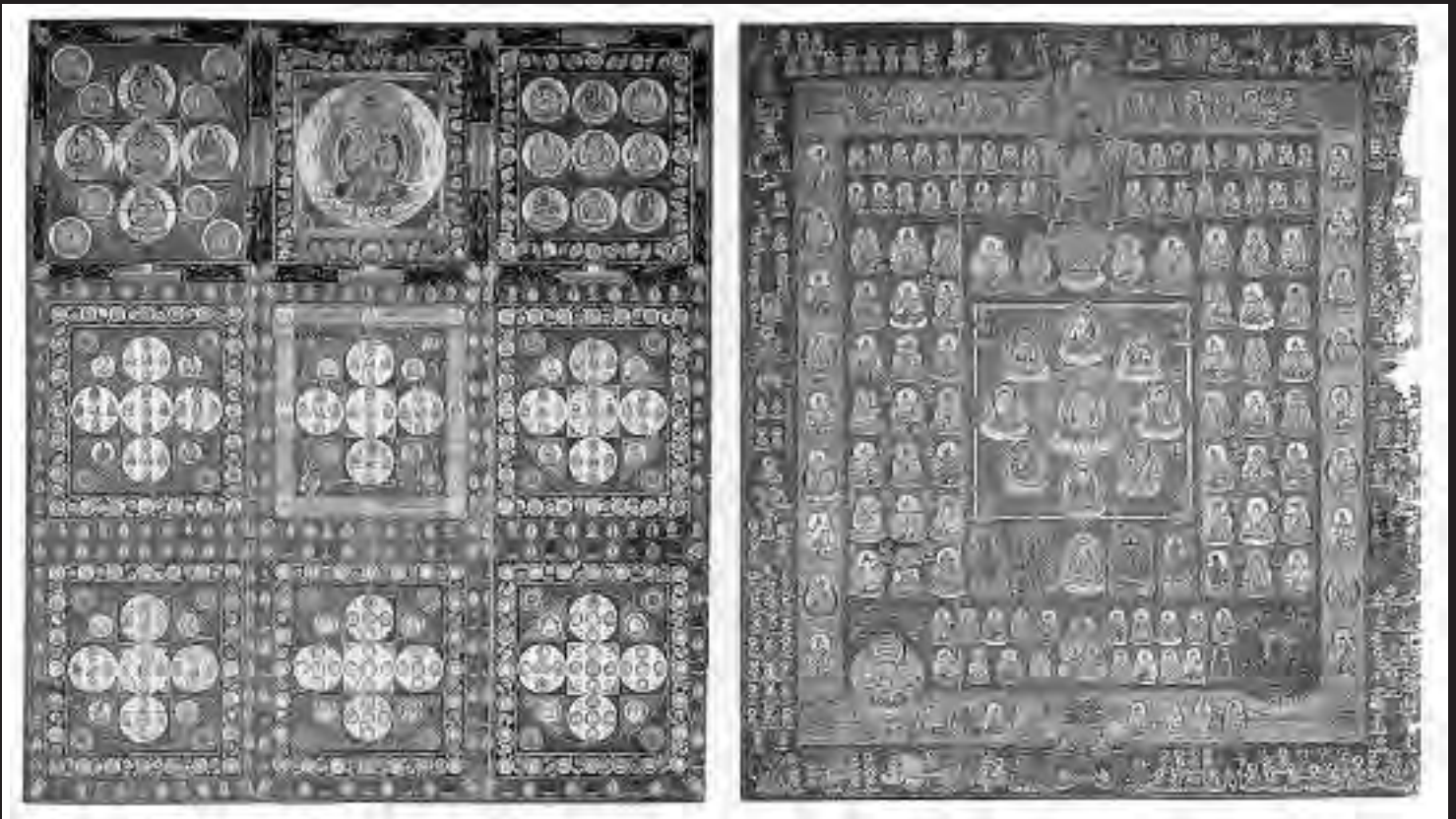


Identifying Buddhist Images in Japanese Painting and Sculpture

By Douglas P. Sjoquist

Two of the most significant mandalas in Japanese Buddhism are the *Taizōkai Mandara*, the “Womb-realm Mandala,” and the *Kongōkai Mandara*, the “Diamond-realm Mandala.” Both are displayed at *Tō-ji*, a *Shingon* sect temple founded in 796 in Kyōto, as well as in other *Shingon* temples throughout Japan. The two mandalas are used in worship and in meditation practice as a means to secure enlightenment. Almost immediately, one is impressed by the sheer number of images in these two works of art. The *Taizōkai Mandara*, for example, contains 414, while its companion, the *Kongōkai Mandara*, has a total of 1,461! Is each of the almost two thousand Buddhist figures in these mandalas an artistic variation of the Buddha? If not, where is the Buddha?



Kongōkai Mandara and Taizōkai Mandara (To-ji, Kyōto, Heian Period)

Tathāgata

Nyorai

如来

Examining Buddhist mandalas such as these, walking past the exhibits of Buddhist sculptures and paintings in an art museum, or visiting a Buddhist temple has the potential to create some confusion if you don't know what you're looking at or who you're looking at. For people unfamiliar with Buddhist art, the word "Buddha" is used as an inclusive term referring to the various saintly figures one sees in connection with the religion. One often hears, "That's a painting of the Buddha" or "That's a sculpture of the Buddha." People tend to lump all Buddhist images into one category and call them "the Buddha." This is a common mistake made by foreigners in Japan, for example, when they visit a temple. The so-called "Buddhas" one views when visiting temples or paging through a book on Buddhism, however, are not all Buddhas! Some of the Buddhist images are *bodhisattvas*, some are celestial guardians or protectors, and some of them are distinguished disciples of the historical Buddha. When you visit a Buddhist temple or examine Buddhist art, how do you know what you're looking at? How do you know if the Buddhist image before you is a Buddha?

bodhisattva

bosatsu

菩薩

