

Jōdo Shū: Pure Land Buddhism

じょう ど しん しゅう
浄 土 真 宗
jyōdo shinshū
Pure Land Buddhism

あ み だ によ らい
阿 弥 陀 如 来
Amida Nyorai
Amida Buddha

ぶつ きょう
仏 教
bukkyō
Buddhism

はす はな
蓮 の 花
hasu no hana
lotus flower

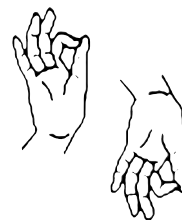
いん
印
in
mudra, hand gesture

Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the sixth century AD and flourished among both the imperial aristocracy and the general population. Early forms of Buddhism that arrived from China and Korea were chiefly those of Mahayana Buddhist practices, which emphasised a concept of universal salvation via elaborate ritual and the worshipping of a complex array of deities. During the tenth century a less complex and more accessible offshoot of Mahayana, called Pure Land Buddhism, started to gain great popularity, and became the most popular form of Buddhism in Japan.

Pure Land worship centred on the Amida Buddha (Sanskrit: *Sukhāvatī*), also known as the Buddha of Immeasurable Light and Buddha of Limitless Life. Amida presided over a heavenly paradise and promised salvation and rebirth in his paradise for all worshippers. Works of art were essential to the Pure Land doctrine and its next-world emphasis on rebirth and salvation. Meditation encouraged practitioners to visualise Amida and to accumulate religious merit through simple meditation and recitation of prayers or sutras.

Until the twelfth century, Amida Buddha was usually represented seated on a lotus flower. However, during the Heian period (794–1185) and Kamakura period (1185–1333) the concept of *raigō* (welcoming descent) flourished and Amida Buddha was often represented in a standing pose descending from the heavens to fetch his devotees and personally transport them back to his blissful paradise. This concept was first introduced in the *Ōjōyōshū* (*The Essentials of Pure Land Salvation*), an immensely popular compendium written by the monk Genshin (942–1017), which prescribed a standing statue of about a metre in height to be erected for one's last rights to ensure a smooth passage to the Pure Land.

This standing Amida Buddha that measures approximately one metre in height, accurately fits the type described in the *Ōjōyōshū*. The serene and circular form of the face with gentle features, long arched eye brows extending to the ridge of the thin nose, down cast eyes and small lips show the strong influence of the sculptor Jōchō (b. 1057), who created the Amida Buddha housed at the most celebrated Heian period temple, *Byōdō-in*. Its broad torso, wide rounded shoulders partly covered with a thin, languidly falling garment also follow Jōchō's uniquely Japanese formula.



gebon jōshō

In accordance with Buddhist merits accumulated in one's present life cycle, the Amida Buddha welcomes devotees with one of nine hand gestures (*mudra*) that determines the level into which they will be reborn in the next world (see diagram). This Amida Buddha's gesture, *gebon jōshō* (the third lowest of nine classes), was deemed the most appropriate level for the common Japanese citizen, and therefore became one of the best known gestures in Japanese Buddhist imagery.

In addition to the *mudra*, the Amida Buddha has a protuberance on the top of his head to accommodate his advanced understanding of the truth. He has large ears that allow him to hear all people in need. The folds on his neck indicate compassion for all people. He has tightly curled hair that spirals in a clockwise direction, which symbolises saintliness, wisdom and spiritual awakening. As well as these clearly recognisable attributes, there are thirty-two other distinguishing features. The two most visible are the rose coloured crystal set among his curly hair that emits rays of light displaying his supreme knowledge, and a single 4.5 metre spiral of white hair on his forehead, indicated by a white crystal to show his love and affection for humanity.

Other less visible attributes include:

- Soles of feet are flat
- Elongated fingers and toes
- Webbing between fingers and toes
- Knees thin, round and beautiful
- Arms and hands reach the knees when standing
- Physical height and arm span the same
- Body glows gold
- Cheeks are well formed
- Plump or fatty under arms
- Shoulders are plump and rounded
- The Buddhist wheel of law or auspicious symbols on soles of feet
- Hands, feet, shoulders and head plump with flesh
- Good overall physical posture and balance

JAPANESE
Amida Buddha (Amida Nyorai)
阿弥陀如来
Heian period 平安時代 (12th century)
Japan
lacquer, gold and pigment on Cypress
(*Hinoki* 檜), crystals
118.5 x 36.1 cm diameter (overall)
Purchased with funds donated by
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