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Symbols of the Buddha in Early Aniconic Art

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Symbols of the Buddha in Early Aniconic Art

For centuries, no sculptor carved the Buddha's face. They carved an empty seat, a riderless horse and a bare footprint. Every viewer knew what each one meant.

Convention Aniconism
Key sites Sanchi, Bharhut, Bodh Gaya, Amaravati
Symbols Six, one per event or place
Human form From the 1st century CE

1 Why early Buddhist art avoided the human form

1.1 What is aniconism?

Aniconism means showing a sacred person through symbols, not in human form. In early Buddhist art, the Buddha appears as a throne, a tree, a wheel or a footprint.

Scholars say the earliest phase of Buddhist art lasted until the 1st century CE. In the earliest art of India, the Buddha was not shown in human form.

1.2 Where do we see it?

The great early sites are Sanchi, Bharhut, Bodh Gaya and Amaravati. Ashoka's Great Stupa at Sanchi began in the 3rd century BCE.

Most reliefs came later. Bharhut's stone railing and its reliefs date from the 2nd century BCE. Its carved gateways came about the 1st century BCE. The Amaravati stupa dates from about the 2nd century BCE.

1.3 Why did artists avoid his image?

Scholars give several reasons. Huntington notes only one indirect ban on Buddha images in all Buddhist texts. It sits in the vinaya of the Sarvastivada school. The Kalingabodhi Jataka adds that a memorial shrine is improper, because it rests on imagination only.

The same text says a great Bodhi tree is fit for a shrine, whether the Buddha is alive or dead. Another idea is that it seemed wrong to show one who had reached nirvana.

Alfred Foucher added a different thought. He said the symbols began as small souvenirs that pilgrims carried home from the great sites. Each souvenir came to stand for the event at that place.

1.4 Do scholars all agree?

No. In 1990, Susan Huntington challenged the idea of aniconism. She argued that many scenes do not show the Buddha at all. They show worship at relics, or devotees re-enacting events at the sacred places.

On her view, an empty throne or a tree marks a sacred spot that devotees worshipped, not a stand-in for the Buddha. Other scholars have answered her. In 1991, Vidya Dehejia took up the debate in an article titled 'Aniconism and the Multivalence of Emblems'. The debate is still open.

1.5 How did a viewer read a symbol-only panel?

Each symbol was tied to one event or place, so it worked like a label. A viewer who knew the symbols could read a whole story panel by panel.

Worshippers in a relief often bow or offer flowers towards the empty symbol. That shows the viewer where reverence belongs.





Worship of the empty Diamond Throne (Vajrasana) and the Bodhi tree, Bharhut relief. Photo: Ken Kawasaki, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0.

> **Quick check 1.** True or false: Early Buddhist sculptors at Sanchi and Bharhut regularly carved the Buddha's face and body. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: dlbs.liberal.ntu.edu.tw; ancient-buddhist-texts.net; dhammatalks.net; metmuseum.org; britannica.com; whc.unesco.org; asi.nic.in

2 The six symbols and what each one means

2.1 What does the empty seat (Vajrasana) mark?

The Vajrasana, or diamond throne, marks the spot at Bodh Gaya where the Buddha reached enlightenment. UNESCO says Ashoka installed it beside the Bodhi tree. The first temple at the site dates to the 3rd century BCE.

In art it often appears under a parasol or beneath the tree, as in the Bharhut relief above.

2.2 What does the Bodhi tree mark?

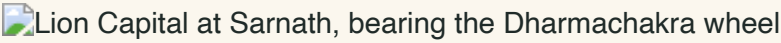
The Bodhi tree is the sacred fig at Bodh Gaya under which, by tradition, the Buddha reached enlightenment. It marks the site and the moment.

It also became an object of worship in its own right. The tree and the empty seat are therefore two separate symbols with the same place behind them.

2.3 What does the Wheel of Law (Dharmachakra) mark?

The Dharmachakra marks his First Sermon at the Deer Park in Sarnath. At Sanchi, the wheel appears several times as an object of worship.

The wheel is sometimes shown between two deer, which recall the Deer Park. The Lion Capital of Ashoka at Sarnath is a different case. Wheels are carved on the side of its abacus. Between the wheels are four animals: a bull, a lion, an elephant and a horse.


Lion Capital at Sarnath, bearing the Dharmachakra wheel

The Lion Capital at Sarnath, with wheels on its abacus. Photograph by Madho Prasad, c. 1905, via Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

2.4 What does the stupa mark?

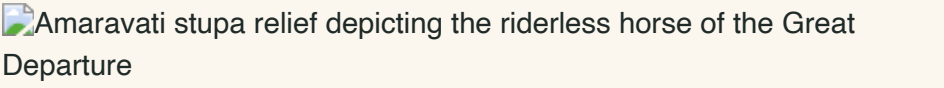
In this scheme, the stupa stands for the parinirvana, the death of the Buddha at the age of 80. It is shown as a dome-shaped mound.