To answer these questions, we first need to identify a couple of important Sanskrit terms. One is *Tathāgata*, which means "Thus-Perfected One." The term refers to a spiritual being who has attained the highest enlightenment (i.e., *nirvana*) like the historical Buddha at the age of eighty. A *Tathāgata* is a Buddha or refers to one who has attained Buddhahood. The Japanese word for this type of spiritual being is *Nyorai*. The other important Sanskrit term is *bodhisattva*, which means "enlightenment being." It refers to an enlightened spiritual being who is qualified in every way to enter into the supreme state of *nirvana* but holds back until all human beings are saved from suffering. A *bodhisattva* is described in Buddhist literature as a compassionate, enlightened being who is ready to take upon him/herself the suffering of all human beings. The Japanese word for such a being is *bosatsu*. In Mahāyāna Buddhism—the kind of Buddhism prevalent in Japan—there are countless *bodhisattvas* and several Buddhas. One will inevitably encounter many of them while visiting Japan and/or studying Japanese Buddhism and its art.

The appearance of so many *Nyorai* and *bosatsu* in Buddhist art is connected to the Mahāyāna teachings on compassion. At the basis of this doctrine is the idea that *Nyorai* and *bosatsu* appear in the various realms of existence to bring an end to suffering for all beings in the universe. In order for all beings to be saved, there need to be numerous and accessible savior beings. Like *Kannon Bosatsu* who hears the cries of the world, the various *Nyorai* and *bosatsu* extend their compassion to all without distinction. In the Pure Land schools of Japan, for example, this compassionate approach is expressed in the term *tariki*, which literally means "other power." This other power that humankind can depend on for help, of course, is a reference to *Nyorai*—especially *Amida*—and *bosatsu*.

Japan Was on the Receiving End of a Rich and Diverse Buddhist Culture



Amida Nyorai at Kamakura (Kamakura, Japan)



Amida Nyorai at Byodo-in (Uji, Japan)

All images are from the postcard collection of Douglas P. Sjoquist. Photographers unknown.

