

# The Nara Buddhist Sculpture Hall



Of all the museums in Japan, the Nara Buddhist Sculpture Hall has both the most and the most important sculptures on display at any given time. Whenever you visit, you can expect to see nearly a hundred statues, and a great number of them have been designated as National Treasures and Important Cultural Properties. Most of the statues are Japanese. They range in date from the seventh through the fourteenth centuries, representing religious sculpture from the Asuka period, the Nara period, the Heian period, and the Kamakura period.

## About the Building

The Nara National Museum was founded in 1895 (Meiji 28), and the Nara Buddhist Sculpture Hall is in the museum's original building. Of all the buildings that were constructed for Japan's modern museums, this one is the oldest! The building was designated as an Important Cultural Property because of its significance as an example of Japanese architecture in a Western style from the middle of the Meiji era (1868–1912). For the 120 years from the time of its construction and through to the present day, the building has been in use as a space for the exhibition of cultural properties, works of art, and religious icons.

**There are workshops held at CHIEHIROBA every single day that the museum is open!**

**This is the special area run by the Nara National Museum's Education Department.**

CHIEHIROBA, located in the museum's underground passageway, is a place where you can become more familiar with Buddhist art through hands-on learning experiences. We invite you to get to know Buddhist art through the many resources gathered there, from replicas of works that you can touch and handle to quizzes about Buddhist icons! For more information, please visit the Narahaku Learning Center's website through the museum's homepage.



**Participation is free of charge, and there is no need to sign up in advance!**



**The Official Mascots of the Nara National Museum The Zammais!**

This booklet was produced by staff members of the Nara National Museum Curatorial Department. The original Japanese version was written and illustrated by Okina Mihori and Kume Sayaka with production and design by Shiroyama Ayumi and Sato Yuna. The English version was translated by Mary Lewine.



## A GUIDE FOR LEARNING ABOUT BUDDHIST ICONS

The **Four** Major Groups of

# Buddhist Icons

**How to tell them apart and more!**

**Buddhas!**

**Bodhisattvas!**

**Wisdom Kings!**

**Heavenly Beings!**



**Do you know about these different groups of the Buddhist pantheon?**

How can we figure out who is who, or to which iconographic category a Buddhist deity belongs? It's not as hard as you may think! Just open up this booklet for a few tips!



## Identifying Buddhas

Is it a **Buddha**? Look for these two features!

- ☐ The head has a hairstyle of tightly-wound curls and a mound-like shape at the top.



- ☐ The style of dress is relatively simple, usually just draping fabric and robes.



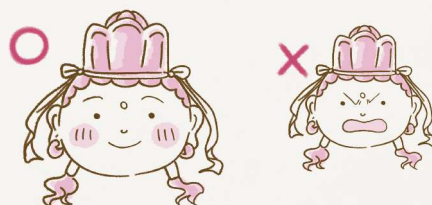
## Identifying Bodhisattvas

Is that a **bodhisattva**? Look for these three things!

- ☐ They're wearing jewelry and various ornaments.



- ☐ Their facial expression is peaceful and inviting.



- ☐ They're on a lotus flower.



## Identifying Wisdom Kings

The following two features tell us it's probably a **Wisdom King**!

- ☐ They look **ANGRY**, and they have fangs sticking out of their mouths!



- ☐ They're standing in front of flames.



## Identifying Heavenly Beings

If it has even one of the following features, you're most likely looking at a **Heavenly Being**!

- ☐ They're wearing armor.



- ☐ Their sleeves have very wide openings, and they are wearing shoes.



- ☐ Since they're not wearing clothes on the top half of their body, you can see their bulging muscles.

- ☐ Even though they may look a lot like a bodhisattva, they aren't on top of a lotus flower.



- ☐ They're wearing pants that are short in length.



- ☐ They have long black hair that ends in rounded locks at both shoulders.



- ☐ They have the head of an animal.

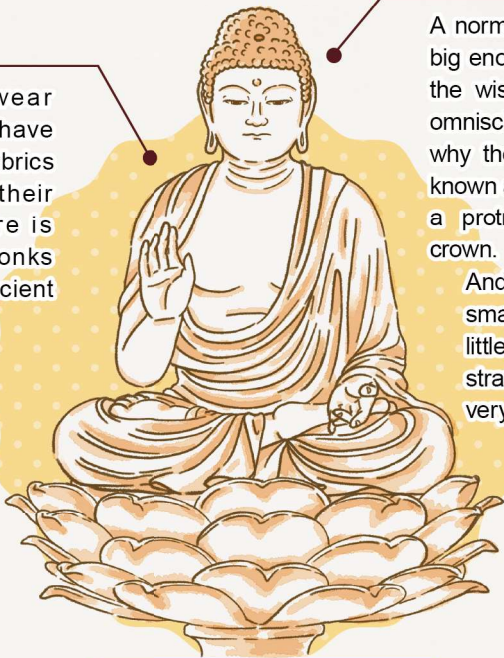
## Buddhas

Buddhas teach us ways to overcome suffering and live more happily. They are the ones who gave us Buddhism.

### The Head

#### Fashion

Buddhas don't wear jewelry, and they have simple clothing—fabrics wrapped around their body. Their attire is based on what monks used to wear in ancient India.



A normal-sized head is not big enough to contain all of the wisdom filling up their omniscient minds. That is why they have the feature known as a "cranial mound," a protruding part at the crown.

And as for all of those small round bumps? Each little bump is a loooong strand of hair wound up very tightly into a curl.



#### Hand Gestures

Buddhas form various shapes with their hands. These gestures, which are known as "mudras," help us to tell apart the different buddhas.

Shaka Nyorai  
(Skt. Śākyamuni)



Amida Nyorai  
(Skt. Amitābha)

This hand gesture  
is made by...



