
Documents

Considering the Evidence: The Good Life in Classical Eurasia



What constitutes a good life for an individual person? How can people live together in communities most effectively? These are among the central questions that have occupied human beings since the beginning of conscious thought. And they certainly played a major role in the emerging cultural traditions of the classical era all across Eurasia. The documents that follow present a sample of this thinking drawn from Confucian, Hindu, Greek, and Christian traditions.

Document 5.1

Reflections from Confucius

No one was more central to the making of classical Chinese culture than Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.). In the several generations following their master's death, his disciples recalled his teachings and his conversations, recording them in a small book called *The Analects*. This text became a touchstone for all educated people in China and across much of East Asia as well. Over the centuries, extensive commentaries and interpretations of Confucius's teachings gave rise to a body of literature known generally as Confucianism, though these ideas encompassed the thinking of many others as well.

In the translation that follows, the word “virtue” refers to the qualities of a complete or realized human being, sometimes referred to in Confucian literature as a “gentleman” or a “virtuous man.”

- How would Confucius define such a person?
- How might one become this kind of person?

The terms “propriety” and “rites of propriety” point to an elaborate set of rituals or expectations that defined appropriate behavior in virtually every circumstance of life, depending on one's gender, age, or class.

- What role does propriety or ritual play in the making of a virtuous man?
- What understanding of “learning” or education comes through in this text?

- What is “filial piety” and why is it so important in Confucius’s understanding of a good society?
- How do “virtue,” “filial piety,” and “learning” relate to the larger task of creating good government or a harmonious society?
- How does Confucius understand the role of the supernatural—gods, spirits, and ancestors for example?

CONFUCIUS

The Analects

ca. 479–221 B.C.E.

The philosopher Yu said, “They are few who, being filial and fraternal, are fond of offending against their superiors. There have been none, who, not liking to offend against their superiors, have been fond of stirring up confusion...”

The Master said, “To rule a country of a thousand chariots, there must be reverent attention to business, and sincerity; economy in expenditure, and love for men; and the employment of the people at the proper seasons.”

The Master said, “A youth, when at home, should be filial, and, abroad, respectful to his elders. He should be earnest and truthful. He should overflow in love to all, and cultivate the friendship of the good. When he has time and opportunity, after the performance of these things, he should employ them in polite studies.”

Tsze-hsia said, “If a man withdraws his mind from the love of [beautiful women], and applies it as sincerely to the love of the virtuous; if, in serving his parents, he can exert his utmost strength; if, in serving his prince, he can devote his life; if, in his intercourse with his friends, his words are sincere: although men say that he has not learned, I will certainly say that he has.”

The philosopher Tsang said, “Let there be a careful attention to perform the funeral rites to parents, and let them be followed when long gone

with the ceremonies of sacrifice; then the virtue of the people will resume its proper excellence.”

The Master said, “He who exercises government by means of his virtue may be compared to the north polar star, which keeps its place and all the stars turn toward it.”

The Master said, “If the people be led by laws, and uniformity sought to be given them by punishments, they will try to avoid the punishment, but have no sense of shame. If they be led by virtue, and uniformity sought to be given them by the rules of propriety, they will have the sense of shame, and moreover will become good.”

The Duke Ai asked, saying, “What should be done in order to secure the submission of the people?” Confucius replied, “Advance the upright and set aside the crooked, then the people will submit. Advance the crooked and set aside the upright, then the people will not submit.”

Chi K’ang asked how to cause the people to reverence their ruler, to be faithful to him, and to go on to nerve themselves to virtue. The Master said, “Let him preside over them with gravity; then they will reverence him. Let him be final and kind to all; then they will be faithful to him. Let him advance the good and teach the incompetent; then they will eagerly seek to be virtuous.”

The Master said, “If the will be set on virtue, there will be no practice of wickedness.”

The Master said, “Riches and honors are what men desire. If they cannot be obtained in the proper way, they should not be held. Poverty and mean-

ness are what men dislike. If they cannot be avoided in the proper way, they should not be avoided.”

The Master said, “In serving his parents, a son may remonstrate with them, but gently; when he sees that they do not incline to follow his advice, he shows an increased degree of reverence, but does not abandon his purpose; and should they punish him, he does not allow himself to murmur.”

Fan Ch’ih asked what constituted wisdom. The Master said, “To give one’s self earnestly to the duties due to men, and, while respecting spiritual beings, to keep aloof from them, may be called wisdom.”

