



Introduction

Buddhist art is that field of East Asian art which, generally speaking, is most alien to Western viewers and has therefore attracted relatively little attention until now. To enter into the spirit of this art is particularly difficult not only because it is based on a distinct religio-philosophical world view, but also because its artistic devices and expressions differ substantially from those of Western religious art. If we propose to explore the world of Buddhist art, we do so not only because this art comprises a wide field equalling in importance and achievements that of Christian art, but also because the Buddhist art of East Asia--as the many-faceted and vast creative expression of one of the great world religions--expresses artistic and religious values which make more detailed studies well worth the effort.

We should be sure from the outset, however, that we are basically not dealing with an art which should be enjoyed primarily because of its aesthetic values or which expresses its meaning directly through its forms and modes of expression; rather, we are dealing with works of art which are first of all intended to hold religious meaning and to serve Buddhist ritual, edification, and salvation. Originally all religious art serves this function; and it is unimportant to the faithful whether a cult image is aesthetically valuable or has the qualities of a great work of art. The oldest religious art found among primitive peoples may be said to have not yet separated the "religious" from the "aesthetic" function. Its works possess above all magic-symbolic efficacy. But the "beautiful" element in cult images is ever increasing--Greek sculpture shows this process most clearly--until in the classic creations of any great religious art both aspects are fused so intimately that religious and aesthetic functions support and intensify each other. Buddhist art represents one of the most impressive examples in world art to support this thesis, and it would be one-sided and unfair to view its works purely as documents of religious history.

More than Christian art, Buddhist art is shaped by cultic and ritual-magic functions. More than the later Chinese and Japanese secular art--which prefers not to take on the burden of philosophical ideas and of specific expressions of world

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views but rather aims more at conveying moods of nature and displaying decorative beauty--Buddhist art in all its details is full of profound meaning which is intelligible only to the initiated. It displays very clearly the strong East Asian preference for mysterious symbolism and sacred formalism. This renders it frequently esoteric-mystic and requires therefore not only thorough "theological" explanations but, first of all, excursions into the language of its esoteric-mystical symbolism.

Iconography in Buddhist art, together with Buddhist ritual, constitutes therefore a vast field of inquiry in its own right which is at least as important for an understanding of works of Buddhist art as is the case with Christian art. The treatment of Buddhist iconography in general and of East Asian Buddhism in particular, is a difficult but unavoidable part of our study. Fortunately, our task is made somewhat easier because we can draw on numerous Japanese and, in the case of India and Central Asia, even on Western pioneering studies.

Buddhism in East Asia means exclusively Mahāyāna Buddhism--the "Great Vehicle," frequently also called "Northern Buddhism"--whose teachings and cults constitute the basis of almost the entire religious art of East Asia. Whatever exists by way of Taoist art in China and Shintō art in Japan lags, as far as it is indigenous, either far behind the powerful and rich Buddhist art or has received its direct stimulating or modifying influence; as, for example, Taoist cult sculpture or the later types of Shintō architecture. Buddhist art in East Asia begins during its early period between the fourth and sixth centuries, i.e., soon after Buddhism had taken root in China and had begun to spread throughout the country. It reached its apex between the seventh and thirteenth centuries when both Chinese and Japanese civilization flourished, i.e., during the T'ang and Sung dynasties and the Nara, Fujiwara, and Kamakura periods, respectively; and it managed to continue until about 1550, particularly in its special branch of Japanese Zen art. During this later time begins the period of the epigoni and soon after that the period of final decay, as the philosophical power and cultural vigor of Buddhism wanes and a period of faithful preservation of an honored tradition, which is also marked by a lack of creative spirit, begins. During the centuries when East Asian Buddhism flourished--a time which we may well be justified calling East Asia's "medieval period" in spite of all the reservations about transposing such historical labels to other cultures and periods--the large esoteric-mystical schools of Chinese and Japanese Buddhism created a highly complicated system of sacred figures as visual expression of their many-faceted and comprehensive teachings. They also brought into existence a vast world of symbol-laden cult figures and cult paintings which, for the most part, are difficult to understand. But this complex world of images was soon substantially reduced by the rapid expansion of the theologically and philosophically simpler and more popular faith in the Savior-Buddha Amitābha and, still later, by the rise of Zen--a school which did not attach great importance to cult images. It is this shift in the development of Buddhism which, among others, prompted Buddhist artists to turn to new spiritual goals and new artistic means.

The Buddhist art with its essentially and unmistakably East Asian character dealt with in this study evolved in China and Korea and was transplanted to Japan only a few centuries later, with Korea serving in part as a cultural bridge. It contained many Indian forms, particularly with respect to types of religious figures and modes of their formal representation. Both were soon absorbed and

transformed by the self-confident artistic spirit of China and Japan. As regrettable as this may be, we may, therefore, ignore the Buddhist art of India and that of the countries of Southeast Asia influenced by it. Nor do we trace the various ways in which the Indian inspiration reached East Asia--a process during which the Central Asian region played an important intermediary role. (This has been described in our general survey, *The Art of Buddhism*, published in 1964 by Crown Publishers, New York.) The art of Tibetan and Mongolian Lamaism remains also outside the scope of this book since this art constitutes a religious and cultural world of its own and displays marked differences from the Buddhist art of East Asia--differences which are quite noticeable in spite of the many links between Tibetan, Mongolian, and East Asian Buddhism, their shared Mahāyāna background, and their common descent from Indian traditions.

Generally speaking, we will be dealing with the Buddhist art of China and Japan, with appropriate attention given to that of Korea.

Though we will find that Korea frequently transformed Chinese imports by giving them an attractive Korean character, not too many noticeable creative contributions can be credited to her. However, Korea served an important historical function as faithful transmitter of Chinese--and therefore also of Buddhist--cultural values to a young and receptive Japan on its way to cultural maturity.

China--in contrast to her status in most other fields--is not a primary culture as far as Buddhism is concerned. She received decisive impulses from India but enriched the Buddhist tradition with significant contributions of her own. However, as far as Japan is concerned, China played the role of a mother culture to Buddhism and its art. She transmitted to Japan a system of religious thought and imagery which, despite its non-Chinese origin, had been firmly established and transformed in China.

In Japan this system was received, expanded, and perfected during successive waves of cultural imports and was gradually assimilated during several distinct historical phases. Japan benefited from the fountainhead of Chinese Buddhism and Buddhist art for several centuries--from the sixth to the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries--but it would be a serious mistake to assume that Japanese Buddhist art amounts to little more than a mere imitation of Chinese--or Korean--Buddhist art. The Japanese spirit--no matter how much inclined toward acquiring foreign elements and how much willing to be an eager disciple--has always quickly passed the learning and adopting phases and progressed to the phase of mastery and creative transformation of imports. More often than not, this was followed by independent further development and a distinctly new creativity. And though this Japanese creative urge is quite evident, in spite of all the inherent conservatism of religious art in the East, Buddhist art left only narrow limits for modifying the important Chinese figures and forms. This becomes even more apparent if emphasis is placed on principles and types of Buddhist art.

This fact is highly significant for the study and understanding of East Asian Buddhist art in general. We may even go so far as to call this restrictive impulse a fortunate coincidence, because much has been lost of the highest achievements from the flourishing period of Buddhist art in China. Innumerable buildings, cult figures and cult paintings have been destroyed as the result of wars, revolutions and natural catastrophies or because they fell victim to religious persecutions. The great anti-

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Buddhist persecution of 845, in particular--coming so soon after perhaps the greatest creative period of Buddhist art during the T'ang dynasty--took a terrible toll. In numerous instances, Buddhist bronze statues constituting the noblest examples in material and artistic refinement were melted down for coinage. Those Chinese Buddhist sculptures surviving from the earlier truly creative centuries are basically limited to stone sculptures--frequently provincial in character though still of high artistic value--and to small bronze figures. These still constitute a sizable sampling and comprise many works which, because they have found their way into Western museums and collections, have thus become quite well known to us. But, as we know from other sources, they do not represent the really great and important works of Chinese Buddhist art. Cast in bronze or other precious metals, these were found in the cult images of the temples of the leading spiritual and political centers of Chinese Buddhism. Moreover, most of the ancient Buddhist paintings--wall paintings and picture scrolls--have practically vanished. As early as the thirteenth century, even the Chinese themselves knew the works of their greatest masters almost exclusively from hearsay or mere copies.

In the field of painting, the remarkable finds at Tun-huang offer at least some instructive examples, but it is Japanese Buddhist art that has preserved a wealth of representative examples, not only in painting but in all fields of Buddhist artistic production, including architecture. Much has been lost in Japan, too, but the Japanese tendency to faithfully preserve, collect and cultivate works of art, combined with an unusually strong sense of history and tradition, has had a very beneficial effect. As a result, much has been preserved in Japan--this storehouse of East Asian culture--even from the earlier period (say, 600 to 800) during which the Japanese were still the remarkably talented disciples of their continental teachers. These surviving examples permit direct suppositions about works which have been lost in China. We may perhaps even go so far as to claim that Japan frequently supplies direct physical substitutes for such lost works. And even during the following centuries, when Japanese Buddhist art acquired a distinctive flavor of its own, it still remained within the framework of the general world of forms and figures of East Asian Buddhist art to the degree that almost everything we can say about particular Japanese works also applies in basic ways to works of Chinese Buddhist art. What is represented in China only by severely damaged and scattered examples, is revealed in remarkable completeness and detail in Japan. And what has survived in China only in examples from more recent times--such as most architectural works--can be found in Japan to be represented by examples covering the entire range of its development from the earliest to the most recent times.

It seems, therefore, natural that we rely for illustrations primarily on Japanese material. If we were to study the relationship between the Chinese and Japanese artistic traditions in detail, we would have to pay more attention to the differences between them. But this study--and this should be emphasized from the very outset--attempts to describe the generally valid and typical elements of East Asian Buddhist art and therefore has little room for details and specific features of this art. Such individual comparisons and attempts to outline specific Japanese features compared with earlier Chinese and Korean models in architecture, sculpture, painting and ornamental design would be doomed to failure anyway, because it is impossible in most instances to compare the Japanese copies and their

corresponding continental originals. Strictly speaking, we are not even able to state with certainty how far the Japanese works substitute for, or replace lost continental works or how far they differ from them in their own peculiar way. This rather depressing dilemma in our field of study results from the shortcomings of the available material. However, there is much evidence to suggest that the Japanese examples are valid representatives of East Asian Buddhist art as a whole, at least in its general and most essential features.

This survey--quite preliminary and summary in nature--attempts to provide an outline of all relevant fields of artistic endeavor: the architecture of temple and monastery precincts, cult statues, ritual implements, paintings and many other items of a more decorative character. But these creations must be explained in their iconographic and symbolic meaning if we are to understand them properly. They also have to be shown in the context of their function in Buddhist cult and Buddhist religious life--an aspect which has been given only scant attention by Western observers until now. Such descriptions, in turn, require a knowledge of those basic teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism which constitute the basis for the rise and essence of Buddhist art and which provide a wealth of clues for an understanding not only of its content and artistic imagery, but also of its underlying principles. Particularly important also is an understanding of its formative principles as applied to painting and sculpture. These represent attempts to translate Buddhist teachings and the religious experiences which gave rise to those teachings into visible form and to provide vital links between religious ideas and their visual expression. We will also have to raise the question of the technical and artistic means employed by the Buddhist artist to impart to these teachings religiously and aesthetically effective and convincing visible equivalents commensurate with basic Buddhist doctrinal principles. Our study will show that formal principles and artistic means display an inner congruence with the spiritual substance of Mahāyāna Buddhism and that, taken as a whole, Buddhist art not only accurately expresses Buddhist faith and thought but consistently unites content and form, religious idea and visual representation, and, last but not least, the Sacred and the Beautiful.

It would be tempting to pursue the question of similarities and differences between Buddhist and Christian art--particularly during the medieval period--and thus contribute to an understanding of the basic problems and typology of religious art in general, but this would go far beyond the scope of this book if we were to attempt to do so in more than a merely perfunctory manner. Such a comparison can only be attempted after both subjects are fully understood in their own and essential nature. With respect to Buddhist art, we are still far from that happy state of affairs.