Another reason for the proliferation of deities in Buddhist art is that over the centuries Buddhist schools—particularly the *Tendai*, “Celestial Platform,” and the *Shingon*, “True Word,” sects—tended to absorb deities from the religious traditions indigenous to China and Japan. In their efforts to spread Buddhism in East Asia, Buddhist missionaries did not ask the cultures they encountered to abandon their gods. Eventually, these regional spiritual entities came to be included in the Buddhist pantheon. One needs to remember that Japan was at the far end of the Buddhist world. By the time Buddhism reached Japan in the sixth century, it had a thousand years of historical and religious development behind it. During that thousand-year period, Buddhism had accumulated hundreds of philosophers, exceptional scholars, outstanding monks and priests, an army of spiritual guardians ready to protect the *Dharma* and those who teach it, as well as stories of earthly and transcendent Buddhas and numerous savior beings. Japan was on the receiving end of a rich and diverse Buddhist culture.

The appearance of so many Nyorai and bosatsu in Buddhist art is connected to the Mahāyāna teachings on compassion. At the basis of this doctrine is the idea that Nyorai and bosatsu appear in the various realms of existence to bring an end to suffering for all beings in the universe.



Dainichi Nyorai at Todai-ji (Nara, Japan)



Shaka Triad at Horyu-ji (Nara, Japan)

All images are from the postcard collection of Douglas P. Sjoquist. Photographers unknown.

The most famous image of Dainichi is in a temple called Tōdai-ji which is located in the city of Nara. The gigantic bronze Dainichi Nyorai is fifty-two feet high and weighs approximately 500 tons.

WHO ARE SOME OF THE PRINCIPAL NYORAI AND BOSATSU IN JAPAN?

Perhaps the most popular *Nyorai* is *Amida*, the “Buddha of Boundless Light.” He is mentioned in many sutras and is the central figure of worship in Pure Land Buddhism (the *Jōdo* and *Jōdo Shin* sects). *Amida* rules over a celestial paradise called *Jōdo* (Sk. *Sukhavati*) and it is said that by calling on him, especially in the hour of death, one will be reborn into this paradise. The large wood sculpture seated in the Phoenix Hall at *Byōdō-in* and the seated bronze Buddha at Kamakura are representations of *Amida*. The central deity in *Shingon* Buddhism, on the other hand, is *Dainichi*, the “Celestial Buddha.” He is one of the five transcendent *Nyorai*. In the *Taizōkai Mandara*, *Dainichi* is depicted in the center of the red lotus flower surrounded by four other *Nyorai*—each representing one of the four directions—and four *bosatsu*. The most famous image of *Dainichi* is in a temple called *Tōdai-ji* which is located in the city of Nara. The gigantic bronze *Dainichi Nyorai* is fifty-two feet high and weighs approximately 500 tons. There are also a number of temples in the vicinity of Nara which contain images of another popular *Nyorai* in Japan: *Yakushi*, the



Dainichi (Supreme Wisdom Mudra)



Senju Kannon Bosatsu (at Sanjusangendo)

“Medicine Teacher” or the “Emerald Buddha.” The *Shin Yakushi-ji*, the *Yakushi-ji*, and the *Akishinō-dera* all house images of *Yakushi Nyorai*, who symbolizes the healing power of Buddhahood. As one might expect, *Shaka*, the “Sage of the *Shakya* clan” (i.e., the historical Buddha) also receives much attention in Japan and in Buddhist art in general.

The principal *bosatsu* in Japan are *Kannon*, *Jizō*, *Monju*, and *Fugen*. *Kannon* is worshipped as a female in Japan (and China). There are thirty-three different forms of this *bosatsu*; that is, she can incarnate in thirty-three distinct ways to help save people from suffering. In addition to appearing in her main form as *Kannon Bosatsu* (i.e., *Shōkannon*), the most popular forms are *Jūichimen Kannon*, the “Eleven-headed *Kannon*,” and *Senju Kannon*, the “Thousand-armed *Kannon*.” Statues of *Jizō* are visible everywhere in Japan. This popular *bosatsu* is conceived of as a helper of the souls of deceased children and is venerated as a savior of those suffering in various Buddhist hells. *Monju*, the *bosatsu* of wisdom who dispels the darkness of ignorance with his sword, and *Fugen*, the protector of all those who teach Buddhism, are seen together with *Shaka* in the famous *Shaka Triad* at *Hōryū-ji* in Nara. *Fugen Bosatsu* is often seen with *Dainichi* in Buddhist art as well.