The Master said, “The superior man, extensively studying all learning, and keeping himself under the restraint of the rules of propriety, may thus likewise not overstep what is right.”

The Master’s frequent themes of discourse were the Odes, the History, and the maintenance of the Rules of Propriety. On all these he frequently discoursed.

The Master was wishing to go and live among the nine wild tribes of the east. Some one said, “They are rude. How can you do such a thing?” The Master said, “If a superior man dwelt among them, what rudeness would there be?”

Chi Lu asked about serving the spirits of the dead. The Master said, “While you are not able to

serve men, how can you serve their spirits?” Chi Lu added, “I venture to ask about death?” He was answered, “While you do not know life, how can you know about death?”

Yen Yuan asked about perfect virtue. The Master said, “To subdue one’s self and return to propriety, is perfect virtue. If a man can for one day subdue himself and return to propriety, all under heaven will ascribe perfect virtue to him.”

Chung-kung asked about perfect virtue. The Master said, “It is, when you go abroad, to behave to every one as if you were receiving a great guest; to employ the people as if you were assisting at a great sacrifice; not to do to others as you would not wish done to yourself; to have no murmuring against you in the country, and none in the family.”

Chi K’ang asked Confucius about government. Confucius replied, “To govern means to rectify. If you lead on the people with correctness, who will dare not to be correct?”

Truly, if the ruler is not a ruler, the subject not a subject, the father not a father, the son not a son, then even if there be grain, would I get to eat it?

The Master said, “Of all people, girls and servants are the most difficult to behave to. If you are familiar with them, they lose their humility. If you maintain a reserve toward them, they are discontented.”

Document 5.2

Reflections from the Hindu Scriptures

The flavor of Indian thinking about the good life and the good society is quite different from that of China. This distinctive outlook is reflected in these selections from the *Bhagavad Gita* (*The Song of the Lord*), perhaps the most treasured of classical Hindu writings. Its dating is highly uncertain, although most scholars put it somewhere between the fifth and second centuries B.C.E. The *Bhagavad Gita* itself is an episode within the *Mahabharata*, one of the huge epic poems of India’s classical tradition, which describes the struggle for power between two branches of the same family. The setting of the *Bhagavad Gita* takes place on the eve of a great battle in which the fearless warrior Arjuna is overcome with the realization that in this battle he will be required to kill some of his own kinsmen. In his distress he turns for advice to his charioteer, Lord Krishna, who is an incarnation of the great god Vishnu. Krishna’s response

to Arjuna's anguished questions, a part of which is reproduced here, conveys the essence of Hindu thinking about life and action in this world. A central question in the *Bhagavad Gita* is how a person can achieve spiritual fulfillment while remaining active in the world.

- What is Krishna's answer to this dilemma?
- What reasons does Krishna give for urging Arjuna to perform his duty as a warrior?
- How does Krishna describe the good society?
- What major themes of Hindu teaching can you find in this passage?
- How does this text differ from that of *The Analects*? Are they asking the same questions? What similarities in outlook, if any, can you identify in these two texts?

Bhagavad Gita

ca. Fifth to Second Century B.C.E.

The deity said, you have grieved for those who deserve no grief. . . . Learned men grieve not for the living nor the dead. Never did I not exist, nor you, nor these rulers of men; nor will any one of us ever hereafter cease to be. As in this body, infancy and youth and old age come to the embodied self, so does the acquisition of another body; a sensible man is not deceived about that. The contacts of the senses. . . . which produce cold and heat, pleasure and pain, are not permanent, they are ever coming and going. Bear them, O descendant of Bharata!

He who thinks it [a person's soul, or *atman*] to be the killer and he who thinks it to be killed, both know nothing. It kills not, [and] is not killed. It is not born, nor does it ever die, nor, having existed, does it exist no more. Unborn, everlasting, unchangeable, and primeval, it is not killed when the body is killed. . . . As a man, casting off old clothes, puts on others and new ones, so the embodied self, casting off old bodies, goes to others and new ones. . . . It is everlasting, all-pervading, stable, firm, and eternal.

Source: Tashinath Trimbak Teland, trans., *The Bhagavad Gita*, in Max Mueller, ed., *The Sacred Books of the East*, 50 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879–1910), 8:43–46, 48–49, 51–52, 126–28.