The aspects of art history proper--description of the sequence of and relationship among the various individual processes as well as the changes in style--can only be touched upon, because this study is primarily systematic and typological rather than historic and genetic. Each approach can illuminate the other, since a systematic presentation of the typical features of an artistic tradition is impossible without insights into the process of their historical evolution, and since such insights will be continuously helpful in specifying, modifying, rounding out, and deepening any such presentation. In turn, however, a correct understanding of the historical sequence implies knowledge of the essential nature of the thing as well as the way it manifests itself as it evolves to its highest forms. Since the essence of the

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phenomenon under review here--the Buddhist art of East Asia--is as yet little familiar to us and since it represents also a rather complex, many-faceted and vast experience in time and space, we think it more urgent to provide first a sketch of the essential features of the world of Buddhist art rather than to enter into a detailed treatment of its history which in any event would require a volume of its own. We find it, therefore, equally impossible to discuss details, notably those of a controversial nature. Special studies and relevant literature are only occasionally cited because they are familiar to the specialists and will not be missed by the interested layman intent on gaining an overview. The latter, in particular, will benefit from the bibliography even though it does not include titles from the very valuable East Asian, notably Japanese, literature on the subject. The illustrations, too, are primarily meant to be informative and are limited to typical features. They should show and explain the most essential elements of this art with the help of characteristic and artistically significant examples. Given this general concept and the general limitations of this book, individual artistic elements and detailed interpretations of individual works cannot normally be given, regrettable as that may be. Research in these aspects of Buddhist art in East Asia still faces urgent and even elementary tasks. Strictly speaking, this attempt at a preliminary synthesis is quite premature. But we may find comfort in the fact that no field can be studied in detail and understood in its inner order unless a survey map, no matter how summary in nature, has been sketched.

I. Religious-Philosophical and Cultural Foundations

It was Śākyamuni's goal to free himself and ultimately also others from entanglement in this transitory and illusory world. Man, he thought, should end his attachment to a so-called reality which is nothing but an incessant stream of births, deaths, and new incarnations on higher or lower levels, and which is, therefore, full of suffering. Rather, he should strive to leave behind the relentless law of karma and the bondage to an imagined Ego. He should free himself from all concepts, images and definitions since these are but clouded reflections of reality. He should rise to that Absolute No-Thingness which is beyond all phenomena and intellectual concepts, and which grants to man final liberation in that perfect "extinction" resulting from a total rejection of the stream of suffering with its surges of error and illusion. This extinction, like the unfathomable and eternally unmoving depth of the ocean, rests beneath the illusory surface waves stirred by the winds of error. This highest goal--the entry into nirvāna--is a blessed state, a Summum Bonum and therefore is not nihilistic in nature, but rather is to be experienced as an overwhelming reality. Man ascends to it through various stages of meditation which gradually perfect his detachment from the phenomenal world and ultimately yield supreme insight and enlightenment.

This abrupt juxtaposition of "Nothingness" (nirvāna) and the painful, illusory world of phenomena (samsāra) displayed by early (Hīnayāna) Buddhism, is transformed in Mahāyāna Buddhism. This transformation had already begun a few centuries after Śākyamuni's death; it received its basic formulation primarily in the "Middle Way" teaching of Nāgārjuna and his successors and was eventually perfected philosophically in East Asia with the teachings of the Hua-yen (Kegon), T'ien-t'ai (Tendai) and Chên-yen (Shingon) schools. These schools postulated a

mutual relationship between the two worlds--the phenomenal and the one standing beyond all phenomena--and thereby restored the idea of an Absolute or an ultimate reality.

According to the teachings of the Tendai school, which formulated this new system most completely and most systematically, it is wrong to believe in the real existence of our world of illusions, but it is equally wrong to regard the world of phenomena as totally unreal because it has temporal existence and relative value, and is a preliminary step toward and reminder of the truly real. It is also wrong to emphasize only one of these two realms since the Absolute manifests itself in the phenomenal world which is, therefore, ultimately, nothing but this Absolute itself, and was called the "Thusness" (*tathatā*) or the "Buddha nature" ("Buddha essence," *buddha-tā*) of the world.

Only all these three truths together, in "perfect mutual interpenetration or fusion" of their different aspects of that one and same reality, constitute the "round, threefold truth."¹ All things, even the lowest and most fleeting, embody Buddha essence. Buddha land is everywhere. According to the teachings which evolved within the T'ien-t'ai and especially the Chên-yen schools as the East Asian form of Tantrism, the entire phenomenal world itself possesses absolute value. It becomes mystery and miracle which the esoteric teachings attempt to unlock for the clouded mind of man through magic means--by a complex system of magic rites, words (*mantra*), gestures (*mudrā*), symbols and images (*pratimā*), all of which are intended to lead to that ultimate, truly unfathomable reality which can only be expressed in silence.

These two basic Mahāyāna schools of East Asia are closely linked both historically and doctrinally. The T'ien-t'ai school derived its name from a mountain near Ningpo where its main monastery was located. Though based on Indian Mahāyāna thought, and relying particularly on the *Saddharmapundarika-Sūtra* (*Fa-hua-ching*, *Hok-ke-kyō* = *Sūtra of the Lotus of the Wondrous Law*), this sect originated in China ca. 580. It was brought to Japan from China in the year 804 by the Japanese monk Saichō (767-822; posthumous title, Dengyō Daishi), who had spent a lengthy period of study in China. He founded its splendid main monastery on Mount Hiei, which dominates the imperial city of Kyōto from the Northeast and provides magic protection for it. T'ien-t'ai's system was a "scholastic" synthesis of all the essential ideas in Buddhist philosophy which had emerged up to that time. It attempted to harmonize them, and bring them into a clearly structured order with its "Theory of the Five Phases." According to this teaching, Śākyamuni presented his teachings during five periods of his preaching life, gradually increasing the degree of difficulty to match the intellectual capacity of his audiences. The T'ien-t'ai sect also aimed at a grand synthesis in its religious life: Discursive thought (speculation), meditative vision (intuition), ascetic practices (discipline, practice), and ritual (liturgy) were equally stressed, and formed the pillars of an edifice which constituted the most consistently structured version of Mahāyāna. It aimed at avoiding all onesidedness and at being truly universal. No wonder that it had so profound an influence on art. Its influence was equalled only by that of the Chên-yen (Shingon) school and, during later times and in a diametrically opposite manner, by that of Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism.

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Related to the T'ien-t'ai school is the Hua-yen (*Ke-gon*, Sanskr. *Avatamsaka*) school, founded in China ca. 630 and brought to Japan around 750. Hua-yen teaches the mutual penetration of the Absolute and the Phenomenal and their ultimate identity in the "true Buddha essence." Both are only different aspects of one and the same reality and reflect each other in infinitely varied ways. As a consequence, the ultimate mystery may be perceived even in the most humble phenomena. The decisive importance of this recognition for the sublimation of the phenomenal world into art is obvious.

The Shingon school (*Chên-yen* in China, however mostly *Mi-tsung* = "secret school," corresponding to the Japanese term *Mikkyô* = secret teaching), also called "esoteric Buddhism," goes still further. It represents the East Asian form of Tantrism, the Vajrayāna or "Diamond Vehicle,"² but incorporated only to an insignificant degree the sexual teachings and practices characteristic of the Indian version. This teaching was brought to China around 720 by Indian missionaries and was introduced to Japan in 806 by the Japanese monk Kūkai (744-835; posthumous title, Kôbô Daishi). In Japan it found its vital monastic center, which still exists today, in a beautiful setting on Mount Kôya (south of Ôsaka). Kūkai is one of the great founding figures not only of Japanese Buddhism but of Japanese culture in general.

The Shingon school may be understood as the final, decisive step of Mahāyāna Buddhism in the direction of bestowing religious significance on the illusory world of phenomena. The Tendai (T'ien-t'ai) school--though still centered around the idea of the "empty" Absolute--had bestowed value on the world of samsāra as being entirely inseparable from the Absolute, while the Kegon (Hua-yen) school had rejoiced in the mystery of the mutual penetration of all things. This was only one step short of bestowing absolute value on the illusory world of phenomena itself and identifying it in itself as the ultimate *mysterium*. The very first philosophical tenet of the Shingon school therefore teaches that: "the things themselves are truth; form itself is principle."³ The ultimate insight into this "secret" is revealed to the practitioner only after he has made a gradual ascent in the degree of his maturity; but even then insight is only granted in esoteric isolation from ordinary life.

The world is an unfolding of the all-one Absolute, personified in the "Ur-" or All-Buddha Mahā-Vairocana (*Ta-jih*, *Dainichi* = "Great Sun") (29) who is revealed in one of the basic scriptures of the school, the *Mahā-Vairocana-Sutrā*. He embodies himself at first in four other Buddhas--each ascribed to one of the cardinal directions and representing a special kind of wisdom--and, proceeding from these, in numerous Bodhisattvas and Vidyārājas (see below, pp. 27 ff.), grouped around these four. These are all hypostases of different kinds of the highest, secret knowledge and thus of the highest degree of numinous power and compassion.

But Mahā-Vairocana manifests himself also in all things and beings of the universe, from the most powerful down to the most humble. The innumerable worlds and world ages basic to Mahāyāna cosmological belief are here linked to an equally infinite number of Buddhas ascribed to each of them as their illuminators. Two strictly defined groups are distinguished among these Buddhas: the "ideal" group of the five wisdom Buddhas (wu-chih-julai, go-chi-nyorai; 6), i.e., Vairocana and four other Buddhas, among them Śākyamuni and Amitābha; and the "historical"

line of the Buddhas of the past, present, and future already described in Hinayāna doctrine--i.e., the five (or more) predecessors of Śākyamuni, Śākyamuni himself and his successor in the next world age, Maitreya. In addition to incarnating itself into Buddhas and their manifestations, the Bodhisattvas and Vidyārājas, the Absolute (Vairocana) manifests itself also in deities (Devas). In Japan, even the national Shintō deities were incorporated into the Shingon pantheon by simply declaring them to be local avatāras ("descents," "footprints," "manifestations") of different Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Since the Sun Goddess Amaterasu was therefore regarded as essentially identical with Vairocana, the initial antagonism between Shintō and Buddhism was reconciled in the so-called honji-suijaku teaching, the teaching of "original ground (original state, body) and (secondary) vestiges." Japanese art received numerous important impulses from this view.

According to Shingon teachings, the believer is able to achieve his archetypal, mystic union with the All-Buddha, i.e., with the True Thusness of the Absolute, by means of a threefold practice: that of the mind, i.e., by a meditative vision (dhyāna) leading to an insight into the non-duality of samsāra and nirvāna; that of the true word, which contains the essence of all figures and of the Absolute represented by them (*chên-yen*, *shin-gon*, i.e., mantra, dhāranī: magic-mystic formulas, essential seed syllables like A, Hūm, etc.); and that of physical acts, i.e. formulaic symbolic gestures of the hands (mudrā, literally "seal"), which are quasi-corporealized mantras. Dhyāna, mantra, and mudrā are means enacted for achieving an identification of Buddha nature, Buddha word, and Buddha body with essence, word and body of the believer. These practices have the mystic-magical result of transforming the believer into the Buddha, who he in fact already really is. The believer can "achieve Buddha-hood in his very body,"⁴ just as the world as it exists--arising from the interplay of the "Six Great (Elements)," i.e., Earth, Water, Fire, Air, Empty Space, and Mind, which in turn are nothing but aspects of Vairocana--also already constitutes ultimate reality, at least to the awakened eye once it is freed from ignorance (avidyā).

According to such teaching, absolute emptiness is also absolute fullness, phenomenon is essence (even though a clouded essence, which is in need of correct interpretation and comprehension); the moment is eternity, and samsāra is nirvāna. Both aspects of the world penetrate each other and are ultimately identical even though they appear separated to human consciousness. Thus ending the erroneous Either/Or dichotomy, they are spoken of paradoxically as being neither one nor different (*pu-i*, *pu-i*; *fu-ichi fu-i*). This identity can only be recognized in its essence by virtue of a difficult mental act and a commitment of one's total personality, and in no other way. Yet there is a difference between the authentic, true reality (*paramārtha-satya*; *chên-ti*, *shin-tai*)--which is neither comprehensible nor describable, is without any specific qualities, and is pure noumenon (emptiness, śūnya; k'ung, kū; the unmanifested, wu-hsiang, mu-sō)--and the veiled, ordinary, relative phenomenal truth (*samvṛti-satya*; *su-ti*, *zoku-tai*) clothed in visible manifestations. Each embraces the other and both, together, constitute ultimately one single truth.

It is most important not to attach oneself to the objects and ideas of our "present" existence which are always trapped in the net of dualistic contradictions and biases. Rather, we must desire to take the liberating leap to the "other shore"--

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which takes us outside the pull of the magnetic field of the karma law. Only then can we recognize the limitations and temporal nature of all phenomena and all human thought; only from the vantage point of "emptiness," of supra-contradictoriness or non-duality (a-dvaitya) are all contradictions cancelled. Then everything is "empty," without, however, being totally void; all dualism has been overcome and the Absolute is recognized in the phenomena. However, transcendence, as understood by the most profound Buddhist schools, is only radical insofar as it goes beyond notions of immanence contained in the idea of the unity of the Absolute and phenomenal. Supra-duality is located beyond the alternatives of "immanent or transcendent," and beyond any unequivocal "yes" or "no," because either position would only lead us back into the entrapment of the world of samsāra. Only non-affirmation and non-negation--as well as recognition of the identity of affirmation and negation--can lead one out of such positive determination. Zen Buddhism expresses this idea in the famous first question of the Wu-men-kuan (Mu-monkan): "Does a dog also have Buddha nature?" The master's reply: "Wu (Mu)."⁵ This means: "yes" and also "no," or: neither "yes" nor "no"; the one alternative answer would by itself be just as wrong or as right as the other.

