

Buddha Shakyamuni and Bodhisattva Maitreya

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Object as History

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Shakyamuni and Maitreya are typical holy figures in Buddhism; Shakyamuni is the one representative of the historical Buddhas and Maitreya is the one of the representative bodhisattvas. These statues are all displayed in the section of “Gateway To Himalayan Art’ in Rubin Museum of Art. They are both figures who find enlightenment in common, but Buddha Shakyamuni is who becomes aware of everything and Bodhisattva Maitreya is who practices asceticism to be conscious of everything, in other words, he is an existence that is right before being Buddha. They seem to be similar each other but they are not. Buddha Shakyamuni and Bodhisattva Maitreya have different functions, and they also have different visual features in their statues.

The term buddha, meaning “awakened” or “enlightened,” was first used to refer to Shakyamuni, who lived in the sixth centuries BCE in northern India, Nepal and whose teachings became the foundation of Buddhism. He was born as a prince, but from a young age he realized and was profoundly troubled by the problem of human suffering; he encountered four sufferings common of all people: birth, ageing, sickness, and death.¹ Through them, he found that the only solution of this suffering world was finding and following right spiritual path. Eventually, he renounced his position and started to practice to understand how human suffering could be overcome. For several years, he used aesthetic ways to reach his goal but later he realized that it is impossible so that he decided to find enlightenment through meditation. He practiced for six years, then he began to travel and once seated under the Bodhi tree that was in the region of Gaya to enter meditation. After forty-nine days, at the age of thirty-five, he completely attained an awakening, a complete understanding of the true nature of reality. At this point, he was

¹ “The Buddha Shakyamuni,” *Karmapa*, <http://kagyuoffice.org/buddhism/shakyamuni-buddha/>.

Buddha. He thought that the liberation from sufferings of birth and death would be open to all of people, so he traveled throughout Indian subcontinents to share his enlightened wisdom and teach how to awaken the great potential of lives. Through teaching, he showed the way how to be free from the endless cycle of suffering that is birth, death, and rebirth. Even though he died at age of eighty, his teachings were recorded in the form and spread out in every countries of Asia.



Over time “buddha” came to refer to not only one person, but now means there were lots of buddhas but all manifestations of enlightenment. This Buddha Shakyamuni statue is one of buddha statues. It does not have specific information when it is founded, but it is presumed to be found in 13th century in Tibet. It is made of gilt copper alloy with pigment, so the overall look is more simple than fancy. And, its dimension is H 17 1/2

x W 15 inch. similar with the soccer ball. Buddha statues are all visualized with folded legs, this posture is known as “vajra position,” which is associated with meditation, means that the legs of this statue are also folded in vajra position. But buddha statues are distinguished by different hand gestures. This hand gesture is called “mudra”. Mudras are modes of communication and self expression, and they all have different symbolic meaning.² The right hand is extended across the knee, its meaning is touching the earth. This is the gesture of the Buddha calling the earth to witness his enlightenment. And, the left hand with an upward palm performs the gesture of

² “Buddha Mudras: Hand Positions of the Buddha,” *Lotus Sculpture*, <https://www.lotussculpture.com/mudras.html>.

meditation. Its posture and hand gesture show relaxed, comfortable atmosphere generally. Not only does the Buddha Shakyamuni statue have a posture and hand gestures but also it has other characteristic in appearance. It has closed eyes, long earlobes with piercings, smile, the blue black hair on the head with a gold ornament adorning the crown, and a white dot between the eyebrows. And, it wears a robe that shows the right shoulder. This robe has hems that have simple line decoration on the chest, the wrist, and the ankle and a cloth belt at the waist part. The physical appearance of this Buddha Shakyamuni statue is described the form as soft, means that it has more body lines and curves than muscles. And, it has a lot of details on the body. It has the nipple, the navel, and the lines on the inner part of the elbow. The nails, the finger joints, and the toe joints are also described clearly. Buddha Shakyamuni is on a lotus throne. The throne is a reference to the idea of spiritual kingship, means that it is representation of the ruler who attains enlightenment in the spiritual world. The base of the throne is decorated with various symbols. Buddha Shakyamuni statue has lotuses on the base of the throne. The lotus represents being free from sufferings to attain enlightenment, beauty, and clarity.³ This lotus throne is an another symbol that shows who Buddha Shakyamuni is.

