideas behind Chinese Pure Land Teaching, Buddhism began to make a serious impact in Japan. During the Nara period (710–794CE), the first Japanese Buddhist essays appeared, including a treatise on Pure Land Buddhism. Although there is evidence in this early period of a belief in the Pure Land of Maitreya, the term Pure Land Buddhism in a Japanese context always refers to the belief system surrounding Amida Butsu. In the Heian era (805–1185), a slow growth in the faith in Amida is evident both among the aristocracy in Kyoto (Heian), and among the populace as a whole, largely owing to itinerant holy men who disseminated the faith in the countryside. In 985CE the scholar Genshin (942–1017) had a great impact with *Ojoyoshu* (“Birth in the Land of Purity”), a work that illustrated most graphically the glories of Amida’s Pure Land. Genshin was a member of the Tendai, the Japanese sect which followed Tiantai concepts introduced from China by Saicho in 805. In the ninth century, under Ennin’s leadership, forms of *samadhi* practice from China were introduced, which included chanting the name of Amida as an aid to meditation.

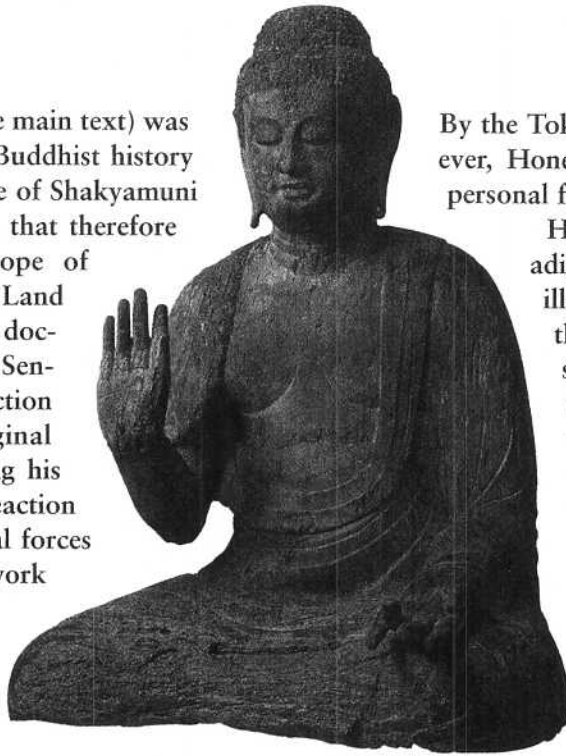
Just as had happened in China, prior to the onset of the Kamakura period (1185–1333) Japan experienced a period of domestic chaos and the Buddhist doctrine of historical decline gained credibility. It led many Buddhists to view the attainment of individual liberation by conventional means

*An important part in the development of Buddhism as a popular religion in Japan was played by the introduction of the Tendai sect’s slightly esoteric rituals, particularly the chant in praise of Amida Butsu and the promotion of the importance of the Lotus Sutra. A monk at Chion-in temple in Kyoto cleaning the altar decorations.*



## THE JODO SCHOOL

The Japanese monk Honen (see main text) was probably the first person in Buddhist history to state overtly that since the time of Shakyamuni there have been no *buddhas* and that therefore people should abandon any hope of becoming one, except in the Pure Land (Japanese, Jodo). He set down his doctrine in a treatise called the *Senchakushu* ("Passages on the Selection of the *Nembutsu* in the Original Vow"), a work kept secret during his lifetime for fear of provoking a reaction from the monastic and intellectual forces of established Buddhism. The work was printed and publicly distributed after his death but was repeatedly suppressed in an attempt to halt the rapid expansion of Pure Land beliefs.



By the Tokugawa period (1605–1868), however, Honen's Jodo school had become the personal faith of Japan's ruling shogunate.

Honen offered a new Buddhist paradigm in which there were no more illusions about personal sainthood in this world. In effect, anyone who sought enlightenment was lowered to the status of an ordinary person, while Amida was raised to the role of transcendent, universal savior through whose assistance devotees could reach the Pure Land, the only place where enlightenment could be achieved.

