

on the other hand, believes that the universe is filled with bodhisattvas and celestial Buddhas, who are revered as deities. Buddhism may have adopted this concept of deities from the religions it came into contact with, including Hinduism and other religious philosophies and sects from across China, Tibet and Thailand.

The most popular deities of Buddhism include the Medicine Buddha, Kuan Yin, the Laughing Buddha and the Green and White Taras. Scholars of art traditionally classify these deities into four types, namely, Buddha, Bodhisattva, Deva and a miscellaneous category. Let us now delve into each of these types of Buddhist deities and explore their history, symbolism and significance.

Buddha, the Highest Category

The Buddha category of deities is the highest in Buddhism. The word, "Buddha", is derived from the Sanskrit root, "Buddh", which means, "to know" or "to awaken". Hence, the term Buddha means the "Enlightened One; the one who has awakened to the Truth".

Buddha, in fact, is never used as a name. it only denotes a term used in respect, such as Christ or Messiah is. The Sanskrit word, "Tathagata", is yet another synonym for Buddha. In Japan, the Tathagata is referred to as the "Nyorai". The Mahayana tradition believes that there are many such Buddhas in this world.



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GAUTAM BUDDHA

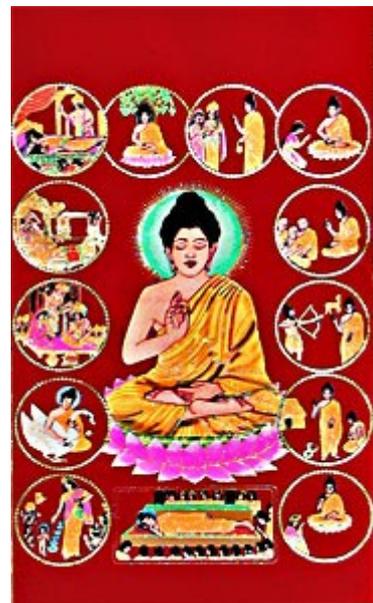
The Buddha, that is, Gautama Buddha, as we know him, lived around 500 BC and is the most widely revered Buddha, both in Asia and around the world as well. The Buddha is generally given common attributes in art and sculpture. He is clad in simple clothing and wears no jewellery. More importantly, all the Buddhas are shown having elongated ears (as they can hear all), a bump on top of their head (to depict their all-knowing nature) and a mark on the forehead (symbolizing their all-seeing ability). Buddhas are also depicted with mudras or traditional hand gestures.

Both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism believe that Buddhas are those that have attained complete enlightenment. Siddhartha Gautama is one such Buddha, who attained this state by meditating under the Bodhi Tree. However, while Theravada reveres only Gautama and the past Buddhas, Mahayana believes that anyone can become a Buddha, if he or she only tries for it. Mahayana avers that these celestial Buddhas live in various levels of heaven and are generally unapproachable, but will still pour their grace on the one that reveres them. The Five Dhyani Buddhas are such celestial beings, who feature centrally in several Tibetan and Tantric branches of Buddhism.

Gautama Buddha

Though there are no official records of Gautama Buddha's life, most scholars agree that he lived in Northern India around the 5th Century BCE. Buddhist philosophy categorizes the Buddha's life into 12 different stages, each one filled with narrations of that particular aspect of his life.

1. Buddha or Shakyamuni, is believed to have been the bodhisattva, residing in Tushita heaven, named Shvetaketu. Moved by the suffering of the people on Earth, he vowed to incarnate on Earth and relieve people from their troubles. He is often shown holding a lotus flower in his right hand, portraying his purity of purpose.
2. The Buddha decided to take birth to the noble King Shudhodhana and his wife, Queen Mayadevi, rulers of the Shakya clan. Mayadevi had a dream, wherein a white elephant approached her and touched her right side with its trunk. By this deed, the bodhisattva entered her womb and she immediately conceived the child.
3. Born from the right side of his mother, while she was taking a walk in a pleasing grove. She felt no unease or pain while delivering the baby. The Hindu deities, Indra and Brahma, were said to be present to witness the baby's arrival. Many auspicious events took place during the Buddha's birth and Siddhartha (as he was named), took seven steps as soon as he was born. Lotuses sprang up wherever his feet touched the ground.
4. Mayadevi died seven days after giving birth and her sister, Mahaprajapati, raised the young prince. He was provided with all the luxuries of life and the finest education as well. He then went on to marry the lovely princess Gopa.
5. Siddhartha was an ace administrator and effortlessly assumed his royal duties. He had a vast retinue of queens and attendants, and lived a life of abundance.
6. The King had been warned by seers that Siddhartha would go on to renounce the world one day. The former, hence, tried to keep him away from witnessing all kinds of human pain and suffering. One day, while riding his chariot, Siddhartha encountered an old and shriveled man walking along the road. He then saw a sick man and then a dead one. This shocked Siddhartha, who realized that he too would have to go through all these stages in his own human life. Siddhartha then met a mendicant. Impressed by his detachment and realizing that this was the only way out from material suffering, he decided to follow in the footsteps of the holy one.
7. Siddhartha took away his turban, cut off his long locks, draped a piece of cloth around him and walked out of his palace at night, when his wife and child were sound asleep.