It is this basic unity of the Absolute and the phenomenal which makes possible a Buddhist art which represents the Absolute, Transcendent and Empty through visible images of all its manifestations, though this is not to be misunderstood as postulating pantheism. The oldest Buddhist art in India refrained from sensualizing this Absolute or the Buddha (who had entered nirvāna and left all phenomena behind) by means of tangible images taken from the world of phenomena. With the exception of illustrations of the sacred legends showing the future Buddha during his earthly career, it had limited itself to symbols such as the Tree of Enlightenment, the Wheel of the Teaching, the Footprint, or the Stūpa as symbols of entry into perfect nirvāna. Only with the new religious-philosophical developments which accompanied Mahāyāna's evolution out of the several early developments found within Hīnayāna could there develop a many-faceted art which comprehended, interpreted and visually represented the Absolute in all its different manifestations, including the most profound of these, i.e., the "Emptiness" shared by all of them.

Without so basic a turn toward the metaphysical--which was in sharp contrast to ancient Buddhism and its expressed rejection of all metaphysical speculation as ultimately futile and not leading to salvation--this art of Mahāyāna would be unthinkable. Moreover, the anti-mythological attitude of ancient Buddhism was just as untenable in the long run as was its anti-metaphysical attitude. This is true even though, according to Mahāyāna teaching, there exists a higher level of understanding where both metaphysics and mythology prove to be merely something preliminary, something adapted to limited human understanding. They make possible, however, the first steps leading to the ultimate level of understanding. Art, as representation of the Absolute, and containing all its preliminary and nonessential qualities, is therefore imbued to no small degree with truth and with a previously untapped power both to reveal religious truth and promote participation in true essence.

But something else also happened. Mahāyāna created for religious consciousness a number of personal-mythic hypostases of the Absolute and of its

incarnated or manifested forms. To these the believer could turn in loving devotion (bhakti) and cultic veneration (pūjā). Aided by a visual representation he might even in a meditative vision identify himself with the Absolute because he possessed, hidden within himself like a seed kernel, the Buddha nature of all being, which needed only to be recognized in order to be realized. Though nirvāna was originally an "empty" state of enlightenment beyond "names and forms," it could now become an Absolute which, though still standing beyond names and forms, would also manifest itself in finite forms and become recognizable through them. Sacred figures, with the Buddha at their apex, might now also be objectivized and regarded as incarnations of the Absolute. This not only permitted I-Thou relationships, visions, and therefore also the rise of tangible images, but even required them. Historically, this change reflects the gradual adaptation of Buddhism to Hinduism (Vedānta) into which it was ultimately absorbed in India. Buddhism succeeded in retaining its own identity in East Asia, but only after it had absorbed strong Hindu elements and was ready to adapt to the various indigenous mythological traditions.

A crucially important precondition for the rise of a Buddhist art within the Mahāyāna tradition was the formation of a "pantheon," a world of religious figures of different degrees of sacredness and participation in the Absolute. Original Buddhism knew hardly more than a single central figure: that of the "Enlightened One" himself, who was at first not represented in human form. Next to him, but at a considerable distance, were a number of his disciples and his relatives, most notable among them his mother Māyā. The Buddha was originally a human being, a historical figure striving for his own salvation, who attained it by his own efforts and then proceeded to teach others. Later, however, his historicity lost all importance; he was elevated to the status of an absolute being (though not made into a deity) and then identified with the ultimate ground of being which only makes use of an earthly body as a temporary and illusory manifestation or incarnation in order to bring its blessed teachings to the unenlightened world.

This sort of incarnation is not unique but may repeat itself innumerable times in all worlds and all world ages. The number of Buddhas is therefore unlimited, and Mahāyāna doctrine further holds that the Buddha exists simultaneously in three bodies or levels of existence which are basically identical. The first of these is the dharma-kāya (cosmic body; *fa-shên*; *hosshin*), the Buddha as the Absolute. The second is the sambhōga-kāya (*pao-shên*, *hōshin*), the Buddha body acquired as the result of religious merit. This aspect of the Buddha appears to enlightened minds and also to those engaged in meditation as a being in radiant beatitude, i.e., for example, as the lord of a supra-worldly realm of bliss (103). Finally, there is the nirmāna-kāya (*ying-shên*, *o-jin*), the shadow, adapted or manifested body into which the Buddha incarnates himself; a body which he "specially fashions," or "emanates from within himself" in order to enlighten the world. At this level, among many others, is the body we perceive as the person of Śākyamuni (17).

The last two bodies are also together referred to as rūpa-kāya, "form body." The Chinese-Japanese equivalent for this Sanskrit expression is *sê-shên* (*shiki-shin*), "color body." The word *se*, or "form" and "color," refers to the bodies' visible manifestations, be they earthly-empirical or supra-mundane-visionary. These two bodies are differentiated even further so that the sambhōga-kāya is held to be the

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"body of true color," and the *nirmāna-kāya* the "body of transformed (manifested) color." Pictures may be made of these two bodies, while the *dharma-kāya*, according to the strict teaching, is unmanifested, "without form and color," and is therefore not to be depicted.

Though neither art nor doctrinal speculation have been seriously restrained by this dictum, terms like "form" and "color" have not yet been sufficiently explored for their significance to comprehension of Buddhist art. Also problematical is the ideal of a threefold stratification of the world of sensual desires (*kāma-dhātu*; *yü-chiai*, *yoku-kai*). These comprise the earthly beings and deities of the first six heavenly spheres, who have already realized a certain degree of spiritualization. Next comes a world of pure form (*rūpa-dhātu*, *se-chiai*, *shiki-kai*), the first step into the higher world of enlightenment. Though still a world of forms, it is no longer one of the senses and corresponds to the level at which meditation occurs, as the second stage along the path to enlightenment. Finally, there is a world without form (*arūpa-dhātu*, *ârūpya-dhātu*; *wu-se-chiai*; *mu-shiki-kai*), which corresponds to the third step of the path to salvation, i.e., that of wisdom (*prajñā*). However, even these three worlds stop short of the threshold to *nirvāna*, which presupposes a rebirth back on the first or human level, even though the next two higher worlds had already led the believer far beyond the first level. This gradation of levels of existence and enlightenment, this ascent and descent among the realms of sensuous images and radical abstractions is a highly important principle for Buddhist art.

It is characteristic of *Mahāyāna*, and quite consistent with its basic metaphysical-religious attitude, that it places a number of compassionate beings between the incarnation of the highest Absolute in the figure of the Buddha and the sphere of human existence even though the Buddha is already seen as being present at all levels. These compassionate beings are intermediaries distributed among the various levels of existence and realms of activity. The three most important categories of intermediaries are *Bodhisattvas*, *Vidyārājas* and divine beings (*Devas*).

Though the idea of the *Bodhisattva* (Chin. *p'u-sa*, J. *bo-satsu*; beings "whose essence is enlightenment" [Zimmer]) was already known to early Buddhism, its application had been limited to Śākyamuni himself, i.e., to his existence prior to his birth while he was still dwelling in one of the heavens, and to his earthly life up to the moment of his enlightenment, which changed him from a *Bodhisattva* into a Buddha. In *Mahāyāna*, however, the *Bodhisattva* became a type of being who incarnates himself in numerous individual figures, so that we no longer speak of "the" *Bodhisattva*, i.e., Śākyamuni, but rather of "a" *Bodhisattva* as a sacred being of the highest level of enlightenment who had matured over the course of many existences and could gain entry into *nirvāna*, but who, out of his own free will and filled with compassion for the suffering world, has renounced his own salvation. Out of the inexhaustible fullness of his compassion and his merciful readiness to help and sacrifice for the sake of all sentient beings, he will devote all his powers for eons to come so that they may be advanced along the path of salvation.

The faithful may turn to such compassionate beings (42 ff.) in any need. In popular imagination the numerous *Bodhisattvas* of *Mahāyāna* have gained a function something akin to that of the Christian saints. According to doctrine, however, they are nothing other than different aspects or emanations of the infinite wisdom and compassion of the particular Buddha to whom they are ascribed; i.e., in

the final analysis they are also personifications of the Absolute but always as a particular variant and serving a specific function. They are intermediate and intermediating figures, and direct their spiritual energies both upward--by striving for highest enlightenment and Buddhahood--and downward--by attempting to convert all sentient beings and guide them along the path of salvation.

It is precisely because of their intermediary position that they have become so important for religious life and thought. Buddhist art faced and splendidly solved the difficult but very intriguing task of capturing in tangible images this dual nature in its inner unity. The ideal figure of Mahâyâna--the Bodhisattva as a self-sacrificing being indefinitely postponing his own salvation--is the opposite of the Arhat ("Venerable One"; *lo-han, rakan*, 91 ff., 127 ff.)--the ideal figure of Hīnayâna--who after great struggles reaches his goal of salvation by his own efforts at asceticism and meditation. The Arhat does not, however, feel the need to show others the path to salvation by such activities as teaching, rendering assistance and sacrificing himself for them. Mahâyânists find in this very attitude the kind of "egotistical" limitation and lack of all-embracing compassion, infinite devotion and universal salvation which prompted them to somewhat derisively label the path of the Arhat as the Hīnayâna, the "Lesser Vehicle." But they, too, recognized the Arhats as religious figures of great spiritual powers and as heroes in the quest of conquering worldly attachment. Art, too, has been greatly interested and successful in depicting them. Arhat and Bodhisattva have thus become two polar types in Buddhist art--the one in the human, the other in the supra-human, supra-worldly sphere.

In esoteric Buddhism, next to the Bodhisattvas came the Vidyârâjas, "wisdom" or "enlightenment" kings (*ming-wang, myô-ô*) who, like several other features of this tradition, may have originated in the Indian Śiva cult. They appear as terrifying, threatening, armed figures (69), conquering and destroying all spiritual darkness, ignorance and sin, and thereby aiding the salvation of the world. As manifestations of the penetrating, indestructible, diamond-hard and diamond-clear All-Wisdom of Vairocana, they are parallel to the Bodhisattvas; but in contrast to the latter--who represent the *numinosum fascinans*--the Vidyârâjas are figures expressing a diametrically opposed polarity, the *numinosum tremendum*.

A third important category of mythical beings in the Mahâyâna pantheon is that of the deities (Devas) (70 ff., 110). They, too, are supra-human but, in contrast with the Buddha and even with the Bodhisattva, they are not supra-mundane, not removed from the world of samsâra. Because it arose out of ancient Indian cosmology, Mahâyâna Buddhism has included a large number of Indian deities within its "pantheon," and has ascribed to them the roles of protectors of the teachings, the congregation, the sanctuaries, as regents of different divine worlds, heavenly and worldly spheres, or as dispensers of good fortune or helpmates in need and models of pure uplifting conduct. But in contrast to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, for whom the label "gods" or "deities" should be absolutely avoided (since that would imply a total misunderstanding of fundamental Buddhist teachings⁶), the Devas may legitimately be called deities, because they have not yet matured to the level of nirvâna, but are still part of the cycle of rebirths according to karma law, even though they live in the highest sphere of this realm and are infinitely superior to human beings with respect to lifespan, power, beauty, and spiritualized existence. But since entrance into nirvâna is only possible from the

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level of man, the deities, too, though only after eons, have to be reborn once more, and are therefore not immortal. Nor do they possess saving powers as do the Buddhas or Bodhisattvas, but rather are themselves in need of salvation, just as are the other categories of beings with whom they populate the Six Realms or Categories (deities, humans, Asura [Titan-like fighting demons], animals, hungry ghosts [Preta], residents of purgatory).

It is, however, understandable that these Deva figures came to hold great significance in cult and piety because of their nobility and power and the protective and helping functions assigned to them. They, like the Bodhisattvas, also came to play an important role in art. Even semi-divine and demonic beings from Indian--but occasionally also from Chinese and Japanese--popular religion, were accepted into Buddhism (31, 75 f., 78) and--like the ancient major Indian deities--were given a variety of special functions, though at a lower level.