*A late 12th-century cypress wood statue of Amida Butsu, making the abhaya mudra gesture of reassurance.*

as hopeless. The most persuasive response to this situation came from the most pivotal figure in Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, the Tendai monk Honen (1133–1212), who is considered the founder of Japan's first Jodo (Pure Land) school or sect. Honen's revelation came while reading the work of the Chinese master Shandao (see box, p.144), whose writings had previously received little attention in Japan. Honen was particularly struck by Shandao's assertion that the oral recitation of Amitabha's name was the one true practice precisely because it was easy to do and therefore had the most universal application. Honen developed the doctrine further and his public lectures in Kyoto drew huge numbers of students from all levels of society.

Honen's student Shinran (1173–1263) took things a stage further by declaring himself a failure at monasticism, publicly taking a wife, and giving up all hope of attaining the Pure Land by his own efforts. Shinran developed a radical doctrine that rejected all forms of practice and piety as *jiriki*, or salvation by one's own power, which he claimed indicated a lack of faith in the Buddha's message. In its stead he advocated *tariki* ("other-power"), which credited Amida Butsu as the only true cause of anyone reaching the Pure Land, which he saw as tantamount to realizing *nirvana*. Shinran saw the practice of repeating the *nembutsu* as unnecessary, since for him it was not a means to any end but simply an expression of gratitude to the Buddha. Shinran's followers eventually formed the independent Jodoshin ("True Pure Land") school. The first Buddhist order to permit its clergy to marry, Jodoshin remains the largest religious organization in Japan today.

ART AND ARCHITECTURE *Michael Willis*

## DEPICTING THE PURE LAND

*This early 10th-century silk scroll from Dunhuang portrays Avalokiteshvara carrying a lotus and a censer, leading a soul, represented by the well-dressed woman, to the halls of paradise (at the top of the painting). The blossoms symbolize blessings. People on their deathbed might hang a scroll painting of Avalokiteshvara or Amitabha before them so as to ease their passage to paradise and salvation.*



One of the most representative features of the Pure Land movement is a practice known as “mindful recollection of the Buddha”. At its most basic level, this involves the visualization of the special marks of his glorified body and the repetition of his name. Visualization could be performed in private meditation or during collective worship; recollection and repetition of the name could be done silently or aloud. These practices are found in many strands of the Mahayana tradition. What distinguishes Pure Land devotees is their devotion to the *buddha* Amitabha/Amitayus, in particular, their single interest in gaining rebirth in Sukhavati, his “Abode of Bliss,” or Pure Land, as described in the Sukhavativyuha Sutra (“Describing the [World of] Bliss Sutra”) texts (see pp.202–3).

The employment of specific spiritual techniques to achieve that end are especially clear in the Guan Wuliangshou Fo Jing (“Visualizing the Buddha of Limitless Life Sutra” or “Contemplation Sutra”). This text tells us that the Buddha gave Queen Vaidehi, mother of Ajatashatru, a vision of all the heavenly worlds, which were made visible in a golden ray that shone from the Buddha’s forehead. The queen acknowledged that all the celestial worlds were pure and brilliant but that she wished to be reborn in the world of Amitabha. To help her and subsequent devotees achieve this end, the Buddha instructed Vaidehi (and Ananda, his favorite pupil) in a series of increasingly complex visualizations. Each was to be mastered before the next was undertaken. The astonishing richness of these meditative techniques, and their potential for use in the arts, is shown by the eighth visualization, which focuses on Amitayus, the *buddha* of Limitless Life, and includes some powerful descriptions of the “Most Happy World”:

