

THE ARTS OF BUDDHISM

The artworks in this packet sample a wide geographical spread and range of time periods and practices within Buddhism. The accompanying essays collectively serve as an introduction to the diversity in Buddhism and its wide and long-lasting spiritual, artistic, and cultural impact in Asia and beyond. While this packet focuses on Buddhism, the themes, topics, and ideas explored in these materials can be applied to other religions, societies, and cultures. History/Social Science teachers can use these materials to spark discussions about worldwide religions and how the spread of Buddhism translated in different areas and cultures throughout the world. English Language Arts teachers may use the foundational texts of Buddhism to analyze complex texts and compare them to the foundational texts of other cultures and religions. Finally, Art teachers can view the way artists have drawn inspiration from religious ideas and texts and translated them into visual images in order to commemorate, celebrate, and teach.

Buddhism is a religion based on the teachings of **the Buddha**, a historical figure who lived sometime during the sixth to fifth century BCE and had a lasting global impact. The Buddha began his life as Siddhartha Gautama, an Indian prince. Gautama lived a sheltered life of luxury until he was twenty-nine years old, when he first witnessed life outside his palace walls. Once he had seen the suffering that was going on in the world, he could not return to his former life within the palace walls. He left his home and family behind and set out on a quest to understand the cause of suffering in the world. Following a decade of meditation, prayer, and fasting, he came to the realization that people suffer because they attempt to hold on to material possessions. Only by realizing that nothing is permanent can one be released from the cycle of suffering. When he came to this realization, known as **the Great Awakening**, Gautama attained **enlightenment**. From that point on he was known as the Buddha, “the enlightened one.”

The Buddha spent the remaining forty years of his life teaching in India, helping others attain enlightenment. His teachings make up **the Dharma**, which is the foundation of Buddhism. The Dharma consists of **four noble truths**: 1. Life is suffering, 2. This suffering has a cause, which is the desire for long life, power, and other worldly concerns, 3. This desire can be overcome and extinguished, and 4. The way to overcome the desire is by following **the eightfold path**. This path includes: 1. right view, 2. right intention, 3. right speech, 4. right action, 5. right livelihood, 6. right effort, 7. right mindfulness, and 8. right concentration.

The goal of Buddhism is to escape **samsara**, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, by achieving enlightenment, or **nirvana**. Enlightened beings see the ultimate nature of the world as illuminated by the Buddha—the illusory nature of perception and impermanence of everything they hold dear—and it enables them to escape the cycle of suffering. Buddhists achieve enlightenment by following the middle path, rejecting extremes of luxury or poverty and pursuing a life of good intentions and actions, and adhering to the four noble truths and the eightfold path.

After the Buddha’s death, his followers spread his teachings throughout Asia with the aid of sacred texts and religious sculptures. As Buddhism spread, multiple schools developed. The first major school of Buddhism was **Theravada Buddhism**, now predominant in Southeast Asia (Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Indonesia), in which each person is responsible for his/her own enlightenment. The second major school of Buddhism was **Mahayana Buddhism**, prevalent in East Asia (China, Korea, and Japan), in which the Buddha is godlike and other enlightened beings called bodhisattvas help others achieve enlightenment. Other major schools that developed include **Zen Buddhism**, which took hold in China, Korea, and Japan and promoted the possibility of enlightenment

in one's lifetime with the help of a teacher and meditative practices as well as **Vajrayana Buddhism**, most strongly associated with Tibet, where tantric rites and sutras are used with the aid of gurus or learned teachers. Together these schools encompass a wide range of religious beliefs, figures, legends, ritual objects, and art, all unified by the common thread of the Buddha's teachings.

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BUDDHA SHAKYAMUNI

late 6th century

India, Uttar Pradesh

It is said that just looking at the Buddha could inspire enlightenment. Despite this assertion, the Buddha was not depicted in his human form in Buddhist art until roughly the second century. By that time, followers had elevated him to the status of a god, and the depiction of him as a man wearing a monastic robe soon dominated the art of India. By the fourth to fifth century an idealized serene image of the Buddha emerged.