It is said to be unperceived, to be unthinkable, to be unchangeable. Therefore, knowing it to be such, you ought not to grieve. . . . For to one that is born, death is certain; and to one that dies, birth is certain. . . .

Having regard to your own duty also, you ought not to falter, for there is nothing better for a Kshatriya^o than a righteous battle. Happy those Kshatriyas, O son of Pritha! who can find such a battle. . . . an open door to heaven! But if you will not fight this righteous battle, then you will have abandoned your own duty and your fame, and you will incur sin. . . .

Your business is with action alone, not by any means with fruit. Let not the fruit of action be your motive to action. Let not your attachment be fixed on inaction. Having recourse to devotion. . . . perform actions, casting off all attachment, and being equable in success or ill-success; such equability is called devotion. . . . The wise who have obtained devotion cast off the fruit of action, and released from the shackles of repeated births, repair to that seat where there is no unhappiness. . . .

The man who, casting off all desires, lives free from attachments, who is free from egoism and from

^o**Kshatriya:** a member of the warrior/ruler caste.

the feeling that this or that is mine, obtains tranquility. This, O son of Pritha! is the Brahmic state. Attaining to this, one is never deluded, and remaining in it in one's last moments, one attains the Brahmic bliss [*nirvana*, or merging with the divine]....

I have passed through many births, O Arjuna! and you also. I know them all, but you...do not know them....Whensoever, O descendant of Bharata! piety languishes, and impiety is in the ascendant, I create myself. I am born age after age, for the protection of the good, for the destruction of evil-doers, and the establishment of piety....

The fourfold division of castes was created by me according to the appointment of qualities and duties....The duties of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaisyas, and of Sudras, too...are distinguished according to the qualities born of nature. Tranquillity, restraint of the senses, penance, purity, forgiveness, straightforwardness, also knowledge, experience, and belief in a future world, this is the natural duty of Brahmins. Valor, glory, courage, dexterity, not slinking away from battle, gifts, exercise of lordly power, this is the natural duty of Kshatriyas. Agriculture, tending cattle, trade, this is the natural duty of Vaisyas. And the natural duty of Sudras, too, consists in service.

Every man intent on his own respective duties obtains perfection. Listen, now, how one intent on

one's own duty obtains perfection. Worshipping, by the performance of his own duty, him from whom all things proceed, and by whom all this is permeated, a man obtains perfection. One's duty, though defective, is better than another's duty well performed. Performing the duty prescribed by nature, one does not incur sin. O son of Kunti! one should not abandon a natural duty though tainted with evil; for all actions are enveloped by evil, as fire by smoke.

One who is self-restrained, whose understanding is unattached everywhere, from whom affections have departed, obtains the supreme perfection of freedom from action by renunciation. Learn from me, only in brief, O son of Kunti! how one who has obtained perfection attains the Brahman, which is the highest culmination of knowledge. A man possessed of a pure understanding, controlling his self by courage, discarding sound and other objects of sense, casting off affection and aversion, who frequents clean places, who eats little, whose speech, body, and mind are restrained, who is always intent on meditation and mental abstraction, and has recourse to unconcern, who, abandoning egoism, stubbornness, arrogance, desire, anger, and all belongings, has no thought that this or that is mine, and who is tranquil, becomes fit for assimilation with the Brahman.

Document 5.3

Reflections from Socrates

Document 5.3 comes from the tradition of Greek rationalism. The excerpt is from Socrates' famous defense of himself before a jury of 501 fellow Athenians in 399 B.C.E., as recorded by Plato, Socrates' student and disciple. Charged with impiety and corrupting the youth of the city, Socrates was narrowly condemned to death by that jury. His speech at the trial has come to be viewed as a powerful defense of intellectual freedom and the unfettered life of the mind.

- How does Socrates respond to the charges laid against him?
- How might Socrates define "the good life"? How does he understand "wisdom" and "virtue"? Do you think that Confucius and Socrates would agree about the nature of "virtue"?

- Why does Socrates believe he has been useful to Athens?
- What do his frequent references to God reveal about his understanding of the supernatural and its relevance to social life?
- Why did he accept the death penalty and refuse to consider a lesser sentence? (See the photo on p. 206.)

PLATO
Apology
ca. 399 B.C.E.

I will begin at the beginning, and ask what the accusation is which has given rise to this slander of me... What do the slanderers say?... “Socrates is an evil-doer, and a curious person, who searches into things under the earth and in heaven, and he makes the worse appear the better cause; and he teaches the aforesaid doctrines to others...”