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**TALES FROM THE
LIFE OF BUDDHA**

8. In search of enlightenment, he spent six years with five mendicants and performed severe austerities. He only ate a single grain of rice a day, for the first two years, drank only a drop of water for the second two years and then took nothing at all in the remaining time. He became thin and withered, but his material desired refused to diminish. He then realized that the Middle Path was the true path towards enlightenment. He then accepted a bowl of kheer (sweet rice pudding) from a village girl, Sujata. This immediately restored his health and good looks. Then, walking towards the bodhi tree, he decided to meditate under it until he attained enlightenment.



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EMACIATED BUDDHA

9. Mara, the manifestation of desire and death, tried to tempt Buddha back into material life. Mara tried everything in his power, but the Buddha was unmoved. Finally, Mara accepted defeat and Siddhartha attained true enlightenment.

10. The Buddha went to Varanasi, where he attracted many followers. He had five main disciples, who encouraged yet more followers to enter the Buddhist monastic order. His two most important followers were Shariputra and Maudgalyayana.

11. Buddha decided to visit his mother, who had become a bodhisattva, in the Trayatrimsa heaven. He stayed there with her for several months. When his devotees requested him to return to Earth, he stepped down a 33-rung ladder, specially crafted by Vishwakarma.

12. The Buddha finally reached the city of Kushinagara and asked his disciples to spread out a couch for him, in a beautiful grove. He knew that it was now time to leave his material coil. Reclining on his right side, he gave up his body that very night, close to midnight. This event, recorded as the Parinirvana or the "Final (or Highest) Nirvana", took place on a full-moon night, also coinciding with his 80th birthday.

The Laughing Buddha/Future Buddha/Maitreya



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LAUGHING BUDDHA - SET OF THREE

The Chinese figure of the happy Laughing Buddha, also named Hotei or Pu-Tai, is considered the Loving or Friendly One. He is also known to bring luck, good fortune, abundance and peace to the ones his idol is gifted to. The figure of the pot-bellied and bald Laughing Buddha is based on an eccentric Chinese Ch'an or Zen monk, who lived over 10 centuries ago. He is considered to be an incarnation of the bodhisattva, who will eventually emerge as Maitreya.

The Laughing Buddha is usually shown carrying a cloth or linen sack. This sack, it is believed, is always filled with rice plants (symbolizing wealth), food, candy and other precious items. The benevolent Laughing Buddha is known as the patron of children, the poor, the old and the infirm.

The Laughing Buddha is usually depicted wearing a monk's robe, with an exposed pot

belly, which symbolizes peace, happiness and plenty. He is regarded as someone who carries away the sadness of others and makes them happy. Sometimes, he is depicted carrying a begging bowl, depicting his basic Buddhist nature. While some images show him surrounded with small children, some other depict him as sitting in a cart drawn by young boys. At other times, he is also shown wielding a fan, symbolizing his past aristocracy.

Interestingly, the Laughing Buddha is considered to be the patron saint of fortune-tellers, bartenders and restaurateurs.

Medicine Buddha or the Healing Buddha

Medicine Buddha is the name which is popularly used for Bhaisajyaguru, who is also referred to as the Master of Healing, the Buddha of Healing and the Sangye Menla in Tibet. The Bhaisajyagurus Sutra describes him as a bodhisattva who took and fulfilled 12 vows. Two of these vows were related to healing. He then entered the realm of Buddhahood.

This Buddha is propitiated in order to achieve inner healing from not only physical sickness, but also inner hatred, attachment and all the other negativities. Venerating this Buddha is known to heal not only oneself, but also others that one comes into contact with.