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The idea that a Buddha can be recognized by thirty-two “favorable signs” originated in India. Supposedly, the historical Buddha possessed all thirty-two marks.

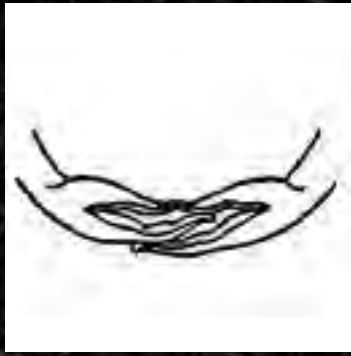


HOW ARE THESE VARIOUS NYORAI AND BOSATSU REPRESENTED IN JAPANESE BUDDHIST ART?
HOW MIGHT WE IDENTIFY THEM?

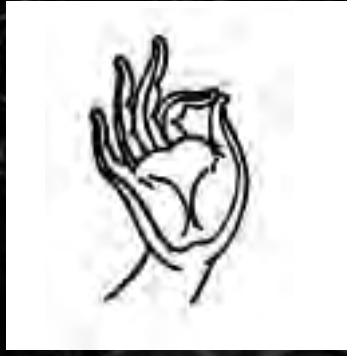
Since most images in Japanese books, museums, or temples are accompanied by a brief narrative or offer some kind of identification in Japanese, one reliable method is to learn to recognize the *kanji* (i.e., Chinese characters) next to the image! Learning to recognize the Chinese characters for at least the most popular deities is obviously helpful. While this may not be an option for most people, a person can and should learn to recognize the *kanji* for *Nyorai* and for *bosatsu*. At least that way the viewer will know what he/she is looking at. Is it a *Nyorai* or a *bosatsu*? Well, what does it say?

When the *kanji* are not available, what then? One could memorize the thirty-two attributes (and the eighty secondary characteristics) of a *Nyorai*.

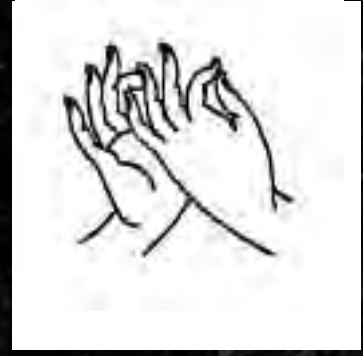
The idea that a Buddha can be recognized by thirty-two “favorable signs” originated in India. Supposedly, the historical Buddha possessed all thirty-two marks. These marks are identified in the *Digha-Nikaya*, a collection of long discourses attributed to the historical Buddha. The *Digha-Nikaya* is one of the five sections in the *Sutta Pitaka* or “Discourse Basket” of the Pali Canon. It is unlikely that anyone other than a serious Buddhist art historian or an artist would be familiar with all of these characteristics, but having some acquaintance with a few of them would be of use in determining what we’re looking at. The *urna* (i.e., the tuft of hair between the eyebrows), the *ushnisha* (i.e., the bulge on the crown of the head which symbolizes wisdom), and the imprint of a *chakra* (i.e., wheel) on the soles of the feet are three of the thirty-two attributes of a *Nyorai*, for example, and if the image has them—as well as the remaining twenty-nine marks (or most of them) — then we’ll know we’re not looking at a *bodhisattva* or a guardian deity or a disciple.



