

PRESENCE AND POWER: FOOTPRINTS IN TIBETAN ART

KATHRYN SELIG BROWN



Fig. 1 Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara and the Buddha's Footprints; central Tibet; 12th century; pigments on cloth; 22 × 19 3/8 in. (55.9 × 49.2cm); Rubin Museum of Art; gift of Shelley and Donald Rubin; C2003.50.5 (HAR 271)

BODHISATTVA AVALOKITESHVARA AND THE BUDDHA'S FOOTPRINTS

Central Tibet
12th century

SUMMARY

This outline of a pair of footprints on a ground of gold pigment looks simple, yet art historian Kathryn Selig Brown shows how it is imbued with divine presence and powerfully symbolic of the Buddhist religion and Tibet's imperial past. Such images were possibly traced from actual footprints at pilgrimage sites in India and allow physical contact with now-vanished sacred figures, able to pass on their blessings through touch. The drawings around these footprints connect them to Tibet's divine protector Avalokiteshvara, with Tibet's founding emperor Songtsen Gampo, believed to be Avalokiteshvara's emanation, flanked by his Nepalese and Chinese queens.

Footprints are one of civilization's most potent symbols. Simultaneously mysterious and familiar, they convey the immediacy of physical contact and the poignancy of absence. Often associated with magic and power, footprints are venerated in many of the world's religions: footprints made by Vishnu, Jesus, Mohammed, and the Buddha are all worshipped today.

Displayed on a lotus pedestal in the central area of this twelfth-century painting is a pair of larger-than-life-size footprints flanking an eleven-headed form of Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion and the patron deity of Tibet.¹ The depiction of Buddha Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, above Avalokiteshvara, and of Songtsen Gampo (ca. 605–649), who began the expansion of what later became the Tibetan Empire, directly beneath Avalokiteshvara creates an axis of imagery imbued with layers of meaning.

INDIAN WORSHIP OF THE BUDDHA'S FOOTPRINTS

According to tradition, Buddha Shakyamuni lived roughly twenty-five hundred years ago, but until some four hundred years after his death, he was not portrayed in human

form. Instead, he was represented by a variety of symbols, including footprints, which soon became one of the most popular modes of signaling his presence.

Called buddhapada (footprints of the Buddha) in ancient Indian texts, footprints continued to be created and worshipped in India even after images of the Buddha became prevalent. Venerated from roughly the second century bce on, superhuman-sized buddhapada in stone appeared in numbers at Buddhist sites around the country.² There are numerous examples of such footprints at one of Buddhism's holiest sites, Bodhgaya, where the Buddha attained enlightenment, including a famous pair that still attracts streams of worshippers (figs. 2 and 3). An imprint of these buddhapada remains a favored souvenir of modern pilgrims to Bodhgaya.



Fig. 2 *Buddhapada*; Bodhgaya, India; photograph by Janice Leoshko



Fig. 3 A cloth bearing buddhapada from a pilgrimage to Bodhgaya hangs on the right-hand wall of this monk's room; Phodang Monastery, Sikkim; photograph by Kathryn Selig Brown

It is possible that the footprints on this thangka represent those from an Indian site like Bodhgaya and are perhaps a souvenir taken back to Tibet by the thangka's patron, a Tibetan lama who appears in the lower left corner, holding a smoking censer. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that the outline of the right foot overlaps Avalokiteshvara's aureole, suggesting that the footprints on the thangka were produced first and then the drawing overlaid afterward. Additionally, the footprints are not

placed exactly, as they would be if an artist had created them from the beginning on a grid; the right foot is positioned a little higher than the left.³

In Buddhism, as in other religions, when a revered person has touched or come into contact with something, that object reverberates with a residue of their presence and power and becomes a relic. And as relics, footprints represent important loci for worship because they establish an earthly presence of their maker, who may have passed away into nirvana. Literary evidence indicates that this concept applies to both real (from the perspective of the devout) and man-made footprints of Buddha Shakyamuni. The Buddha (or another holy person) is actually manifest in his or her print, and anything that comes into contact with the print is blessed. And because the prints represent contact with a holy person, they are not viewed as merely passive and unresponsive objects of worship but are thought to emit blessings or possess other miraculous capabilities. Thus, a thangka such as this one, which displays buddhapada, would have been treated as if it had come into contact with the Buddha himself.

