

# *Prominent Buddhist Deities*



Temple Guardians – Keepers of Living Tradition

# Guanyin - 觀音菩薩

Guanyin Also Known As: Avalokiteśvara, Goddess of Mercy is one of the most beloved bodhisattvas in East Asian Buddhism. Originally known as Avalokiteśvara in India, she came to be depicted as a compassionate female figure in China around the Tang Dynasty.

## Significance:

Guanyin embodies compassion, mercy, and unconditional love. She listens to the cries of those in suffering and offers comfort and guidance.

Many Buddhists pray to Guanyin for protection, healing, and peace.



## Special Characteristics:

Often portrayed wearing flowing robes and holding a vase of pure water or a willow branch. In some temples, she may have multiple arms and eyes — symbolizing her ability to see and help all beings.

# Amitabha Buddha - 阿彌陀佛

Known as Amitufo in Chinese and his name literally means the "Buddha of Boundless Light and Life" in Sanskrit.

## Short History:

According to Mahayana scriptures, Amitābha was once a king who renounced his throne and became the monk Dharmākara. After immense spiritual practice, he attained Buddhahood. Before achieving enlightenment, he made 48 great vows, the most significant being the promise to create a pure and blissful realm—the Western Pure Land (Sukhāvātī)—where beings can be reborn to continue their path toward enlightenment.



## Significance:

Amitābha is the central figure of Pure Land Buddhism, which is one of the most widely practiced traditions in East Asia. Devotees rely on his boundless compassion and power, chanting his name (nianfo) as the primary practice for gaining rebirth in his Western Paradise. This Pure Land is seen as a stepping stone where enlightenment can be easily achieved, a realm free from suffering.

## Special Characteristics:

Amitābha is typically depicted in a meditative posture and may be making the Mudra of Meditation (Dhyana Mudra) or a gesture signifying welcome to the Pure Land. His color is often associated with the glorious red of the setting sun, symbolizing the direction of his Western paradise. He is frequently flanked by the Bodhisattvas Guanyin (compassion) and Mahāsthāmaprāpta (wisdom).

# Buddha

## Shakyamuni

### 釋迦牟尼佛



The Historical Founder - Original name was Siddhārtha Gautama (or Gotama in Pāli). After achieving enlightenment, he became known as Śākyamuni ("Sage of the Śākya Clan") or simply The Buddha ("The Awakened One").

#### Short History:

Born a prince in the foothills of the Himalayas (modern-day Nepal) in the 6th century BCE, Siddhārtha Gautama lived a life of luxury until he encountered old age, sickness, death, and an ascetic monk. Shaken by suffering, he renounced his princely life to seek the end of human misery. After years of intense spiritual practice, he attained full and perfect enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree in Bodh Gaya. He then spent over forty years teaching the Dharma, or the core truths of the universe.

#### Significance:

Shakyamuni is the teacher and founder of Buddhism. His teachings — the Dharma — guide followers toward wisdom, ethical living, and spiritual awakening.

#### Special Characteristics:

Depicted in meditation posture, with serene facial expression, elongated earlobes, and a topknot (ushnisha) symbolizing spiritual wisdom. Often shown touching the earth — the “Earth Witness” gesture — at the moment of enlightenment.





**Jade Emperor 玉皇大帝**

**Also Known As Yuhuang Dadi  
or Tiangong.**



### **Biography:**

The Jade Emperor is the supreme ruler of Heaven and the highest deity in the Taoist pantheon, whose immense popularity led to his inclusion within the religious landscape of Chinese Buddhism. He oversees the entire celestial bureaucracy, administering all affairs of Earth, Heaven, and the Underworld.

### **Significance:**

His presence in a Buddhist temple reflects the syncretism of Chinese religion, where he is respected as a powerful, benevolent administrator and patron who maintains cosmic order and justice. He is seen as the highest authority in the realm of mortal affairs, respected by both Taoist and Buddhist practitioners.

### **Special Characteristics:**

He is invariably depicted in the full formal attire of a Chinese emperor, wearing a magnificent golden dragon robe and a Mian crown (a ceremonial hat with hanging strands of beads). He is always seated on a majestic throne, symbolizing his absolute authority over the three realms.



# Happy Buddha

布袋和尚



## Various Names:

Universally known as the "Happy Buddha" or the "Laughing Buddha." His Chinese name is Budai (meaning "Cloth Sack").

## Short History:

Budai was an eccentric and beloved Chán (Zen) monk who lived in China during the tenth century. He was famous for his joyous, carefree wandering, his kindness, and his seemingly supernatural foresight. He is widely venerated as a manifestation of the future Buddha, Maitreya, whose eventual arrival is prophesied to usher in a new era of spiritual awakening and abundance.



## Significance:

He is a deity of happiness, contentment, abundance, and prosperity in Chinese folk religion and Chinese Buddhism. His cheerful disposition serves as a powerful reminder for people to cultivate joy, generosity, and inner peace, reinforcing the notion that true wealth lies in a satisfied heart.



## Special Characteristics:

Budai is instantly recognizable as a plump, bald man with a large, protruding belly and a wide, cheerful smile. He is typically shown carrying a large cloth sack (which is said to contain endless treasures, gifts for children, and provisions for the poor) and sometimes a staff or a string of prayer beads.

