

Burmese Buddhist sculpture

ပဒုမ္မာကြာ

Pa-don-mar Kyar

lotus

ရဟန်းတော်

Ra-han-daw

monk

ဗုဒ္ဓမြတ်စွာ

Buddha Myat Swar

Buddha

Buddhism was introduced to Southeast Asia from India and Sri Lanka in the second or third century AD and became popular in the region by the sixth or seventh century. Today the Theravada form of Buddhism is the predominant religion in the mainland Southeast Asian countries of Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. Buddhism is based on the philosophy and doctrine of the spiritual leader and teacher, Siddhartha Gautama or Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, who was born at Lumbini in Nepal c. 563 BC and taught in north east India until his death in c. 483 BC.

In Theravada Buddhist doctrine there is only one Buddha in existence at any time; the Buddha of the present age being the historical Buddha Shakyamuni. Theravadans believe that the individual is responsible for his or her own self awakening, and that in order to attain enlightenment one must follow and practice the Noble Eightfold Path (also known as the Middle Path) as taught by the historical Buddha.¹

Buddhism was initially transmitted to Southeast Asia by proselytising monks who also disseminated sculptures and other works of art throughout the region. Early images of Buddha in Southeast Asia are highly influenced by Indian prototypes but by the end of the first millennium distinct and varied Southeast Asian styles of Buddha images had developed. The distinctive characteristics that differentiate Buddha images from various regions of Southeast Asia include facial appearance, physiognomy, shape of the *ushnisha* (cranial protuberance), choice of pose depicted and style of robes.

The earliest evidence of Buddhism in Burma dates from the fifth century AD, and a distinct Burmese style of Buddhist art developed during the eleventh century. The characteristics of Burmese sculpture from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century illustrated in this example include: the bulbous finial shaped like a lotus bud, emerging from a low, broad *ushnisha*;² the rounded face with a broad forehead tapering to a small chin; fine arched eyebrows and a small, gently smiling mouth with fullness above the upper lip; a band around the hairline; large hands and feet; earlobes extending to the shoulders;³ and robes covering the left shoulder only.⁴ This sculpture was made using the 'lost wax' process, and therefore, although conforming to a standard iconographic form, is unique.⁵

One of the hand gestures (*mudra*) most frequently depicted in Burmese Buddha sculptures is the one illustrated here, known as 'calling the Earth to witness' (*bhumisparsha mudra*), which is synonymous with the Buddha's Enlightenment. The posture of meditation with the fingers of his right hand reaching downwards signifies the period in the the sage's life when he meditated beneath a pipal or *bodhi* (enlightenment) tree, in the vicinity of present day Bodhgaya in north east India. It was during this period that Siddhartha overcame a series of temptations sent by the demon Mara, God of Death and Desire.

Mara was determined to divert Siddhartha from his progress towards enlightenment through meditation. The demon unleashed storms and showers of hot coals over the meditating sage, which Siddhartha transformed into flowers. Mara then sent his beautiful daughters to seduce Siddhartha, followed by an army of demons but all to no avail. Finally Mara challenged Siddhartha's claim to enlightenment whereupon the sage placed the fingers of his right hand upon the earth, thus calling on the Earth Goddess, to witness his right to enlightenment. The Goddess rose up and washed away the demon army with the waters of the earth. Siddhartha meditated until dawn and attained Nirvana, after which he was known as Buddha Shakyamuni.

BURMESE

Buddha calling the Earth to witness
(late 18th – early 19th century) Burma
bronze
37.0 x 19.8 x 12.0 cm
Felton Bequest, 1976 (AS130-1976)

- ¹ The Noble Eightfold Path incorporates three aspects: Wisdom (Right understanding, Right intention); Ethical conduct (Right speech, Right action, Right livelihood); Meditation (Right effort, Right mindfulness, Right meditation).
- ² The *ushnisha* is a protuberance on the top of the Buddha's head. It may have originated in the bun hairstyle once worn by Nepalese nobility (the Buddha was born into a noble family), but is generally considered a sign of the Buddha's wisdom and enlightenment.
- ³ The Buddha has long earlobes that recall the heavy earrings he once wore before he renounced his wealth and noble status.
- ⁴ Southeast Asian Theravada monks still wear robes that are the same style as those developed during the lifetime of the Buddha. The robes consist of three parts:
The outer robe is a large rectangle of fabric, about six by nine feet, that can be wrapped to cover both shoulders, but most often it is wrapped to cover the left shoulder but leave the right shoulder and arm bare. A sarong is worn beneath the outer robe, wrapped around the waist and covering the body to the knees.
In cooler areas a large outer wrapping may be worn around the upper body for warmth. When not in use it is sometimes folded and draped over a shoulder.
- ⁵ For an explanation of the lost wax process see the entry on the DVD for *Kalachakra and Vishvamata*.

