

Fulfilling the Vow

The Priory recently received as a gift a gracious and stately sculpture of Shakyamuni Buddha. He is now our main altar image. Buddhist statues teach—some show us how to sit or walk or lie down; others show how to ground ourselves in the midst of difficulty or to pour out compassion upon the world. This particular statue teaches, “Don’t be afraid. Come with me, and together let’s train and fulfill our heartfelt wish to cleanse our karma and rescue sentient beings.”



The statue was sculpted in China of a high-quality, dark red clay. (Water should not be used to clean it—only a soft cloth or feather duster.) A natural patina or sheen will occur over time and contribute to the statue’s sense of age, just as abundant moss on a tree indicates a venerable specimen. We associate old age with wisdom, stability, strength, and dependability. An ancient-looking altar statue gives the sense of having al-

ways been in its particular place and will always be there in the future. Likewise our Buddha nature has always been there, waiting patiently for the right moment to appear, and will be there for eternity. This statue seems the perfect one for our meditation hall in color, size, and style. It completes our Chinese rosewood altar with its images of Avalokiteshvara (Kwan Yin) on either side of the Buddha. It's as if the small gold Avalokiteshwara that served as the main altar image since the Priory's beginning was silently, patiently, and brightly sitting, holding the Buddha's place until he arrived.

The style of the statue is a very old one, said to be modeled on a likeness of Shakyamuni carved for King Udayana while the Buddha was away teaching his mother in one of the heavens. He stands erect, with one knee slightly forward to give a sense of movement – he's approaching us. In addition to showing us how to sit, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas show us how to practice active meditation, to come forth into the world of everyday people and fulfill the Bodhisattva vow of benefiting others.

The Buddha raises his right hand in the mudra (body position or hand gesture) of fearlessness. Palm facing forward, he says, "Don't be afraid." Fearlessness is one of the great gifts of training. When we can see through our ignorance and delusion, we can let go of our fear because we now know it was based on misperception. A popular book on acupuncture gives this insightful definition of fear: **False Evidence Appearing Real**. Rev. Master Jiyu called such old karmic conditioning "ghosts." Fear does have its causes, but training gives us the strength and courage to face these old habits and resolve them. This hand mudra also communicates blessing and bestowal of peace – the results of relinquished fear.

The statue extends its left arm downward with the palm of the hand open in the mudra of giving, or charity. When we step beyond our fear of the unknown and our tight grasp of the familiar, the Buddha is then able to give us the greatest gift, that of liberating Dharma. Although actually, the act of giving up – of relinquishment, of letting go – is itself the liberation. We don't "get" something else. We "receive," become aware of, what was always ours. And this gift is free, though we do have to do the training to realize it.

The fingers of the offered hand are curled gently toward us, so that we want to reach out and touch his hand. The Buddha kindly beckons us. The love of the Unborn is offered tenderly, for our benefit. The statue seems to have a significant presence, larger than life. From the moment we placed him on the altar, I found myself continually drawn to the hall. Because of other temple responsibilities, I can't be in the hall as much as I would like, but I'm aware of this Buddha's presence and invitation, even at great distances, such as recently when I was on retreat in northern British Columbia. In this same manner our Buddha nature quietly calls us to a life of meditation and precepts – we become aware of Its presence through sincere and diligent practice, wherever we are. This portrayal of the Buddha also teaches us in turn how to extend ourselves when we make an offering – no expectations, no secret costs, no strings or ties, no insistence – simply pure love.

Each hand of the Buddha is impressed with a Dharma wheel, which represents the Eightfold Path, the fourth of the Four Noble Truths. To practice the Buddha's way is to impress the teachings upon our minds and hearts so deeply that we find them as familiar as the palms of our hands. The potential for wisdom and understanding is already there within us, just waiting in the same way as the soft clay receives the imprint of the wheel. We can draw on the teaching anytime if we will put our hands and hearts in meditation and look. When we extend our reassurance or offering to others, they likewise see the skillful teaching of Buddha.

These Dharma wheels are connected thematically to the manji on the Buddha's chest, right over the heart. The manji is an ancient Indian Buddhist symbol for turning the wheel of the Dharma. We use this symbol to represent the movement of the heart (Buddha nature) when one gives voice to or listens to the Dharma. It also illustrates the direction of the breath in meditation: up the spine on the inhalation and then cascading down the front of the body on the exhalation. Monks of our Order sometime call this circulation of the breath the "backward-" or "return-flowing method." The manji is the wheel, the point where things turn, just as waterwheels were once used to power mills or generate power. Stillness within at the very

center allows the teaching to move, to flow into us, to turn the heart around, and to flow out purified and strong to the world.

The manji should not be mistaken for the Nazi swastika, which intentionally turns counterclockwise, the reverse direction from that usually seen with the Buddhist manji. In our Serene Reflection/Soto Zen tradition we are careful to make sure the manji flows or turns clockwise. This represents things turning toward the good, in the right way, just as when we circumambulate in ceremonies we process around the Buddha in a clockwise direction. If you travel in Asia, you may not always see this convention followed, but you can rest assured that if you see a manji in Buddhist architecture, art, or writings, it represents this turning of the wheel of the teaching – toward the good, the cessation of suffering.

We'll be opening the eyes of the new statue soon. The face of a Buddhist statue or painting is particularly important, as its beauty and kindness elicit that same longing and love within ourselves. In this short dedication the celebrant symbolically paints in the pupils of the statue's eyes. Rev. Master Jiyu explained that the ceremony is one of recognition, like the recognition ceremony at the end of the Ten Precepts Retreat. We recognize the Buddha nature of the statue and thus of all things.

Traditionally copies of scriptures or relics of great masters are inserted into statues to represent the heart, the Dharma. They enliven the statue, they bring it "to life," for it's the teaching, not this sculpted mass of clay, that liberates us. Given that this particular statue is solid, we'll be affixing a calligraphed and sealed scripture to its base.

The eye-opening ceremony officially installs the statue in the hall. We invite it to sit, lie, rest, and walk with us and to always watch over us with loving eyes. IT, the Buddha nature, the Unborn, is always with us regardless of where we are or what we do. We bring IT to life by being mindful and meditative in our daily actions of body, speech, and mind. IT is always present as unconditional love and compassion, and longs for our return – "re-turning" – toward and with IT.

So when we walk into the hall and raise our eyes to view this beautiful statue, we may hear it speaking, "Please come. Don't be afraid. Here is the wondrous, life-giving, tender Dharma. This is true and sure refuge, liberation without remainder. Take my hand and let us together turn the wheel of the teaching and fulfill the vow of benefiting sentient beings."

Rev. Oswin

References: Rev. Master Koton Benson, Lions Gate Buddhist Priory, Vancouver, BC, Canada; Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett, ed. Rev. Daizui MacPhillamy, *Roar of the Tigress*, Vol. 2, glossary, p. 264; Robert E. Fischer, *Buddhist Art & Architecture*, Thames & Hudson, 1993, pp. 15-16, 126-132; and Alice Burmeister with Tom Monte, *The Touch of Healing*, Bantam, 1997, p. 18. We also extend our sincere gratitude to the statue's donor, with the wish that the resulting merit of the gift may be used for whatever purpose she wishes. December 5, 2006.

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