Buddha Shakyamuni's presence in this thangka is amplified by his depiction in the center of the top register, a figure larger than the other deities in the row. His footprints, too, are the largest objects on the thangka, indicating their placement at the apex of the Tibetan artistic hierarchy, in which the largest item is the most important. The footprints are each topped by an honorific parasol, an ancient Indian sign of respect and honor. The round mark in the center of each foot, a stylized wheel symbolizing the Buddhist doctrine, the dharmachakra, is one of the thirty-two congenital marks (lakshana) that distinguish a buddha from a mortal.⁴

Feet and footprints play polar roles in Indian culture because the feet are considered to be lowest in the bodily hierarchy. By touching or worshipping the feet, one humbles

oneself beneath that person or deity. This inherent humbling layer of symbolism also underlies the worship of footprints.

TIBETAN BUDDHIST WORSHIP OF FOOTPRINTS

The buddhapada tradition traveled across Asia, appearing in varied forms in China, Japan, Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, the footprints achieving a noteworthy popularity as symbols in Tibet.⁵ The worship of footprints on cloth is said to have been brought to Tibet by the Bengali Buddhist master Atisha (ca. 982–1054) and the translator Marpa (1012–1097), among others,⁶ but many Tibetans visited India and witnessed the worship of buddhapada firsthand. In 1234, roughly around the same time that this thangka was created, Chak Lotsawa (1197–1263/4), a Tibetan monk and translator, visited Bodhgaya and viewed the main pair of footprints (fig. 4). The buddhapada were so popular with pilgrims that he noted a chapel was supposed to have been built over the footprints to protect them; in the end it was not constructed because the resulting entry fee would have reduced the number of devotees who could worship there.⁷



Fig. 4 Chakrasamvara and the Footprints of Drigungpa Jikten Sumgon (1143–1217); Tibet; before 1217; pigments on silk; 24 × 24 3/8 in. (61 × 61.9 cm); Rubin Museum of Art; C2003.7.1 (HAR 65205)

During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Tibetan buddhapada tradition expanded to include the footprints of Tibetan Buddhist lamas (figs. 5 and 6) and other revered holy figures, such as Atisha, whose footprints were once housed at Reting Monastery, in central Tibet.⁸ According to twelfth- and thirteenth-century Tibetan texts, a lama's footprints are so imbued with his presence that they can act as a stand-in for the teacher and can even give teachings in the teacher's absence. The renowned scholar Pakmodrupa (1110–1170), who wrote a text called "Requesting Footprints," commented that receiving Buddhist teachings via the footprints, such as those in an object from the Rubin Museum of Art (fig. 4),⁹ is no different from hearing "whatever practice, explanation, or teaching" from the real lama,¹⁰ an esoteric capability implying the prestige and power inherent in owning such a footprint thangka.



Fig. 5 The Buddha's Footprints and Incarnations of Avalokiteshvara; Tibet; 10th–11th century; ground mineral pigments on silk; 21 × 21 in. (53.3 × 53.3 cm); The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Zimmerman Family Collection, Gift of the Zimmerman Family, in celebration of the Museum's 150th Anniversary, 2019; 2019.291 (HAR 85079); CC0 – Creative Commons (CC0 1.0)



Fig. 6 Karmapa with His Footprints; central Tibet; late 12th–early 13th century; pigments on silk; 20 3/4 × 18 5/8 in. (52.7 × 47.3 cm); Rubin Museum of Art; gift of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation; F1997.32.2 (HAR 508)

AVALOKITESHVARA AND HIS INCARNATIONS

The buddhapada on this thangka flank Avalokiteshvara, the most popular bodhisattva in Buddhism, particularly in Tibet, where he is part of the country's founding mythology and his mantra, om mani padme hum, is recited universally. Depicted directly below an eleven-headed image of Avalokiteshvara is Songtsen Gampo, the first monarch of the Tibetan Empire, who is also credited with bringing Buddhism to the country. This axial placement visually cues the viewer to the famous story of Songtsen, who, along with his two wives, dissolved into light in the midst of prayer and then was absorbed into a statue of an eleven-headed sculpture of Avalokiteshvara. Although this legend dates to at least four hundred years after Songtsen's death, his association with this particular form of Avalokiteshvara, whose eleven heads are stacked in a particular

manner, has become an integral part of the nation's identity (fig. 5). Images such as this thangka bear witness to the ways in which art can project ideas such as the first emperor, a fearsome warrior, being an emanation of Tibet's most widely worshipped bodhisattva of compassion.¹¹

