

# Who is the Buddha?

**Dr Naomi Appleton**

University of Edinburgh, [naomi.appleton@ed.ac.uk](mailto:naomi.appleton@ed.ac.uk)

**Dr Chris Jones**

University of Cambridge, [cvj20@cam.ac.uk](mailto:cvj20@cam.ac.uk)



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## *Programme*

<b>January 27th</b>	The Buddha: Historical Figure or Literary Character?
<b>February 3rd</b>	The Buddha as Philosopher
<b>February 17th</b>	The Buddha as Social Reformer
<b>February 24th</b>	The Buddha in Buddhist Practice
<b>March 10th</b>	<b>The Buddha among Buddhas</b>
<b>March 17th</b>	The Buddha in Modern Britain

Each session will consist of roughly 45 minutes of presentation, and up to 30 minutes of questions and/or discussion.

The presentations (though not the discussions) will be recorded. Please keep cameras off during this part of the event.

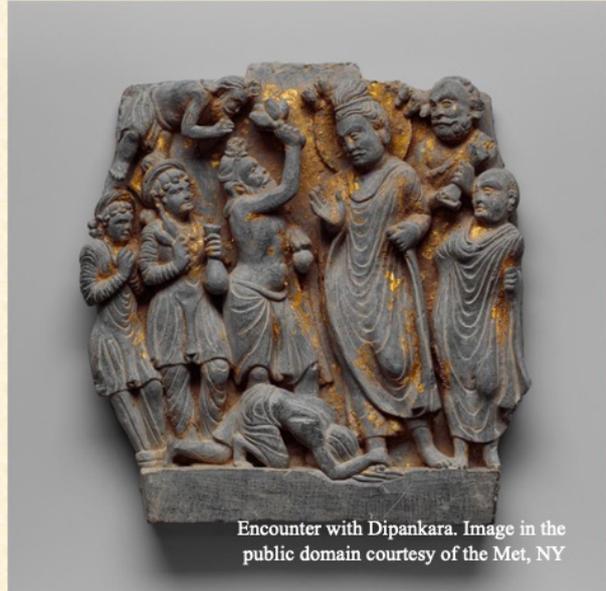


Miniature *stūpa* with four buddhas: image in the public domain, Metropolitan Museum, NY

See previous sessions for more on Buddhist *stūpas*, or relic-chambers. Not all of these are large, architectural creations: some can be miniatures that were also used to house precious items, whether believed to be relics or otherwise.

## Sumedha's encounter with Dīpaṅkara Buddha (in the *Buddhavamsa*)

41. Asked by me, these declared that an incomparable Buddha had arisen in the world, the Conqueror named Dīpaṅkara, leader of the world, and that it was for him that the ... road was being cleared.  
42. When I heard "Buddha", zest arose immediately. Saying "Buddha, Buddha" I expressed my happiness.  
43. Standing there elated, stirred in mind, I reasoned, "Here will I sow seeds; indeed, let not the moment pass!"



Encounter with Dipankara. Image in the public domain courtesy of the Met, NY

The *Buddhavamsa* is a Pāli verse text included in the Theravāda scriptures, though it is one of the later additions, perhaps dating to the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BCE.

The translation is taken from Horner, I. B. (trans.). 1975. *The Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon, Part III: Chronicle of Buddhas (Buddhavamsa)*. Oxford: Pali Text Society. pp. 9-29.

You can read it here: <https://jatakastories.div.ed.ac.uk/stories-in-text/buddhavamsa-2/>

Image: 2<sup>nd</sup> century schist relief from the Swat Valley (ancient Gandhara, present-day Pakistan).