The word for it, Mahaparinibbana, means the final passing. Do not mix it up with the empty seat. The seat is enlightenment, and the stupa is death.

2.5 What does the riderless horse mark?

The horse is Kanthaka, the favourite horse of Prince Siddhartha. He rode it to leave the palace and become an ascetic.

The event is the Great Departure, or Mahabhinishkramana. At Sanchi, the horse carries an empty saddle. At Amaravati, a servant holds an umbrella over the horse.


Amaravati stupa relief depicting the riderless horse of the Great Departure

Departure of Siddhartha (Mahabhinishkramana), relief from the Amaravati stupa, Government Museum, Chennai. Photo: Sailko, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 3.0.

2.6 What do the footprints (Buddhapada) mark?

The Buddhapada stand for the Buddha's presence and his travels. They appear on reliefs at Amaravati, beside other symbols of the Buddha.

Footprints are often marked with auspicious signs. Burmese examples carry 108. The Sri Pada, a footprint-shaped hollow on Adam's Peak, is still venerated in Sri Lanka.

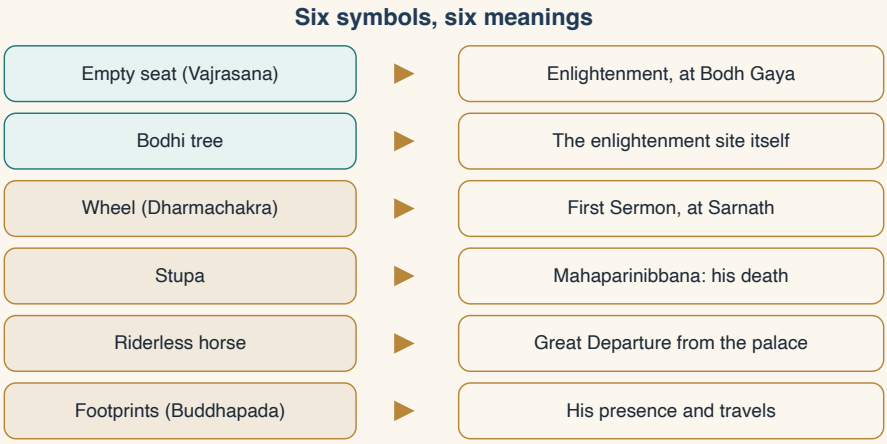


Worshippers venerate the Buddhapada (footprints) and the Bodhi tree together. Photo: Anandajoti Bhikkhu, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

2.7 How do all six compare?

Hold one symbol to one event. The seat and the tree both point to Bodh Gaya. The wheel points to Sarnath. The stupa points to the death. The horse points to the departure. The footprints point to presence and

travel.



Original diagram: each symbol points to one moment or place. The green rows both point to the enlightenment site.

Quick check 2. True or false: The stupa and the empty seat both stand for the same moment in the Buddha's life. *(True or False?)*

See answer ↓

Sources: whc.unesco.org; britannica.com; ancient-buddhist-texts.net; orias.berkeley.edu

Sources: britannica.com; metmuseum.org; dlbs.liberal.ntu.edu.tw; britishmuseum.org; artsandculture.google.com

3 How the human form eventually arrived

3.1 When did the Buddha first appear in human form?

Human images of the Buddha begin to emerge from the 1st century CE in northern India. The Bimaran gold casket in the British Museum is an early example.

Two main centres are named: Gandhara and Mathura. For that comparison, see the lesson on the two schools.

3.2 What was Gandhara's role?

Gandhara was a major centre of Greco-Buddhist art. Many scholars link the first human Buddhas to contact with Greek traditions there. Alfred Foucher gave this theory its full form. Ananda Coomaraswamy argued instead for an Indian origin at Mathura.

The question is still debated.

3.3 What was Mathura's role?

Mathura was a centre of sculpture from the 2nd century BCE. Its Buddha images are related to earlier Yaksha figures, the nature deities of India.

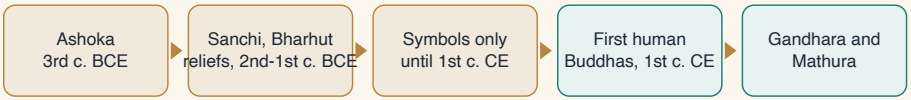
Both schools flourished under the Kushans. Each seems to have shaped its own Buddha image about the 1st century CE. Scholars still debate whether the human Buddha arose mainly at Mathura or through Gandhara.