Thus Mahâyâna absorbed and assimilated from the indigenous faiths and cults of the many countries which it conquered during the course of its history every imaginable kind of deity, rite, and religious idea; and by virtue of its comprehensive receptive and transforming powers gave rise to a hierarchy of figures, a vast "pantheon," which is of the highest importance to faith and particularly to art even though, according to Mahâyâna philosophy, these many figures were nothing but illusionary phantasmagoria without true reality. Just as East Asian Mahâyâna Buddhism contains almost every imaginable type or stage of development of religiosity--ranging from the highest and purest philosophical insight and mystic vision down to very gross superstitions--its art, too, embraces a fullness of figures of divergent religious meaning and spiritual status rarely ever encountered in other sacred arts of the world. These sacred beings enter the phenomenal world the more vigorously the more removed they are from the highest Buddha figures dwelling in the Absolute. Hence they display a great degree of concrete realism not only with respect to philosophical and religious conceptualization but also in their artistic representations, which display clearly defined personalities and tangible, near-human corporeality.

Finally, another dualistic factor contributed to the formation of an abundance of sacred figures in the world of Mahâyâna thought and art. There is, on the one hand, the "cosmological" view of karma law,⁷ of "Buddha nature," etc. This implies the idea that the painful effects of karma law as well as the blissful effects of the Buddha nature or absolute existence are not limited to the individual self but are immanent in everything and hold negative or positive meaning for the entirety of the world including all its causes and consequences, no matter how small and uncalculable they may be. On the other hand, quite in accordance with this basic metaphysical idea, Mahâyâna realized that the finite Ego, which finds it difficult to transcend itself, was powerless vis-à-vis these universal processes and needed help from above in order to rise to enlightenment and salvation. Salvation through one's own powers (tzu-li, ji-riki) as practiced by the Arhats of Hīnayāna, gave way under Mahâyâna to salvation by somebody else's powers (t'a-li, ta-riki): salvation by the merciful, helpful intervention of higher powers. All this meant, in the final analysis, salvation by the Absolute Being embodied in the figure of the Buddha.

The Absolute's representatives, those helpful saving beings, now became vastly important, and the more their miraculous powers were invoked, the more the

power of religious imagination bestowed upon them tangible, impressive forms, the more art was able and compelled to devote itself to creating images of these beings. This compassionate power manifested itself in a multitude of figures, but most prominently in Amitâbha (Amida) and Avalokiteśvara (Kuan Yin, Kannon). It is in their images that Buddhist art has created its greatest and best works.

The richest unfolding of this Mahâyâna pantheon has taken place in East Asia in the comprehensive systems of the Chên-yen (Shingon) and T'ien-t'ai (Tendai) schools. These two have therefore also gained supreme importance for Buddhist art, particularly because they combined a complicated system of magic rites, symbols, and figures with a grandiose philosophical world vision of scholastic universality. They have given not only numerous stimuli and challenges to artistic creativity, but also matched an abundance of concrete images with a unique element of metaphysical spiritualization.

As an exact expression of the philosophical-religious ideas of Mahâyâna Buddhism, this art has two aspects. On the one hand, it participates in the Absolute, whose essence it seeks to comprehend through a spiritual-mystic act, which conveys it to the faithful. On the other hand, to the extent it is filled with mystic power, it also possesses a "magic" function and is filled with a genuinely numinous reality and efficacy. Viewed from a higher, purely philosophical vantage point which seeks "genuine truth," art is only a low preliminary stage along the path to the understanding of "Emptiness." Art remains attached to the phenomenal world where it cannot participate in the Absolute in its pure unclouded state.

This is why art is only a "popular" aid adapted to earthly levels of comprehension (*upâya-kauśalya*; *fang-pien*, *hō-ben*--corresponding to the term of "preliminary, counterfeit truth"). Those failing to attain the highest spiritual level need a pedagogical "trick" to make it possible for them to reach at least a preliminary understanding commensurate with their lower spiritual level. This lets them sense something of the more profound truth and to ascend thereby to a higher sphere of spiritual existence. The art of Buddhism therefore possesses the highest metaphysical value, because it truly shows and reveals the Absolute and Holy, or even may "contain" it. But at the same time it is also devoid of any metaphysical value, because it functions only at the limited preliminary level of tangible images, i.e., at a level which has to be transcended along the path to true essence and ultimate unity. The innermost goal of this art is its own destruction. In this goal we encounter one of those paradoxes prompting the believer to take that liberating leap into supra-dualistic "Emptiness" so typical of Buddhism and other essentially mystic religions.

This double aspect of Buddhist art reveals something of the essence of all art: art conveys in the phenomenal, in the "image," something that is basically beyond images, that is essential and transcendental; art makes the tangible transparent and links image and metaphysical interpretation without, however, being in a position to capture and show the transcendent itself. In Buddhist art these two aspects are particularly sharply separated. The main emphasis is put on the side of the Nontangible-Absolute and on allusions to its presence, while depiction and any implied acceptance of objects which exist in the phenomenal world are largely avoided. The real aim of this art is to point beyond all phenomena. Yet it always remains somehow attached to them, and is permitted to do so, because even

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phenomena share in the Buddha nature of all things; they share in something that is basically beyond images. This art would ultimately have negated itself, if it had not always remained linked to and dependent upon the earthly-phenomenal and empirical world. In part, this dependence involves the necessity to draw on the treasure of sensory experiences; in part, it involves art's magic-cultic as well as "pedagogical" and psychological functions. It also shares the philosophical conception of the nonduality of the phenomenal world and the Absolute without, however, being tied to that conception. All this clearly testifies to the intermediary position of art, particularly of religious art, in the spiritual sphere: it is open to all sides of the issue and embraces them in both an antinomic and synthetic manner.

II. Evolution of Buddhist Art

Buddhist art was sustained spiritually and materially by sects which originated in China during the period from the 5th to the 8th centuries. Some of them reached Japan shortly thereafter and continued to develop there. These sects owned most temple-monasteries and enjoyed official sponsorship by the court and usually also a sizeable following among the population at large. The label "sect" fits them poorly, because Buddhism knows no unified "church" with central authority and hierarchical structure from which these faith and cult communities could have broken off in heretical opposition. Rather, these sects gave more emphasis to certain sacred scriptures and their interpretation by great spiritual teachers and to certain monkish disciplines and cult traditions. They should, therefore, perhaps be called denominations or, more simply, schools.

Only during the course of time did they consolidate into regular organizations which co-existed in free competition with each other. They mutually tolerated each other, but also conducted lively religious-philosophical debates which were marred by hostile tension only whenever these schools allowed themselves to be dragged into the political-military quarrels of the secular authorities or whenever a new school managed to attract a large following and thus appeared as a threat to the others. Within the widely differing Buddhist schools numerous and frequently contradictory basic types of religiosity, and therefore also of religious art, have evolved. All have found room to live side by side with one another in the vast and varied edifice to which we normally apply the highly simplifying label of Buddhism.

During the first centuries of Mahāyāna Buddhism there existed about half a dozen such schools whose speculative teachings did not as yet exert any particular influence on art. The iconography of this earliest Buddhist art of East Asia therefore did not yet display the sectarian choices of subject and far-going, unwieldy and complicated iconographic differentiations of later times. Certain Buddhas and Bodhisattvas enjoyed great veneration and frequent artistic representation, as for example, the future Buddha Maitreya (42, 45 ff.), and (though we will not pursue this aspect any further) their depictions may serve as reliable reflections of the course Buddhist faith and piety were taking.

Out of this still many-faceted and open world of ideas and sacred figures emerged those schools which created the foundation for the religious thought and artistic work of the "high middle ages" in China and Japan. Next to the T'ien-t'ai (Tendai) and Chên-yen (Shingon) schools, the most important schools were the Ching-t'u (Jôdo, Amitâbha) school and the Ch'an (Zen) school.

This is not the place to describe the external and internal history of these Buddhist schools in East Asia. Those interested in this history are referred to the works listed in the bibliography, particularly those by Eliot, Gundert, von Glasenapp, and Conze. The most comprehensive and yet shortest survey of Buddhism in Asia is H. von Glasenapp's book, *Der Buddhismus in Indien und im Fernen Osten*. Our bibliography also lists some works which provide information about the cultural historical backgrounds in India, China, and Japan. Since it should be clearly understood that it is not the task of this book to sketch the historical development of the Buddhist art of East Asia--which would be impossible without the inclusion of Indian and Central Asian Buddhist art and should perhaps be attempted at some later time elsewhere (see note on p. 3 of the Introduction)--we will only mention a few important cultural and religious facts essential for an understanding of the essence of this art. The maps of China and Japan and the chronological list are designed to facilitate access to this information.

Indian Buddhism had become known in China during the middle of the first century A.D. at the latest. After the Han period it advanced vigorously against both ancient Chinese cosmosophy ("universism") and Confucianism. This advance did not come without effort but was energetically promoted by the Six Dynasties, some of which were of non-Chinese origin. Buddhism enjoyed intensive support during the eight hundred years spanning the time from the 4th to the 12th centuries. In spite of occasional official persecutions and the continuous rivalry with Confucianism and Taoism it came to have a considerable, but never dominant, effect on China's intellectual life; as, for example, on philosophical thought (in logic, epistemology, and metaphysics), on poetry, art and the religious life of the people.

Buddhism initially entered China in both its major Indian variants--Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna--but Mahāyāna, as everywhere in East Asia, soon came to have the field all to itself. The doctrine of the Bodhisattva Amitābha and his Pure Land reached China relatively early (from about the fourth century on), to be followed soon after by the arrival of the missionary Bodhidharma, who laid the foundation for the Ch'an (Zen) school (ca. 530). Then came the founding of the T'ien-t'ai school and, relatively late, at the beginning of the 8th century, the Tantric form of Mahāyāna, the Vajrayāna (Mi-tsung, Chên-yen), which had already evolved in India as the secret school. I have not mentioned numerous other schools which were important for philosophical speculation and religious practice but less so for religious art.

Buddhism also took a very different attitude toward the two leading and diametrically opposed indigenous Chinese schools of thought, Confucianism and Taoism. Buddhism remained alien to Confucian ideas and was only too frequently despised and persecuted by Confucians because it remained aloof from their philosophical principles and the socio-ethical and political ideals derived from them. However, Buddhism shared many features with Taoism. Like Buddhism, Taoism espoused a mystic-dialectic philosophy of the Absolute. Taoism also opposed Confucian thought and its attendant life-style. While those who regard Chinese Buddhism as being basically a modified Taoism and as something far removed from its Indian prototype may go too far in their claims, it should be noted that there

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exists a close and profound relationship between the central Taoist concept of the Tao and the Buddhist notion of "Emptiness," or "Nothingness."

But Chinese Buddhism never severed its connections with its Indian sources as long as Buddhist teaching still flourished in India. Time and time again it received new ideas from India. Chinese Buddhism preserved these ideas, but also developed them further in its own particular fashion. From the beginnings of Buddhism in China to about the year 1000 contacts were maintained with the holy land of Buddhism by numerous Indian monks--who came to China as missionaries and as translators of Sûtras and also (from about 400) by many Chinese pilgrims who visited the holy places in India and returned with new teachings, scriptures, rituals, and images. This traffic followed the great caravan routes through Central Asia, but sometimes also the southern routes. The Central Asian sites of Khotan, Kucha, Turfan, Tun-huang, etc., which served as way stations between India--particularly Northwest India (Gandhâra)--and East Asia have yielded most important documents for the study of the transcontinental migration of Buddhism.⁸ Surviving monuments also clearly show the stages of the development of Buddhist art, notably in sculpture and painting.

The Buddhist art of China, however, does not simply stand at the end of a single evolutionary line running across inner Asia, but came to benefit directly from Indian sources in quite early times. During the first great flourishing period of Chinese Buddhism from the Six Dynasties to the T'ang, initial fragmentation and regional alien rule by Turkish dynasties (which were also generous sponsors of Buddhism) was ended by the T'ang reunification, which brought Chinese culture to its highest peak. There was a remarkable degree of creativity in all fields of culture which both radiated into and received stimuli from wide areas of Asia. The resulting Buddhist art reached its classic expression with the infusion of Chinese spirituality and sense of form, and became the model for all subsequent East Asian Buddhist art.

Unfortunately, only relatively few--and certainly not the most important examples--of this art have been preserved from these epochs. Aside from a few buildings (pagodas), there remain only the great north Chinese cave temples which have survived in their original sites: Yün-kang (455 until the middle of the sixth century), Lung-mên (end of the 5th century until ca. 700), and T'ien-lung-shan (from the second half of the 6th century and into the T'ang period). These are of crucial importance for the history of East Asian sculpture during its most fertile period. South China, too, played an important part in the development of early Buddhist art, but few original sites remain.