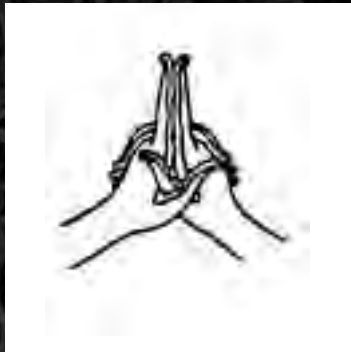
Dhyā Mudrā
Gesture of meditation



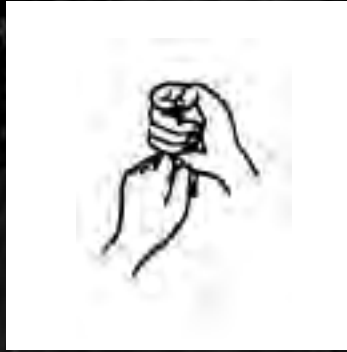
Vitarka Mudrā
Teaching gesture



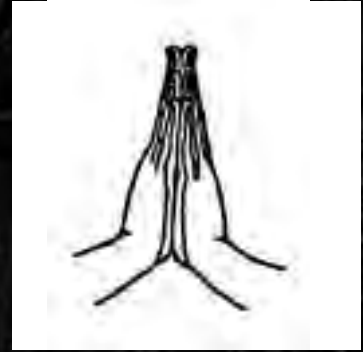
Dharmachakra Mudrā
Gesture of turning the
wheel of the teaching



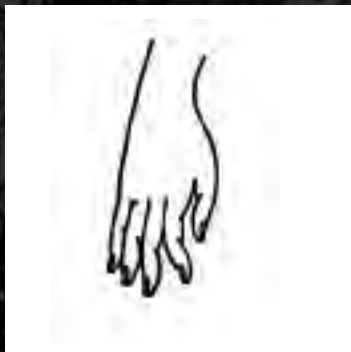
Uttarabodhi Mudrā
Gesture of supreme
enlightenment



*Mudrā of Supreme
Wisdom*



Añjali Mudrā
Gesture of greeting and
veneration



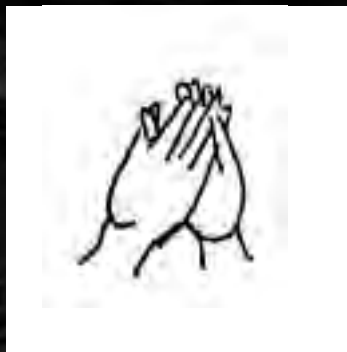
Bhūmi-sparsha Mudrā
Gesture of touching the
earth



Abhaya Mudrā
Gesture of fearlessness
and granting protection



Varada Mudrā
Gesture of granting
wishes



Vajrapradama Mudrā
Gesture of unshakable
confidence

Drawings are from worksheets supplied by
Douglas P. Sjoquist.



The lotus flower upon which Amida Nyorai sits at Byōdō-in, the position of his hands, his elongated earlobes, the ushnisha, and so on are symbols which point to some Buddhist ideal or truth.

These primary and secondary attributes are not the only elements integrated into Buddhism’s complex iconography. Like Medieval Christian art, Buddhist art is highly symbolic. The hand gestures, the position of the body, the objects an image is holding, for example, all hold special meaning. The lotus flower upon which *Amida Nyorai* sits at *Byōdō-in*, the position of his hands, his elongated earlobes, the *ushnisha*, and so on are symbols which point to some Buddhist ideal or truth.

Knowledge of these symbols is another effective tool one can employ to determine the identity of Buddhist images. Each *Nyorai*, for instance, has a typical *mudrā* (i.e., hand gesture) which often allows one to easily identify it. The “Touching the Earth” *Mudrā* indicates that the image is the historical

Buddha. This *mudrā* is derived from the story of Siddhārtha Gautama’s enlightenment. While sitting in meditation under the *bodhi* tree, Siddhārtha quietly lifted his right hand from his lap and touched the ground in front of him, indicating to the demon *Mara* that the earth was a witness to his sincerity and compassion. In this *mudrā*, then, the left hand is resting in the lap with the palm upward, while the right hand is hanging over the knee, with the palm inward, touching the ground.

Dainichi is most often depicted with the “Supreme Wisdom” *Mudrā* where the index finger of the left hand is grasped by the fingers of the right hand.