I found that the men most in repute were all but the most foolish; and that some inferior men were really wiser and better...

O men of Athens,... God only is wise;... the wisdom of men is little or nothing;... And so I go my way, obedient to the god, and make inquisition into the wisdom of anyone, whether citizen or stranger, who appears to be wise; and if he is not wise, then... I show him that he is not wise; and this occupation quite absorbs me...

There is another thing: young men of the richer classes, who have not much to do, come about me of their own accord; they like to hear the pretenders examined, and they often imitate me, and examine others themselves; there are plenty of persons, as they soon enough discover, who think that they know something, but really know little or nothing: and then those who are examined by them instead of being angry with themselves are angry with me: This confounded Socrates, they say; this villainous misleader of youth!... [T]hey repeat the

ready-made charges which are used against all philosophers about teaching things up in the clouds and under the earth, and having no gods, and making the worse appear the better cause; for they do not like to confess that their pretence of knowledge has been detected...

Someone will say: And are you not ashamed, Socrates, of a course of life which is likely to bring you to an untimely end? To him I may fairly answer: There you are mistaken: a man who is good for anything ought not to calculate the chance of living or dying; he ought only to consider whether in doing anything he is doing right or wrong, acting the part of a good man or of a bad.... Had Achilles^o any thought of death and danger? For wherever a man's place is, whether the place which he has chosen or that in which he has been placed by a commander, there he ought to remain in the hour of danger; he should not think of death or of anything, but of disgrace...

And therefore if you let me go now, and... if you say to me, Socrates, this time we will... let you off, but upon one condition, that you are not to inquire and speculate in this way any more, and that if you are caught doing this again you shall die; if this was the condition on which you let me go, I should reply: Men of Athens, I honor and love you; but I shall obey God rather than you, and while I have life and strength I shall never cease from the practice and teaching of philoso-

Source: Plato, *Apology*, translated by Benjamin Jowett (1891).

^o**Achilles:** the great warrior-hero of *The Illiad*.

phy, exhorting anyone whom I meet after my manner.... I interrogate and examine and cross-examine him, and if I think that he has no virtue, but only says that he has, I reproach him with undervaluing the greater, and overvaluing the less.... For I do nothing but go about persuading you all, old and young alike, not to take thought for your persons and your properties, but first and chiefly to care about the greatest improvement of the soul.... Wherefore, O men of Athens, I say to you... either acquit me or not; but whatever you do, know that I shall never alter my ways, not even if I have to die many times....

[I]f you kill such a one as I am, you will injure yourselves more than you will injure me.... For if you kill me you will not easily find another like me, who, if I may use such a ludicrous figure of speech, am a sort of gadfly, given to the state by the God; and the state is like a great and noble steed who is tardy in his motions owing to his very size, and requires to be stirred into life. I am that gadfly which God has given the state and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you.... I dare say that you may feel irritated at being suddenly awakened when you are caught napping; and you may think that if

you were to strike me dead..., which you easily might, then you would sleep on for the remainder of your lives....

[After the jury finds Socrates guilty, he accepts the sentence of death, rejecting the alternative punishments of prison or exile.]

There are many reasons why I am not grieved, O men of Athens, at the vote of condemnation. The difficulty, my friends, is not in avoiding death, but in avoiding unrighteousness....

I am not angry with my accusers, or my condemners.... Still I have a favor to ask of them. When my sons are grown up, I would ask you, O my friends, to punish them... if they seem to care about riches, or anything, more than about virtue; or if they pretend to be something when they are really nothing, then reprove them, as I have reprovved you, for not caring about that for which they ought to care, and thinking that they are something when they are really nothing. And if you do this, I and my sons will have received justice at your hands.

The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways—I to die, and you to live. Which is better, God only knows.

Document 5.4

Reflections from Jesus

Like Confucius, Jesus apparently never wrote anything himself. His sayings and his actions were recorded in the Gospels by his followers. The Gospel of Matthew, from which this selection is taken, was composed during the second half of the first century C.E. For Christian people, this passage, known as the Sermon on the Mount, has long been among the most beloved of biblical texts, regarded as a guide for effective living and the core of Jesus' ethical and moral teachings. In this selection, Jesus contrasts the "broad road" of conventional understanding and values with the "narrow road that leads to life."

