

# Iconography in Buddhist Traditions: A Study Shivangi Dwivedi

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17408861>

## ABSTRACT:

The visual language of Buddhist traditions serves as a profound medium for transmitting religious philosophy, cultural values, and historical narratives across time and space. This study, *Iconography in Buddhist Traditions*, explores the evolution, symbolism, and regional adaptations of Buddhist imagery from early aniconic representations to the richly elaborated anthropomorphic forms. Drawing on archaeological evidence, sculptural analysis, and comparative stylistic studies, the research examines how Buddhist iconography both reflects and shapes doctrinal developments, sectarian identities, and cross-cultural interactions across South Asia and beyond. The work investigates key motifs—such as the Bodhi tree, Dharma wheel, footprints, and the various mudras of the Buddha—while situating them within their socio-political and ritual contexts. By integrating art-historical methodology with historical inquiry, this study underscores the enduring role of iconography in sustaining Buddhist devotional practices and in facilitating the transmission of the Dharma across diverse geographies. The findings highlight not only the aesthetic richness of Buddhist art but also its capacity to serve as a dynamic vessel of meaning, bridging the sacred and the tangible, the universal and the local.

## KEYWORDS:

Buddhist Iconography, Aniconism, Mudras, Bodhisattva, Dharma.

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## Introduction

The study of Buddhist iconography provides an invaluable window into the religious, cultural, and socio-political life of Asia over more than two millennia. As Buddhism spread from its Indian homeland to Sri Lanka, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, China, Korea, Japan, and Tibet, its visual traditions adapted and evolved to meet the needs of local audiences while retaining a shared symbolic vocabulary. Iconography thus served as a transnational language of devotion and communication. This paper aims to explore the layers of symbolism embedded in Buddhist art, tracing its historical development, regional variations, and theological meanings. In doing so, it demonstrates how Buddhist iconography functioned both as a

medium of devotion and as a carrier of doctrine, adapting dynamically to changing cultural contexts.

### **Historical Background**

Buddhism originated in the 6th century BCE with Siddhartha Gautama, who attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya. For several centuries following the Buddha's passing, the tradition emphasized aniconism—the avoidance of representing the Buddha in human form. Instead, symbolic elements such as stupas, trees, wheels, and thrones were employed to signify his presence and teachings. This approach aligned with early doctrinal concerns about attachment and idolatry, as well as the emphasis on the Buddha as a transcendent figure beyond worldly description.

By the time of the Mauryan Empire (3rd century BCE), under Emperor Ashoka's patronage, Buddhist art flourished through the construction of stupas and pillars. The Lion Capital at Sarnath, for instance, reflects the blending of imperial authority and religious symbolism. Over time, however, devotional needs and the expansion of lay worship necessitated more accessible and humanized representations of the Buddha. This transition was particularly evident during the Kushan period (1st–3rd century CE), when anthropomorphic images became widespread.

### **Aniconic Traditions in Early Buddhism**

The earliest visual culture of Buddhism is characterized by aniconism, a reliance on symbols rather than direct images of the Buddha. This practice is evident at sites like Bharhut, Sanchi, and Amaravati, where relief carvings depict events from the Buddha's life without portraying him physically. Instead, the Bodhi tree stands for his enlightenment, the empty throne symbolizes his spiritual authority, footprints represent his earthly presence, and the Dharma wheel illustrates his teaching. These symbols served not only to represent the Buddha but also to convey complex doctrinal concepts.

For instance, the Dharma wheel (Dharma chakra) is more than a symbol of teaching; it signifies the cosmic order and the perpetual cycle of samsara, which the Buddha sought to transcend. The Bodhi tree becomes a metaphor for spiritual awakening, while the stupa embodies the axis mundi, linking heaven and earth. These visual strategies allowed early Buddhists to navigate the tension between reverence for the Buddha

and the prohibition against deifying him.

### **Transition to Anthropomorphic Representations**

The shift from aniconic to anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha around the 1st–2nd century CE marked a major turning point in Buddhist art. Two major artistic centres—Gandhara in present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan, and Mathura in northern India—played pivotal roles in shaping these new forms.

The Gandhara school, influenced by Greco-Roman art, depicted the Buddha with naturalistic drapery, wavy hair, and finely modelled features. This Hellenistic style reflects the cultural exchanges along the Silk Road and the cosmopolitan environment of the Kushan Empire. By contrast, the Mathura school emphasized indigenous traditions, portraying the Buddha with a sense of spiritual strength, broad shoulders, and symbolic gestures. Together, these traditions set the foundation for the standardized iconography of the Buddha that would spread across Asia.