Although Songtsen was already being identified with Avalokiteshvara by the end of the early dynastic period (ca. 608–866), it was Atisha and his team of disciples and translators in the eleventh century who advanced the cult of Songtsen as a manifestation of Avalokiteshvara, aligning this conquering ruler with the favored bodhisattva.¹² Over the succeeding centuries, many others followed suit, using a link to this deity to further themselves or their particular tradition of Tibetan Buddhism politically.¹³ The Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682), for example, who united Tibet, asserted his divine right to rule by presenting himself as an emanation of both the country's patron deity and the empire-building emperor, Songtsen Gampo. To glorify this status, he widely publicized a list of his previous incarnations, commissioning a series of paintings with his handprints and footprints surrounding each incarnation, emphasizing his presence and his identification with each one (fig. 7).¹⁴



Fig. 7 Songtsen Gampo with Handprints and Footprints; Tibet; late 17th century; ground mineral pigments on cloth; 30 1/8 x 19 1/2 in. (76.5 x 49.5 cm); Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Brussels; Ver. 338 (HAR 51616); photograph © RMAH, Brussels, Creative Commons CC BY – MRAH/KMKG

CONSECRATION

The act of consecration ensures that a deity takes up residence in an object, and all religious sculptures and paintings undergo this enlivening process before they can be used for devotion and meditation. On this thangka, as on most Tibetan paintings, evidence of consecration can be seen on the reverse, represented by the Sanskrit seed syllables om ah hum written behind the major figures. The typical dedicatory formula known as the Buddhist creed is also written here (fig. 8).

