



Symbolism, Motifs and Attributes in Asian Art

The Footprint of the Buddha

By Patricia Bjaaland Welch

In the beginning, figural images of the historic Buddha were non-existent; only aniconic (non-figural) symbols such as a wheel, an empty throne or the Bodhi tree, for instance, were employed to represent the Buddha and his teachings. One of these symbols was the indentation of the footprint of the Buddha, known as a *Buddhapada*. The earliest known example (now in the Indian Museum in Calcutta) is a relief on the Ajatasatru Pillar from the Bharhut Stupa, dating to the 2nd Century BCE. These footprints quickly became larger than life, such as the example from the 1st Century BCE from Uddiyana (now in the Swat Museum in Pakistan), which measures 90 cm in length, approximately the same size as the *Buddhapada* we have in the Asian Civilisations Museum collection. At the centre of the sole of the Uddiyana example was a large chakra (wheel), an important symbol in Buddhism representing the 'Wheel of the Law' or the teachings of the Buddha; its eight spokes represent the Eightfold Noble Path. The chakra was destined to become the central motif of all *Buddhapada*.

Since the footprints of the Buddha are understood to represent the physical presence of the historical Buddha, they are especially venerated in such Theravada Buddhist countries as Sri Lanka and Thailand, although they also exist in other Buddhist countries. Faxian recorded his impression of the two footprints of the Buddha that he saw in Sri Lanka on his travels (399-414 CE), and we know that Xuanzang brought back to China a drawing of a Buddha's footprint he saw in India in the 7th Century. A recent Japanese survey estimates there are approximately 3,000 extant examples. The *Buddhapada* in the ACM's Southeast Asian Gallery is Thai, and dates to the Rattanakosin Period (19th century).

One question that often arises is that of why the footprints tend to be larger-than-life if they are signs

of the physical presence of the historical Buddha. The answer is given in the *Mahavastu*, an important early Buddhist text that recounts the life of the Buddha: the Buddha was supra-mundane. "His true body has nothing worldly about it... [it] can be either large or small and exist in any number and... can appear anywhere in the universe. It is in this body that he descends to earth."

Although the oldest footprints were marked by just a few symbols (the chakra, swastika, lotus flower), over time more auspicious symbols (known as *mangalas*) followed, so today the footprints have 21, 108 or 132 symbols, although the vast majority have 108.

The ACM's footprint has 108 *mangalas* and includes the most auspicious: the wheel, a crown, a conch shell, a vase, fish, parasol, lotus and banner. The 'official lists' of the symbols varied from school to school dependent on historical and scriptural variants. Even their positioning on the sole of the foot varies, but represent the three positive realms one can be born into: the Brahma realms (of which there are 16), the Deva realms (of which there are six), and the human realms (86). On the ACM *Buddhapada*, the 16 Brahma realms are identified by the 16 beings in *anjali* mudra. The remaining symbols or good omens that are easily identifiable include a rabbit, Eravana (the elephant king, mount of Indra), deer, books, conch shell, fan, blue water lily, red water lily, lotus, a golden bee, hamsa, goose, fan and monk's bowl, together with other animals, good omens and signs of royal insignia.

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Photo courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum