

Learn Buddhist mythology from great works of art



ABC Buddhist mythology in Art

Acknowledgement

All images used in the book are in public domain mostly obtained from relevant museum websites

Front cover: Myanmar, Votive tablet with seated Buddha flanked by standing Buddhas, c. 1050-1100, Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, US

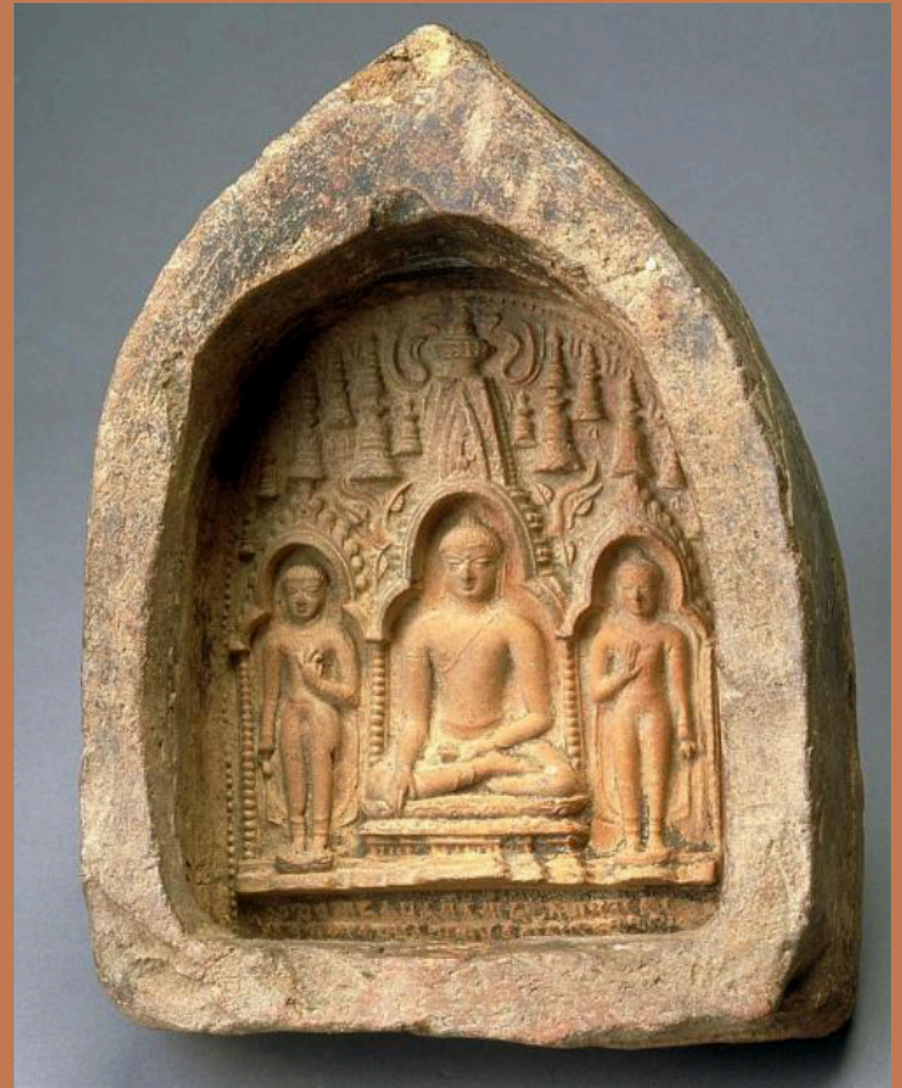
Back cover: Myanmar, Buddha Reclining with Base, c. 18th century Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., US

Compilation, text and design © 2024 Uhjin Kim

Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International
Free use and distribution. No commercial use



For free pdf version, please visit www.freechildrensbook.org



ABC Buddhist mythology in Art

A is for Avalokiteshvara

Avalokiteshvara is a bodhisattva of infinite compassion and mercy, who is revered in Mahayana Buddhism as the embodiment of compassion



Sri Lanka
Bodhisattva, probably Avalokiteshvara, c. 8th century
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, US

B is for Bodhisattva

A Bodhisattva is an enlightened being in Mahayana Buddhism who compassionately postpones their own enlightenment to assist others on the path to liberation



Korea
Pensive Bodhisattva, c. 6th century
National Museum of Korea, Seoul, Republic of Korea

C is for Chakravartin

Chakravartin is a universal monarch in Buddhist and Hindu cosmology who rules ethically and benevolently over the world, turning the wheel of Dharma and bringing prosperity and righteousness to his realm



Amaravati, India
Limestone relief panel depicting a chakravartin (centre),
c. 100-199
The British Museum, London, UK

D is for Dakini

A Dakini is a female spirit embodying wisdom and enlightenment in Vajrayana Buddhism, often depicted as a fierce, sky-dancing figure who aids in spiritual transformation and the removal of obstacles on the path to enlightenment



Angkor, Cambodia
A Dakini, c. 1100
The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, US

E is for Ekadasamukha

Ekadasamukha is a manifestation of Avalokiteshvara, depicted with eleven faces to represent his ability to see in all directions and hear the cries of suffering beings everywhere



Tibet
Eleven-Headed Avalokiteshvara, c. 1800
The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, US

F is for Fudō Myō-ō

Fudo Myo-o (Acala) is a wrathful deity in Japanese Buddhism, known as the Immovable One, who protects the Dharma and helps practitioners overcome obstacles by embodying unwavering determination and fierce compassion



Mokujiki Shōnin (1718-1810)
Fudō Myōō (Achala Vidyaraja), The Immovable Wisdom King
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, US