As far as painting is concerned, the importance of the wall and scroll paintings found in the cave temples of Tun-huang--a northwestern outpost of the Chinese empire (middle of the 4th century until about 1300)--can hardly be overestimated, since practically all the rest of ancient Chinese cult painting has been lost (most of it in the time of persecution during the 840s). Numerous important and splendid temple monasteries were erected all over China, but particularly in the T'ang capital of Ch'ang-an. These were full of marvelous art treasures and were the centers of intensive religious, philosophical, and liturgical life of the various faith and cult communities ("sects") in their pursuit of highly divergent spiritual ways. Few traces of this splendor have survived in the form of original monuments

because of massive anti-Buddhist persecutions (particularly around 845) and other catastrophes, but the strong, fertilizing effect of this Buddhist spiritual life on Japan demonstrates its greatness, breadth and vigor. Works of art from this period, particularly sculpture, surviving in China or in Western collections, testify to the great achievements of the early Buddhist art of East Asia.

The classic T'ang period, the Golden Age of China, was followed first by a period of decentralization into the territories of the Five Dynasties but soon after that by a new period of unification under the Sung Dynasty. This epoch--though tragically overshadowed during its second half by the invasion of the Jurchen and the loss of North China to them--may still be labelled the Silver Age of Chinese culture, during which Buddhist art not only survived, but witnessed a new, though final, great upturn in the painting of the Ch'an (Zen) sect. From about the year 1300, Chinese Buddhism experienced a decline, caused in part by its internal exhaustion, in part by the regeneration of Confucianism and--promoted by the Mongol (Yüan) dynasty--the strong impact of Lamaism which continued to expand until recent times, particularly in North China. Since the end of the Sung period, with very few exceptions, no significant Buddhist art has been produced.

Korea's role in the history of Buddhism and its art is for the most part that of an intermediary between China and Japan. Korea did produce characteristic works of her own, but it is not easy to define this distinctly Korean quality. Following a period during which northern Korea was a colony of the Han empire (until 303), three states--Koguryô, Paekche and Silla--existed side by side (until 668) and came to adopt Buddhism from China around 400. This meant that Korean Buddhist teaching, ritual, and art initially followed the example of the first great period of Buddhist culture in China, i.e., that of the Six Dynasties period and of the Northern Ch'i/Northern Chou Dynasties.

Unfortunately, only relatively few examples of the oldest Buddhist art of Korea have survived. After Silla had united the country under its rule in 668 (until 935), Korean culture and art came directly under the influence of the Chinese T'ang Dynasty, whose cultural influences extended beyond the confines of East Asia. A combination of political power and economic prosperity under Silla rule made possible the building of grandiose temple complexes whose grandeur is impressively demonstrated even today by the (restored) Pulguk-sa (Temple of the Buddha Realm) and the Grotto Chapel of Sôkkul-am, both from the middle of the 8th century. Architecture, sculpture, and ritual implements reached levels almost approaching those of T'ang art, as presumably did Buddhist painting, of which no examples have survived. It is during this period that the specifically Korean type of the pagoda was perfected, a type distinguished by the monumental simplicity of its stone block construction.

The flourishing of Buddhist culture and art continued during the following Koryô Dynasty (935-1392). But while up to this time the teachings and cult practices of the Avatamsaka School (Chin. *Hua-yen*, Korean *Hwa-om*) had dominated, the Meditation Sect (Chin. *Ch'an*, Korean *Son*, J. *Zen*) now came to the forefront, although it never attained the same importance in art as it did in the other two countries. Though we have few examples to judge from, Buddhist painting seems to have developed an attractive style in wall and scroll painting. Though somewhat imitative of Sung painting, it managed to achieve interesting variations of its own.

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But the general impression left by the Buddhist art of this period is one of limited creativity, and the end of the Koryo Dynasty also sealed the fate of Buddhist sculpture and art in Korea.

The last dynasty preceding Japan's colonial rule, the Yi Dynasty (1392-1910), based itself entirely on the political teachings and social ethics of Confucianism. In its cultural activities it followed totally the model of China's Ming and Ch'ing Dynasties, which also dominated Korea politically. Following the destructive incursions by the Tungus and Mongols, who had already plagued previous dynasties, the country suffered a major catastrophe during the 1590s as a result of the Japanese military campaigns under Hideyoshi. Innumerable works of older Korean art, particularly Buddhist art, perished during these events. During the Yi period painting was secularized in the Chinese mode, but ever since the Koryo Dynasty, Korea had produced characteristically Korean variations of Chinese painting styles as well as highly independent and important works in the fields of ceramics, lacquerware and other crafts.

Buddhism and its art have experienced a steadier development in Japan than in China and Korea. This development can also better be understood in its totality thanks to the fact that the most important buildings have been relatively well preserved. The Japanese people have led a nearly complete insular existence since their very beginnings and have been spiritually dominated by the native nature and ancestor-worship religion of Shintô. In the middle of the 6th century (552, but more likely as early as 538)--through Korean mediation but almost without preparation--they first encountered the mature and highly developed religion of Buddhism and the far superior ecumenical culture of the Chinese empire. The astonishing ability of the Japanese aristocracy, including the priesthood originating from it, to make this new and initially very foreign spiritual and intellectual world their own is well known. (The "people" came of age culturally, and hence as contributors to Buddhism, only many centuries later during the time of the rise of the bourgeoisie.)

A leading role in this adoption process was played by the imperial prince Shôtoku (574-622), who, as regent and pious Buddhist, contributed decisively to helping the new religion, its culture and its art take root in Japan. The oldest Buddhist temple not only in Japan but in East Asia, the Hôryûji near Nara (founded in 607), is mostly credited to his efforts⁹⁽¹⁾. It is still preserved with its essential original features intact. The sculptures of this period in particular, which correspond in style to the Chinese Six Dynasties period, have as their point of departure the "archaic," yet highly perfected, style of the great first phase in the Buddhist art of East Asia.

During the Nara period (named after the capital city built in the 8th century which followed in its layout the model of the Chinese imperial capital Ch'ang-an) Buddhism virtually became the Japanese state religion. Promoted with enthusiastic piety by the imperial house, the monks carried on a flurry of cultural and artistic activities to which we owe a rich treasure of precious works of art in all fields--architecture, sculpture, painting, and crafts. Today, Nara is still the most impressive site of this mature flourishing period of Buddhist art in Japan and still conveys the most intensive experience of this world of faith and art, even though the city itself has lost most of its ancient splendor. Art and Nara culture in general followed the

Tang style, which by this time had reached its apex and had become the model for all of East Asia. Nara art so faithfully followed the Tang pattern that the Japanese works may substitute to a large degree for lost Chinese works without, however, giving the impression of being mere copies.

These epochs of decisive, fundamental change were followed by the Heian or Fujiwara period. Heian is the name of the imperial residence founded at the end of the 8th century which we know under its modern name of Kyôto. Fujiwara is the name of the large, powerful aristocratic clan which practically ran the government and dominated cultural life from the middle of the 9th century to the end of the 12th century. During this period a synthesis between the Chinese-Buddhist and the native-Japanese spirit took place which resulted in the aesthetically refined culture, sustained by the dignity and grace of a high aristocratic society, which we encounter in the novel, *Tale of Prince Genji*, in lyric poetry, and particularly in works of art which rank among the most perfect realizations of human cultural aspirations.

Buddhism continued to be the dominant spiritual force and enjoyed the generous support of the leading families. In the large monasteries--notably in the vast mountain monasteries like those on Hiei-zan near Kyôto or Kôya-san (*san, zan* = mountain), but also in splendid temple precincts in the capital and its beautiful surroundings--new universal systems of thought and cult practices, like Tendai (Chin. *T'ien-t'ai*) and Shingon (Chin. *Chên-yen*) which had been brought to Japan from China by Japanese priests, continued to evolve. These new schools not only brought the world view of East Asian Mahâyâna to its apex, but also provided the most fertile ground for the art of the "high medieval period."

They also solved the long smoldering problem of the relationship between Buddhism and the ancient indigenous Japanese worship of nature, ancestor and state--Shintô--in a simple and harmonious fashion by interpreting the Shintô deities as incarnations or manifestations (*avatâras*, "descended traces") of Buddhist savior figures which constituted the original essence and true body of the native deities. This view not only enriched the Buddhist pantheon substantially but rendered its teachings more complex and its cult practices more difficult to fathom and truly understand.

Gradually, however, and strongly influenced by the slowly spreading feeling of decadence and of the doctrine of the "End of the Law" (*mappô*), i.e., of the final decline of our world age, a simpler piety arose which profoundly affected larger segments of the population. This piety focused almost exclusively on the Buddha Amitâbha (Amida) and derived strength and comfort from faith in his saving powers which could grant to believers rebirth in the blessed realm of his "Pure Land of the West." In China as well as in Japan, this movement maintained intimate links with other schools, particularly with the T'ien-t'ai from the beginning and well into the high stage of East Asian Buddhism. T'ien-t'ai had devoted intense veneration and specially structured meditative practices to Amitâbha. Only later did the Amitâbha schools split off from T'ien-t'ai because of their aversion to T'ien-t'ai's overly complicated speculative and liturgical system (which had become incomprehensible for the ordinary believer) and to its shift to such external aspects as justification by works and ostentatious religious displays.

In Japan this split took place primarily under the leadership of Hônen (1133-1212). A decisive turn away from speculation and meditation about Amitâbha to an

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ever simpler surrender in faith, i.e., a bhakti attitude, took place. It came to be held possible that even or perhaps especially the most depraved minds, could gain comfort and salvation. Finally, the mere invocation of the name of Amitâbha, even during one's dying moment, became sufficient to guarantee the believer's rebirth in the Pure Land of the West. Religious and artistic imagination depicted this blessed realm and its innumerable Bodhisattvas--among them Avalokiteśvara (Kuan-yin, Kannon) as Amitâbha's most prominent helpmate--and its overwhelming splendor and beauty in the most glowing colors (103). There were also paintings of Amida and his train of Bodhisattvas descending from on high and appearing to the believer on his deathbed (106) in order to welcome and guide him to this pure realm. Here the believer would be reborn as a small child inside a lotus flower and would mature to his final liberation in nirvâna. The almost fairytale-like poetic charm permeating all notions attached to the Pure Land may account for the fact that the Pure Land faith found the widest acceptance among the Japanese. Even today the Amitâbha schools have the largest following among the Buddhist schools of Japan.

This simple, strong piety which sought salvation in "faith alone" was also bound to appeal to the warriors (the samurai or bushi) who emerged as the dominant cultural segment of the population during the succeeding great age, the Kamakura period (1185-1336). The warrior class was in conscious opposition to the slowly decaying court aristocracy of Heian. It had created a new political and cultural center far away from the imperial capital in Kamakura, which today is still the most important site of Buddhist art in Japan next to Nara and Kyôto.

In their search for a vantage point beyond life and death, the warriors were eventually even more attracted to the vigorous Ch'an or Zen Buddhism which had come from China. Zen demanded strict discipline and untiring effort to advance along the path of self-realization and self-liberation "by one's own powers" (jiriki), and made meditation the center of religious life. Zen Buddhism constituted not only the very opposite of the Amitâbha faith and its blind trust in the saving "powers of some other" (tariki) but also of the speculative "scholasticism" and esoteric rituals of the T'ien-t'ai and Chên-yen schools. This contrast is so strong that the Zen school abandoned the religious approaches of these schools altogether. It declared all logical-discursive thought, all ritual acts, all customary ascetic discipline, all acts of faith in any saving powers as insubstantial compared to that moment of enlightenment (satori) which liberates one from all bonds and which may often occur quite suddenly. This enlightenment is achieved by one's own power. It is the result of incessant meditation and intuitive penetration of the existing world and ordinary life up to the moment when one experiences the ultimate ground of being.

Artistically, Zen had acquired its distinctive features in China during the T'ang and Sung periods. It found its clearest expression in ink painting--in China during the Sung period and in Japan during the Ashikaga or Muromachi period (1336-1573)--a period in Japan during which warrior and court cultures were reconciled. In the art of this period the Buddhist spirit found profound manifestation for the last time. But even though Buddhism did not inspire great creative achievements after the 16th century, its spirit entered many spheres of Japanese secular culture. Poetry, the tea cult, domestic and garden architecture, flower arrangement, and Japanese modern culture in general came to be widely

permeated by the Zen spirit. As a result, the distinctions between religious and secular culture and art were obliterated in many important fields.

The Buddhist art of East Asia may be divided into four major types: the art of the founding period; that of the scholastic-mystic Hua-yen, T'ien-t'ai, and Chên-yen schools; that of the Amitâbha faith; and that of Zen Buddhism. These types have tended to become dominant in that order, particularly in Japan. In China they tended to overlap. The first was dominant from the Wei until the early T'ang period in China, and during the Suiko and Nara periods in Japan. The second flourished during the T'ang and early Heian periods. The third overlapped the second period in China, but became dominant in Japan only after the middle of the Fujiwara period. The fourth rose during the Sung and the Kamakura/Muromachi periods, respectively. Since this last type, Zen art, holds a special position among the four, we will deal with it and its spiritual foundations in a separate and concluding final chapter.