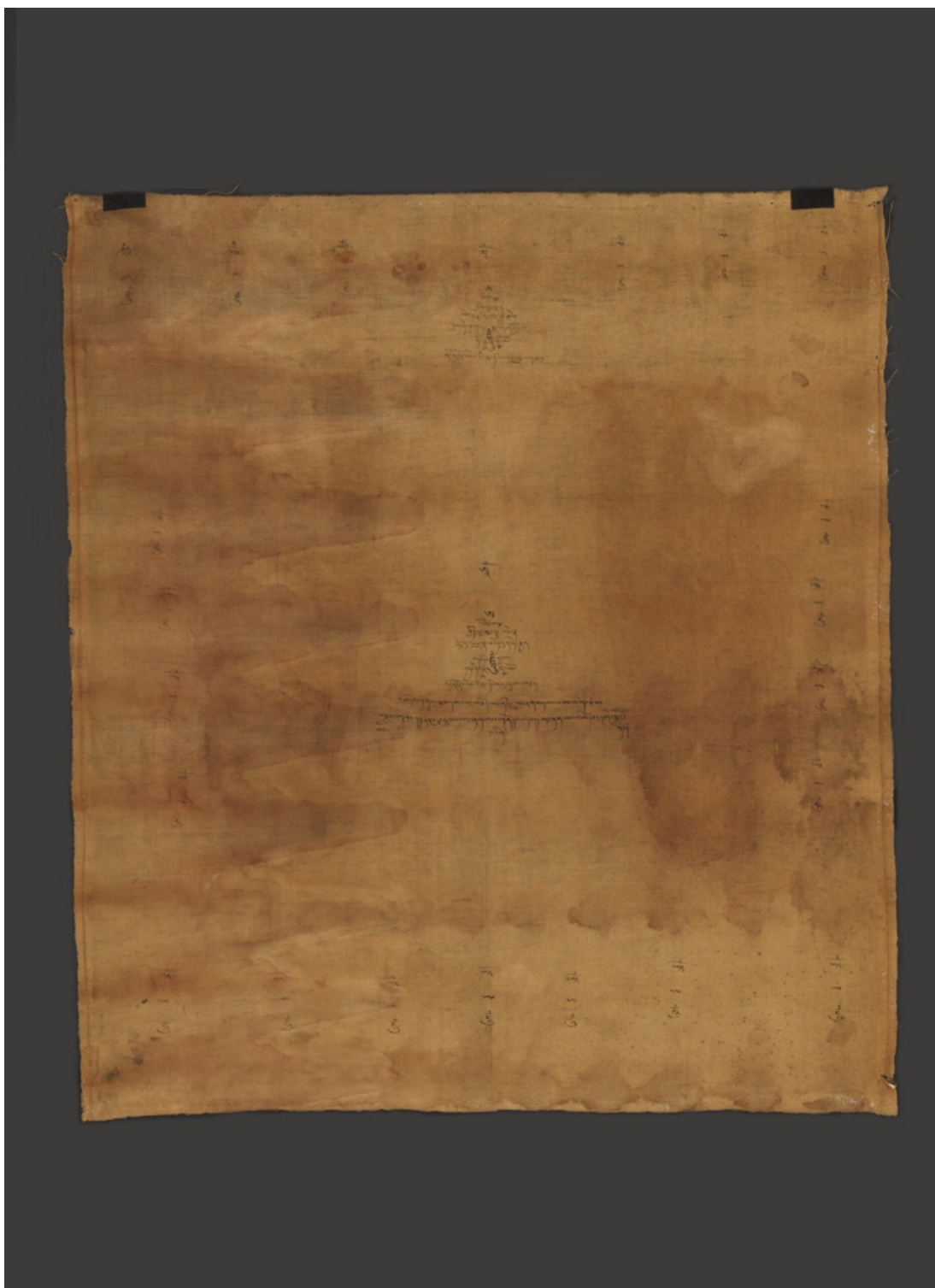


Fig. 8 Reverse of Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara and the Buddha's Footprints; Rubin Museum of Art; C2003.50.5 (HAR 271)

Unadorned drawings such as this are often among the consecratory materials inserted into sculptures.¹⁵ A number of such footprint thangkas have fold marks that indicate they were originally part of the consecration contents for a sculpture (fig. 4 and 5), including one with parallel iconography (fig. 5) now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.¹⁶

The appearance of footprints on this thangka, combined with Avalokiteshvara and Songtsen Gampo, makes this object resonate on many levels. As Buddha Shakyamuni and his footprints protectively surround Avalokiteshvara, the patron deity of Tibet, Avalokiteshvara safeguards the Tibetan nation, founded by his emanation Songtsen Gampo, who brought Buddhism to his people. The footprints, too, conjure the eternal presence of their maker, humble the devoted, and continue to emanate blessings on a thangka with imagery that marries these ancient Buddhist symbols with the legendary inception of the Tibetan nation-state.

FOOTNOTES

¹ This painting has been carbon dated to 1100 plus or minus fifty years.

² This material on introductory buddhapada is from Kathryn Selig Brown, *Eternal Presence: Handprints and Footprints in Buddhist Art. Exhibition Catalog* (Katonah, NY: Katonah Museum of Art, 2004), 13–18, 34–37.

³ See David Jackson and Janice A. Jackson, *Tibetan Thangka Painting: Methods and Materials*, 2nd ed. (London: Serindia, 1988), 45–73, for information on thangka composition.

⁴ For more on lakshana, see Donald S. Lopez Jr., “Limbs of Enlightenment,” in *Eternal Presence: Handprints and Footprints in Buddhist Art. Exhibition*, ed. Kathryn Selig Brown, Exhibition catalog (Katonah, NY: Katonah Museum of Art, 2004), 9–11.

⁵ For examples, see Kathryn Selig Brown, *Eternal Presence: Handprints and Footprints in Buddhist Art. Exhibition Catalog* (Katonah, NY: Katonah Museum of Art, 2004), 27–30, 63–67, and for their different appearances in Tibetan culture, 19–27.

⁶ Donald S. Lopez Jr., “Limbs of Enlightenment,” in *Eternal Presence: Handprints and Footprints in Buddhist Art. Exhibition*, ed. Kathryn Selig Brown, Exhibition catalog (Katonah, NY: Katonah Museum of Art, 2004), 9–11, 19n21, 22, citing Phag mo gru pa, “Rin po che mtha’i rtsa bas mdzad pa’i zhabs rjes zhu ba’o,” in *Phag mo gru pa rdo rje rgyal po’i gsung ’bum* (Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1997), <http://purl.bdrc.io/resource/MW1KG15061>, 299–303; Lhun grub chos ’phel, *Rwa sgrenng Dgon pa’i Dkar chag* (Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1994), <http://purl.bdrc.io/resource/W20838>, 137; ’Bri gung skyob pa ’jig rten gsum mgon, *’Bri gung thel chos bdud rtsi’i thigs pa* (New Delhi: Tsering Dorma Gelek, 1975), <http://purl.bdrc.io/resource/W4CZ1721>, 525.