Shaka Nyorai  
(Skt. Śākyamuni),  
Yakushi Nyorai  
(Skt. Bhaiṣajyaguru),  
and others

Dainichi Nyorai  
(Skt. Māhāvairocana)

The mudras of a few  
**Buddhas**

#### Background

Why do buddhas look the way they do? The visual forms of buddhas developed from representations of Shaka, who lived in India around 2,500 years ago and was the beginning of the Buddhist tradition. Shaka transformed from a human being into a buddha after enduring over six years of very difficult practices and attaining enlightenment.

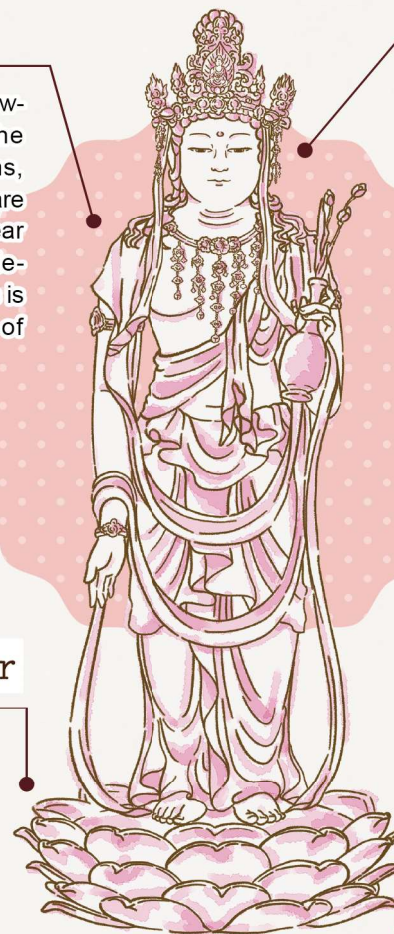
## Bodhisattvas

Bodhisattvas are the ones that come to the rescue of human beings, fulfilling all kinds of different wishes.

### The Face

#### Fashion

Bodhisattvas wear lots of jewelry, with ornaments at the neck, adorning their arms, and at their wrists. There are also bodhisattvas who wear crowns. The fancy and elegant dress of bodhisattvas is modeled after the attire of royalty in ancient India.



The peaceful faces of bodhisattvas tell us that they are here to look out for us, offering kindness and protection.

Some of  
the  
**Bodhisattvas**

Jizō Bosatsu  
(Skt. Kṣitigarbha)



Thousand-Armed (Senju)  
Kannon Bosatsu  
(Skt. Sahasrabhūja)

Eleven-Headed (Jūichimen)  
Kannon Bosatsu  
(Skt. Ekādaśamukha)



Kannon Bosatsu  
(Skt. Avalokiteśvara)

### The Lotus Flower

It is said that buddhas and bodhisattvas are born emerging from lotus flowers, and so bodhisattvas are often depicted atop a lotus pedestal.

#### Background

Bodhisattvas were originally modeled after the form of Shaka before he began his difficult practices to become a buddha. Shaka was born as the prince of a small kingdom in India, and the earliest representations of bodhisattvas are therefore depicted in the mode of ancient Indian royalty. Over time, new bodhisattva iconographies emerged to better respond to the prayers of human beings.

## Wisdom Kings

Wisdom Kings can get rid of different kinds of evils, prevent disasters, and guide people who are doing bad things in a better direction.

### Flames

One feature of Wisdom Kings is that they have flames behind their bodies, as big as their forms, as if engulfing them.

The flames are said to have the power to burn away defilements, delusions, and confusion.



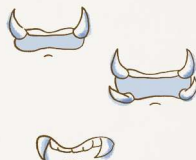
Fudō Myōō  
(Skt. Acala-rāja)

### The Face

Wisdom Kings usually have fangs emerging from their mouths and frightening expressions.

This is likely to scare people who aren't following the Buddhist teachings.

The fangs stick out of their mouths in different ways



### Some of the Wisdom Kings

Gundari Myōō  
(Skt. Kuṇḍali-rāja)



Daiitoku Myōō  
(Skt. Yamāntaka-rāja)



Aizen Myōō  
(Skt. Rāga-rāja)



### Background

Wisdom Kings can stave off various disasters and ward against evil. Their powers and strength are represented in their angry expressions along with the billowing flames emerging behind their forms.

## Heavenly Beings

The heavenly beings can bestow worldly blessings to human beings. Some of them protect not only Buddhists, but also all of Buddhism!

### Fashion

#### TYPE 1 Armor

The heavenly beings tasked with protecting the entire world of Buddhism can wear armor. They can also be bare-chested with bulging muscles.

Daikokuten  
(Skt. Mahākāla)



Benzaiten  
(Skt. Sarasvatī)



There are other types of heavenly beings too!

Some of the heavenly beings are members of the special group known as the Seven Gods of Good Fortune. There are also heavenly beings who look like men or women instead of deities, and others that have the body of a human being but the head of an animal!

### Background

The heavenly beings are largely a group of deities that came to Buddhism from the ancient Indian pantheon. They have such a wide variety of forms in part because of their associations with the faith of different regions and countries. The heavenly beings reflect many distinct religious and cultural influences.

#### TYPE 2

#### Wide-Sleeved Garments + Pants + Shoes

Buddhist deities wearing clothes with wide sleeves, pants (hakama), and shoes are usually heavenly beings. Their outfits are of a Chinese or Japanese style.



Bishamonten  
(Skt. Vaiśravaṇa)

### They appear on top of...

Unlike buddhas and bodhisattvas, you won't see heavenly beings on the tops of lotus flowers! Instead, they stand or sit on top of demons, rocks, rolled bales of hay, or on lotus leaves.