



The Buddha triumphing over Mara, 900–1000
India; probably Kurkihar, Bihar state
Stone
The Avery Brundage Collection, B605598

WHO IS DEPICTED HERE?

This is an image of the historical Buddha. We can tell it is the Buddha because of the many distinguishing marks (*lakshana*) visible in the sculpture. He has a cranial bump on his head (*ushnisha*), a tuft of hair between his eyes (*urna*), and the sign of the wheel (*chakra*) on his hands and soles of his feet. This wheel signifies the teaching of the Buddha, as well as his righteousness as a leader. He is dressed in a monk's robe, typically with one shoulder bare. He is seated on a lion throne. Above his head are branches of the bodhi tree, a reference to Bodhi Gaya where the Buddha sat under the bodhi tree and achieved enlightenment.

WHAT WAS THE BUDDHA'S ENLIGHTENMENT?

The Buddha sought answers to the problems of suffering and the continual cycle of birth, death and rebirth which he witnessed all around him. He rejected the path of complete self-denial (asceticism), and also rejected the comforts and indulgences of his former life as a prince. He resolved to sit under the bodhi tree and meditate on these issues until the answer to these problems became clear. His revelation has been called the Four Noble Truths, a summation of the cause of human suffering, and the possibility and pathway to enlightenment for all beings.

WHO TEMPTED THE BUDDHA?

In the course of his meditations, the Buddha was tempted by the demon Mara. Mara sent his armies, various temptations, and finally (as depicted here) a challenge that the Buddha must defend his claim of enlightenment. The Buddha touched the earth, and called the earth to witness his achievement. This "touching the earth" is seen as a significant gesture (*mudra*) in this sculpture. This iconography of the Buddha became very popular throughout Asia.

Mara can also be understood not only as a figure in a story, but also as a representation of inner temptations—mainly one's ego—that obstruct the path to enlightenment. Therefore, overcoming Mara is equivalent to overcoming the self.

WHEN WAS THIS MADE AND HOW WAS IT USED?

Based on an analysis of the style, medium and subject, this sculpture is dated to around the 800s CE and comes from eastern India. At that time, Pala dynasty rulers were generous supporters of the Buddhist religion, and many famous monasteries and universities existed in what is now the state of Bihar. Unfortunately, most of these buildings are now in ruins, as Buddhism succumbed to Muslim incursions and seriously declined around the 1100s CE. This sculpture was probably placed in a niche in a temple made of brick. We believe from the inscription on the base that the tiny figure on the lower right represents the donor.

Typical of the Pala style is the tendency for the central figure to stand out against a very decorative background. The dark schist gives the statue a dramatic, crisp appearance.