- In what ways does his teaching challenge or contradict the conventional outlook of his time?
- What criticisms does he make of those referred to as hypocrites, Pharisees, and the teachers of the law?

- How would you summarize “the good life” as Jesus might have defined it?
- How might Jesus and Confucius have responded to each other’s teachings?
- What is Jesus’ posture toward Jewish law?
- Beyond its use as a guide for personal behavior, what are the larger social implications of the Sermon on the Mount?

The Gospel of Matthew

ca. 70–100 C.E.

Now when he [Jesus] saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its

stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. . . .

“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

“Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to

the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart....

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

“Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them.... So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men.... But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men.... But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think

they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him....

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also....

“So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

“Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye....

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it....”

When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.

Using the Evidence: The Good Life in Classical Eurasia

1. **Making comparisons:** In describing the “good life” or the “good society,” what commonalities do you see among these four documents? What differences are apparent? How might the authors of each text respond to the ideas of the others?
2. **Placing texts in context:** In what ways was each of these texts reacting *against* the conventional wisdom of their times? How was each shaped by the social and political circumstances in which they were composed?
3. **Relating spirituality and behavior:** What is the relationship between religion (the transcendent realm of the gods or the divine) and moral behavior on earth in each of these documents? How does the “good life” relate to politics?
4. **Defining the “good person”:** How do each of these texts characterize the superior person or the fully realized human being? How do they define personal virtue?

Visual Sources

Considering the Evidence: Representations of the Buddha



Buddhism derived from a single individual, Siddhartha Gautama, born in northern India between the sixth and fourth centuries B.C.E. Legendary accounts of his life often begin with his miraculous conception and birth, as a sacred white elephant pierced his mother's side with its trunk. The son of royalty, the young Siddhartha enjoyed a splendid but sheltered upbringing encased in luxury, and his father spared no effort to protect the child from anything painful or difficult. At the age of sixteen, he was married to a beautiful cousin, Yasodhara, who bore him a son thirteen years later. But while riding beyond the palace grounds, this curious and lively young man encountered human suffering in the form of an old man, a sick person, and a corpse. Shattered by these revelations of aging, illness, and death, Siddhartha determined to find the cause of such sufferings and a remedy for them. And so, at the age of twenty-nine and on the very day his son was born, the young prince left his luxurious life as well as his wife and child, shed his royal jewels, cut off his hair, and set off on a quest for enlightenment. This act of severing his ties to the attachments of ordinary life is known in Buddhist teaching as the Great Renunciation.

What followed were six years of spiritual experimentation that finally led Siddhartha to a particular tree in northern India, where, legend tells us, he began a forty-nine-day period of intensive meditation. There he was assailed by that figure of temptation and illusion known as Mara, who sent demons, wild beasts, and his beautiful daughters to frighten or seduce Siddhartha from his quest. But his persistence was finally rewarded with the almost indescribable experience of full enlightenment. Now he was the Buddha, the man who had awakened.

For the next forty years, he taught what he had learned, setting in motion the cultural tradition we know as Buddhism. Over many centuries, the religion evolved, as it attracted growing numbers of converts and as it intersected with various cultures throughout Asia, including China, Japan, Tibet, Korea, and Vietnam. Those changes affected not only matters of doctrine and practice but also the images that expressed the core teachings of Buddhism.

For almost five centuries after his death, which likely took place in the early fifth century B.C.E., artists represented the Buddha as an empty throne, a horse with no rider, a tree, a wheel, or in some other symbolic way, while

largely shunning any depiction of him in human form. No one knows precisely why. Regarding the Buddha as a fully human teacher and guide, perhaps they sought to prevent his being perceived as a divine figure that might be worshipped. On his deathbed, after all, he had counseled his followers: “Be a lamp unto yourselves. Work out your own salvation.” But it was hardly a unique form of religious representation, for some Christians and almost all Muslims likewise declined to portray their prophetic figures in human terms.