A *Nyorai* displaying the “Meditation” *Mudrā* almost certainly indicates that the image is *Amida*. In this particular *mudrā*, the back of the right hand is resting on the palm of the other with the end of the thumbs touching one another. The hands are seen resting in the lap.

An additional strategy for identifying Buddhist images is to look for certain objects in the image itself. *Yakushi*, for instance, usually carries a covered jar in his left hand. This jar is an unmistakable sign that the *Nyorai* is the “Medicine Buddha” who heals disease and sickness and dispels spiritual confusion. This approach is especially effective for identifying *bosatsu*.



There are a number of objects in an image of *Jizō Bosatsu*, for example, which would enable one to distinguish him from among the hundreds of other *bosatsu*: the monk's staff with six rings on it which he holds in one hand, the wish-fulfilling gem which he carries in his other hand, the halo surrounding his head, and the lotus flower he stands on.

While *Jizō* is the only *bosatsu* portrayed as a monk (i.e., with a shaven head), other *bosatsu* are regularly depicted with elaborate headdresses. (The portrayal of these *bosatsu* as princes is perhaps done by the artist to symbolize their "spiritual wealth" or merit). These headdresses hold precious clues. An image of *Amida Nyorai* in the headdress of a standing Buddhist sculpture, such as those at *Sanjūsangendō* in Kyōto, nearly guarantees that the sculpture is *Kannon*. Although there are thirty-three different ways of depicting *Kannon*, each of the various forms (e.g., *Senju Kannon*, *Jūchimen Kannon*, *Fukū Kenjaku Kannon*) will contain an image of *Amida* on the headdress or crown. Similarly, other *bosatsu* are easily recognizable because of the objects they carry, the decorative items they wear, or in some cases the creatures they ride. *Monju* is frequently depicted with a sword in one hand and a sutra in the other. Sometimes he carries a lotus flower and is riding a lion. One way to distinguish *Fugen Bosatsu* from *Monju Bosatsu*—who often appear together with *Shaka Nyorai* and *Dainichi Nyorai*—is to know that he is usually depicted riding a white elephant. Awareness of details such as these will greatly assist the viewer in ascertaining the identity of a *bosatsu* in Buddhist painting and sculpture.

Unfortunately, employing a single identification formula does not guarantee that one will be liberated from all difficulties with regard to recognizing Buddhist images. The "Giving" *Mudrā* and the "Fearlessness" *Mudrā*, for example, are common to all *Nyorai*. The *Dainichi Nyorai* at *Tōdai-ji*, the *Yakushi Nyorai* at *Shin Yakushi-ji*, and the *Shaka Nyorai* at *Hōryū-ji* each display these two *mudras*. Relying exclusively on one particular verification technique for all Buddhist images is simply insufficient. Several tactics are necessary, but the reward justifies the effort. Identifying the Chinese characters next to the image when available, looking carefully for some of the thirty-two attributes of a *Nyorai*, and being attentive to the hand gestures and various objects associated with particular *Nyorai* or *bosatsu* makes viewing Buddhist art an enriching experience. As *Kōbō Daishi* (774–835), the founder of *Shingon* Buddhism in Japan once remarked, "Since the Esoteric Buddhist teachings are so profound as to defy expression in writing, they are revealed through the medium of painting to those not yet enlightened. The various postures and hand gestures depicted in the mandalas (i.e., the *Taizōkai* and *Kongōkai Mandaras*) are products of the great compassion of the Buddha; the sight of them may well enable one to attain Buddhahood."¹ ■

NOTES

1. Robert Ellwood and Richard Pilgrim, *Japanese Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1985, 88).

DOUGLAS P. SJOQUIST is a Professor in the Humanities and Performing Arts Department at Lansing Community College. Among the courses he teaches is Religions of East Asia.



Jizō Bosatsu

Nyorai

如来

bosatsu

菩薩



Shaka



Miroku



Monju



Kannon



Yakushi



Fugen



Ashuku



Amida



Kokuzo Bosatsu



Dainichi



Jizo

Which of the Buddhist images are Buddhas?

Can you identify each of them?

Drawings are from worksheets supplied by Douglas P. Sjoquist.