“You should think of the *buddha* of Limitless Life [Amitayus]. Why? Because the Body of the *buddha* is the Body of the Universe and it is within the mind of all beings. Therefore when you think of that *buddha* your mind becomes the One who has the thirty-two Magnificent Figures and the eighty Virtues. It is the mind that is to become a *buddha* and it is the mind that is the *buddha*. The Ocean of Omniscient Wisdom of all *buddhas*





grows up from the mind. . . When one has achieved this visualization, one can hear the murmuring sound of the streams and see the rays, jewel-trees, and sheldrakes and mandarin ducks, whose voices praise the Wonderful Law." As the visualizations progress, they become ever more elaborate. Toward the end of the series, the devotee is instructed to see himself or herself sitting in a lotus flower and to imagine the lotus opening before the *buddha* and *bodhisattvas* that have been previously visualized. When this has been achieved, one is guaranteed rebirth in the Pure Land, cutting short hundreds of incarnations in more mundane bodies.

Although the visualizations in the *Guan Wuliangshou Fo Jing* read almost like descriptions of some of the scenes portrayed in Buddhist paintings, particularly those in some of the more elaborate works of art produced in Tibet (see illustration above), direct parallels between the arts and textual sources are rare. In part this is due to the fragmentary nature of the evidence, much of the ancient painting and sculpture in India and China having been lost and the texts themselves having been subject to a subtle reworking process in the course of transmission. In India, archaeological evidence for devotion to Amitabha appears in the first two centuries CE. His name is mentioned in an inscription and a number of stelae from northwest Pakistan (ancient Gandhara) show Amitabha flanked by devotees on small lotuses.

*Visualizations commonly implore the meditator to think of the figure of the buddha Amitabha, who was in Sukhavati when he was struck by a light that shone from the Buddha. Amitabha took this as his signal to manifest Avalokiteshvara, Tibet's most revered bodhisattva. Amitabha radiated his thoughts into a lake, where they produced a lotus that fell apart to reveal Avalokiteshvara. The bodhisattva then changed himself into a monkey and sought union with Tara to produce the ancestors of the Tibetan people. This Tibetan painting, probably dating to the 18th century, shows various paradisaical places of purity and power, together with buddhas, bodhisattvas, lamas, and primates.*