In art, the Buddha Shakyamuni (the historical Buddha) can be identified by his thirty-two major characteristics (known as *lakshana*), including long, slender fingers; an upright and erect body; full, rounded shoulders; a shorn head represented by raised curls (he cut off his long hair when he renounced his princely life); and elongated earlobes (the result of years of wearing heavy earrings as a prince). The Buddha's enlightenment is symbolized by the lump on the crown of his head called an *ushnisha* (here it resembles a topknot or bun). His eyes are frequently half shut as they would be during meditation, a practice that quiets the mind and enables practitioners to focus on the present moment as well as detach themselves from the distractions of the world. Having renounced his former princely lifestyle, the Buddha wears the simple robes of a monk.

This particular depiction of Buddha Shakyamuni dates to the sixth century, a time of peace, prosperity, and artistic achievement in India. It was also during this time that the iconic Buddha image, which was later disseminated and copied throughout the Asian Buddhist world, was introduced. Here Buddha Shakyamuni is slim and narrow-waisted with wide shoulders. He stands in a graceful S-curve, resting his weight on his right leg. His monk's robes appear nearly translucent and cling to his body as

if wet, flaring slightly at the sides. The Buddha's left hand holds the end of his robe, while his right hand makes the *mudra*, a symbolic hand gesture of reassurance. This *mudra* tells his followers to have no fear; they are under his protection. His face exemplifies calm reflection, and his inner radiance is manifest in the statue's golden glow. Aside from this golden glow, the Buddha bears no adornment—he wears no jewelry, and his robes are without embellishment.

Representations of the Buddha are strictly symbolic. They serve as objects of contemplation and meditation aids for practitioners of Buddhism. Sculptures like this one were dispersed along with the teachings of the Buddha throughout Asia. Before entering LACMA's collection, this Indian sculpture was long preserved in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. How does this depiction of the Buddha reflect his characteristics and what we know about the Buddha from his teachings?
2. How does it change your perception of this sculpture to know when and where it was made, and how far it has traveled? Choose another representation of the Buddha from lacma.org. How does it differ from the statue pictured here? What is the difference in the time and location in which they were created, and how do you think those differences are reflected in the sculpture?



Buddha Shakyamuni
India, Uttar Pradesh, late 6th century
Sculpture
Copper alloy with traces of paint
15 1/2 x 6 3/4 x 4 in.
Gift of the Michael J. Connell Foundation (M.70.17)

ALTAR CABINET

19th–20th century

Eastern Tibet, Kham region

Buddhism became the predominant religion in Tibet beginning in the sixth century. Most Tibetan families engage in religious observance throughout the day at the family shrine, the center of which is the altar. The altar houses images of the Buddha and is the focus of religious ritual. It is a place for contemplation and prayer, where worshipers make offerings of tea, money, or other valuables as expressions of devotion.

The household altar is frequently kept inside a special cabinet, usually a wooden cabinet of simple construction that is elaborately carved and painted with Buddhist symbols and other decorative motifs. The top of this cabinet has been carved to resemble a temple roof. Just beneath this layer of carving, and a row of painted lotus petals crowns the main cabinet doors. These doors open to reveal six niches, where Buddhist sculptures would have been displayed.

Aside from the niches themselves, which are surrounded by a painted floral motif, the doors that cover these niches are the most highly decorated element of the altar cabinet. The motif on the exterior of the cabinet doors is relatively straightforward: The upper half of each door is dominated by a *zipak* (also called a *zeeba*), a mythological creature with a pig-like snout and curled horns. Each *zipak* wears a sun-and-moon crown (a protective symbol) and grasps the swirling foliage coming from its mouth with disembodied hands. In Buddhism the *zipak* symbolizes the eternal cycles of time and creation and is associated with prosperity and transformation. Around the *zipaks* swirl scrolling foliage.

The upper half of each of the doors is divided from the lower half by a band of stylized *wang zi*, a continuous band of linked swastikas (the swastika is an ancient, auspicious symbol for Hindus and Buddhists). Below this band, painted mountains rise above waves and clouds.

The inside of the altar doors are even more elaborately painted. The left door's interior is illustrated with the Eight Auspicious Buddhist Symbols:

1. A parasol, a symbol of the Buddha
2. A pair of fish, an ancient symbol of good fortune
3. A conch shell, a reminder that Buddhist teachings should be widely proclaimed
4. A lotus, a symbol of purity of mind
5. The standard of victory, a symbol of the victory of Buddhist teachings over evil
6. The vase of plenty, a symbol of good fortune and long life
7. The endless knot, a symbol of endless wisdom
8. The wheel of law, a symbol of the dharma with eight spokes representing the eightfold path.

