

Amida Buddha from across the Mountains

This silk painting depicts Amida Buddha approaching from the far side of the mountains where he has descended to the present world from the Pure Land, his paradise in the west. The depiction suggests that Amida is here to welcome his believers, who need only to “cross the mountains” and join him. The scene of Amida coming to lead his believers to paradise, an event known as *raigō*, became a popular motif with the spread of Pure Land Buddhism during the Heian period (794–1185). In this image, Amida is flanked by two bodhisattvas, Seishi (Sanskrit: Mahāsthāmaprāpta) on the left and Kannon (Sanskrit: Avalokiteśvara) on the right. These three divine beings are often depicted together in *raigō* imagery and are known as the “Amida Raigō Triad” (Amida Sanzon Raigō). Below, the four Wisdom Kings who guard the four cardinal directions stand in pairs on either side. The image on display at Eikandō is a replica. The original silk painting is considered to be the oldest and highest-quality extant image of its type and is designated a National Treasure.

In the upper-left corner, the moon encloses the Sanskrit vowel “a” (अ), the most fundamental morpheme in Sanskrit. The character has come to represent the undying essence of all that exists within the universe (*honpushō*), embodied in the form of Dainichi Nyorai, the Cosmic Buddha. Within the Shingon school of Esoteric Buddhism, this Sanskrit character and its associated concepts are the primary focus of meditative practice, and its appearance in the image is an indication of its connection to Shingon.

The image, which is a miniaturized version of an original, larger image, is believed to have been used as part of a deathbed ritual to ensure that the deceased would be welcomed by Amida and taken to the Pure Land. During this ritual, a light would have been placed behind the image to shine through a small hole representing the urna, the curl of hair between Amida’s eyebrows that constitutes one of the 32 physical marks of Buddhahood. It was believed that this spot emitted a divine light. On some paintings, the urna is represented by a small jewel affixed to the canvas. In some cases, the paintings could also be connected to the dying person by a five-colored cord threaded through the two holes near Amida’s hands, which have been included in the replica.