Unlike Buddha Shakyamuni, Bodhisattva Maitreya is an ideal type, means that it is not a depiction of an historical person. Bodhisattvas are traditionally described as beings who aspire to attain enlightenment and help others to achieve it. The greatest of bodhisattvas are near enlightenment and are regarded as entities with abilities nearly equal to other buddhas. They can be identified by distinctive attributes that symbolize their particular enlightened qualities, such as book and sword, representation of wisdom. There are many different bodhisattvas, Maitreya is

³ "Buddhist Symbols." Ancient Symbols. <http://www.ancient-symbols.com/buddhist-symbols.html>.

one of them. Bodhisattva Maitreya has appeared in the first centuries CE in northern India.

Maitreya is the Buddha of the future who will be born to teach enlightenment in the next age. He is considered as one who helps left people who are not rescued by Buddha. According to Mahayana teachings, a Buddha is born as a bodhisattva, and then he becomes Buddha completely after attain Buddhahood.⁴ In India, people have believed and served Bodhisattva Maitreya for the last 2500 years. They built a huge bronze statue for followers. The Indian belief is that he will return in 30,000 years during a period of decline, and will be the future buddha.⁵ Interestingly, the belief for Bodhisattva Maitreya is little different in different parts of the Buddhist world. In China, he is regarded as a folk deity that monitors the country with a third eye in his back. In Korea, he is regarded as the god of fertility. And, also Japanese have had a claim to him by the teacher Kukai who is a Japanese monk.⁶ Maitreya has appeared in centuries as a true path claiming holiness.

Bodhisattva Maitreya statue is presumed to be founded in 12th century in Bihar or Bengal, India. And, its dimension is H 17 1/2 x W 10 inch. Bodhisattva Maitreya statue is visualized with posture and hand gesture: “vajra position” and “mudra”. This statue has a comfortable posture with the right leg that has the shape of zigzag and the left leg that is put on the right leg unlike Buddha Shakyamuni statue that has folded legs as one. This posture is called “royal ease,” is commonly associated with regal leisure. And, its body tilts slightly unlike Buddha Shakyamuni statue that has the straight posture. It means that Bodhisattva Maitreya

⁴ “Bodhisattva Maitreya, 100–300,” Asian Education, <http://education.asianart.org/explore-resources/artwork/bodhisattva-maitreya-100-300>.

⁵ “Maitreya,” *All About*, <https://www.allaboutreligion.org/maitreya.htm>.

⁶ Barbara O'Brien, “Biography of Kukai, aka Kobo Daishi,” ThoughtCo, February 05, 2017, <https://www.thoughtco.com/kukai-450199>.

statue has a freewheeling composition comparatively. The left hand is extended across the knee,



its meaning is touching the earth. And, the right hand forms the shape of a wheel, symbolizing the turning of the “wheel of dharma,” a reference to teaching the Buddha’s doctrine. This right hand has three extended fingers, they represent the three vehicle of Buddha’s teaching. The middle finger means of the hearers of the teachings, the index finger means of the realizers of the teachings, and the little finger means of the great vehicle. This statue has more particular posture and hand gestures than Buddha Shakyamuni statue has. Not

only does Bodhisattva Maitreya statue have complicated posture and hand gestures but also it has various characteristics in appearance. It has closed eyes, smile, and a dot between the eyebrows like Buddha Shakyamuni statue has. However, unlike Buddha Shakyamuni statue, it is portrayed adorned with crowns, jeweled ornaments, and garments of Indian royalty. This statue is also depicted with fancy decorations, it is made of gilt copper alloy with pigments. It is adorned with bracelets, necklaces, a cloth belt, pants that has dots on, and a crown with jewels. And, there is something splendid at the back that is reminded of the back part of the chair, it looks weaving flowers. It makes this statue looks more fancy. Also, Bodhisattva Maitreya statue has details on physical appearance. The nail and the finger joint of this statue are described more specifically than those parts of Buddha Shakyamuni statue. In addition, the base of the throne stands out by

emphasized shapes. Overall, this Bodhisattva Maitreya statue is luxurious unlike Buddha Shakyamuni statue that is calm.

Buddha Shakyamuni and Bodhisattva Maitreya have both similarity and difference. They all have appeared in northern India, but there are more differences between them. Buddha Shakyamuni is a historical person but Bodhisattva Maitreya is an ideal person, Buddha Shakyamuni is who attain enlightenment completely but Bodhisattva Maitreya is who still practicing to attain enlightenment to become a buddha, Buddha Shakyamuni is emerged in the sixth centuries BCE but Bodhisattva Maitreya is emerged later than, Buddha Shakyamuni is who teaches people liberation from sufferings of birth and death would be open to all of people and rescues them from sufferings but Bodhisattva Maitreya is who helps people to follow buddha's doctrine, and Buddha Shakyamuni has a calm appearance but Bodhisattva Maitreya has a fancy appearance with different postures, hand gestures, and decorations.

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