The Medicine Buddha is usually portrayed sitting, holding a jar of medicine in his right hand, with the left hand held in a gesture of succour. He wears simple clothes and peacefully sits in meditation.



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MEDICINE BUDDHA

The Five Dhyani Buddhas - the Great Buddhas of Wisdom

The Five Dhyani Buddhas comprise a vital part of Tibetan Buddhist beliefs, art and culture. These Buddhas are usually found in Tibetan mandalas and thangkas. Each of these Buddhas is believed to be filled with immense wisdom and is capable of fighting one kind of evil and grants devotees one particular good quality.

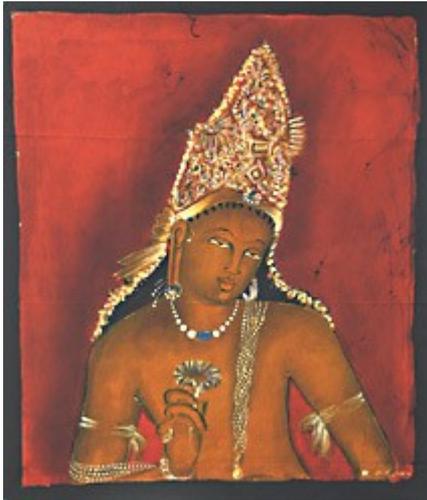
Dipankara Buddha

The Dipankara Buddha, also Dipamkara or the "Lamp Bearer", is one of the past Buddhas, who is believed to have lived one hundred thousand years ago. Hence, Dipankara had reached enlightenment far before the Historical Buddha, that is, Gautama Buddha.

Dipankara is usually portrayed as being seated in India. But in China, Nepal and Thailand, he is most usually shown standing, with the right hand (and sometimes, also the left hand) in the abhaya mudra (offering succour). Dipankara is usually not shown to be alone. He is usually shown to be along with two bodhisattvas, Manjushri and Vajrapani, or with some Buddhas who came after him.

During the 17th Century, Dipankara emerged as the protector of merchants in Nepalese Buddhist communities. He was also associated with alms-giving. Also considered to be the saviours of the sailors, images of Dipankara can sometimes be found along the coastline of this country. Dipankara is also worshipped by several folk communities in Taiwan.

Bodhisattva



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BODHISATTVA

Bodhisattvas are those who have reached a spiritual state, just one rung below Buddhahood. This word comes from the Sanskrit roots, "Bodhi", meaning "wisdom" and "Sattva", meaning "being". Taken together, this term implies the "one seeking enlightenment". The Japanese refer to bodhisattvas as "Bosatsu".

Bodhisattvas remain on Earth taking various forms and manifestations, in order to help all seekers achieve salvation. Once their mission is accomplished, they all attain the state of Buddhahood. All bodhisattvas are kind and compassionate by nature and have a burning desire to help others out of their troubles in this material world. The term bodhisattva has other meanings as well, but the above is the one that is most commonly used in the Mahayana tradition.

As against the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas are generally portrayed wearing princely clothes and elaborate jewelry, including earrings, necklaces, bracelets, armlets and even crowns. Some bodhisattvas are recognized on the basis of their vehicles and the objects that they carry in their hands. Their only aspect that is similar to Buddhas is that bodhisattvas too have elongated earlobes.

The Five Major Bodhisattvas

There are various major Bodhisattvas in Buddhism. They are as follows:

1. Avalokiteshvara

Avalokiteshvara is the bodhisattva of karuna or compassion, sympathy and affection. This Bodhisattva's name translates as "the One who Looks Down in Pity" or the "One who Cares for the World". Avalokiteshvara also represents the Amitabha Buddha and is sometimes portrayed as being Amitabha's helper.



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AVALOKITESHVARA



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KUAN YIN

In art, this bodhisattva is sometimes depicted as male, sometimes as female and in some depictions, as being genderless. In China and in Kannon in Japan, this bodhisattva takes the female form of Guanyin or the Kuan Yin. In Tibetan Buddhism, he is called Chenrezig. Interestingly, the Dalai Lama is said to be an incarnation of this bodhisattva.

2. Manjushri

Manjushri literally means, the "One who is Noble and Gentle". This deity represents awareness, insight and intuition. Manjushri is the bodhisattva who perceives the very essence of all phenomena and sees that everything in this world is nondual. He also knows the actual limitless nature of the self.