G is for Gandharva

Gandharvas are celestial beings known for their exceptional musical abilities and often depicted as heavenly musicians in Buddhist art and literature



Gyeongju, Korea
Facade Stones with Eight Divine Beings of Stone Stupa
(Gandharva), c. 8th century
Gyeongju National Museum, Gyeongju, Republic of Korea

H is for Hevajra

Hevajra is a wrathful deity in Vajrayana Buddhism, particularly featured in the Hevajra Tantra, symbolizing the transformative power of enlightened wisdom and compassion, often depicted with multiple faces, arms, and legs, dancing in a fierce pose



Angkor, Cambodia
Hevajra, c. 1200
The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, US

I is for Indra

Indra, also known as Sakra, is often depicted as the ruler of the heavenly realm of the Thirty-Three Gods and a protector of Buddhism, embodying certain virtues and worldly powers



Myanmar
The God Indra (Sakra), c. 1700
The British Museum, London, UK

J is for Jambhala

Jambhala is a deity of wealth, associated with prosperity and abundance, often depicted holding a mongoose that spews jewels



Tibet
Jambhala, c. 15th-16th century
National Museum, New Delhi, India

K is for Kuanyin

Kuanyin, also known as Guanyin, is the East Asian bodhisattva of compassion and mercy, revered for her ability to alleviate suffering and respond to the prayers of those in distress



China
Kwan Yin (Goddess of Mercy), c. 960-1644
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., US

L is for Lokapala

Lokapalas are the Four Heavenly Kings who serve as guardians of the four cardinal directions, protecting the world and the Buddha's teachings from evil forces



China
Heavenly Guardian (Lokapala), c. 601-700
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, US

M is for Maitreya

Maitreya is a future Buddha in Buddhist belief, expected to appear on Earth in the future to teach the Dharma and lead sentient beings to enlightenment



Mongolia
Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future, c. 1700-1800
Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, US

N is for Naga

Naga is a serpent-like deity or mythical being associated with water and rain, often revered as protectors of the Buddha and his teachings



Thailand
Buddha enthroned under the seven headed naga,
c. 18th century
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

O is for Oni

Oni are a type of yōkai or demon, believed to originate from the souls of wicked individuals who died and descended to the Buddhist Hells, where they serve as demonic minions of the Buddhist Lord Enma, the ruler of Hell, and act as obstacles on the path to enlightenment



Tomochika (1800-1873)
Oni Becoming Buddhist Monk, Having Head Shaved, c. 1825
Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, US

P is Padmapani

Padmapani is a manifestation of Avalokiteshvara, holding a lotus in his left hand, representing compassion and mercy



Pakistan
Avalokiteshvara Padmapani, c. 7th century
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, US

Q is for Queen Maya

Queen Maya, the mother of Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha), is revered for giving birth to the future enlightened one after a miraculous dream of a white elephant entering her side, symbolizing his pure and auspicious nature



Pakistan
The Conception of the Buddha-to-be in Queen Maya's dream
c. 100-300
Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, US

R is for Rakshasa

Rakshasa is a malevolent demonic being known for their shape-shifting abilities and often depicted as antagonists with a penchant for causing harm and disruption



Eastern Java, Indonesia
Demonic Figure (Rakshasa), 14th-16th century
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, US

S is for Shakyamuni

Shakyamuni, also known as Gautama Buddha, was a sage and the founder of Buddhism, revered for attaining enlightenment and teaching the path to liberation from suffering



Sri Lanka
Buddha Shakyamuni, c. 18th century
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, US

T is for Triad

The Amitabha Triad is a devotional motif in East Asian Buddhist art depicting the Buddha Amitabha along with his attendant bodhisattvas, Avalokitesvara and Ksitigarbha, symbolizing compassionate guidance toward rebirth in Sukhavati



Korea
Amitabha (Amitabha, Ksitigarbha and Avalokitesvara), c. 1400
The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, US

U is for Upagupta

Upagupta is a revered Buddhist monk and teacher, traditionally considered to be a direct disciple of Ananda and a key figure in spreading Buddhism in India and Central Asia



Myanmar
The Monk Shin Upagok (Upagupta), c. 19th century
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, US

V is for Vasudhara

Vasudhara is a Buddhist goddess of wealth, prosperity, and abundance, often depicted with multiple arms holding symbols of fertility and generosity, and venerated for granting material and spiritual well-being



Nepal
Vasudhara, Goddess of Abundance, c. 1300-1400
The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, US

W is for Wheel of Dharma

The Wheel of Dharma (Dharmachakra) symbolizes the teachings and principles of Buddhism, representing the continuous cycle of life, death, and rebirth, as well as the path to enlightenment and liberation from suffering



Madhya Pradesh, India
Worship of Chakra, c. 100-200
Indian Museum, Kolkata, India

X is for Xuanzang

Xuanzang was a Chinese Buddhist monk, scholar, and translator who traveled to India in the 7th century to obtain sacred texts, significantly contributing to the understanding and spread of Buddhism in China through his translations and writings



Japan
The Monk Xuanzang, c. 14th century
Tokyo National Museum, Tokyo, Japan

Y is for Yama

Yama is the deity of death and the ruler of the underworld,
who judges the deceased and presides over the cycle of
rebirths



Tibet
The Buddhist Guardian Yama, c. 1700-1900
Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, US

Z is for Zangpo

Namgyal Dragpa Zangpo was a prominent Tibetan Buddhist lama and scholar known for his contributions to the Sakya tradition and his role in the development of Buddhist teachings and practices in Tibet



Tibet
The Teacher Namgyal Dragpa Zangpo, c. 15th century
The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, US