Image in the public domain courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, where it is accession number 1998.491

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/49809?ft=dipankara&offset=0&rp=40&pos=3>

Scottish teachers might be interested to see that there is a similar image in the NMS collection:

[https://www.nms.ac.uk/explore-our-collections/collection-search-results/?item\\_id=368961](https://www.nms.ac.uk/explore-our-collections/collection-search-results/?item_id=368961)

And you can read more about it, and the story, here: <https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/teachingbuddhism/2020/04/06/taking-the-buddha-vow-an-image-from-the-nms/>

## The *Buddhavamsa* continued...

54. While I was lying on the earth it was thus in my mind: If I so wished I could burn up my defilements today.

55. What is the use while I (remain) unknown of realizing dhamma here? Having reached omniscience, I will become a Buddha in the world with the devas.

56. What is the use of my crossing over alone, being a man aware of my strength? Having reached omniscience, I will cause the world together with the devas to cross over.

57. By this act of merit of mine towards the supreme among men I will reach omniscience, I will cause many people to cross over.

[Dīpaṅkara says:]

61. Do you see this very severe ascetic, a matted hair ascetic? Innumerable eons from now he will be a Buddha in the world.

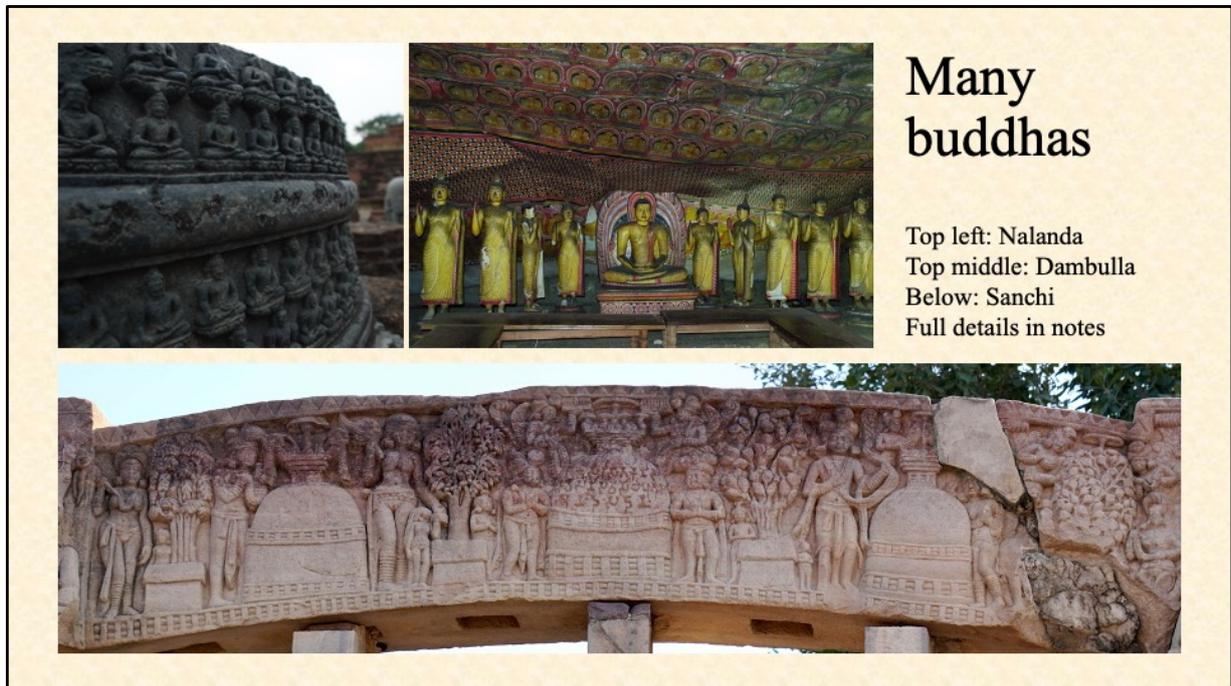
[Sumedha says:]

110. The utterance of Buddhas is not of double meaning, the utterance of Conquerors is not false, there is no untruth in Buddhas. Assuredly I will be a Buddha.