III. Some Comments on Iconography

The disclaimer implied in the chapter heading is intended to make it clear that a well-rounded presentation of Buddhist iconography should not be expected here. Given the gaps in the study of this field such a presentation is still not possible today. A separate volume would most likely be required for an exhaustive treatment of the subject. However, some iconographical information is best provided in connection with the description of particular fields of Buddhist art, especially those of sculpture, painting, and cult implements, because the iconographical study of any art first asks for those objects to be depicted which already existed before the artist transformed them into works of art. But iconography touches on questions genuinely relevant to art history only when it deals with the way in which pre-existing objects find their artistic form. Any iconographic notion--for example, that of sacred figures like the Bodhisattvas or that of a holy scene--is in itself already shaped by religious and visionary "poetic" imagination, is itself already an "image." The artistic achievement of different peoples, ages, and artists is constituted largely by their creative approach to such given and frequently already pre-shaped objects, and the new, distinct, frequently individualistic interpretations they impart to these objects. Iconography is therefore basically inseparable from the artistic process.

Every iconographic system has its origins and its history. The world of figures and symbols of East Asian Mahâyâna Buddhism, for example, can only be truly understood if dealt with not in a merely descriptive manner resembling that employed for zoological-botanical systems which aim at complete listings of their individual components. Rather, this iconography can only be understood if the wide context of its different areas of origin, its growth within the individual schools ("sects"), the principles of its combination, structures, and evolution, in short, the "historical relief" of these numerous iconographical elements, is analyzed and made transparent.

In the Buddhist iconography of East Asia we would therefore have to first distinguish between original Indian Buddhist and pre-Buddhist Indian components. Secondly, we would have to include Hinduist components which later fused with the former and, finally, those components from West Asian cultures which may have

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entered Buddhist iconography. In addition, indigenous Chinese and, finally, also Japanese components would have to be included in such a presentation and their complicated historical stratification given due attention. As long as the preconditions for such a presentation are not met¹⁰--and we are far from this happy state of affairs in spite of some promising pioneering studies¹¹--it is only possible here to offer as a practical aid for orientation a survey of the most important iconographical characteristics of the major figure types found in Buddhist art.

Since every detail of a Buddhist image had profound, metaphysical-magical significance, artists had to be provided with a secure foundation and reliable aid for their work. Continuing the ancient Indian tradition of the *sādhana*s and *śilpa-śāstras*, Buddhist artists were guided by books containing exact descriptions of all sacred persons and strict and detailed prescriptions for their depiction in cult images. These texts themselves were, in part, based on canonical *Sūtras* and other scriptures which occasionally put precise directions about their own images into the very mouths of these sacred figures. In a similar vein, books regulating every detail of ritual matters can be found. More popular and widely known even today are iconographical handbooks in scroll form which arrange all Buddhist figures in hierarchical categories and provide brief pictorial sketches of them. These handbooks contain information which, though vitally important to anyone interested in Buddhist art, are as yet barely accessible, nor have they to date been the subject of exhaustive studies.¹²

Almost nothing is yet known in the West about one highly interesting specific question: that of iconometry, i.e., the canon of proportions which prescribe different mathematical relationships for the individual figure categories, though such data is available in very minute detail from Indian texts dealing with art theories. The basic measuring unit is the width of a finger (Sanskrit: *angula*). Different multiples of this unit apply to the measurements of the parts of the body of a Buddha, a god, a prince, an ordinary man and their proportional relationships. We are therefore not dealing with a uniform system of proportions derived from observing natural human bodies and striving to make visible in aesthetic perfection the ideal measurements and proportions found by optical laws of a reality embodied in nature. Rather, we are dealing with symbolic measurements, established as norms of a purely spiritual and metaphysical nature on the basis of supra-sensory insights. These measures make visible and intelligible the categories of being and forms of manifestations entered into by the Absolute. These figure types and the levels of being they represent have been incorporated into concrete images with the help of the magic power of numbers and proportions.

Seemingly aesthetic-formal features of such works of art are, therefore, basically ontological statements and iconographically important signs. Only if these stipulated dimensions are correct (the same applies to their attributes and many other features), can the sacred "correctness" and potential powers of these images be guaranteed. This iconometric system of "abstract proportions" was generally applied in India and Tibet.¹³ Similar rules applied in East Asia too, though perhaps not everywhere and at all times with equal strictness. This is shown by various texts which, unfortunately, are still too little known. There has been no study until now to find out what proportions were applied in East Asia, how they are related to those

used in India and Tibet, and how far they have actually been applied in the works of art from different periods.

This holds true not only for proportions but applies to an even higher and more noticeable degree to other iconographical features. Beings at the different levels of existence distinguished by Buddhism are generally clearly identified not only according to body type, posture, movement, and expression, but also on the basis of jewelry, attributes, and symbolic signs. The Buddha (for example, 19, 22, 23, 28, 29, 97) is distinguished by the great austerity of his artistic representation, even though thirty-two major and eighty minor natural and supernatural attributes appropriate for an Enlightened One, or a spiritual world ruler, are ascribed to him.¹⁴ Among these the most important are: the protrusion on top of the head (*uṣṇīṣa*) as sign of highest enlightenment and the *ūrṇā*, originally the light-emanating, world-illuminating white lock of hair between the eyebrows (a crucially important spot in the Eastern practice of meditation) which was later simplified to a dot of light, and reinterpreted as an "wisdom eye."¹⁵ Additional attributes are the wheel of the law (*dharmacakra*) and other symbols on the palms of his hands and on the soles of his feet and the (counter-clockwise) swastika on his chest.

Other signs are in part physical signs of beauty and distinction, such as dark blue eyes, wide smooth forehead, softly rounded shoulders and extremities, smooth skin. Still others are derived from the Buddha legend. Elongated ear lobes are linked to the Indian custom of wearing heavy ear ornaments, but in their religious symbolism most likely are to be understood as signs of human nobility and higher wisdom. The short locks on his head, running clockwise, no longer grew after the Buddha had cut his hair prior to his taking up ascetic practices. There are other miraculous qualities, such as possession of forty teeth, arms extending to his knees in a standing position, webs between his fingers and toes (50), a mighty lion voice and a fine fragrance.

In art, only the most important of these signs are depicted, among them primarily the beautifully rounded ideal figure of the Buddha. He is also made to appear very austere in body pose and garment. A modest monk's robe, frequently leaving one shoulder, chest and arms partially exposed, succeeds in conveying a lofty majesty, a simplicity and a near absence of particular individualizing features which are so very appropriate for the embodiment of the Absolute. His body posture, too, is of the greatest simplicity. Usually he is seated in the yoga position with legs crossed under him but in some instances he may also be standing quietly.

Normally, the Buddha wears no appurtenances or ornaments. This "negative iconography" more than anything else makes him stand out from among all the other savior figures as something special, as the highest figure beyond compare. It is therefore frequently rather difficult to determine which Buddha is represented by a particular figure or painting in cases where written documents or other sources do not provide this information. Occasionally the *mudrās* may be helpful, but more frequently the *Bodhisattvas* and other accompanying figures attached to the Buddha or accompanying the Buddha provide necessary clues since they are exactly defined iconographically and, together with "their" Buddha, constitute fixed configurations. For example, *Avalokiteśvara* and *Mahā-sthāmaprāpta* belong to *Amitābha*, *Mañjuśrī* and *Samantābhadra* to *Śākyamuni*.

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The only Buddhas bearing appurtenances are Bhaiṣajyaguru (Yao-shih, Yakushi), who grants healing from disease and carries a round medicine box or a fruit in his open left hand (20), and Vairocana (Ta-jih, Dai-nichi), who in some instances holds the wheel of teaching and, in addition to other jewelry, wears a splendid crown (29, 102). This might appear to contradict the very nature of the Buddha. The reasons for this deviation are numerous and by no means unambiguous. Common to them all is perhaps the notion that the original or All-Buddha (âdi-Buddha) appears as world ruler (cakravartin) and ruler of the universe or, perhaps, that he reveals himself in this royal, splendidly ornamented sambhoga-kâya form on the level of the Bodhisattvas, i.e., in a figure adorned with Bodhisattva ornaments, since his real form, his dharma-kâya, is remote and beyond form.¹⁶ However, the crown itself is by no means mere ornament and sign of a ruler, but is also an ontological symbol and bears the images of the five "wisdom Buddhas" (see p. 8).



1* Sample Mudrâs.

Next to Vairocana, Śākyamuni, Bhaiṣajyaguru and Amitābha (the "infinite, immeasurable [a-mita] splendid Radiance [ābha]," the Lord of the "Pure Land of the

West"), are depicted most frequently. All of them form a *mudrâ* with their hands. The most common *mudrâs* symbolize meditation, preaching, protection, or wish granting (1*). The specific Vairocana *mudrâ* is formed by enclosing the index finger of the left hand with the fingers of the right hand (29). According to one of the many interpretations, this *mudrâ* symbolizes the interpenetration of the One Absolute and the Five Elements of the world of phenomena. Bodhisattvas and some Devas, too, form *mudrâs*. The *mudrâs* are an important device by which the priests, particularly in esoteric Buddhism, establish a relationship with the essence of the numinous and ultimate world principle or even achieve a merger of identities with it.¹⁷ In a *mudrâ*, each individual finger has several meanings, such as the world elements (earth, water, etc.), the five wisdoms, etc.

Compared to the "ideation" Buddhas--the personifications of the Absolute--the earthly existence of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni plays a relatively minor role. He is most often depicted as a child--just after the seven steps he took immediately after his birth and, with one arm pointing to heaven and one to earth, he declared: "I am the most Exalted One in the Heavens and on Earth" (32)--or during subsequent decisive phases of his life: his departure into the wilderness; as a totally emaciated ascetic; during the moment of his enlightenment under the bodhi tree; during his first sermon; on his deathbed (the "entry into perfect nirvāna," *parinirvāna*), and in a few other scenes. Usually there are eight such scenes focused on individual figures or groups of figures (119).

The Bodhisattvas (24, 25, 53, 55, 57, 58, 66, 111, 114) are less austere and restrained in their appearance. They are depicted in more active and graceful poses and are covered with jeweled ornaments; their garments are draped into numerous folds and lines, but frequently Bodhisattvas appear dressed only in the Indian dhoti extending from hips to feet, and with jewelry at their necks, chests and arms, sometimes with a splendid crown on top of a raised hair style. All these are features derived from the figure type of the Indian prince (*rājā*).

Only Kṣitigarbha (Ti-tsang, Jizō)--who helps beings trapped in the cycle of rebirth in the six realms of the *samsāra* world, but particularly residents of purgatory and dead children--appears as the merciful figure of a monk with shaved head, priestly gown and staff whose six rings refer to the six realms (65). He has a rather complicated history, extending into pre-Buddhist times and originally may even have been an earth-goddess, as suggested by his name Earth-Womb-Storehouse. As a Bodhisattva, he is distinguished from ordinary monks (86) by *ūrnā* and halo.

Almost all Bodhisattvas also bear some appurtenance, such as the lotus flower (see below); a flask containing the *amṛta*-drink--the "sweet heavenly dew" or "nectar"; a Cintāmani Jewel, which grants all wishes;¹⁸ or a sword as symbol of irresistible, all-penetrating wisdom which cuts through the darkness of ignorance (*avidyā*). In Buddhist symbolism, weapons usually have such a positive meaning; they promote the good. Sometimes the Bodhisattva carries a sacred Sūtra in the form of a book scroll. Sword and Sūtra are ascribed to one of the most important Bodhisattvas, Mañjuśrī (Wên-shu, Mon-ju), the embodiment of highest wisdom. Common major symbols of Buddhism, such as the Wheel of Dharma (the world law of the teaching), the Vajra-Thunderbolt (see p. 167 f.), and others, occur regularly in connection with many of these figures. Almost all of the Bodhisattvas form symbolic gestures (*mudrâs*) with their hands.

Several of them also display abnormalities, such as multiple arms or heads. Multiple arms usually symbolize the many aspects of their numinous powers and the unlimited nature of their compassionate intercession. Best known are two such manifestations of Avalokiteśvara (Kuan-yin, Kannon): the Cintāmanicakra (Wish-granting jewel and Wheel-of-the-law) form (*J. Nyoi-rin Kannon*) with six arms (63, 112) of which four hold the wish-granting jewel, the wheel, the rosary, and the lotus flower)¹⁹ and the eleven-headed Avalokiteśvara (Juichimen Kannon; 58, 62). On his own head the latter carries, like a crown, nine small heads. According to one of the many popular interpretations, three of these symbolize the main virtue of the Bodhisattva (compassion), three his holy rage over evil in this world, and three his joy over the good. They are all topped by a Buddha head (with *uṣṇīṣa*) depicting Amitābha, whose most important manifestation is Avalokiteśvara.