⁷ George N. Roerich, trans., “Biography of Dharmasvamin (Chag lo tsa-ba Chos-rje-dpal). A Tibetan Monk Pilgrim,” Historical Research Series 2 (Patna: K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute, 1959), 72.

⁸ Dan Martin, “Painters, Patrons and Paintings of Patrons in Early Tibetan Art,” in *Embodying Wisdom. Art, Text, and Interpretation in the History of Esoteric Buddhism*, ed. Rob Linrothe and Henrik H. Sørensen (Copenhagen: Seminar for Buddhist Studies, 2001), 147.

⁹ See Chakrasamvara and the Footprints of Drigungpa Jikten Sumgon (1143–1217), C2003.7.1 (HAR 65205).

¹⁰ Kathryn Selig Brown, *Eternal Presence: Handprints and Footprints in Buddhist Art. Exhibition Catalog* (Katonah, NY: Katonah Museum of Art, 2004), 31n39.

¹¹ For more on the “emanational nexus” of Avalokiteshvara, see Brandon Dotson, “The Emanated Emperor and His Cosmopolitan Contradictions,” in *Faith and Empire: Art and Politics in Tibetan Buddhism. Exhibition Catalog*, ed. Karl Debreczeny, Exhibition catalog (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2019), 69–81, http://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/faith_and_empire.

¹² Per K. Sørensen, “In His Name: The Fake Royal Biography—Fabricated Prophecy and Literary Imposture,” *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 52 (October) (2019): 296–99.

¹³ Per K. Sørensen, “In His Name: The Fake Royal Biography—Fabricated Prophecy and Literary Imposture,” *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 52 (October) (2019): 284–335.

¹⁴ Kathryn Selig Brown, *Eternal Presence: Handprints and Footprints in Buddhist Art. Exhibition Catalog* (Katonah, NY: Katonah Museum of Art, 2004), 22, 24, 48–54; Per K.

Sørensen, “In His Name: The Fake Royal Biography—Fabricated Prophecy and Literary Imposture,” *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 52 (October) (2019): 284–335.

¹⁵ Kathryn Selig Brown, *Eternal Presence: Handprints and Footprints in Buddhist Art*. Exhibition Catalog (Katonah, NY: Katonah Museum of Art, 2004), 26–27, fig. 21.

¹⁶ Kathryn Selig Brown, *Eternal Presence: Handprints and Footprints in Buddhist Art*. Exhibition Catalog (Katonah, NY: Katonah Museum of Art, 2004), 60, 60n65.

FURTHER READING

Dotson, Brandon. 2019. “The Emanated Emperor and His Cosmopolitan Contradictions.” In *Faith and Empire: Art and Politics in Tibetan Buddhism*, edited by Karl Debreczeny, 69–81. Exhibition catalog. New York: Rubin Museum of Art.
https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/faith_and_empire

Selig Brown, Kathryn H. 2004. *Eternal Presence: Handprints and Footprints in Buddhist Art*. Exhibition catalog. Katonah, NY: Katonah Museum of Art.

Sørensen, Per K. 2019a. “In His Name: The Fake Royal Biography—Fabricated Prophecy and Literary Imposture.” *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 52 (October): 284–335.

CITATION

Kathryn Selig Brown, “Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara and the Buddha’s Footprints: Presence and Power,” Project Himalayan Art, Rubin Museum of Art, 2023, <http://rubinmuseum.org/projecthimalayanart/essays/bodhisattva-avalokiteshvara-and-the-buddhas-footprints>.¹⁶ Kathryn Selig Brown, *Eternal Presence: Handprints and Footprints in Buddhist Art*. Exhibition Catalog (Katonah, NY: Katonah Museum of Art, 2004), 60, 60n65.

ABOUT PROJECT HIMALAYAN ART AND THE RUBIN MUSEUM

This essay is featured in *Himalayan Art in 108 Objects*, a publication from the Rubin Museum of Art that illuminates Himalayan art through a collection of significant objects from the Neolithic era to today. Along with a [digital platform](#) and traveling exhibition, this publication is part of the [Rubin’s Project Himalayan Art](#), an integrated initiative that presents a sweeping introduction to Himalayan art. Located in New York City, the Rubin Museum of Art explores and celebrates Himalayan art, cultures, and ideas, and serves as a space for reflection and personal transformation. Learn more at: <http://rubinmuseum.org/projecthimalayanart>