Horner, I. B. (trans.). 1975. *The Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon, Part III: Chronicle of Buddhas (Buddhavamsa)*. Oxford: Pali Text Society.

The translation is taken from Horner, I. B. (trans.). 1975. *The Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon, Part III: Chronicle of Buddhas (Buddhavamsa)*. Oxford: Pali Text Society. pp. 9-29.

You can read it here: <https://jatakastories.div.ed.ac.uk/stories-in-text/buddhavamsa-2/>



## Many buddhas

Top left: Nalanda  
 Top middle: Dambulla  
 Below: Sanchi  
 Full details in notes

For the earliest account of the past buddha Vipassi, alongside brief mention of the other buddhas in the set of six, in the Digha Nikaya (Long Discourses) of the Pali canon see

<https://suttacentral.net/dn14/en/sujato>

Images:

Top left: Many buddhas depicted on a stupa at the ancient university site of Nalanda in north India. Photograph: James Hegarty.

Top middle: Interior of one of the Dambulla caves in Sri Lanka. Photograph Balou46, CC-BA-SA3.0

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:LK-dambulla-cave-temple-inside-12.jpg>

Bottom: Stupas of past buddhas depicted on a gateway at the Sanchi Stupa. Photograph Dhammajoti, CC-BY2.0

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:022\\_Stupas\\_and\\_Bodhi\\_Trees\\_representing\\_the\\_Seven\\_Buddhas\\_\(33772342726\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:022_Stupas_and_Bodhi_Trees_representing_the_Seven_Buddhas_(33772342726).jpg)

## The Next Buddha: Maitreya



Left: Seven Buddhas and Maitreya, from Bodhgaya

Right: An East Asian depiction of the future buddha, or 'Budai' (布袋). Image in the public domain



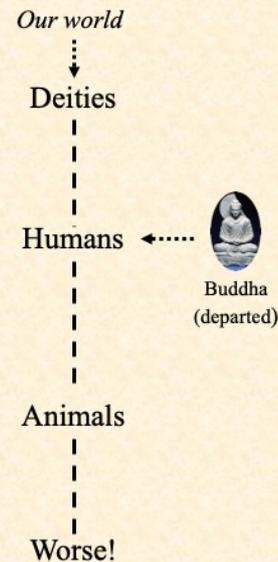
Images:

Left: Bodhgayā, Bihar. Photograph of a Stone Slab with seven Buddhas. The original sculpture in the Indian Museum, Calcutta. Photograph, probably by Joseph David Beglar, collected by A. Cunningham and acquired by A. W. Franks who bequeathed it to the British Museum in 1897; now numbered 1897,0528,0.32.a. (hence out of copyright and free to use)

