

Shaka Triad with Sixteen Deities

Japan, artist unknown

1800s, Edo period (1600-1868) or Meiji period (1868-1912)

woodcut mounted on a hanging scroll

126.7 x 58.3 cm

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. George A. Colom

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Essay by Brian Hogarth

Various schools of Buddhism throughout East Asia disseminated copies of texts (sutras) and images of Buddhist deities through the technology of woodblock printing. Producing printed copies of Buddhist texts and images helped to disseminate ideas about the religion, but it also accumulated spiritual merit, which adherents believed would assure a better rebirth in the next life. Some of the earliest Buddhist prints have been found in China, Korea and Japan dating from the seventh and eighth centuries. This large image of a group of Buddhist deities in the Spencer Museum of Art collection dates from the Edo period (1615-1868) or possibly later. An arrangement of figures like this can be traced back to earlier examples in East Asian art, exemplifying the dissemination of not only religious but also artistic ideas across China, Korea and Japan.

In the Spencer print, we see a gathering of Buddhist figures arranged vertically on either side of a main figure seated on a throne. This main figure is Shaka (Japanese word for *Shakyamuni*), the Historical Buddha who lived around the fourth or fifth century B.C.E. Buddhist figures can be identified by various attributes and by their placement within various groupings. Shaka is noticeably larger than the other figures, indicating his importance. Above

him hovers a richly decorated floral canopy, referring to an umbrella that traditionally was held above important or royal persons. Shaka sits on a lotus throne, which is perched on a multi-layered pedestal, elevating him above the others. The lotus is a symbol of purity. Shaka's right hand is raised in a gesture of "have no fear" (*abhaya mudra*) and his left hand is lowered on his crossed legs in a meditation gesture (*dhyana mudra*). Buddhas are recognized by additional attributes such as a wisdom bump on the head, a tuft of hair (*urna*) on the forehead, elongated earlobes (a reference to the Buddha's former life as a prince who wore heavy jewelry), a simple monk's robe draped lightly over the shoulders, and three rings on the neck. Several large mandorlas (like halos or solar bursts) surround the figure, indicating his radiant wisdom. An assemblage of figures around Shaka usually indicates he is preaching, or it can refer to specific texts, as Buddhist texts are, for the most part, derived from the sayings of the Buddha.

Immediately below Shaka to his right and left are two figures with smaller mandorlas. These can be identified as Monju (Japanese for *Manjusri*) to Shaka's left, and Fugen (Japanese for *Samantabhadra*) to Shaka's right. Monju and Fugen are bosatsu (*bodhisattvas*)—enlightened beings who forego the full achievement of Buddhahood ('Buddha' being a designation of the state of perfect wisdom and spiritual achievement, and not a personal name) to help others along the path to enlightenment. In contrast to the unadorned figure of Shaka, the bosatsu are heavily adorned with princely crowns, jewels, elaborate scarves and robes.

What are the origins of the figures of Monju and Fugen? Fugen is strongly associated with the Lotus Sutra; introduced in the final chapter as a protector of those who chant the sutra. Monju is mentioned in at least three sutras that originate in India. In one of them, he engages in a philosophical debate about the nature of non-duality with a layperson named Yuima (*Vimilakirti*). Monju was strongly associated with the Five Peaks (*Wutaishan*) in China, where he is said to

have appeared in visions to various monks. The Japanese monk Ennin (794-864) traveled to the Five Peaks to witness these visions, and is believed to have carved the first image of Monju in Japan upon his return. Like Fugen, Monju is associated with the protection of sutras. In Monju's case, the specific sutra is the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra (Prajnaparamita sutra)*.

There are additional attributes that help us identify Fugen and Monju. Both ride on animal mounts, an idea derived from India, where the ancient Hindu deities are seen 'riding' on animal mounts. Monju's animal mount is a lion, whereas Fugen rides on an elephant with six tusks. Neither the lion nor the elephant are native to Japan; therefore artists modeled the depictions of these animals from paintings and prints originating from China, which in turn were copied from elsewhere or partly imagined. The lion in a Buddhist context symbolizes the power and extent of the Buddhist teachings (the *dharma*). Shakyamuni means "Sage of the Shakas," a reference to his ancestral clan. The elephant is associated with royalty, strength and the ability to overcome obstacles. The six tusks are believed to represent the six senses that must be overcome by the practitioner on the path to enlightenment. Fugen is sometimes shown seated atop a lotus throne, but in this triad, when he is paired with Monju on the lion, he either stands or rides on his elephant.

The two bosatsu also communicate through hand gestures or various objects held in their hands. Monju, for example, is often depicted with a sword in the right hand (to cut through disillusioned minds) and in the other hand, he holds a sutra. In the Spencer print, the sutra is in a small box, and it is perched on a lotus flower. This represents the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* mentioned above. Monju himself represents wisdom, intelligence and memory. Students might worship him specifically for assistance with passing examinations. He is said to have a beautiful voice. Fugen's hands are joined together in a prayer-like position (*anjali mudra*). Fugen

represents beneficence and everlasting support. He communicates diligence in following the Buddhist precepts (what one agrees to do when becoming a follower of the Buddha) and practices. Like Monju, Fugen holds a long stem, on top of which is a motif in the shape of a fungus of immortality, a symbol often seen in Chinese art called an “as you wish” (*ruyi*) scepter. The Japanese term for this scepter is *nyo-i*.