Also painted on this door is a set of secondary symbols associated with the Buddha as universal monarch. These symbols are rarely depicted; they include a mansion (the building shown in the center) and a sword.

The right door's interior is painted with a mix of various offerings, as well as some of the Eight Auspicious Buddhist Symbols and the secondary symbols associated with the Buddha as universal monarch, including rhinoceros horns, which are associated with virility.

Unlike most of the artworks illustrated in this packet, which are centuries old, this altar cabinet was made relatively recently, in the nineteenth or twentieth century, a fact which highlights that, although the religion is very old, Buddhist practice continues to flourish today.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. What are some examples of symbols that our society uses to signify good fortune, luck, guardians, and gratitude? Investigate the roots of these symbols. Where did they originate and how do they communicate their messages? Do you think someone from another culture would be able to determine the symbols' meanings simply by viewing them?
2. How does the decoration of the altar cabinet reflect its function? Compare this altar cabinet to altars from churches, arks from synagogues, and mihrabs from mosques. What similarities do you see in the way these traditions mark spaces of religious significance?



Altar Cabinet
Eastern Tibet, Kham region, 19th–20th century
Wood with mineral pigments and gilding; brass fittings
56 1/2 x 48 x 17 1/2 in.
Gift of the 2010 Collectors Committee (M.2010.82.2)

MANUSCRIPT OF PHRA MALAI TALE

c. 1860–80

Thailand

SUTRA BOX

c. 1920–40

Thailand

As the physical manifestation of the Buddha's teachings, Buddhist texts are some of the primary objects of Buddhist devotion. Efforts to record, transmit, and preserve the Buddha's teachings in written form began in the first century and resulted in three main kinds of Buddhist texts: the **Vinaya**, monastic disciplinary codes; the **Abhidharma**, abstract philosophical treatises; and the **Sutra**, which takes a narrative form.

The Sutras contain the extended teachings and dialogues passed on by the Buddha to his disciples. They hold the stories of Buddha's many lives before his enlightenment, as well as the life stories of other holy persons. The term "sutra" is Sanskrit for thread, and the sutras act like thread, linking the many varied and widespread adherents of Buddhism to the dharma. Monks carried these manuscripts throughout Asia, where they were copied into native languages. Manuscripts like this one from Thailand were treasured and sheltered in monasteries, and used to educate and train young monks.

This particular page of sutra combines paintings of some of the Buddha's past lives (*jatakas*) with text from the story of the monk Phra Malai. The tales of Phra Malai were among the most popular subjects of nineteenth-century illustrated Thai manuscripts. Through the powers he achieved through meditation and his great merit, Phra Malai is said to have visited hell and heaven, where he met the future buddha, Buddha Maitreya. Although the story of Phra Malai is known throughout Southeast Asia, it is especially popular in Thailand, where the text, with its vivid descriptions of heaven and hell, was widely preached from during funerals and weddings.

As was typical with Thai Buddhist manuscripts, this page tells a story from Phra Malai but is illustrated

with scenes from *jatakas*, tales concerning the previous lives of the Buddha that demonstrate his teachings. The text of the Phra Malai Tale occupies the center, with a *jataka* painting on either side of it.

The page of sutra shown here is painted with scenes from the Sama Jataka, the tale of the devoted son, on the left and the Nimi Jataka, the tale of the noble king, on the right:

In the Sama Jataka, the Buddha is born as Sama, a boy who lovingly cares for his blind, ascetic parents in their home in the woods. When Sama is mortally wounded by a misguided king, he is brought back to life and his parents' eyesight is miraculously restored as a result of their lifelong penance. In the painting, Sama is shown reunited with his parents in the king's palace.

In the Nimi Jataka, the Buddha is born as the exemplary ruler Nimi, who is invited by the god Indra, the king of the heavens, to preach to his subjects. In the corresponding painting, Nimi rides in Indra's celestial chariot to his palace in heaven, while onlookers point up at him from the ground below.