Among the most widespread of these early symbolic representations of the Buddha were images of his footprints. Found throughout Buddhist Asia, such footprints indicated the Buddha’s spiritual presence and served as a focus for devotion or contemplation. They also reminded his followers that since he had passed into *nirvana*, he could not be physically present. One Buddhist text declared that those who looked upon those footprints “shall be freed from the bonds of error, and conducted upon the Way of Enlightenment.”²⁴

Visual Source 5.1 shows a footprint image from northwestern India dating probably from the second century C.E. and containing a number of Buddhist symbols. In the center of each footprint is a *dharmachakra*, a wheel-like structure that had long symbolized the Buddha’s teaching. Here, it surrounds a lotus flower, representing the Buddha’s purity. Near the heel is a three-pronged emblem known as a *triratna*. It symbolizes the three things in which Buddhists can take refuge: the Buddha himself, his teaching, and the *sangha* (the Buddhist community). This particular footprint image also includes in the bottom corners two *yakshis*, Indian female earth spirits suggesting fertility. The position of their hands conveys a respectful greeting.

- Why might the wheel serve as an effective symbol of the Buddha’s message?
- What does the inclusion of the *yakshis* add to the message of this image?
- What overall religious message might this footprint convey to those who gazed upon it?

By the first century C.E., the impulse to depict the Buddha in human form had surfaced, with some of the earliest examples coming from the region of South Asia known as Gandhara in what is now northern Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan (see Map 4.3, p. 152). That area had been a part of the empire of Alexander the Great and his Hellenistic successors from about 322 B.C.E. to 50 B.C.E. and had developed commercial ties to the Roman Empire as well. These early images of the Buddha reflect this Greco-Roman influence, depicting him with a face similar to that of the Greek god Apollo, dressed in a Roman-style toga, and with curly hair characteristic of the Mediterranean region.



Visual Source 5.1 Footprints of the Buddha (Courtesy, John Eskanazi Ltd, London. Photo: A. C. Cooper N & P Ltd, London)

By the time of India's Gupta dynasty (320–550 C.E.), the Greco-Roman influence of the Gandhara style was fading, replaced by more completely Indian images of the Buddha, which became the “classic” model that spread widely across Asia. Visual Source 5.2 represents one such image, deriving from Bihar in eastern India during the sixth century C.E. Notice here the hand gestures known as *mudras*. The Buddha's right hand, for example, with palm facing the viewer, indicates reassurance, or “have no fear.” The partially webbed fingers are among the *lakshanas*, or signs of a Buddha image, that denote the Buddha's unique status. So too is the knot on the top of his head, symbolizing enlightenment.

- What might account for the emergence of human images of the Buddha?
- What overall impression or religious meaning is this statue intended to convey?



Visual Source 5.2 A Classic Indian Buddha (Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY)

- The elongated earlobes remind the viewer that, earlier in his life, the prince Siddhartha had worn heavy and luxurious earrings. What does their absence suggest about his transformation as the Buddha?
- Notice the partially closed and downcast eyes of the Buddha as well as his bare feet. What might these features of the image suggest?

Among the conditions favoring the proliferation of Buddha images in the early centuries of the Common Era was the growth of a new form of Buddhist belief and practice known as Mahayana (Great Vehicle). As the message of the Buddha gained a mass following in the several centuries after his death, some of its early features—rigorous and time-consuming meditation practice, a focus on monks and nuns withdrawn from ordinary life, the absence of accessible supernatural figures able to provide help and comfort—proved difficult for or beyond the reach of many converts. Expressed in various sects, practices, and schools of thought, Mahayana Buddhism offered a more accessible version of the faith, a spiritual path available to a much wider range of people beyond the monks and ascetics, who were the core group in early Buddhism.

In most expressions of Mahayana Buddhism, enlightenment (or becoming a Buddha), was available to everyone; it was possible within the context of ordinary life, rather than a monastery; and it might occur within a single lifetime rather than over the course of many lives. While Buddhism had originally put a premium on spiritual wisdom, leading to liberation from rebirth and the achievement of nirvana, Mahayana expressions of the faith emphasized compassion—the ability to feel the sorrows of other people as if they were one's own. This compassionate religious ideal found expression in the notion of *bodhisattvas*, fully enlightened beings who postponed their own final liberation in order to assist a suffering humanity. They were spiritual beings, intermediaries between mortal humans and the Buddhas, whose countless images in sculpture or painting became objects of worship and sources of comfort and assistance to many Buddhists.

Across the world of Asian Mahayana Buddhism, the most widely popular of the many bodhisattva figures was that of Avalokitesvara, known in China as Guanyin and in Japan as Kannon. This Bodhisattva of Compassion, often portrayed as a woman or with distinctly feminine characteristics, was known as the “the one who hears the cries of the world.” Calling upon him/her for assistance, devotees could be rescued from all kinds of danger and distress. Women might petition for a healthy child. Moral transformation too was possible. According to the *Lotus Sutra*, a major Mahayana text, “Those who act under the impulse of hatred will, after adoring the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, be freed from hatred.”