The figures of Shaka, Monju and Fugen together form the ‘core’ group identified as the Shaka triad. The surrounding figures—mostly guardian or warrior-like figures—are a bit looser in conception. They are usually identified as “Sixteen Deities” or “Sixteen Good Spirits” (Japanese: *jūroku zenjin*). They form a protective shell around the triad, and are typically positioned along the outer edges of Buddhist altars. In temples, they can appear in separate gateways or buildings. In the Spencer print they are tightly grouped together, creating a sense of depth and recession by standing in front of each other, and arranged vertically.

Guardian figures are generally thought to have originated from followers of the Buddha who swore to serve and protect the three jewels of Buddhism: the Buddha, the monastic community (*sangha*) and the teachings (*dharma*). Guardians can also derive from local heroes or angry deities that are subdued or converted by the Buddha and his followers and put to beneficial use protecting Buddhism. In Japan, local Shinto deities can also take the form of Buddhist figures, or be installed in Buddhist temple sites.

A clue to the overall function of the group lies in the presence of several monk-like figures standing on the lower right and left of the group. The one on the lower right can be identified as Genjō (Chinese: *Xuanzang*), the seventh-century monk who traveled from China to India and back over many years to retrieve Buddhist texts. His journey was later popularized in

the story called *Journey to the West*. Genjō carries a backpack made of bamboo and filled with Buddhist texts (scrolls). Opposite him is a fierce looking guardian figure with an image of a coiled snake on his left arm and child's head on his chest. This represents Jinja Taishō (Chinese: *Shensha Dajiang*) the guardian deity who saved Genjō during his hazardous journey across Western China and Central Asia. The sixteen other guardian figures (eight on each side) also represent guardians who have sworn to protect Genjō and, by extension, the sutras that he carries. The arrangement of sixteen guardians may be related to similar arrangements of sixteen Rakan (Chinese: *luohan*, Sanskrit: *arhat*). Guardians like these, carrying weapons and wearing armor, are generally referred to as *ten* (*devas*) who are on a higher realm than mortals, but who seek enlightenment through their unwavering support of Buddhism. Four of the sixteen guardians are known as the “Four Guardians of the Directions” (Shitennō) who often appear on the four corners of Buddhist altars in Japan.

The identity of the female figure on the lower right is somewhat uncertain. The *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* can take the form of a woman (Japanese: *Hannya*) or it could be another guardian figure in female form such as the earth goddess Prthivi. The additional monk could be one of Shaka's disciples, but given the attention to the sutras it is more likely a representation of Ennin (mentioned above) who brought back images and sutras related to Monju from the Five Peaks in China in the ninth century. Thus, both monks are celebrated as translators and transmitters of the Buddhist teachings.

A similar image in painted form in the collections of the Honolulu Academy of Arts (*Shaka Triad with Sixteen Good Spirits of the Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra*, Muromachi period, c. 1400 Purchase, 1991 6060.1) helps to confirm the Spencer print as an image not only of the Shaka Triad and Sixteen Deities, but also one that shows the worship and protection of the

Perfection of Wisdom Sutra. An entry in the Honolulu catalogue *Visions of the Dharma* says that the depiction of this group was first sketched by a retired, twelfth century emperor after reading the sutra. Such a group could facilitate a reading of the text, protect the worshipper, or be seen as a vision resulting from the reading of the text.

As Buddhism spread across Asia, many local kings supported Buddhism as a way to advance their political goals and align their regimes to Buddhism's perceived international standing. Buddhism was useful for communicating ideas about earthly sovereignty and order. The Buddha in the Spencer print is seen as a heavenly sovereign, protected by a host of resolute looking guardians. This hierarchical arrangement resembles the rank and file of the king and his ministers at court, supported by military commanders. It is notable that images of the *Shaka Triad with Sixteen Deities* turn up in China, Korea and Japan around the thirteenth to fourteenth century, a period that witnessed Mongol invasions across Asia. In Japan, the Kamakura period (1185-1333) was established by the first military government (*bakufu*) ruled by a shogun. Images of the protection of Buddhist texts would have appealed to the new ruling class of military daimyo or local lords. It was often the practice at this time to copy Buddhist texts as a way to help protect the nation. In fact, some of the oldest surviving complete printed editions of the Buddhist canon (*Tripitaka*) survive from this time.

The Spencer print was probably based on a painting at a Japanese temple, displayed on certain occasions or for ritual purposes, such as the recitation of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*. Prints allowed visitors (even today) or pilgrims to take away copies of the temple image for their own devotional use at home. Mounted as a hanging scroll (possibly emulating the original format of the painting on which it was based) the Spencer print may have hung on the wall or alcove area (*tokonoma*) of a traditional Japanese home, where it served to divinely inspire its owner.

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