<https://zenodo.org/record/2551672#.Yh3ioJPP2Es>

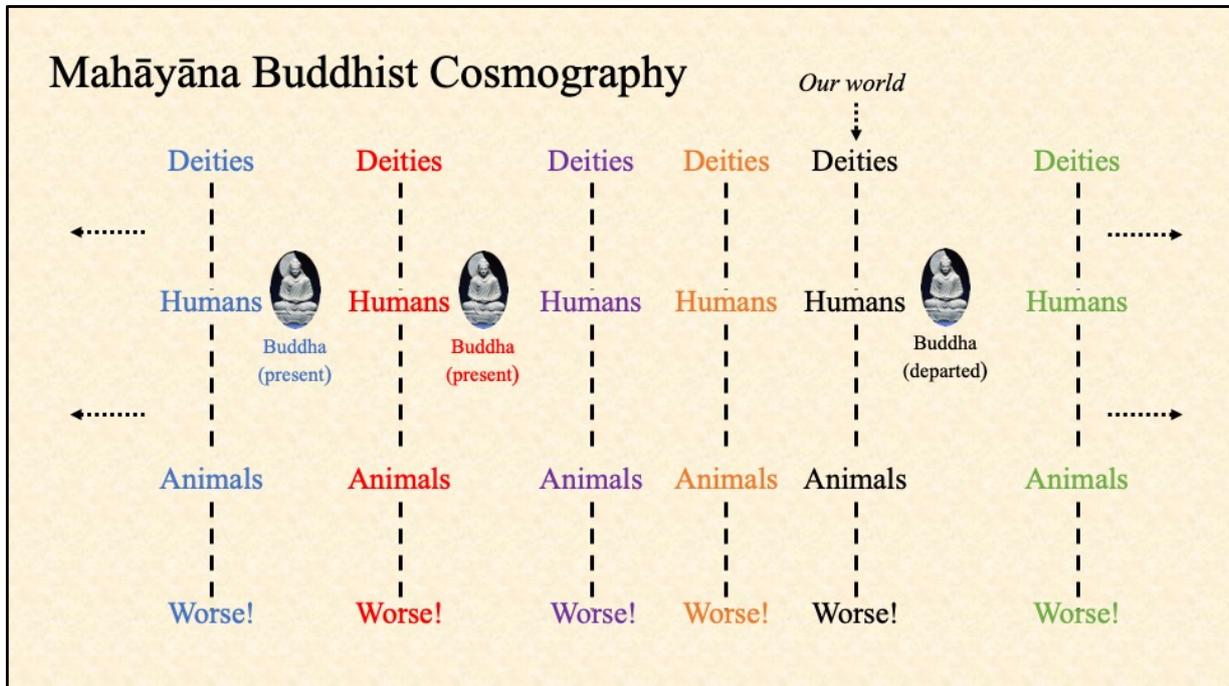
Right: Ways of depicting Maitreya have varied across the Buddhist world, with different indications of his status as future buddha, such as looking like a prince, or reclining on a throne, or – as here – laughing as a symbol of success and happiness. This is a standard example of the depiction, and is in the public domain: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Happy\\_Buddha.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Happy_Buddha.jpg)

## 'Mainstream' Buddhist Cosmography



The image is a fourteenth century Chinese depiction of the world, based on traditional Buddhist descriptions of its arrangement. At the centre is the great mountain Sumeru, which has a summit wider than its base. In the four directions are four continents; one of which, called Jambudvīpa, lies in the south, and is the continent that early Buddhist understands to be the mass of land occupied by the Buddha and every known kingdom (that is, it corresponds to the subcontinent of 'India'). Although something like this 'map' is pervasive in pre-modern Buddhist thought, it very arguably is not so important in terms of Buddhist doctrine, which has as its focus not the shape of the world but the workings of the process of transmigration.

The simple chart on the right represents the range of births that can be taken by beings as they undergo transmigration: one can be human, or a deity, an animal, or otherwise (a 'hungry ghost' [*preta*] or being suffering in a hell [*nāraka*]). Remember that most forms of Buddhism, and certainly all that existed in India, accept that only *one* buddha can be in the world at a time, by definition, because a buddha's function is the reintroduction of the Dharma to the world when it has been absent. This is necessarily a great gap between the appearance of buddhas, seeing as the Dharma must be completely lost or forgotten when another emerges.



The slide attempts to communicate how Mahāyāna Buddhist cosmography reimagines rebirth. Not only can one be born as a human, deity, animal or otherwise in our world, or often ‘world-system), but one can be reborn in one of immeasurable *other* world-systems that have a similar structure but are nonetheless different.

Remembering that there can be only one buddha in the world at a time, and that a buddha emerges only when the Dharma has been forgotten, the postulation of *many* worlds allows for two related ideas: 1) a bodhisattva, on the path to becoming a buddha, could become a buddha in *another* world, much faster than if there were only our world, and 2) many other worlds must be home to buddhas teaching at this very moment, under whose instruction one could make much faster progress in the direction of complete awakening oneself. These developments are obvious reassurances in Mahāyāna thought: although the path of the bodhisattva is long and arduous, it is less arduous than it would be if there were indeed only a single world-system.

