

This Buddha Maitreya, also known as the Future Buddha or the Buddha of the next Coming, is thought to be the oldest existing wooden image in India.

The striking, sun-bleached statue, probably carved around 750AD, stands nine feet tall in the harsh landscape of the remote Himalayan Zaskar River region near the Ladakh/Tibet border. Parched cracks and the flowing grain of the ancient wood accentuate the tapered, almost sensual body of a Buddha that appears both male and female. A small white scarf, the traditional sign of respect for a deity, hangs

Maitreya suggests that this statue is at least one thousand years old.

Buddhism originated in India around 500BC and spread from there to Sri Lanka, Thailand, Japan, China and many other parts of the world. Its birthplace was eventually to reject it, however, and Buddhism had ceased to be a major religion on the Indian sub-continent by the thirteenth century. Hinduism outgrew it in India and Islam replaced it throughout most of the Western Himalayas and what are now Pakistan and Afghanistan. Many of the Buddhist monuments were destroyed by iconoclastic Muslims,

so far saved the statue from decline. How Buddha Maitreya escaped the marauding iconoclasts, and indeed how and when it came to a village that is accessible only on foot and three days' walk from the nearest road, remain mysteries. The locals still revere it as an object of great power, swearing solemn oaths by it, yet not daring to touch for fear of the wrathful spirits which are believed to inhabit abandoned sacred objects. This belief in spirits is an echo of the old religion – a shamanistic animism which worships the gods and goddesses of trees, water, animals and particular places – which still thrives, its spirits and practices liberally accepted within the framework of Tibetan Buddhism. Overlooking the ancient Buddha Maitreya is an animist altar of ibex horns and sacred juniper branches tied around with a white scarf. This is a 'I hatho', a home for the pagan deity which protects homes and villages.

Because of the power with which the Buddha is invested, the statue has been moved only once in living memory, by a monk called Zimgar, from the place where it lay across a path. In defiance of local superstition and despite stories about an abbot from a nearby monastery who was thwarted in his attempt to move the Buddha by torrential storms, Zimgar raised the statue with elaborate ceremony and stood it upright in the temple enclosure where it remains, an integral part of the landscape.

In the surrounding fields, heavily yoked yaks drag their wooden ploughs through sparse, rocky earth to the singsong commands of their masters. Villagers chanting rhythmically follow the plough, sowing the vital barley seed – wheat does not grow well at these altitudes. Above towers a massive, icy mountain wall, reverberating with the voices of the village labourers, and overseeing all, the powerful, meditative presence of Buddha Maitreya.

The Future Buddha has survived twelve turbulent centuries, but recently exceptionally heavy rainfall has posed a grave and unexpected threat to the image's existence. The ancient wood, if sodden, will shatter in winter temperatures that regularly drop below minus 25 degrees Centigrade. If the Buddha is to stand for the years to come, it may now need some worldly assistance. □

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THE ONCE AND FUTURE BUDDHA

High in the Himalayas stands an eighth-century Buddha thought to be India's oldest wooden statue.

Tim Malyon reports from Ladakh



Above, the ruined temple enclosure containing the Buddha Maitreya.

Opposite, the white scarf tied to the Buddha's crown is a sign of respect for a deity

from the image's crown – propped against the ruined enclosure where a temple once stood.

Although politically part of India, Ladakh's culture is Tibetan. It is an area where, despite the Chinese occupation of Tibet, the old way of life continues largely undisturbed and a rich artistic heritage has survived relatively intact. The Tibetans did not create works in their own style in Ladakh until about the twelfth century (by which time Kashmiri Buddhist art, threatened by Islam, was on the decline), and the distinctly Indian, probably Kashmiri, mould of Buddha

while those which survived have been subject instead to the ravages of the weather. Ladakh's remote position, however, protected by mountain passes seventeen thousand feet high, and the population's staunch adherence to the Tibetan strand of Buddhism saved the statue from the full onslaught of Muslims, although the village headman maintains that the eleventh-century temple in the remains of which the Buddha now stands was destroyed by an Islamic raiding party. And the area's exceptionally arid climate, with an average annual rainfall of only three inches, has