Most of Avalokiteśvara's pictures have therefore small Amitābha figures in the frontal part of his crown and are thus easy to identify (54). This Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara occurs in many forms and is the most popular figure of grace. His name, according to H. Zimmer, means "The Being Capable of Enlightening Insight" or, according to a Chinese reinterpretation, "The Lord Who Responds With Full Compassion To The Sounds Of Suffering Of The World." He is the Bodhisattva whom the religious imagination of Buddhism has endowed with the greatest variety of motifs, including even several drawn from non-Buddhist sources, particularly from popular legends. In China, only a few forms occur, but in Japan, at least thirty-three (of which, however, only six to ten are important in art) can be found.

It is frequently claimed (unfortunately even in academic studies) that in East Asia Avalokiteśvara appears in female form as the "Goddess of Mercy." He is also mistakenly likened to the figure of the Madonna. Such claims not only contradict the very concept of a Bodhisattva who, like all other dualities of the *samsāra* world, has also transcended the duality of the sexes,²⁰ they also contradict Avalokiteśvara's external appearance, because the overwhelming majority of the Kuan-yin images display no characteristic female features as real goddesses invariably do (74). Even in cases where Kuan-yin figures appear holding a child—as happens in later Chinese and Japanese works (but none much earlier than the 13th to 15th centuries)—these children are not their own. Kuan-yin is not a holy mother but a Bodhisattva who out of the vast store of his own compassionate powers may also grant children.

A Bodhisattva may, of course, also incarnate himself in female form. Particularly in China, a good many indigenous myths and legends speak of benevolent and self-sacrificing figures of young girls and motherly deities. These have merged into popular notions and pictures of Kuan-yin, but this is a secondary, relatively late stratum which overlays the original concept and is without relevance for classic Buddhist art. One should be more cautious in making claims about mother goddesses and similar female figures with respect to East Asian Buddhism because Śaktism, in contrast to India and Tibet, was practically unknown there. The classic Kuan-yin images (and those of the other Bodhisattvas) appear "feminine" to Westerners only as long as these observers are unfamiliar with the way in which the essential nature of the Bodhisattva is manifested. A Bodhisattva is suspended between male and female in a way which affirms as well as negates (in that characteristically Buddhist sense) both natures, and yet manages at the same time to neither affirm nor negate them.

It is one of the astonishing achievements of Buddhist art to have captured the supra-dualistic character of these figures in visual images; to have skillfully, and perhaps also consciously, made use of the pliable Indian body and facial types. Upon closer scrutiny, however, it will be noticed that the faces of Kuan-yin and of other Bodhisattvas are shaded--albeit ever so slightly--to the masculine side, frequently even displaying clearly marked but small mustaches (113). In general, they have the appearance of a princely ruler. This is perhaps linked to the notion that every being, in order to advance to the Bodhisattva level, would have to be born first not just as a human being, but as a male. However, only the figures of gods, i.e., figures below the level of Bodhisattvas, display clearly masculine features. Such obviously masculine beings include the World Guardians and Vidyârâjas who, though of equal rank with the Bodhisattvas, originated in the strongly masculine Śiva cult. The same applies to the female deities.

A most important Bodhisattva is Maitreya (Mi-lo, Mi-roku), who awaits his hour to become the Buddha, the illuminator of the future world age (42, 45-47), in the Tuṣita heaven from where Śākyamuni had also descended for his last earthly incarnation. His preferred posture, particularly in the early period, is that of waiting and meditation: one of his feet rests on his knee and his hand is raised to his cheek.²¹ There are also images which anticipate or, perhaps, indicate his true, timeless, essential nature and show him as the perfect Buddha.

Esoteric Buddhism, in particular, has created numerous Bodhisattva figures which are purely "theoretically" construed hypostases of ontological concepts, essential qualities or functions ("virtues") and aspects of the Absolute. For example, Ākāśagarbha (J. *Kokūzō*, "Womb of Emptiness") is a personification of the unity of wisdom and compassion and of the highest wisdom of absolute emptiness (*śūnyata*). Prajñā-pāramitā (J. *Hannya-haramitta* or *-mitsu*) is a hypostasis of the highest wisdom, of "sophia," and is also called the "Mother of all Buddhas," but is only occasionally depicted as a female figure even though the word *prajñā* is of feminine gender. Both hold the usual wisdom symbols: Lotus, Sword, Scroll, etc.

Some Bodhisattvas are depicted riding animals symbolizing certain of their characteristics and powers or more general traditional Buddhist virtues: Mañjuśrī on a lion signifying strength and energy as necessary complements of wisdom;²² Samantābhaddra (Pu-hsien, Fu-gen) on a six-tusked elephant--the symbol of strength, wisdom, and overpowering dignity.²³ Several Devas, particularly the Devas of the elements, also have animal mounts suitable to the qualities ascribed to them.

The Vidyârâjas ("Kings of Secret Wisdom"), like the terrifying manifestations of the Bodhisattvas (118), are also characteristic of esoteric Buddhism and are easily recognized by their raging-threatening expressions and belligerent stances, by their weapons (which are to destroy the darkness of illusion and the evil resulting from it), and usually also by their flame halos symbolizing the consuming fire of truth. Each of them is associated with a Buddha whose benevolent-destructive aspects they represent. For example, the Five Great Vidyârâjas (J. *Go-dai-myōō*) correspond to the Five Wisdom Buddhas. Particularly important among them is Acala, the Vidyârāja manifestation of the All-Buddha Vairocana who, though rarely depicted in China, can be found very frequently in Japan where he is known as Fudo-Myōō ("The Immovable, Unshakable Wisdom King" [69, 137]). To mention the numerous other Vidyârâjas--most of them hypostases of the kind referred to earlier--would go

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too far since every one of them requires detailed explanations. Related to them but of different origin--having evolved out of Chinese warrior heroes and Indian Yakṣas who serve as apotropaic gate guardians (dvarapālas)--are the "Two Kings" (Erhwang, Ni-ô). With terrifying and defensive gestures they stand guard on both sides of a temple gate. They may be counted among the Deva even though they have absorbed several features from esoteric Buddhism (79).

The gods, whose nature and origin has already been explained, are noticeably more realistic in bodily appearance and facial types, clothing, weapons and jewelry. They are beings--richly dressed and armed in Chinese fashion--who frequently hold some symbolic object in their hands, or are identified in other ways according to their character and functions.

Most important among them are the Twelve Gods of the Elements: sun (77), moon, earth, water, fire, etc., as well as the ancient gods Indra and Brahma, the Four World Guardians (Lokapāla; T'ien-wang, [Shi-] Tennô, "Heavenly Kings"), whose function is to guard the Buddha, the Buddha land, the sanctuary, the teaching, and the congregation from all four directions (70, 72). Each of them protects one of the world realms on the four sides of Mount Sumeru (see p. 61). Related to them is the youthful warrior figure of Wei-to (J. *Ida* [-ten]), who was particularly popular in China.

The Twelve Heavenly Generals serve in a similar capacity. They are attached to the Buddha Bhaiṣajyaguru as "body guards" and are, in the final analysis, merely astral deities, as symbolized by the fact that there are twelve of them (71). Semi-divine or demonic beings could also assume such protective functions. Among these are the "Eight Groups of Divine Beings" (J. *Hachi-bu-shu*)--originally Indian demonic beings, such as Yakṣas (low-ranking nature and local deities), Nāgas (snake demons), Garudas (bird demons as enemies of snakes), Gandharvas and Kinnaras (supra-earthly musicians, genii, "sirens")--who are in almost every instance clearly identified by animal emblems or other signs. We may also add to this group the Aśuras (75, 76), belligerent "titans," who are particularly interesting because of their three faces and their relationship to the Iranian Ahuras.²⁴

All these beings are attached to the entourage of Śākyamuni Buddha as protective guardians. Some of them were originally evil, man-hating demons and had been converted by the Buddha into pious, helpful beings who subsequently found the path to salvation for themselves in his service. This happened, for example, to the child-eating demoness Hārītī (J. *Karitei-mo*, *Kishi-mojin*), who was transformed by the wisdom and compassion of the Buddha into a goddess charged with protecting children and granting them to the childless, and who for this reason became the object of a popular cult (23*, 78). She is always depicted accompanied by one or several small children. As a figure fulfilling the desire for children, she represents--almost as frequently as Kuan-yin--the East Asian figure motif of the "Madonna"²⁵ and may even have influenced this variant form of Kuan-yin but apparently without being linked in any way to the Christian divine mother. Her material symbol is the red pomegranate with its many kernels--a widely used fertility symbol. She has risen in rank and, for all practical purposes, is treated as if she were on the same level as the real goddesses (Devīs). She occupies a place in religious life close to that of the goddess of good fortune, Lakṣmi or Śrī-Devī (J. *Kichijōten*), whose symbol is the wish-granting jewel (74). Both are depicted as

graceful women of the Chinese type, wearing the dresses and ornaments characteristic of the T'ang period. These almost divine figures have been "nationalized" and thus moved closer to the samsāra level than some normally higher-ranking beings of the pantheon. Numerous other auspicious pre- or extra-Buddhist deities have been taken into the Mahāyāna pantheon, including astral deities who are very prominent in astrology.

The categories of figures discussed so far share two "attributes" which symbolize their supra-human, numinous natures: throne and halo. We should remind ourselves at this point of the generally accepted meaning of these attributes, because in Asian cultures in particular, higher beings--such as royal princes--are entitled to a lofty throne seat. This applies of course especially to the Buddha as spiritual world ruler. His "diamond throne" (*vajrāsana*) is the immovable center of the world, symbolizing the transcendent, eternal, diamond-like, indestructible truth. The throne is held up by lions who symbolize awakening, preaching and invincible rule. The Buddha's throne is therefore called the lion throne (*simhāsana* [compare 39]).

It is often only a simple pedestal, but is more often than not a highly structured and decorated pedestal whose narrow middle part is supposed to imitate the central world mountain Sumeru (29, 31). Above it rises the lotus throne (*padmāsana*). Its lotus flower symbolizes enlightenment, purity, and the Buddha world and, more than any other, is properly the symbol of the Buddha, particularly in his transcendent bodies (*sambhōga-kāya* and *dharma-kāya*). Bodhisattvas are also placed, sitting or standing, on lotus pedestals because they are potential Buddhas. Vidyārāja, on the other hand, often have rock pedestals (69) or symbolic animals as their thrones.

Some Bodhisattvas may be seated on animals, like lions and elephants. These serve as "vehicles" (*vāhana*). However, lotus flowers, which are more appropriate for expressing a Bodhisattva's true nature, are placed atop these animals to serve as throne seats. Gods, strictly speaking, are not entitled to this symbol of highest perfection but numinous beings, frequently, though by no means always, came to be depicted on lotus blossoms parallel to their transformation into helpful, wise, and numinous beings. Just as often, however, they can be found with animals serving as their mounts. This is particularly true of the elementary deities, such as the water god on his water buffalo.

A corresponding order exists with respect to halos: Gods frequently, but by no means always, have halos, while beings of higher categories have them without exception. The halos of the Vidyārājas, in accordance with the function of these figures as fighters and with their rudimentary nature, usually consist of wildly flickering flames (69, 137). Perfectly round halos, which may also assume the form of a lotus, belong to perfected or nearly perfected beings. These are beings who have matured to wisdom and ultimate quietude and purity, i.e., Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and also Arhats. Since the presence of halos is rooted in the notion or religious experience of emanating rays, halos may also assume the form of a flaming gloriola enclosing the lotus circle and surrounding the head or the body (or both) with their tender, gently rising curves which are joined at the top (for example 16, 23, 28).

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The subhuman demonic sphere is represented in the Buddhist world of beings by gnomelike figures (31) as, for example, those who squat below the Buddha throne or, as demons of the underworld, who help to hold it up. Historically, they may be counted among the Yakṣa. Other demons are trampled on as vanquished foes by the World Guardians (70). The grotesque elements within Buddhist mythology and art have found their home at this level and in the depictions of the world of pretas and of purgatory (123, 124).