3.4 Did the human form simply replace the symbols?

No. The two phases overlapped for a long time. Some small figures may even appear in the supposedly symbol-only period.

A visitor to a later site could see an empty seat on one panel and a Buddha figure on the next.

From symbols to the human Buddha



Green = the human-form phase. The two phases overlapped for a long time.

Original diagram: the shift from symbols to the human form. Dates are approximate.

> **Quick check 3.** True or false: Symbols vanished the moment human images of the Buddha appeared. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: metmuseum.org; dlbs.liberal.ntu.edu.tw; britannica.com; britishmuseum.org

Connect the lesson to a previous-year question

What does an empty seat represent in early Buddhist iconography? The options were the meditation of the Buddha, his First Sermon, the Mahaparinibbana and the Mahabhinishkramana.

The paper's answer key gives the meditation of the Buddha. The seat marks the spot at Bodh Gaya where he sat and reached enlightenment. The other three options are other symbols and events. This was asked

in UPSC CSP 2026, GS Paper I.

Exam trap: the wheel, the stupa and the horse are each a real symbol with its own meaning. Match each symbol to its own event.

Remember this

- **Empty seat and Bodhi tree:** enlightenment, at Bodh Gaya.
- **Wheel:** the First Sermon, at Sarnath.
- **Stupa:** the death of the Buddha (parinirvana).
- **Riderless horse (Kanthaka):** the Great Departure.
- **Footprints:** his presence and his travels.
- **Human images:** from the 1st century CE, at Gandhara and Mathura. They overlapped with symbols.

Explain it back: Say why early Buddhist artists avoided the human form, what they used instead, and how a viewer read the story. Then name one scholar who disagrees.

Practice MCQs

1. Which symbol in early Buddhist aniconic art represents the Buddha's Great Departure (Mahabhinishkramana) from the palace?

A. The Empty Seat (Vajrasana)

B. The Wheel of Law (Dharmachakra)

C. The Stupa

D. The Riderless Horse

See answer ↓

2. What does the Wheel of Law (Dharmachakra) mark in early Buddhist art?

A. The Great Departure

B. The First Sermon at Sarnath

C. The birth at Lumbini

D. The death of the Buddha

See answer ↓

3. In the early symbol scheme, which symbol stands for the death (parinirvana) of the Buddha?

A. The footprints

B. The riderless horse

C. The Stupa

D. The Bodhi tree

See answer ↓

4. What is the Vajrasana, or diamond throne?

A. The throne of Ashoka at Sarnath

B. A lion seat from Gandhara

C. A stone seat at Sanchi for monks

D. The seat at Bodh Gaya where the Buddha reached enlightenment

See answer ↓

5. When do scholars say human images of the Buddha begin to emerge in India?

A. 5th century CE

B. 3rd century BCE

C. 1st century CE

D. 5th century BCE

See answer ↓

6. Which scholar challenged the idea of aniconism in 1990?

A. Alfred Foucher

B. Ananda Coomaraswamy

C. John Marshall

D. Susan Huntington

See answer ↓

7. Which early Buddhist site has a relief of the empty throne and Bodhi tree being worshipped?

A. Bharhut

B. Badami

C. Elephanta

D. Ellora

See answer ↓

8. The Buddhapada, a common symbol, stands for what?

A. A royal parasol

B. The Buddha's footprints, his presence and travels

C. A ship

D. A lotus throne

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **D.** The riderless horse is Kanthaka, the Buddha's own horse. It marks the Great Departure from the palace. ↑ Q1
2. **B.** The wheel marks the First Sermon at the Deer Park in Sarnath. At Sanchi it was also an object of worship. ↑ Q2
3. **C.** The stupa stands for the parinirvana, or Mahaparinibbana. The empty seat marks enlightenment instead. ↑ Q3
4. **D.** The Vajrasana marks the spot at Bodh Gaya, at the foot of the Bodhi tree. UNESCO says Ashoka installed it. ↑ Q4
5. **C.** Human images emerge from the 1st century CE, mainly at Gandhara and Mathura. They overlapped with symbols for a long time. ↑ Q5
6. **D.** Susan Huntington argued that many scenes show worship at relics, not the Buddha himself. Other scholars have replied to her. ↑ Q6
7. **A.** Bharhut has a famous relief of worship at the empty Diamond Throne and the Bodhi tree. ↑ Q7
8. **B.** Buddhapada means the Buddha's footprints. They show his presence and travels, and often carry auspicious signs. ↑ Q8

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** The Buddha appears only through symbols in this phase. ↑ 1
2. **False.** The seat marks enlightenment, and the stupa marks his death. ↑ 2
3. **False.** The two overlapped for a long period. ↑ 3

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