

## WALKING BUDDHA



Artist Unknown  
Thailand  
15<sup>th</sup> century CE  
Bronze Sculpture  
Acc: 31.115  
G213

The Buddha depicted walking with the left hand raised in the gesture of granting protection was popularized during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries by Sukhothai sculpture. The figure displays the supernatural anatomy of the Buddha as described in ancient texts. Some of these features include projecting heels, long fingers, smooth skin the color of gold, and elongated arms. The walking Buddha type represents an episode from the Buddha legends, when he descends from heaven by walking down a ladder.

## QUESTIONS

1. How would you describe this Buddha?
2. What is this Buddha doing?

### 3. How realistic is this depiction of Buddha? Why>

## KEY IDEAS

1. Thais say their history as a nation began in 1238 when the Sukhothai kingdom (translation: Dawn of Happiness) was established as an independent state following a war that overthrew their Khmer overlords. The resulting two hundred year period was a Golden Age and the fount of many contemporary Thai traditions. It was the first kingdom to make the Thai language official. It was also time of prosperity when the arts flourished especially in bronze sculptures and ceramics. It was also a classical period of architecture which can be seen today in the Sukhothai Historical Park.



2. The Buddhist religion and the state were inextricably linked in the Sukhothai kingdom. The king was so dedicated to the Buddhist faith that he shared his throne weekly with monks who preached the Dhamma (goals of righteous living) of Buddha. Religion was political; peace and unity were forged on religious grounds. This intertwining of state and religion posed no problem for the deeply devout Sukhothai people. As a result, Thai kings were considered to be much closer to their people than their Indian and Cambodian counterparts.
3. Thai's referred affectionately to their king Ramakhamphaeng as Lord Father. He described life in the Sukhothai kingdom in the following way: "There is fish in the water and rice in the fields. The lord of the realm does not levy toll on his subjects for traveling the roads; they lead their cattle to trade or ride their horses to sell; whoever wants to trade in elephants, does so; whoever wants to trade in horses, does so... When he sees someone's rice he does not covet it, when he sees someone's wealth he does not get angry...".
4. To the uninitiated eye, Sukhothai Buddhist art may appear awkward and distorted. But this "distortion" is deliberate. Thai artists did not base their images on human models but on close and literal interpretations of metaphors taken from Buddhist

religious verse and scripture which specified the many distinguishing marks or *lakshanas* of the great being.



**4. Characteristics of depictions of Sukhothai Buddhas include:**

- a. The “Thai flame” ushnisha that indicates Buddha’s radiant spiritual energy
- b. The vee-shaped hairline, the small, tight hair curls
- c. The curved sweep of the eyebrows joining at the bridge of the nose.
- d. The substantial, almost hooked “parrot beak” nose
- e. The broad shoulders and inflated chest (as with yogic breath)
- f. The lines at the neck indicating the Great Being
- g. The long and sinuous arms and legs “like the trunk of a young elephant”
- h. The equal length fingers.
- i. The smooth skin, gold color
- j. The smooth modeling of the clothing

All of these traits were designed to demonstrate the superhuman nature of the Buddha and express his compassion and serenity through his posture and facial expression.



5. The walking Buddha is a distinctive feature of Thai art. Earlier Buddhist art had stressed the god-like and king-like images of the Buddha—and neither gods or kings were imagined as a walking monk. This new image of Buddha walking among the people emphasized his earthly aspects.