## Śākyamuni, Amitābha, and Pure Land Buddhism

‘At one time, the Blessed One, the Buddha Śākyamuni, was staying near the city of Śrāvastī, in the cloistered garden that the generous Anāthapiṇḍada gave to the Buddhist Order, in Prince Jeta’s grove...

...then, the Blessed One addressed the reverend Śāriputra, saying: ‘To the west of us, Śāriputra, a hundred thousand million buddha-fields from where we are, there is a world called ‘Land of Bliss’ (Sukhāvātī). At this very moment, the tathāgata, arhat, perfect and full buddha called Amitāyus (/Amitābha) lives in that buddha-field; he abides and remains there, and even now continues to teach the Dharma in that field.’

Translated from the Sanskrit version of the *Sukhāvātīvyūha-sūtra*; adapted from the English of Gomez 1996, *The Land of Bliss*, pp.15–16.



Tibetan depiction of Sukhāvātī, C17th, from the San Antonio Museum of Art.

The image is in the public domain and can be freely used ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%27Amitabha\\_in\\_Sukhavati\\_Paradise%27,\\_Tibetan,\\_circa\\_1700,\\_San\\_Antonio\\_Museum\\_of\\_Art.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%27Amitabha_in_Sukhavati_Paradise%27,_Tibetan,_circa_1700,_San_Antonio_Museum_of_Art.jpg)).

It depicts the Buddha Amitābha (or Amitāyus – both names are used for this same figure) in the world in which he teaches, that is his ‘buddha-field’ (*buddhakṣetra*), called Sukhāvātī or ‘the Land of Bliss.

The English expression ‘Pure Land’ comes from a Chinese rendering of Sukhāvātī (*jingtu* 淨土); the earlier, Indian notion of a ‘buddha-field’ refers to whatever world a buddha presides over as teacher (one might say his ‘domain’). Sukhāvātī is an example of a buddha-field that is supposed to have been made particularly pleasant due to Amitābha’s power, hence it is ‘pure’ as a result of that buddha’s actions.

The passage of text, from one version of the Mahāyānist *Sukhāvātīvyūha-sūtra* (‘the Discourse on the Arrangement of the Land of Bliss’), comes from the beginning of the discourse, in which it is ‘our’ buddha, Śākyamuni, who reports at length and in detail the attributes of Sukhāvātī and its buddha, celebrating this as a world in which faithful and committed bodhisattvas could be reborn in order to then make more rapid progress under Amitābha’s influence.

## Amitābha in East Asia



‘...if a good man or woman who hears of Amitābha holds fast to his name even for a day, or two, three, four, five, six or seven days, with a concentrated and undistracted mind, then at the hour of death Amitābha will appear with his host...[the aspirant] will be born immediately in Sukhāvātī, the domain of Amitābha.’

Translated from Chinese *Emituo jing* (阿彌陀經), a Chinese translation of the *Sukhāvātīvyūha-sūtra*

Left: the iconic Kamakura Buddha, Japan – a C13th depiction of Amitābha / Amitāyus (in Japanese ‘Amida’).

The image is in the public domain and free to use. The Kamakura Buddha is a widely-recognized national treasure of Japanese Buddhist art, but importantly is not an image of ‘the’ Buddha (i.e., Gotama, or Śākyamuni), but instead Amitābha (or in Japanese ‘Amida’). The background in Pure Land Buddhism is the belief that we are so incredibly far from being liberated in our current world and age that our only prospect is to aim for rebirth in a better location, the Land of Bliss (Sukhāvātī), and that Amida’s salvific power is the most reliable means of getting there.

## Tantric Buddhas

*tantra* – (in simple terms!) the use of esoteric rituals, often involving access to powerful beings, to accelerate progress to worldly power/s, or liberation.