Manjushri is usually portrayed as a youth, who is pure and innocent. He is sometimes shown as resting on a lotus or riding a fierce lion. The vajra or sword he carries is symbolic of slicing through ignorance and granting liberation. In his other hand, he holds a scroll of sutra, representing the texts of the Prajnaparamita.



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FIVE ASPECTS OF MANJUSHRI

3. Kshitigarbha

Kshitigarbha literally means the "Womb of the Earth". This bodhisattva is worshipped as being the saviour of those in hell and also the one who guides the journey of deceased children. He is also considered to be the protector of expectant mothers, children and travellers. In China, this bodhisattva is known as Ti-ts'sang or Dicang. In Japan, he is referred to as Jizo.

Kshitigarbha is dressed in simple robes, like a monk with a shaved head. He is usually depicted holding a wish-fulfilling jewel in one hand and a staff in the other.

4. Mahasthamaprapta

Mahasthamaprapta, or the "One who Has Great Powers", is responsible for awakening

human beings and liberating them from the sufferings of the Samsara. This bodhisattva is sometimes depicted as being accompanied by Avalokiteshvara. While the latter showers Amitabha's compassion on his followers, the former represents Amitabha Buddha's wisdom.

Mahasthamaprapta is also sometimes depicted as male and sometimes as female. In Japan, he is referred to as Seishi. He may be shown holding a lotus or even as having a pagoda in his hair.

5. Samantabhadra

Samantabhadra, the "One who is All-Pervading", is also referred to as P'u-hsein or Puxian in China and as Fugen in Japan. He is venerated as the one who protects those who preach and practise righteousness. Samantabhadra is usually shown as being part of the trinity, as being along with Shakyamuni and Manjushri. Sometimes, he is also associated with Vairochana Buddha. In Vajrayana Buddhism, he is venerated as the Primordial Buddha.

Shown either as a man or woman, he is sometimes shown riding a six-tusked elephant; holding a lotus, parasol, wish-fulfilling jewel or sutra scroll. In the Vajrayana, he is shown to be naked and dark blue, accompanied by his consort, Samantabhadri.

Taras

The Sanskrit meaning for Tara is "star". Taras are Buddhist saviour goddesses, who are most popular in Nepal, Tibet and Mongolia. In Tibet especially, the concept of the Tara is very important - the Tara Sgrol-ma is their most important deity. In fact, the mantra for Tara, which is "Om Tare Tuttare Ture Swaha", is second in sanctity only to the mantra of Chenrezig.

The Goddess of Compassion, Tara also represents virtuosity and enlightenment. It is believed that her love for living beings is much more intense than a mother's love for her children. Also, Tara, it is believed blesses her devotees with longevity, protects them during their long-distance travel, and also guides them on their journey towards enlightenment.

Origins of Tara

Before she emerged as an important part of Buddhism, Tara was venerated as Devi Parvati by Hindus. Buddhism started considering the aspect of the sacred feminine only post the 4th Century CE - Tara featured as a female deity round about the 6th Century CE.

According to Buddhist records, Tara was born from the tears of compassion of Avalokiteshvara. It is believed that he was so moved by people's suffering, that his tears formed a lake in which a lotus blossomed. Tara emerged as a Goddess from that very lotus.

Another version of the origin of Tara is that the White Tara manifested from the tears of Avalokiteshvara's left eye and the Green Tara was born from those of his right eye.

Yet another legend states that Tara was born from a beam of blue light emanating from one of the eyes of Avalokiteshvara. Incidentally, Tara is also considered as the consort of Avalokiteshvara.

The Green Tara is usually shown with a half-open lotus, which represents night. The White Tara, on the other hand, holds a lotus in full bloom, symbolizing day. While the Green Tara embodies virtuosity, the White Tara symbolizes an attitude of calm and grace. Together, the Green and White Taras symbolize the love and compassion of the goddess whose

mission is to alleviate the sufferings of earthlings.

In Tibet, during the 17th Century, every pure and pious woman was seen as an incarnation of the Tara. Particularly, two wives of a Buddhist King ruling Tibet were considered her manifestations. While his wife from China was considered to be an incarnation of the White Tara, his Nepalese wife was considered a manifestation of the Green Tara.

The Green Tara



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GREEN TARA

The Syamatara in Sanskrit and the Sgrol-ljang in Tibet, the Green Tara is the goddess of vigour and activity. A fiercer manifestation of Tara, she still has a lot of love and compassion in her. She is the consort of Avalokiteshvara and is sometimes considered to be the original Tara. Much like her consort, Avalokiteshvara, the Green Tara, it is believed, is one more expression of the "self-born" Buddha Amitabha. Interestingly, an image of Amitabha is sometimes depicted in her headdress.