PART 3 • CHAPTER 3 *Mark L. Blum*

# MAHAYANA SCRIPTURES

## PERFECTION OF WISDOM SUTRAS

PERFECTION OF WISDOM  
SUTRAS 196

THE LOTUS SUTRA 198

PURE LAND SUTRAS 202

YOGACHARA SUTRAS 204

NIRVANA SUTRA 206

TANTRIC WRITINGS 208

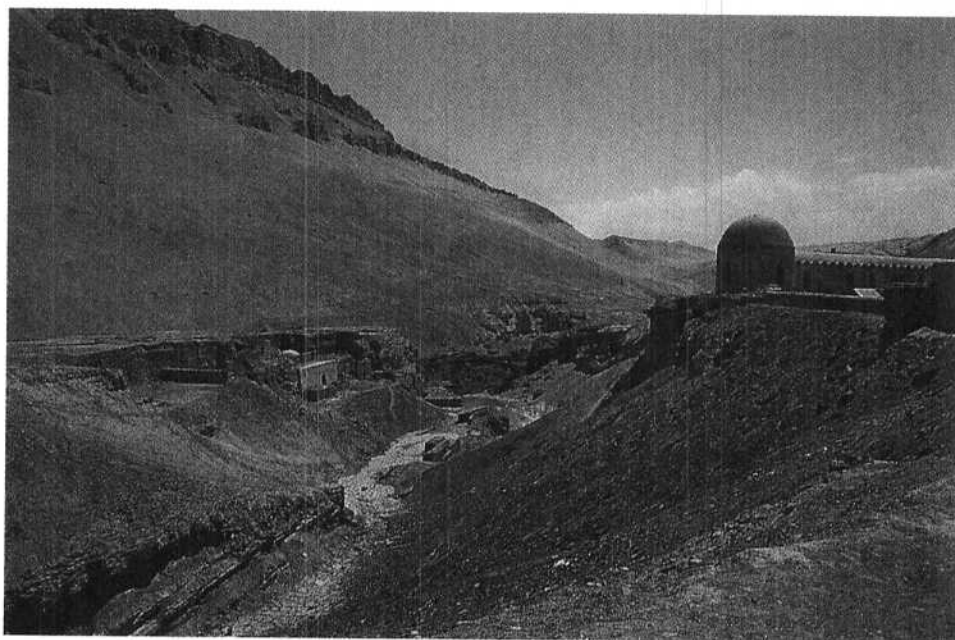
*John Peacock*

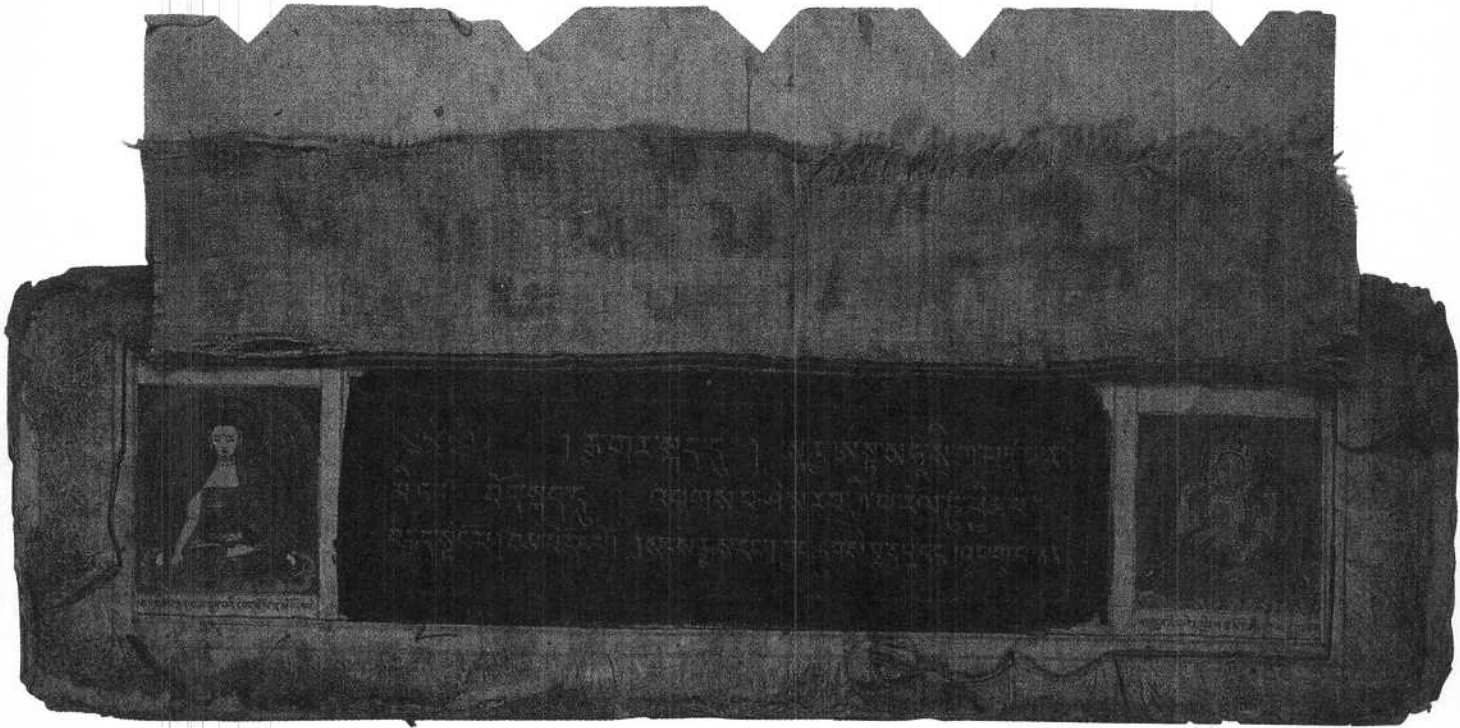
Although accurate dating of the first appearance of any scripture in Buddhism is difficult, many scholars believe that the production of Mahayana *sutras* (see p.132) began in the first century before, or perhaps shortly after, the beginning of the Common Era.