As sacred objects, Buddhist manuscripts are often stored in gilded lacquer boxes such as the one represented in this packet. The sutra box pictured here is decorated with protector deities and celestial worshippers of the Buddha, all of whom are kneeling with their hands held together in a gesture of prayer. Boxes such as this one were kept in monasteries, where they were stored in elaborately decorated altar cabinets when not being read by monks or serving as objects of ritual veneration.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. Buddhist texts were translated into many languages and consumed by and adapted to many cultures. Name an example of a popular story that has been read and reinterpreted in books and movies over time and in different cultures. Why do you think this story has endured? What about it has remained relevant to readers/watchers? Would you consider the story universal?
2. Name an example of a character or hero who you think exemplifies virtue. How does his or her virtue manifest in stories about him or her? Do you consider this character a model for how you conduct yourself?
3. What stories are important to your culture and your family history? What lessons do they provide, and what do those lessons reveal about your values?



Sutra Box
Thailand, c. 1920–40
Wood, lacquer, and gold leaf
12 x 32 1/2 x 10 in.
Indian Art Special Purpose Fund (M.75.57)

GIBBON REACHING FOR THE REFLECTION OF THE MOON

Early 16th century

Yōgetsu

Japan

Unlike other schools of Buddhism, Zen Buddhists believe that through reliance on a teacher and personal effort, enlightenment can be achieved within one lifetime. Zen Buddhist practice emphasizes meditation, the use of *koans* (riddles), and the direct transmission of knowledge from teacher to pupil. The discipline and hierarchy of Zen appealed to Japan's military elite, and by the fifteenth century Zen Buddhism had become the principal religious and cultural influence in Japan.

Despite its apparent simplicity, Zen art imparts a profound message. A single brushstroke by an enlightened master can reveal a new reality to the Zen viewer. For this reason, paintings were often given to students and practitioners to inspire and help them on their quest to attain enlightenment, and to display during meditation rituals.

Gibbon Reaching for the Reflection of the Moon illustrates a Zen parable in which a gibbon tries to catch the moon's reflection in the water. The theme can be traced to a story in the sutras about a monkey king who pursued the reflection of the moon. Both the painting and the story serve as cautionary tales against mistaking illusion for reality and becoming attached to the temptations of this world.

This artwork is an exemplary piece of Zen painting notable for its bold lines, simplicity, asymmetry, and tranquility, as well as for the high quality of its brushwork. With his varied brushstrokes, the artist, the monk Yōgetsu, differentiates the soft fur of the gibbon from the smooth, hard weight of the rock upon which he sits. In just a few brushstrokes, he manages to make the gibbon's face quite expressive. In fact, the gibbon's concentration and frustration are almost palpable. Its body is crouched into a tight ball, clinging to the rock with its right arm extended as far as possible toward the water, its fingers nearly

brushing the top of the waves below. (In fact, the gibbon's long and elegant fingers are painted in a technique that differs from that used for the rest of the painting.) The length of this arm has been exaggerated for effect, and the tight composition, without excess space above or to either side of the gibbon, directs the viewer's eye downward to the reflection of the moon. In this way the artist focuses attention on the gibbon's futile exertions and the moral of the parable.

The finishing touch is the *fukizumi*, or spattering of paint, a difficult technique that was prevalent in this period. For *fukizumi*, ink is applied to the brush and then blown off onto the surface of the painting. Here it is used to create a foamy effect in the water. *Fukizumi* is typically applied after the rest of the painting is finished, thus, if a mistake is made using the technique, it can easily ruin the entire piece. It takes a true master to control such a difficult application and trust that it will not undermine his work.

While the gibbon is not native to Japan, Yōgetsu is thought to have studied the work of the famous Chinese painter, Muqi (1210–1269), whose renowned painting of a gibbon was housed at a Zen temple in Japan. In China, gibbons were known as the gentlemen of the forests, admired for their graceful movements swinging from branches through the treetops.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. Look at other visual representations of stories and analyze the techniques used to retain and communicate their respective themes. Then choose another parable or tale (for instance, Aesop's Fables). How would you illustrate that story in a way that communicates the message of the tale for those who may not be familiar with it?
2. Is this painting successful in communicating its message to the viewer?



Gibbon Reaching for the Reflection of the Moon
Japan, early 16th century
Yōgetsu
Hanging scroll; ink on paper
60 x 20 in.
Far Eastern Art Council Fund (M.83.36)