The Green Tara, it is believed, helps her devotees overcome fears, dangers and anxieties. Calling out her name in the most difficult times helps the devotee get instant relief from his or her problems.

In Buddhism, green signifies accomplishment and activity. The Green Tara is usually portrayed as being ever ready for action. Her left leg is folded in the contemplative position and her right leg is outstretched. Her left hand holds the abhaya mudra, while her right hand is shown making a boon-granting gesture. She is also shown holding closed blue lotuses, symbolizing purity. She looks royal and is adorned with priceless jewels.

The White Tara

Known as Sitatara in Sanskrit and as Sgrol-dkar in Tibetan, the White Tara is regarded as the Mother of all Buddhas. Representing motherly love and compassion, her white colour also signifies purity, wisdom and truth.

White Tara is often depicted as having seven eyes. In addition to her two eyes, she has a third eye on her forehead and one on each of her hands and feet. This represents her attitude of vigilance and her capability to see and address all of samsara's sufferings. The "Tara of Seven Eyes" is an aspect of White Tara, which is very popular in Mongolia.



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WHITE TARA

White Tara, it is said, helps her followers overcome troubles and obstacles, especially the one those inhibit the practice of religion. She also grants longevity to her devotees.

The White Tara wears silk robes, which display her slender torso and rounded breasts uncovered. Also, like Green Tara, she is heavily ornamented with rich jewellery as well. The White Tara is usually shown seated in the diamond lotus position, with the soles of her feet pointed upward. Her right hand holds the boon-granting gesture and her left hand shows the abhaya mudra. In her left hand, White Tara wields a lotus flower, which is made of three blossoms. The first is in seed, which represents the past Kashyapa

Buddha; the second is in full bloom and represents the present Shakyamuni; the third is ready to bloom and represents the Future Maitreya Buddha. This iconography goes to prove that the White Tara is the very essence of all the Buddhas.

Other Taras

Besides the Green and the White Taras, there are some other Taras too. Tibetan temple banners show 21 different types of Taras, coloured white, red, and yellow. These goddesses are usually grouped around a central Green Tara. Some of these Taras are angry, fierce goddesses.

According to Japanese Buddhism, Tara is actually a bodhisattva called Tarani Bosatsu. While this sect too reveres the White and Green Taras, the goddesses can only be found in mandalas and on temple banners. Incidentally, one rarely finds the mention of the Taras in Chinese Buddhist sects.

Deva

Buddhism believes that the Devas are those Hindu deities and divine beings who converted to Buddhism after having listened to the teachings and discourses of the Historical Buddha. Much like the Myo-o, these Devas guard various Buddhas and are protectors of the Buddhist laws. Japanese refer to the Devas as Tenbu, literally meaning, "group of celestial beings". This category also includes creatures such as the Dragon. The Tenbu form an integral part of many mandala scrolls and paintings and also widely feature in Japanese esoteric sects.

Characteristics of Devas

According to Buddhism, Devas possess the following characteristics:

- They are invisible to the human eye and can be seen only by those humans who have extrasensory powers.
- Devas can construct illusory forms and manifestations at will.
- Devas can cover great distances with impressive speed and can fly from one place to another. They can also create vehicles that fly in air.
- Most of the higher Devas do not have to eat or drink in order to sustain themselves. Many live on their own power.
- Buddhist Devas are not immortal, but can live for thousands to billions of years.
- They do not influence the world in any way and they also are not responsible for cyclical dissolutions of the world.
- Devas are not omnipresent, omnipotent or omniscient and their level of knowledge is much lesser than that of Buddhas, who inhabit pure lands.
- Devas are not always morally perfect and, like humans, are influenced by pride, arrogance, insecurity, lust, jealousy and anger.
- They do, however, have an inbuilt Buddha Nature, like all human beings.

Types of Devas in Buddhism

According to Buddhism, devas can be broadly categorized into three classes, depending on their dhatus or "realms" they manifest into.

- Those that belong to the **Arupyadhatu class of Devas** do not have a physical form or set location. They are always in meditation and this intensity towards meditation would have come down from the good karma of their previous births. They live alone and do not interact with the rest of the world.