### **Iconography of the Buddha**

Anthropomorphic images of the Buddha are distinguished by several defining features. Mudras, or hand gestures, convey specific aspects of his teaching and life: Dharma chakra mudra symbolizes the first sermon; Bhumisparsha mudra recalls his enlightenment; Dhyana mudra reflects meditation; and Abhaya mudra represents reassurance and protection. Each of these gestures carries profound theological significance, serving as visual sermons for devotees.

The ushnisha, a cranial protuberance, indicates wisdom and spiritual attainment, while the urna, a tuft of hair between the brows, symbolizes insight. The elongated earlobes allude to the Buddha's princely past and renunciation of material wealth. Over time, these features became canonical, ensuring that depictions of the Buddha were recognizable across diverse regions and periods.

### **Bodhisattva Imagery**

With the rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the concept of the Bodhisattva gained increasing prominence. Bodhisattvas are beings who postpone their own enlightenment to assist others in attaining liberation. Iconographically, they are often shown adorned with princely attire, crowns, and jewellery, reflecting their compassionate engagement with the world.

Among the most significant figures is Avalokiteśvara, the embodiment of compassion, whose imagery varied across regions—from Padmapani holding a lotus in India to Guanyin in China, often depicted as a merciful saviour. Another central figure is Maitreya, the future Buddha, typically represented seated in a relaxed posture awaiting his future descent to earth. The Bodhisattva Manjushri, symbolizing wisdom, is frequently portrayed with a sword cutting through ignorance. These figures expanded the Buddhist pantheon and enriched its visual and devotional culture.

### **Regional Variations in Buddhist Iconography**

As Buddhism spread beyond India, local cultures left distinctive marks on its iconography. In Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, Theravāda traditions emphasized serene, meditative images of the Buddha, reflecting the emphasis on monastic practice. The monumental Buddhas of Thailand and Myanmar illustrate this tradition.

In Central Asia and Tibet, Vajrayāna Buddhism developed a complex iconographic system involving mandalas, fierce protective deities, and esoteric symbols. Tibetan thangkas, for instance, depict elaborate cosmological diagrams used in meditation and ritual. East Asian traditions adapted Buddhist iconography to their own aesthetics: in China, Guanyin evolved into a figure of compassion accessible to all, while in Japan, Kannon and Amida Buddha became central devotional icons. These variations highlight the adaptability of Buddhist art to diverse cultural landscapes.

### **Symbolism and Doctrinal Interpretations**

Buddhist iconography is not merely decorative but deeply doctrinal. In Theravāda contexts, art underscores the historical Buddha and his path to nirvana, focusing on his enlightenment and teachings. Mahāyāna iconography expands the scope by incorporating celestial Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, emphasizing universal salvation. Vajrayāna imagery adds another layer, utilizing symbolic deities, ritual implements, and esoteric gestures to convey complex tantric teachings.

For example, wrathful deities in Tibetan Buddhism, though terrifying in appearance, symbolize the destruction of ignorance and obstacles to enlightenment. The lotus flower, ubiquitous in Buddhist art, symbolizes purity and spiritual awakening, growing unstained from muddy waters.

These symbolic elements serve as teaching tools, reinforcing the Dharma through visual means.

### **Socio-Cultural and Political Contexts**

The production and patronage of Buddhist art were closely linked to socio-political contexts. Emperor Ashoka's building of stupas and pillars marked the earliest large-scale use of Buddhist symbolism in statecraft. Later, rulers such as Kanishka of the Kushan dynasty promoted Buddhist art as part of their imperial identity. Monastic communities also played a key role in commissioning art, which served as devotional objects and didactic tools.

The spread of Buddhism along the Silk Road facilitated the transmission of iconographic traditions across Central Asia into China. Caves such as those at Dunhuang, Ajanta, and Bamiyan bear witness to the flourishing of Buddhist art under diverse patronage. These sites demonstrate how art functioned as a medium of both religious devotion and cultural exchange, linking India with the broader Asian world.

### **Conclusion**

Buddhist iconography illustrates the dynamic interplay between religion, art, and society. From its early reliance on symbolic aniconism to the development of elaborate anthropomorphic and esoteric traditions, Buddhist art has continually adapted to meet the devotional, doctrinal, and cultural needs of its practitioners. Its trans regional spread demonstrates the power of visual culture to transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries, offering a shared symbolic language across Asia.

This study highlights the richness of Buddhist iconography as both an artistic and religious phenomenon. It reflects the enduring relevance of visual culture in sustaining religious traditions, transmitting doctrine, and shaping cultural identities. Ultimately, Buddhist art is not merely a reflection of faith but an active participant in the creation and perpetuation of Buddhist practice and thought.

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**Funding:**

This study was not funded by any grant.

**Conflict of interest:**

The Authors have no conflict of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.

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