

The Buddha's Footprint Stone

This stone is engraved with lines representing Shakyamuni Buddha's footprint, which was one of the principal iconic objects venerated in the early years of Buddhism. Today it is customary to pray before images of the Buddha himself, but that was not the case for several hundred years after the Buddha reached Nirvana. Buddhism then was primarily the study and practice of the Shakyamuni's teachings regarding meditation and precepts for daily life. Followers would have been fearful of making representations of the Buddha. The creation and veneration of such images was a much later practice. Instead, stone engravings were made of, for example, the Buddha's footprint, intended as a concrete reminder that he had lived on this earth.

According to an inscription on the Yakushiji stone, this footprint was a copy of one at a temple in present-day Xi'an, China, which in turn had been copied from another enshrined in the ancient Indian kingdom of Magadha, where the Buddha is said to have lived much of his life. It also reveals that it was a Japanese envoy to China's Tang Dynasty (618–907), Kibumi no Honjitsu, who made a rubbing and brought it to Nara. There, it was carved into stone at the behest of Funya no Mahitochinu (693–770), a grandson of Yakushiji originator Emperor Tenmu, as a memorial for Funya's deceased wife, Manta no Kori no ou. It is dated 753, making it the oldest of around 300 similar stones that can be found in Japan.

According to the inscription, this footprint is from the spot where Shakyamuni Buddha stood as he stepped into Nirvana. The footprint bears symbols and auspicious signs relating to him, and it was believed that the mere sight of it had the power to cleanse away the sins of the devout.