

Tōfukuji Nehanzō (Parinirvana image from Tōfukuji temple in Kyoto)

copied from a painting by Kichizan Minchō (1351/1352-1431)

Japan, Artist Unknown

late Edo period (1600-1868) to early Meiji period (1868-1912)

woodcut

41.0 x 25.6 cm

Gift of Sherry Fowler

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Essay by Takaaki Kumagai

On the fifteenth day of the second lunar month, Buddhist temples throughout Japan hold a Parinirvana ceremony called *nehan-e*, in which a large hanging scroll depicting Sakyamuni's Parinirvana becomes the central focus. According to the Mahayana Buddhist *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, at midnight on that day, the historical Buddha Sakyamuni (J. Shaka), in whose teachings Buddhist doctrine originated, lay down facing north on a dais set in a grove of sala trees on the riverbank, near Kushinagar in northern India. Sakyamuni thereby announced that he was about to enter Parinirvana. Hearing this news, hundreds of sentient beings—monks, bodhisattvas and animals—gathered around the dais to hear Sakyamuni's last sermon.

The word Parinirvana or *nehan* in Japanese literally means “extinguishment,” or the blowing-out of the fires of greed, hatred and delusion after one's soul is released from life. Parinirvana is conceived as liberation from lengthy spiritual training in the secular world. According to Buddhist legend, Sakyamuni became a monk at the age of twenty-nine, and engaged in ascetic training in the mountains for six years. Thereafter, he meditated under a tree in Bodhgaya (present day northeastern India) where he gained Enlightenment. He preached throughout India for forty years until he entered Parinirvana. The scene depicted in the present print is this final moment of Sakyamuni's life described in *Mahaparinirvana*

Sutra. This familiar scene is one of the most frequent motifs in Buddhist visual culture all over the Asian Continent, which has been materialized in diverse art forms and styles.

The present print, woodblock monochrome, based on the fourteenth century Zen monk painter Kichizan Minchō's (吉山明兆) color-on silk painting, demonstrates the popularity of the Parinirvana theme during the late Edo period (1615-1868). While the print is an elaborate copy of Minchō's painting from Tōfukuji temple, as indicated in the upper and lower inscriptions, we must note the radical reduction of its size from 876.1 x 351.0 cm to 41.5 x 26 cm (1 inch = 2.54 cm), in addition to the lack of color. The mid Edo period (around the eighteenth century) saw the flourishing of print production in Japan with the increasing availability of materials including paper and woodblocks. Particularly, the affordable circulation of paper led to the proliferation of both religious and secular imagery among a large part of the population. The large number of woodblock prints on the Parinirvana theme, either monochrome or polychrome and in varying sizes, were produced by different workshops. Among them, the pioneering Dōeki (道益) workshop in Edo was best known for their superior techniques in producing Buddhist prints. As already mentioned, a large-scale Parinirvana painting is traditionally hung like a banner on occasions of the temple ritual *nehan-e*, in which the believers commemorate one of the most significant moments of the Buddha's life. In the Edo period, however, Parinirvana prints circulated more widely, and were appreciated privately in individual households. In other words, in the Edo period, Parinirvana images came to be separated from the traditional context of temple use. Unfortunately, this print does not indicate the name of the workshop, and the information provided through the inscriptions is limited to the date and title of Minchō's original painting.

Active in the early Muromachi period (1336-1573), Minchō was the monk painter working as *densu*, or the manager of Buddhist altars in the Zen Buddhist temple Tōfukuji in the city of Kyoto. Not many details are known about Minchō. He was born on Awaji Island in present-day Hyōgo prefecture and brought to Kyoto at an early age by the monk Daidō. The temple records describe Minchō as a monk of modest personality. One episode indicates that when Minchō heard the news of his mother's illness, he quickly portrayed his face reflected on the pond and sent it to her. In that way, he communicated that he was in good health without leaving his official duties aside. Minchō is famous for his prolific productions of Zen Buddhist master portraits, yet he also worked on diverse subjects such as *shigajiku* (poem-painting scroll) screens characteristic of Zen literary salons in the early fifteenth century. Overall, however, rather than following the spontaneous quality characteristic of the early Japanese Zen tradition, Minchō seems to have been more faithful to the official demands of Buddhist temples by producing a large number of portraits.

Needless to say, the production of the image of Sakyamuni entering Parinirvana is not a phenomenon exclusive to Japan. Nevertheless, its representation in a single painting is more rare outside of Japan; in India, China and Central Asia, with a few exceptions, most known examples are sculptures or murals. It is quite logical to consider that the Parinirvana image originated in India. For example, relief sculptures from the Gandhara region, which are deemed to be the oldest extant images of Parinirvana scenes, depict the reclining Sakyamuni with a mandorla. Unlike later Japanese compositions that are full of human, divine and animal figures, after which this print is modeled, the image in the relief sculpture appears to be more cohesive, and the reclining Sakyamuni is presented in an iconic manner with only a few of his disciples.

