

The Visual Language of Buddhist Art

Illustrated by Stephanie Kao

For centuries as the Buddhism spread throughout Asia, the visual arts were critical in conveying the teachings of the Buddha to diverse audiences. By reading a visual vocabulary of physical characteristics, body postures, and hand gestures, individuals could learn the story of the Buddha's life. Although there are a standard set of symbolic features and gestures buddha images from different times, cultures, and places often have their own distinctive styles.

Examine the similarities and differences between the illustrated buddhas from the Asian Art Museum. Using the hand-outs *The Buddha Image* and *Eight Scenes of the Buddha's Life*, identify the characteristics, poses, and symbolic gestures of each buddha. Next, look for meaning behind the large illustrations of buddhas provided (also from the Asian Art Museum) by first locating and labeling as many visual clues you can find.

Pakistan



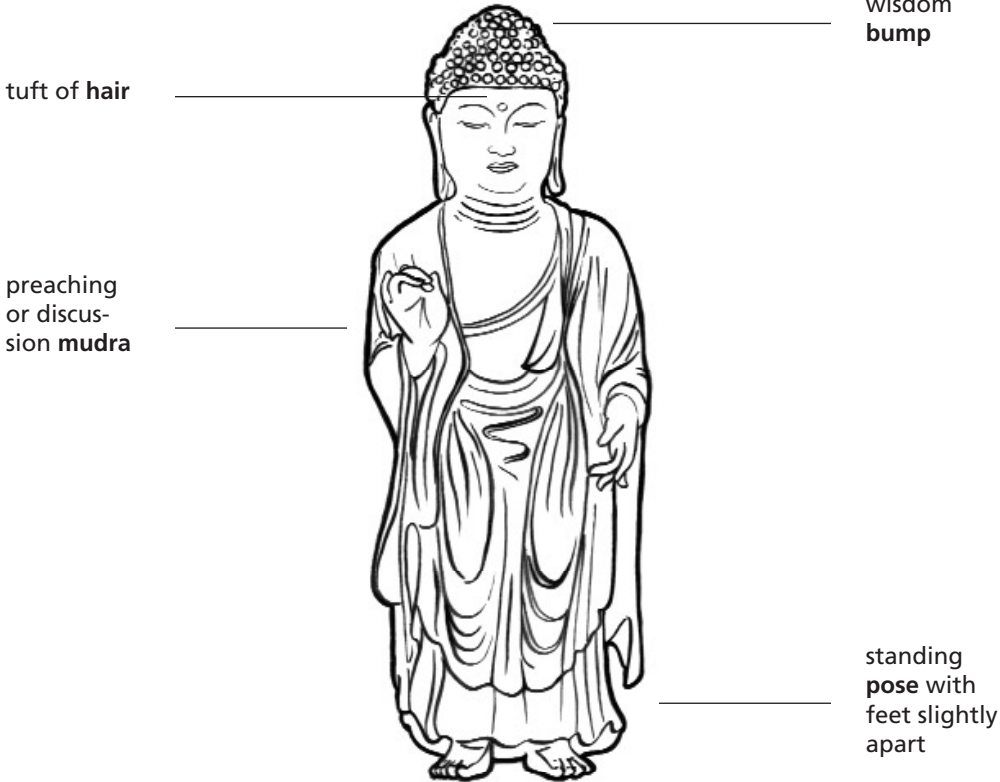
China



Japan



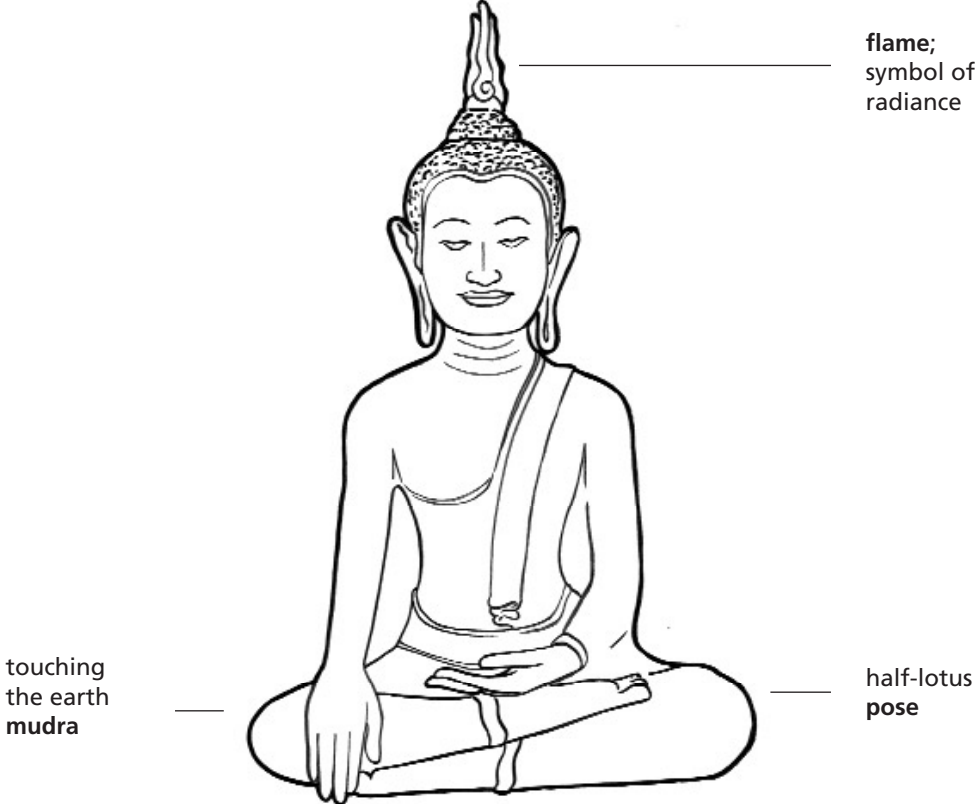
Korea



China,
Dolonor,
Mongolia



Thailand



Indonesia

turning the wheel of the doctrine or preaching mudra



wisdom bump

seated pose with legs hanging down

Thailand

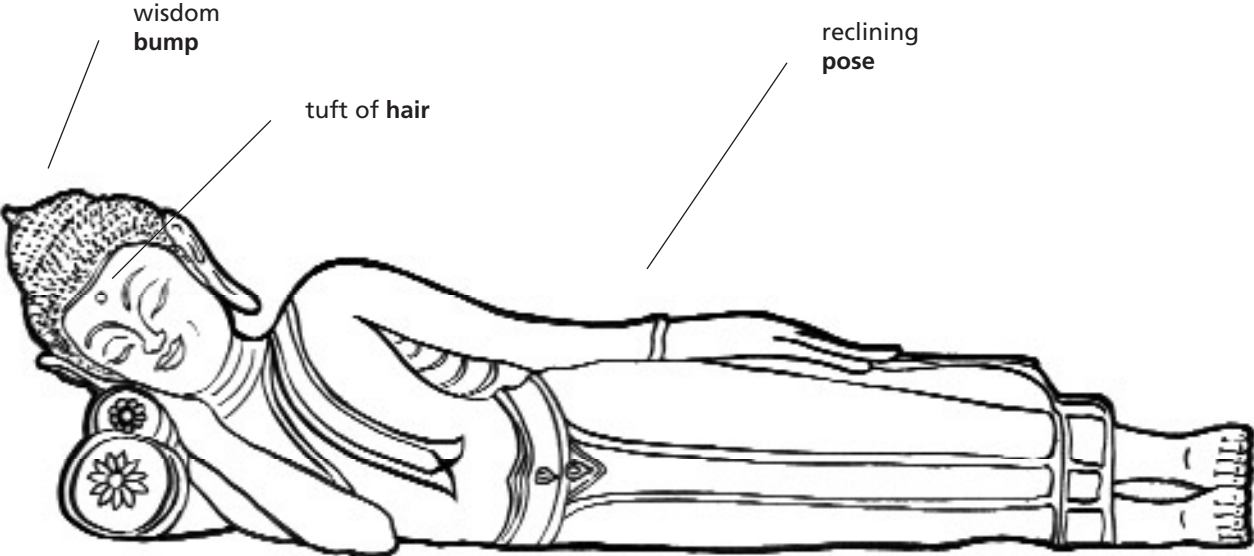
giving reassurance mudra



crown

standing pose with legs slightly apart

Thailand





Buddha; India, approx. 975–1025