Among the most striking of the many representation of this bodhisattva are those that portray him/her with numerous heads, with which to hear the many cries of a suffering humanity, and with multiple arms to aid them.



Visual Source 5.3 A Bodhisattva of Compassion: Kannon of 1,000 Arms (From *The Concise History of Japanese Buddhist Sculpture*, Bijutu Shuppan-sha. Photo: Lightstream)

Visual Source 5.3 provides one illustration of such a figure, the Senju Kannon, from Japan of the eighth century C.E.

- What elements of Buddhist imagery can you identify in this statue?
- To whom might such an image appeal? And why?
- Notice the lotus flower, for centuries a rich Buddhist symbol, on which the bodhisattva is resting. With its roots in the mud, the lotus emerges

on the surface of the water as a pure, beautiful, and fragrant flower. Why would the artist choose to place the bodhisattva atop such a flower?

- Some scholars have identified similarities between the Bodhisattva of Compassion and the Virgin Mary in the Christian tradition. What common elements and what differences can you identify?

Beyond numerous bodhisattvas, Mahayana Buddhism also populated the spiritual universe with various Buddhas in addition to the historical Buddha. One of these is the Maitreya Buddha or the Buddha of the future, predicted to appear when the teachings of the historical Buddha have been lost or forgotten. In China, this Buddha of the future was sometimes portrayed as the “laughing Buddha,” a fat, smiling, contented figure, said to be modeled on a tenth-century monk named Budai, who wandered the country merrily spreading happiness and good cheer, while evoking contentment and abundance. Visual Source 5.4 illustrates this Chinese Maitreya Buddha together with some of his disciples in a carving, dating to the tenth through fourteenth centuries, in China’s Feilai Feng caves.



Visual Source 5.4 The Chinese Maitreya Buddha (Nazima Kowail/Corbis)

- How does this Buddha image differ, both physically and in its religious implications, from the Buddhas in Visual Sources 5.2 and 5.3?
- Why might this image be appealing to some Buddhists, and why might others take exception to it?
- In what ways does this figure represent an adaptation of Buddhist imagery to Chinese culture? Consider what you know about Confucian and Daoist postures to the world.



Visual Source 5.5 The Amitabha Buddha (The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. Photograph © The State Hermitage Museum)

Yet another Buddha figure within the Mahayana tradition is that of Amitabha, or Amida, the Buddha of Infinite Light, associated with the Pure Land school of China and other parts of East Asia. In this version of Buddhism, worship of the Amitabha Buddha, by sincerely chanting his name, for example, would earn devotees rebirth in the Western Paradise, or the Pure Land. Often imagined as a place of constant light, fragrant breezes, luxuriant vegetation, and abundant water, the Western Paradise was as accessible to commoners, even criminals and outcasts, as it was to monks and nuns.

Visual Source 5.5, dating from somewhere between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries, depicts Amitabha in bright robes, accompanied by several bodhisattvas. They are shown welcoming a deceased person, represented as a naked boy in the stream of light that comes from the Amitabha's forehead, into the Pure Land, where he will be installed on the golden lotus throne, carried by the bodhisattvas. There he can continuously hear the teachings of the Buddha, while working off any remaining negative karma, before achieving complete liberation in nirvana.

- Why do you think the practice of Pure Land Buddhism became so widely popular in China by the mid-seventh century? What features of this image might help to explain its appeal?
- What details from this painting support the sacred character of the Buddha and bodhisattva figures?
- What is the significance of the small figure sitting in meditation under a tree at the bottom left of the painting?

Using the Evidence: Representations of the Buddha

1. **Tracing change:** What transformations in Buddhist belief and practice are disclosed in these images?
2. **Identifying cultural adaptation:** What evidence do these images provide about the blending of Buddhism into a variety of cultural settings?
3. **Understanding the growth of Buddhism:** What do these images suggest about the appeal of Buddhism to growing numbers of people across Asia?
4. **Considering cultural boundaries:** To what extent are these images meaningful to people outside of the Buddhist tradition? In what ways do they speak to universal human needs or desires? What is specifically Buddhist or Asian about them?