Naturally, human beings (81-96, 127-134), i.e., Arhats, Buddha's disciples (particularly the group of the Ten Major Disciples), patriarchs and ordinary monks, pilgrims, donors, et al. are given much simpler iconographical treatment than supra-human or supra-worldly beings. The lack of such vital characteristics as *uṣṇiṣa* and *ūrṇā* makes it possible (86) to easily distinguish between earthly monks and monk-like figures like that of the Bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha (65) or the Buddha himself (19-28), even though the latter is also portrayed as a type of monk. In addition to their simple robes and shaved heads, holy men can frequently also be identified by such priestly attributes as the alms bowl, priest's staff and scepter, rosary, and incense burner. In this particular context, these attributes symbolize no metaphysical dimension or numinous qualities. Rather, they are professional insignia and belong fully to the empirical-human sphere of life but retain a certain cultic-symbolic meaning apart from the individuals holding or using them.

Genuinely iconographical elements may be found in the images of Arhats. Arhats are often joined by companion figures and animals and can be distinguished by certain postures, mudrās, magic acts and, above all, very individual characteristics. In a way which would be unthinkable with respect to savior figures, they are depicted in a free and noncanonized manner largely of the artist's choice. This often makes identification of the individual Arhats very difficult, particularly in cases where written documents are missing. Since Arhats are already enlightened beings and therefore potentially beyond *samsāra*, they are depicted with halos (127). Such halos are usually not found in "earthly-historical" monk figures (130, 132). The specific worldly place of origin of these monks is frequently consciously indicated by imparting to them stereotypical "Indian" faces and clothing.

In Buddhist theology and art, sacred figures are rarely found alone. Rather, they are joined with other figures or are linked to them in belief and cult to form iconographically quite firmly established groups (21*, 17, 24, 25, 26, 39, 40, 98, 135). Each Buddha has attached to him one or, more frequently, two Bodhisattvas. In the esoteric schools, a Vidyārāja is also included. A group of protective and a group of venerating beings, including worshipping or sacrificing Bodhisattvas or Apsaras' (angelic heavenly beings) (33, 35, 36, 152), youthful adoring figures, and disciples may also accompany him. These accompanying figures are called the "relatives" or "entourage" (*parivāra*) of the central figure.

Bodhisattvas, Vidyārājas, Devas, and priests who serve as entourage to a Buddha may of course also become themselves the main figure of a group with an "entourage" of their own, or may form groups with figures of equal rank. All these are either ideal groups expressing dogmatic-metaphysical relationships among their figures (such as the Buddha-Bodhisattva Triads), are "historical" in nature and combine figures who have biographical/legendary links (such as Śākyamuni and his

disciples), or they unite their figures on the basis of descriptions found in the Sūtras. Every group or configuration represents a "Buddha-land," a sacred sphere. The images or paintings depicting them have the magic-sacral function of "realization." This is one of the basic iconographic ordering principles for groups of figures. The other is the maṇḍala.

Maṇḍala (*man-ta-la, man-da-ra*)²⁶ originally meant, "circle," or "ring," particularly that magic circle which provides the space for the invocation, summoning, veneration, and depiction of the deities. In the fully developed cults of India and East Asia, a maṇḍala is a geometric diagram, divided into several concentric or radial areas or chessboard-like fields. Beginning from some center as their common source, it is supposed to reveal in perfect clarity sacred beings in their metaphysical relationship with one another, and, hence, the inner law of the structure of the spiritual world. A maṇḍala thereby serves the faithful as an aid in meditation along the path to perfect enlightenment.

Maṇḍalas have been called "diagram-paintings for meditation" (von Glasenapp) and psychocosmograms (Tucci), because at the most profound level there is no distinction between the individual mind of the viewer and cosmic existence per se. Almost any deity or elevated being may form the center of a maṇḍala and be surrounded by appropriate figures. In a certain sense even those groups of figures or configurations mentioned above constitute a kind of maṇḍala, and, as a matter of fact, are often called maṇḍalas. Most important in Buddhist art is the pair of Maṇḍalas of the Two Worlds (7, 99, 100) as conceptualized by esoteric Buddhism, which has been most productive in designing ever new and minutely differentiated and classified symbolic figures and occasionally appears to have been under a veritable sort of compulsion to engage in such systematizing endeavors. But what would the Buddhist art of East Asia have been like without recourse to this almost inexhaustible source of intuition and inspiration?

The Maṇḍalas of the Two Worlds made the cosmic Buddha Vairocana, who is the foundation of all Being and all individual phenomena, their center. In one of the two worlds, that of the "Diamond World" (vajradhātu), the potential, not-yet-unfolded aspect of the world is represented as Absolute Wisdom which, directed inward, exists as pure, indestructible idea. The other world, the "Womb World" (garbhakōśa-dhātu), represents the actual aspect of the world, i.e., its dynamic unfolding into its myriad manifestations. It shows the world principle directed outward. It unfolds in compassion and constitutes the source (the womb) for that diamond aspect which is the true goal of salvation, the diamond or thunderbolt, vajra, being the symbol of ultimate reality and wisdom. One aspect is unthinkable without the other. Together, they signify that salvation is only possible if one's spiritual path leads through both aspects; i.e., this relationship must come to be dialectically comprehended by means of a meditative process of realization.

The relationship between the Absolute and its manifestations--the structure of the universe in its true being--is expressed in the form of a symbolic geometric pattern which allows for the arrangement of the numerous (over 400 in each) figures in both maṇḍalas. How this is done cannot be explained in a few words. The fields or circles of the maṇḍalas may be filled either with images of particular Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Vidyārājas, etc., or with symbols representing them (vajra, wheel, etc.). Another alternative is to use modified Sanskrit letters (in the Siddham script)

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to represent the individual figures with their "seeds" (bīja)--seed syllables of their magic-mystic formulas (101)²⁷ which are held to have existed forever. Uncreated, they are believed to contain the metaphysical essence and meaning and to constitute the natural symbols of these deities and ultimately to correspond to their images (pratimās), mantras and mudrās.

There are also pictures erroneously, or at least improperly, called "maṇḍalas" which depict a "Pure Land" (sukhāvati; ching-t'u; jō-do), a realm of bliss, ruled over by a Buddha, populated by innumerable Bodhisattvas and other sacred beings, and adorned with supra-earthly splendor and beauty. This "Pure Land" serves the believer as the preliminary location for his final maturing phase prior to entry into nirvāna. Such pictures often illustrate exactly the descriptions found in the Sūtras. Amitābha's Pure Land of the West has been most frequently depicted and has found a classic illustration in the Taema Maṇḍala, named after a temple near Nara (103). Strictly speaking, such pictures are "transformed manifestations," as indicated by the Chinese-Japanese term (*pien-hsiang; hen-sō*). They take something that is in its essence beyond form but reveals itself in visionary forms adapted to our earthly ability for visualization and conceptualization.

The third ordering principle applying to Buddhist figures places them within the context of particular events, i.e., those linked to historical anecdotes, holy scenes, or narrative descriptions. Three kinds of historical anecdotes are particularly important. First and foremost are those legends which came to attach themselves to the earthly life of Śākyamuni and his numerous previous incarnations. These are contained in the Lalitavistara and other texts and also in the Jātaka stories (30, 32, 119, 120, 122). The life story of the Buddha, from birth to enlightenment, and his life as a mendicant monk and preacher up to his entry into nirvāna, has been depicted in East Asian art in preference to the Jātaka stories which were very popular in the Indian cultural sphere (as, for example, in the reliefs of the Borobodur on Java). Emphasis is put on scenes of the birth and youth and on the subsequent major events of the Buddha's career. Usually four or eight of these scenes are depicted in reliefs on steles and cave walls or in paintings.

The second source for such narrative pictures are Sūtras, i.e., sermons which are put in the mouth of Buddha and which frequently contain lively, visionary descriptions of supra-worldly events and realms ("Pure Lands"). Some of the large number of such texts have served as important sources of inspiration for Buddhist art: above all, the Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-Sūtra (Fa Hua-ching or Lien-hua-ching, Hokke-kyō or Renge-kyō), the Book of "the Lotus of the Splendid Law," one of the basic texts of East Asian Buddhism. It provided the scriptural base for many other details but its central scene was repeated ad infinitum: a miraculous stūpa appears in which resides Prabhūtaratna, the Buddha of a previous age, with Śākyamuni at his side. This event provides the final proof for the truth of his teachings to the innumerable Bodhisattvas and other beings who are gathered around Śākyamuni to listen to his sermon.

Next in importance to this text are the Sūtras of Amitābha who, along with his train of Bodhisattvas (103-106), calls home the faithful to the "Pure Land" of the West, and the "Diamond" (vajra) Sūtras belonging to esoteric Buddhism which focus on Vairocana. These two groups of Sūtras have also provided crucial inspirations for Buddhist art.

But the depictions of Bodhisattvas and of nearly every other figure of the pantheon usually rely for their imagery on literary descriptions found in books especially devoted to particular figures and their legends. Also very popular was the book of the Sage Vimalakīrti (Wei-mo, Yui-ma) (84, 85), a man who matured during his mundane life to the highest insight into "Emptiness" and came therefore to be endowed with miraculous powers. He was visited on his sickbed by the Bodhisattva of Highest Wisdom, Mañjuśrī (Wen-shu, Mon-ju), and was able to best his visitor in a philosophical dispute on the innermost essence of the Buddha's teachings by the paradox of "a silence like thunder" (which anticipates later Zen sayings). His story is an expression of the Buddhist conviction that everyone, even laymen and children of samsāra, may mature to reach salvation, i.e., realize their essential "Buddha nature" in this life. The visit of Mañjuśrī with Vimalakīrti and their dispute has been a favorite subject for reliefs and paintings but also for groups of plastic figures. The Vimalakīrti figure is a special type of Buddhist sage with non-clerical garb and non-monkish lifestyle. He appears in a number of artistically important images.

But it is characteristic of the Buddhist art of East Asia that it displays a preference for selecting and isolating particular moments, individual persons or groups from their contexts and imparting to them the character of cult images removed from time and particular events. It makes them reside in an "Eternal Now." These kinds of pictures are, therefore, not easily recognizable as "illustrations" of certain Sūtra scenes.

Such considerations do not apply to the third kind of narrative representations, the biographical-historical pictorial chronicles which, with or without accompanying texts, narrate the lives of holy men, miraculous events, or the legendary story of sacred buildings and objects (125, 126). These descriptions usually employ the pictorial form of the picture scroll (*emakimono*). Such scrolls are very popular in East Asia but their use is by no means exclusively Buddhist. More will be said about them in the chapter on painting.

It is basic to our understandings of Buddhist art to realize that every detail of a Buddhist figure has iconographical value. This holds true--as we will have to show below--even for features which may be regarded as purely formal at first glance. It would therefore appear necessary to group and describe all the many symbolic signs which can be found in this vast world of images. One should, for example, also comment on symbolic colors which are more or less firmly prescribed for the individual figures and are fitted into a complicated array of strictly corresponding sets of directions, seasons, world elements, wisdoms, virtues, etc. These are derived in part from Indian and in part from Chinese world views and mostly fall into sets based on the number five.

Numbers, too, have high symbolic power. The East Asian mind was particularly predisposed for this kind of speculative endeavor and eagerly explored it by entering into the most complicated speculations and scholastic classifications. This can easily be ascertained from any Buddhist encyclopedia. It is impossible to comment here on all these facets, most of which are still not sufficiently studied. Some comments will be made later in the text whenever this seems to be

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appropriate. But a few comments on the central symbol of Buddhism, the lotus flower, should be added at this time.

This symbol is literally "central" because the lotus flower (28, 29, 33, 40, 100, 101, 103, 151-153, 163)--as throne of the Buddha--is located in the physical and spiritual center of the temple and also in that of the Womb World Maṇḍala which unfolds into the world in eight directions from its center occupied by Vairocana. According to ancient Indian mythology, the lotus stem is the world axis rising from the primordial waters on which the world floats. The lotus flower is, therefore, both cosmic symbol and symbol of the Absolute, and thus also symbol of the Perfectly Beautiful. Hence it came to form the throne of all enlightened beings, notably of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, whenever these beings did not appear in an earthly manifestation (such as Śākyamuni, who is for this reason often seated on a lion throne).

Just as the Buddha manifests himself in all worlds, the blossom of his throne unfolds into 1,000 petals on which, in turn, thousands of worlds appear, each illuminated and led to salvation by its own Buddha. On the bronze petals of the lotus throne of the Great Buddha of Nara (middle of the 8th century) these worlds and Buddhas are depicted in schematic engraved sketches. However, the lotus flower blossoms not only in cosmic infinity but also beyond time and space in the center of one's heart, in that innermost sphere of the self from which deepest enlightenment and liberation arise. The lotus flower thus becomes a symbol for the kernel of true essence which is identical with the Buddha nature and remains as unpolluted from all samsāra existence as the lotus' snow-white petals. The lotus grows out of murky waters but sheds all dust of the world without leaving any traces of this dust as it sheds drops of dew and water.²⁸