

MEDITATIVE ART

WHERE ART MEETS SAMADHI

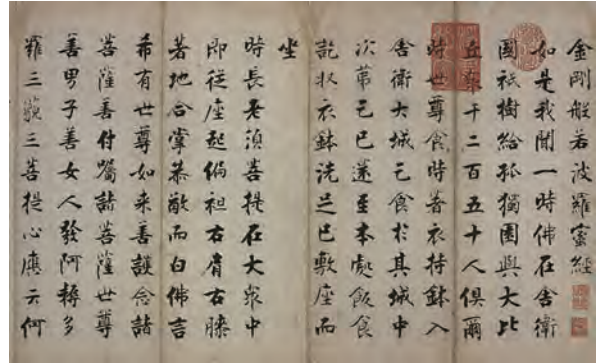
There are many forms of art related to Buddhism, and these various rich and diverse artforms have evolved through time, cultures and geographical space. The symbolic representations in Buddhist art are truly countless as artists, craftsmen and devotees are ceaselessly inspired – be it religious images, sculptures, designs, patterns, poetry and even songs and dances, all these reflect the Buddhist teachings that are intertwined into the daily life and other aspects of personal fulfilment and interests, unique to different cultures and countries.

Support for the Practice of Sutra Copying

In the past, before the great invention of woodblock printing in 868 A.D., hand-copying important documents, including the Buddhist scriptures was not only common but a recognised process of documentation. The first dated block-printed book is *The Diamond Sutra*, a 17-and-a-half-foot-long scroll of the sacred Buddhist text commissioned by Wang Jie in 868 A.D. (13th of the 4th moon of the 9th year of Xiantong in Jie's time). Crucial in the book, is an inscription on the lower right hand side reading, "Reverently made for universal free distribution by Wang Jie on behalf of his two parents". Though no one has officially found out the reason why exactly Wang Jie printed the book, one thing is for sure: making duplicates of the Buddhist texts for Dharma teachings and propagation was considered meritorious with this excerpt from *The Lotus Sutra* that says: "After the passing away of the World-Honored One, we will go to all corners of the Universe, unceasingly encouraging all beings to copy, read, and recite his sutra." And thus, woodblock printing or other forms of print reproduction eclipsed hand-copying but this said,

hand-copying seems to have found its "niche" and retained its relevance even up till today, in a slightly different context and purpose.

The Chinese calligrapher Zhang Jizhi (張即之, 1186–1266) made this handwritten edition of *The Diamond Sutra* (section depicted) on 18 July 1253 during the Song dynasty. The calligraphy is in the style of the regular script with elements of the running script. The transcription of sutras, a practice for which Zhang Jizhi was well-known for, was considered an act of accumulating merits and the Indian monk, Kumarajiva; 鳩摩羅什 (344–415) was the translator of *The Diamond Sutra* from Sanskrit into Chinese. Kumarajiva's translated text was used by Zhang Jizhi in making the depicted work.



Extract and Photo Credits: Zhang Jizhi 張即之-The Opening of Prajñā Wisdom.

The Buddha Light Illuminating All: Treasured Buddhist Scriptures and Paintings from the Museum Collection (exhibit). Taipei: National Palace Museum.

On the Practice of Japanese Shakyō

The form of hand-copying Buddhist sutra in Japan is called "Shakyō"; a word-for-word sutra transcription in the physical form, similar to the memorisation and recitation of sutras – a meritorious and devotional practice. This sutra-copying practice can be considered an expression of piety, devotion, worship and in modern times, even encompassing artistic expressions and mindfulness practice.

The history of *Shakyō* in Japan goes back to the time when the *Tripitaka* was transcribed at Kawaharaji Temple (which has ceased to exist in its original location in the Nara prefecture) for the first time. According to historical records, this is recorded in the *Nihonshoki*: "...gathering a group of transcribers, the Buddhist *Tripitaka* was transcribed at Kawaharaji temple for the first time...". Later, Emperor Shomu (701-756) appointed specialists in sutra transcription to transcribe for archival and distribution purposes. It was distributed to the Kokubunji Temple with many temples across Japan to appease the then unstable state of affairs in the country. Then, after the Heian Period (794-1191), the Japanese started to privately copy sutras as a Buddhist practice and/or as a prayer to wish for the healing and consoling of the souls of their ancestors, transforming a previously practical form of sutra duplication to a spiritual support. This spiritual support is known to harmonise the body and mind – a practice in tune with the Buddha's teaching and it is without question why it continues to find its way to the hearts of seekers and devotees even right up till today.

Spiritual Practice and Art

Shakyō is not merely a paper exercise as it is a process akin to a prayer where "practitioners praise the divine letters with the eyes, while they keep their meaning and form in the heart. They use the mouth to intone the

sounds of the letters, and their hands to write them. Approaching it in this manner, all of the senses are engaged in this spiritual practice, and if done correctly, one can attain Buddhahood.” This Buddhist practice varies – from different sects, to different materials used and duration of practice as well as intensity of it. Some practices stretch for days, others are daily practice and materials used differ – from tradition brush and calligraphy ink, indigo paper and powdered gold to pen and pencil. Regardless of the materials, the essence of sutra-copying lies in the state of mind and the attitude (and motivation) in approaching the practice.

The Korean Samadhi Art of Sageyeong

In Korea, *Shakyo* is known as “Sageyeong”, and is also a common practice by Buddhists as it regarded as a pious practice for spiritual discipline. And in recent times, it gained even more popularity especially after this 1700-year-old tradition of sutra transcription and illumination by hand was brought to life in a 55-piece spectacular exhibition in 2012, “Samadhi + Art = Sageyeong”, showcasing elegant and inspiring calligraphy and painting in gold and silver.

Then, in the Korean *Guardian of Heritage* Winter 2017 Issue, Volume 31, Number 4 article, “The infinite Zen of Extremely Fine Lines”, it is said about *Sageyeong* that, “Along with painting, it formed a major genre of Buddhist art during the Goryeo Dynasty (918–1392), when Buddhism was the state religion. However, with Buddhism being suppressed during the subsequent Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910), the traditional artform almost died out over the following six centuries. An officially designated master of this age-old art, Kim Gyeong-ho has striven to keep the legacy alive.”



(Above)

“Frontispiece to *Samantabhadra Bodhisattva’s Practices and Vows from The Avatamsaka Sutra*” (gold paint on indigo paper, 18.3cm x 36cm) is Kim Gyeong-ho’s elaborate recreation of the frontispiece to *The Practices and Vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva from the Great and Expansive Avatamsaka Sutra* (National Treasure No. 235) in the collection of the Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art.

“The lines flowing from the tip of his brush belonged to a microcosm. With an amazingly steady hand, he drew in 5 to 10 minuscule lines on a tiny spot no wider than 1mm. He was also capable of drawing two eyes, a nose and a mouth onto the Buddha’s face, no larger than 1mm in diameter. Practicing such an intricate task, his brush did not falter a moment: he had to make the most of the 3 to 5 seconds before the gold paint, a mixture of gold powder and oxhide glue, would dry at the brush tip. During the brief instant, a strand or two of his brush’s hair should land on the exact spot without even a 0.1mm error. He held his breath since the line would get squiggly if he breathed.”

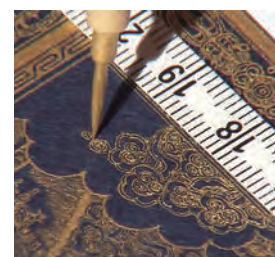


Photo Credit: Screenshots from YouTube video by Oegil Kim Kyeong Ho, President of Korean Transcribed Sutra Research Association