

Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism: Origins, Art, and Ideas

Key Ideas

- Three great religions have origins in literary and philosophical texts of this period (derived from oral traditions).
- Central concepts: material world is an illusion; we must understand the nature of the divine in order to escape an endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (= eternal bliss).
- Art is functional: used in religious practice for worship and devotion to the gods.
- Evocation of the senses plays a role in our experience of the world as a gift of the gods.

terms/names/places

caste system – priests, warriors, merchants, laborers

enlightenment (eternal bliss): moksha – Hindu, nirvana – Buddhist, kaivala – Jain

Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas

Mahabharata, Ramayana

Buddhism: Origins and Ideas

- Buddhism emerges as a reaction to complex, ritual practices of priestly class/highest caste. “Counter-culture” sages, spiritual leaders, and sects emerge in 6th c. BCE.
- Prince Siddhartha Gautama renounced his earthly life of luxury, meditated on how to alleviate suffering in the world, achieved enlightenment, and became “the Buddha.”
- The Buddha’s teachings were written down by his followers in the *sutras*.
- Buddha images are used to contemplate the divine/the “Buddha nature” so that we can become like him (they are both teaching and sacred images).
- Buddhists seek *nirvana*, or release from an endless cycle of birth/death/rebirth (*samsara*).

Buddhist Art and Culture

- After violent campaigns, Ashoka (3rd c. BCE) resolves to rule by spreading teachings of Buddhism through public art and establishing Buddhism as major religion of his reign.
- The Buddha is not initially represented in human form: lotus flower, wheel, bodhi tree (place of Enlightenment), empty throne, footprints.
- Early Buddhist worship centered on veneration of relics housed in stupas.
- As Buddha images emerge, they reflect characteristics proclaimed in the ancient texts.
- Images are influenced by cultural encounter and exchange.

Afghanistan (Gandhara), *Standing Buddha*, 3rd century, schist, 2000.153

Thailand (Siam), *Seated Buddha*, 10th century, bronze, 69.86.2

Thailand (Siam), *Walking Buddha*, 15th century, bronze, 31.115

Myanmar (Burma), *Enshrined Buddha*, about 1800, wood, lacquer, gold leaf, colored glass, and mirrors, 89.55

Thailand (Siam), *Seated Buddha*, 15th century, bronze, 31.116

China, *Standing Buddha*, late 6th century, limestone, 2000.207

China, *Bodhisattva pair*, late 6th century, white marble, 42.4.1-2

China, *Seated Kuan-yin*, wood, pigments, and gold, 11th – 12th century, 98.62a-h

Buddhist terms/names/places

circumambulation

mandala – circular diagram of Buddhist cosmos

yakshis/yakshas – nature spirits

Shakyamuni Buddha (563-483 BCE) – founder

urna – “third eye”

ushnisha – cranial protrusion

mudras – hand gestures

Mathura style

Sarnath style

bodhisattvas

Jainism: Origins and Ideas

- Mahavira gave up his earthly possessions and practiced severe austerities as an ascetic to attain enlightenment.
- Through a life of ascetism, Jain monks attain *kaivala*, which is release from an endless cycle of birth/death/rebirth.
- *Tirthankaras* (“pathfinders”) help others find the path to enlightenment; also called *Jinas* (“victors”).
- Some gods and goddesses are drawn from ancient pool of local deities.

Jain Art and Culture

- Images of Mahavira are a symbol of perfection pointing toward a spiritual goal.
- “Sky clad” monks have renounced the needs of the world and their bodies; they are vulnerable to the forces of nature, but ignore them.
- Profuse decoration of Jain temples represents the rich inner life of the soul and great complexity of the theology.

India, Gujrat region, *Mahavira Gives Away all His Possessions*, about 1500, opaque watercolors and gold on paper, 90.29.4 (nov)

India, *Seated Jina*, 1108, burnished black stone, 98.211

India, *Standing Jina*, 11th or 12th century, bronze, 98.246

Jain terms/names/places

asana – place and position of yoga practitioner

shrivatsa – “jewel”; chakra location; point of physical or spiritual purity and energy

maya – physical world of illusion

prana – yogic breath control

Hinduism: Origins and Ideas

- Emerges out of mingled Vedic culture and indigenous beliefs; deities are associated with forces of nature
- Social class/caste system sanctioned by Hinduism
- First images appear in 2nd c. BCE; by 6th c. CE imagery is well established
- Each sect considers its deity to be supreme
- *Brahmins* (priests) perform rituals of the faith to help release practitioners from *samsara* and achieve *moksha*
- Artists create rich imagery based on Hindu/Vedic literature

Hindu Art and Culture

- Art is profusely **ornamental, textural, and colorful**. Reflects the abundance and favor of the gods: through repetition and reduplication of elements we reach understanding and assimilation of the ideas expressed.
- **Symbolism** is pervasive. Forms and images used were prescribed by ancient religious texts, as were the ritual practices in which the images are used.
- The arts depict a world filled with **divine dynamism**: forms are tactile, sensuous, and radiant. This is the way artists show the divine nature.
- **Visualization of the god** is central to understanding

India, Madhya Pradesh, *Shiva's Family (Uma-Mahaeshvara)*, about 1000, buff sandstone, 97.36

Indonesia, *Ganesha*, 10th-11th c., volcanic stone, 2003.198

India, Tamil Nadu, *Shiva Nataraja (Lord of the Dance)*, about 1100, bronze, 29.2

India, Tamil Nadu, *Devi as Uma (Parvati)*, 14th century, bronze, 2009.12.1

West Bengal or Bangladesh, *Vishnu with Lakshmi and Sarasvati*, 11th century, grey schist, 90.67

India, *The Adoration of Krishna*, about 1700, opaque watercolors on paper, 90.34

Hindu terms/names/places

Brahman – all-inclusive and eternal spiritual reality

Brahma – creator god

brahmin – priest

Shiva/Shivaism

Vishnu/Vaishnavism

Shakti/Shaktism, Devi

Nandi/Nandin – bull, Shiva's vehicle

Ganesh/Ganesha – elephant-headed remover of obstacles

Karttikeya/Skanda – god of war and wisdom, protector of children

Nataraja – Lord of the Dance

Ganga – goddess of river Ganges

Uma, Parvati, Durga

Lakshmi – Vishnu's wife/consort, goddess of wealth and good fortune

Sarasvati – Vishnu's wife/consort, goddess of learning and wisdom

Garuda – Vishnu's vehicle, half man/half bird

puja – worship (through offerings)

darshan – face-to-face contact with the god

prasad – part of offering returned to you that has been blessed by the god

bhakti – worship in the form of love, personal devotion, and offerings