While depicting a large number of animals is a distinctive quality of extant later Japanese Parinirvana paintings, scholars agree that this tradition originated in China during the Song Dynasty (960-1279), rather than being indigenous to Japan. The Japanese scholar Nakano Genzō has revealed that there are two major formats of Japanese Parinirvana painting. The first and older type presents the historical Buddha Sakyamuni more centrally by depicting him in a larger scale at a slightly right angle. In the picture, Sakyamuni appears to be rigid, with his arms parallel to the body. The major examples in this first type are found from the eleventh to twelfth centuries, with the 1086 painting from the Shingon Buddhist temple Kongōbuji on Mt. Kōya, Wakayama prefecture as the most renowned example. On the other hand, the second type emerged around the thirteenth century. In the second type, the Buddha's figure is depicted from a left angle in a relatively small scale, and the space is instead filled a large number of deities and sentient beings, which include Sakyamuni's disciples, compassionate bodhisattvas, monks and animals. In contrast to the Buddha in the first type, Sakyamuni here looks more casual and relaxed, supporting his head with his right arm. Minchō's painting from Tōfukuji belongs to this second type.

The existence of these two types of Parinirvana images in the history of Japan and the transition from the first type to the second type are quite interesting, as they point to the rise of the subject in the popular consciousness of Japanese Buddhist visual culture. Carolyn Wheelwright provides fascinating insight by comparing the aforementioned Parinirvana painting from Mt. Kōya with Minchō's Parinirvana painting. According to Wheelwright, in the Mt. Kōya painting, which is depicted in an iconic manner, Sakyamuni's suffering may be more immediately felt by viewers. The variety of emotional expressions made by the bodhisattvas, disciples and lesser sentient beings were rendered more realistically. On the other hand, in Minchō's painting, which is much larger in size,

Sakyamuni's presence is less central, as he is presented in a smaller size accompanied by increasing number of beings and is a part of the popular narrative. Set in the greater landscape and explanatory context, here the divine aura of Sakyamuni, as well as the grief of bodhisattvas and Buddha's disciples, seems to be more neutralized.

The present print shows a wide variety of details. In the composition, the witnesses interestingly reflect the order in which they arrived at the scene. Closest to the dais are Sakyamuni's major disciples, which number seventeen figures, including the Ten Great Disciples of the historical Buddha, Indian saints known as arhats and virtuous monks individually named in the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*. Closely surrounding the dais from the rear to the left, the row of disciples continues into the foreground. The monk who fell senseless in front of the dais because of his grief is Sakyamuni's personal attendant Ananda. Behind these disciples at the rear are six bodhisattvas. The picture also includes laypersons—nine men and two women—who figure in the narrative of the sutra. These people are described mostly as representative of the categories such as virtuous kings, righteous ministers and wealthy landlords. One specific example, however, is the righteous doctor Jivaka, who guided King Ajasatru's kingdom by curing the king's spiritual sickness. At the rear of the dais, the disciples and bodhisattvas are surrounded in a protective manner by heavenly beings.

Across the lower area of the composition, fifty-two different animals mourning Sakyamuni's death are depicted. As already mentioned, the inclusion of various animals in the composition was originally a Chinese tradition, but survives only in Japanese Parinirvana painting. Many Japanese Parinirvana paintings focused on two principal animals mentioned in the sutra: the great elephant and the fearless lion. Minchō's painting includes most of the animals named in the sutra: water buffalo, cow, sheep, wild geese,

mandarin ducks, and *kalavinka* peacock, a fantastic human-headed music-making bird. Interestingly, while Minchō limited his depiction of fantastic creatures to *kalavinka*, he depicted many other animals familiar to Japanese people yet not mentioned in the sutra. These animals include a chicken, owl, tiger, leopard, horse, camel, deer, turtle and cat. This gives the painting a casual, rather than emotional, look.

Full of fascinating pictorial details, *Tōfukuji Nehanzō* demonstrates the creative response of nineteenth century Japanese printmakers to the long tradition of Parinirvana image making that was widespread all over the Asian continent. What we can confirm in the present print is the fact that Buddhist divinities continued to be inspirational to commoners in early modern Japan yet in a form that was ever more closely embedded in their everyday lives. The proliferation of wood-block techniques in nineteenth century Japan permanently changed the meaning of Buddhist visual images. Buddhist images were no longer secret or objects exclusive to temple priests. This Edo period Parinirvana print is the product of a multifaceted interaction between the religious and popular realms. In other words, popular imagination was projected on the Buddhist visual world and Buddhist divinities became increasingly omnipresent in people's quotidian lives through affordable reproductions.

Bibliography

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