Above: a C11th Tibetan presentation of the *Vajradhātu maṇḍala* ('Mandala of the Diamond Realm'): from a private collection, and image sourced from [himalayanart.org](https://www.himalayanart.org/items/88570) (<https://www.himalayanart.org/items/88570>). At the centre are four buddhas, and at their centre the primary buddha of this tantric system, Vairocana ('the Radiant One').

A tantric *maṇḍala* (literally just 'circle') is a diagrammatic representation of enshrined buddhas, bodhisattvas and/or deities; in fact they are imagined to be three-dimensional structures, akin to a giant palace, replete with walls, fences, doors and other features. The *Vajradhātu maṇḍala* is just one of hundreds of different mandalas that are described in tantric Buddhist works, and represented in Buddhist art from (primarily) India, Nepal, Tibet and Japan.

Forms of tantric Buddhism persist in Tibet (and moreover in Tibetan Buddhism that has spread far wider than Tibet itself) and in Japan (where the Shingon sect is the only remaining East Asian tantric tradition). Tantric religion was not peculiar to Buddhism in India; rather, the development of highly complex, esoteric ritual systems was found across forms of what we come to call Hinduism, especially focused on the worship of Śiva and other gods and goddesses related to him.

## Buddhas and bodhisattvas



Four representations of (in some or other form) the advanced bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara: (from left) from Gandhāra, perhaps C3rd (Ashmolean Museum); a ‘thousand-armed, eleven-headed’ form, from Tibet; a giant depiction of Kannon, Japan (Sendai); the fourteenth Dalai Lama.

In a sense the four images in the slide are of the same figure: the popular bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (rough translation: ‘the lord who observes [people]’).

First is a relatively early, classical Indian image of this character, who appears quite frequently in Mahāyāna Buddhist literature.

Second is a typical South/Central Asian depiction of this figure with a thousand arms and eleven heads, representative of his pervasive involvement in the lives of innumerable sentient beings in innumerable worlds.

Third is a typical East Asian (here Japanese) depiction of Avalokiteśvara, where ‘he’ is usually depicted instead as female (Chinese Guanyin; Japanese Kannon), and is a very popular figure of devotion. This statue, at Sendai in Japan, is 100m tall and is the largest female figure in the world.

Finally, we have the fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyantso. The lineage of the Dalai Lamas stretches back to the fifteenth century, and for most of the time since they have been regarded in Tibet as successive emanation bodies (Tib. *tulkus*; Skt. *nirmāṇakāyas* – see notes to the previous session!) of Avalokiteśvara.

## Conclusion



Above: page from a 12th Prajñāpāramitā ('Perfection of Wisdom') text, illuminated with an image of the Buddhist Goddess Tārā (specifically, Green Tārā) – one of a number of popular female tantric divinities.

All forms of Buddhism acknowledge the importance of *the* Buddha as the most recent expositor of the Dharma in the world; but most acknowledge him to be only the most recent of innumerable buddhas in the world, or simply the latest buddha of just *our* world. Still more central to Buddhism than the Buddha himself is the category 'buddha', referring to figures who periodically transform the world by reintroducing truths about how it is, and how turbulent rebirth in it can be escaped.

The image in the slide is free to use (<https://www.lookandlearn.com/history-images/YM0074902/Green-Tara-Folio-from-a-dispersed-Ashtasahasrika-Prajnaparamita-Perfection-of-Wisdom-Manuscript?t=2&q=Green+Tara>).

Especially tantric Buddhism expands the pantheon of Buddhist devotional figures further beyond buddhas and bodhisattvas to include deities who stand above those of the normal world (e.g., those worshipped in Hinduism) by virtue of their being embodiments of Buddhist truth (that is, the Dharma). The goddess Tārā is just one of these. A good resource for exploring Tibetan art, with good descriptions of the colourful cast of bodhisattvas and deities depicted in it, is Himalayan Art Resources: <https://www.himalayanart.org/>.