

The Who's Who of Japanese Deities

And how to identify them in Japanese art

The Hierarchy of Deities

- Buddhas (J: nyorai 如来)
- Bodhisattvas (J: bosatsu 菩薩)
- Wisdom Kings (J: myōō 明王)
- Celestial Beings (J: tenbu 天部)

There is always an exception.

Butsu 仏 / Nyorai 如来

- Enlightened beings
- Teachers
- Simple clothing
- Lack of ornamentation
- Thirty-two signs
(J: sanjūnisō 三十二相)
- Cranial protuberance
(J: nikkei 肉髻)
- Snail-shell curls of hair
(J: rahotsu 螺髮)
- Light-emitting bump of hair
(J: byakugō 白毫)



Sanzon 三尊

- Central figure
 - Lends name to triad
- Larger than attendant figures





Shaka nyorai 釈迦如来

- Sakyamuni
- The historical buddha
 - Asceticism
 - Enlightenment
- Mudra of fearlessness (J: semui-in 施無畏印)
 - Right hand (raised)
- Mudra of wish-granting (J: yogan-in 与願印)
 - Left hand (lowered)
- Mudra of meditation (J: zenjō-in 禪定印)
- Attended by Fugen and Monju



Tanjō butsu
誕生仏
Buddha at birth

Shussan shaka

出山釈迦

Shaka descending
from the
mountain



Meditating shaka

Shaka achieving
enlightenment





Nehan

涅槃圖

Shaka's entry into nirvana





Yakushi nyorai 薬師如来



- Bhaiṣajyaguru
- The medicine buddha
- Associated with healing
- Mudras of fearlessness and wish-granting
- Medicine jar (J: yakuko 薬壺) in left hand
- Attended by Nikkō 日光 and Gakkō 月光; also by the Jūni shinshō 十二神将

Dainichi nyorai 大日如来



- Mahavairocana
- The primordial buddha
- Especially important in the Shingon and Tendai traditions
- Mudra of dharma-realm meditation (J: hokkai jō-in 法界定印)
- Jeweled crown (J: hōkan 宝冠)
- Mudra of the knowledge fist (J: chiken-in 智拳印)



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Dainichi and the Buddhist Cosmos



- Situated at center of the Two-Realm Mandala (J: Ryōkai mandara 両界曼荼羅)
 - Diamond Realm (J: Kongōkai 金剛界) – universal buddha fields
 - Womb Realm (J: Taizōkai 胎藏界) – physical body aspects

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Amida nyorai 阿弥陀如来

- Amitabha
- The Lord of the Western Paradise of Ultimate Bliss (J: saihō gokuraku 西方極樂)
- Exceptionally popular
 - Salvation for all
- Attended by Kannon, Seishi, and sometimes Jizō
- Namu amida butsu 南無阿弥陀仏
- Mudra of welcoming (J: raigō-in 来迎印)
- Mudra of meditation
 - Amida-type with fingers bent (J: Amida jō-in 阿弥陀定印)

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Amida



Amida triad



Amida and 25 bodhisattvas





Five Aeons Amida 五劫思惟阿弥陀

- Hōzō
 - Practitioner who becomes Amida
- Intense meditation for five aeons
(J: gokōshii 五劫思惟)
 - Hair untouched
- Creation of the Western Paradise
- Achieved Buddhahood



Miroku nyorai 弥勒如来

- Maitreya
- Buddha of the future
- Appears after Age of Decline (J: mappō 末法)
- Mudra of exposition (J: seppō-in 說法印)
- Difficult to identify by appearance alone
 - Pay attention to context

Quiz

via the poll function

*Note: you may have to move the poll on your screen
so you can see the images

1



Amida

2



Yakushi

3



Shaka

Sites

- Shaka nyorai – Seiryōji 清涼寺 (Kyoto)
- Tanjou buddha – Tōdaiji 東大寺 (Nara)
- Nehan – Kongōbuji 金剛峰寺 (Mt. Koya)
- Yakushi nyorai – Shin'yakushiji 新薬師寺 (Nara)
- Dainichi nyorai – Tōji 東寺 (Kyoto)
- Ryoukai mandara – Jingoji 神護寺 (Kyoto)
- Amida nyorai – Jōruriji 浄瑠璃寺 (Kyoto)
- Amida raigou – Kongōbuji 金剛峰寺, Byōdōin 平等院 (Uji)
- Miroku nyorai – Kōfukuji 興福寺 (Nara)

Review

Butsu 仏 / Nyorai 如来

- Simple clothing
- Lack of ornamentation
- Cranial protuberance
- Snail-shell curls of hair
- Light-emitting bump of hair



Bosatsu 菩薩

- Princely garb
- Jewelry and ornamental bands
- Implements or mudras connected to their virtue or purpose
- Attendant deities
 - Exceptions



Myōō 明王

- Multi-armed, multi-faced
- Implements and weapons and/or mudras connected to their purpose
- Flame mandorlas



Tenbu 天部

- Either wrathful or peaceful forms
- Mostly two-armed, single-faced
- Implements or weapons connected to their purpose
- Many wear armor or aristocratic clothing



Questions
via the Q&A function

This concludes the “Who’s Who of Japanese Deities” lecture series. A quiz has been uploaded to the lecture page.

Thank you for joining us!

Stay tuned for more programming from the Japan Foundation, Los Angeles.

Please take a moment to complete the digital lecture questionnaire via the poll function. If you would like to comment on today's programming, you may do so through the Q&A function.

Further questions can be directed to michaelvanhartingsveldt@gmail.com