- The **Rupadhatu devas** have physical forms, but are not influenced by passion and sex. They reside in a number of heavens, far beyond the earth. They can be further classified as follows:
 1. The Suddhavasana devas, who were Buddhist practitioners, who died just before attaining enlightenment.
 2. The Brihatphala devas remain in a calm state of the fourth dhyana.
 3. The Subhakritsna devas are in the third dhyana stage.
 4. The Aabhaaswara devas reside in the blissful second dhyana.
 5. The Brahma devas or Brahmas experience the joys of the first dhyana. They sometimes involve themselves with the activities of the lower worlds.
- The **Kamadhatu devas** have physical forms similar to human beings - only, they appear larger than life. They live like the humans do, sometimes living lives of luxury. However, they are a more contented lot than human beings.

Asuras are usually classified differently, but some Asuras are also classified under the deva category.

Buddhists believe that human beings originally had all the qualities of devas, but over time, their power diminished due to their bad deeds while in this world. Ever since, they lost all their special powers.

Others

The Eight Guardians of the Zodiac

The Eight Guardians of the Zodiac fall in a special category of Buddhist deities. Though these deities were most popular in Japan in between the 17th and 19th Centuries, this concept is still recognized among certain Buddhist sects across the world.

Each of these Eight Guardians is associated with one of the 8 directions; also with one or two of the 12 zodiac animals and one of the 10 calendar signs. Originating in China, the concept of the Zodiac evolved rapidly, based on the principle of Chinese cosmology. The zodiac was then used to calculate time, tell fortunes, determine personality types based on the animal type of the person and also to forecast the future.

Many Buddhist sects in both China and Japan were very much influenced by this concept of the zodiac.

Among the Eight Guardian deities, four guard the cardinal directions, each associated with one animal. The other four deities guard the semi-directions, each one associated with two animals. These deities are also linked with the Five Elements, Five Colours and Five Entrances.

Given below is a list of the Eight Guardian deities, along with the direction and animal associated with each one of them:

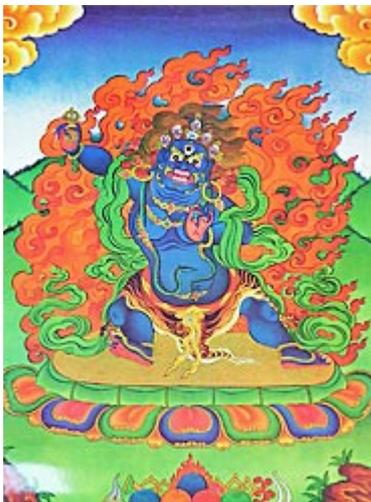
<u>Deity</u>	<u>Direction</u>	<u>Animal</u>
Senju Kannon	North	Rat
Kokuzo Bosatsu	Northeast	Ox, Tiger
Monju Bosatsu	East	Hare
Fugen Bosatsu	Southeast	Dragon, Snake
Seishi Bosatsu	South	Horse
Dainichi Nyorai	Southwest	Sheep, Monkey
Fudo Myo-o	West	Rooster
Amida Nyorai	Northwest	Dog, Boar/Pig

Though this classification was at one time very popular in Japan, it can now be found rarely, in certain pockets of Buddhist tradition.

Wrathful Deities of Destruction

Buddhism also features some wrathful, angry deities of destruction. They can be categorized as the Herukas, who adopt fierce manifestations in order to exhibit their detachment from materialism; the Vidyrajas or the Wisdom Kings, who are the protectors of the Five Dhyani Buddhas; and the Paalas, or the Protector deities, further classified into Lokapalas, Kshetrapalas and Dharmapalas.

The Eight Dharmapalas are supernatural beings, who can be compared to bodhisattvas. They are the defenders of the laws of Buddhism and are known to mercilessly destroy Asuras and other enemies of Buddhism. The Eight Dharmapalas are:



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VAISHRAVANA

1. Yama, the God of Death
2. Mahakala, the Great Black One
3. Yamantaka, the One Who has Conquered Death
4. Kubera or Vaishravana, the God of Wealth
5. Hayagriva, the One with the Horse-Neck
6. Palden Lhamo, the Goddess
7. Tshangs Pa, the White Brahma
8. Begtse, the God of War

This article was written by Priya Viswanathan, a teacher/performer of Bharata Natyam, Classical Music and Classical Instrumental Veena. A recipient of several awards for both music and dance, Priya is also a freelance writer online. She currently writes for About.com, a subsidiary of the New York Times Company (<http://mobiledevices.about.com>)

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