Early Mahayana thought is revealed in the Lotus Sutra (see pp.198–201), the Pure Land *sutras* (see pp.202–3), and the corpus of scriptures known as the Prajnaparamita (“Perfection of Wisdom” *sutras*), each presenting somewhat different conceptions of the cosmos and humanity’s relation to it. The Perfection of Wisdom *sutras* derive their name from their singling out of wisdom from the list of virtues (“perfections”) that all *bodhisattvas* cultivate. The Prajnaparamita is thus an extensive treatise on the nature of religious wisdom; it focuses on the absolute as *shunyata*, or Emptiness (see pp.140–41)—a notion not entirely absent in early discourses, but not of central concern.

Pre-Mahayana traditions often spoke of the importance of grasping the significance of non-self (*anatman*), impermanence (*anitya*), and suffering (*dukkha*). Many Buddhists, though, found *anatman* counter-intuitive and one new explanation asserted that while there is no permanent substance underlying an individual sentient being, the component parts (*dharma*s) of

*The Turfan basin in eastern Turkestan in central Asia (present-day Xinjiang Autonomous Region, China), stands astride the ancient Silk Road, part of the network of trade routes along which the Mahayana Buddhist sutras were transmitted into China and beyond. The basin is the location of many early Buddhist sites and caves, including those at Bezeklik, seen here, where there is also a monastery cut into the side of a gorge in the Flaming Mountains. The frescoes in the monastic cells at Bezeklik date to the 8th–10th centuries CE.*





all beings have an unchanging “own-nature” (*svabhava*) (see p.192). The Perfection of Wisdom *sutras* view this analysis as insufficient—instead, they assert that individual *dharma*s are also without a fixed self-nature. This position was to some extent an attack on the assumption that *nirvana* was a “thing” that one could gain or attain. The Prajnaparamita’s core criticism was that in striving to develop more refined statements on truth, many people became attached to their “correct” opinions. In the Perfection of Wisdom tradition, all opinions must be abandoned because they inevitably prejudice perceptions: Emptiness means to be emptied of all speculative thinking (see pp.140–41).

The dating of the Perfection of Wisdom *sutras* is unclear, but the oldest one, the “Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines,” appears to have emerged, at least in an early form, in the first century BCE. Based on this, the second-century CE Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna, who also expounded the doctrine of Two Truths (see p.132), founded an interpretive tradition known as Madhyamika (“School of the Middle Way”) or Shunyatavada (“School of Emptiness”). Nagarjuna had an enormous impact on the evolving Mahayana tradition. According to him, the Buddha’s teaching of Dependent Origination means that nothing can be known except in terms of something else. *Nirvana* itself only has meaning because it is set apart as the opposite of the messy, karmic world of *samsara*. Thus *nirvana* for Nagarjuna is just another dimension of the world before us: we simply cannot perceive it because we are unable to abandon our dualistic mode of comprehension. Although he does not quote the Perfection of Wisdom *sutras* directly, what Nagarjuna brought out from their doctrines is not simply that all the phenomena of the universe are dependent upon each other, but the more difficult concept that this interdependence *is* the universe itself. This tradition thus deconstructs individual identity of any kind, concluding that what we perceive is only the illusion of separate entities.

A Tibetan translation, ca. 1500, of the “Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines,” probably the oldest of the Mahayana *sutras*, dating to the 1st century BCE. The cover, shown here, is decorated with paintings of the Buddha (left) and the Perfection of Wisdom (right), personified as the four-armed goddess Prajnaparamita.

#### LITERARY FORMS

The Perfection of Wisdom *sutras* take a variety of forms, from the extreme brevity of the Heart Sutra, which consists of a single, direct statement on the unity of opposites (“Form is none other than emptiness; emptiness is none other than form”), to the lengthy “Perfection of Wisdom in 100,000 Lines.” They also include practical homilies, such as those in the Diamond Sutra (“True charity occurs only when there are no notions of giving, giver, or gift”).