

The Art of Buddhism

A TEACHER'S GUIDE

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Introduction

Thank you for turning to the Smithsonian Institution's Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, the national museum of Asian art, as a resource for teaching about Asia. One of our missions is to help teachers find innovative ways to include the study of Asia in their curriculum. Many national, state, and local educational organizations now recommend or require the study of Asia as part of every student's education.

A team of teachers from the Washington, D.C., area helped us design this packet. We hope that teachers of all grade levels and disciplines will benefit from these materials. We have identified grade level appropriateness in the table of contents for some lessons and activities. We hope, however, that you will look over the entire packet to determine for yourself what might be useful to you and your students. Also, please note that all words in the vocabulary list (pages 53–55) are in bold the first time they appear in any section.

While the arts of Buddhism have an enduring tradition throughout Asia, we have chosen to focus on the cultures of three countries in which our museum collections are particularly strong: India, China, and Japan. Please use our outstanding collection as a springboard for lessons, activities, and classroom discussion. If you teach in the Washington, D.C., area, we invite you to bring your students to the galleries and see the objects discussed here.

Meditation

Meditation—the practice of quieting the mind and focusing on the present moment—is one step on the Eightfold Path of Buddhism (see page 9). The goal of meditation is to detach oneself from thoughts of daily life and observe them without judgment or emotion. In this way, one can recognize that endless thoughts and speculations about the past and future are just thoughts, not reality, and need not disturb the mind. One is then free to experience the true reality of the present moment.

One can practice meditation in a variety of ways, depending on individual preference and the type of Buddhism followed. Some methods include counting and monitoring the breath, chanting a special word or phrase (mantra), or using a visual or audio focal point, such as the flame of a candle or the sound of a bell. Meditation usually takes place seated in a quiet space.

The Buddha achieved enlightenment after an intense period of prolonged meditation. To recall this important event in the life of the Buddha, he is often depicted in a seated position with his hands in the symbolic gesture of meditation, the Dhyana mudra (see mudras on page 10).

Buddhism began about 2,500 years ago, when young prince **Siddhartha Gautama** tried to understand the causes of suffering in the world. Siddhartha was born in Lumbini, Nepal, about five hundred years before Jesus of Nazareth, the founder of Christianity, and twelve hundred years before Muhammad, the founder of Islam. He lived for eighty years sometime between 563 and 400 B.C.E.

Until he was twenty-nine years old, the prince lived a life of luxury in his palace within sight of the Himalayan mountains. Then, on several trips he made outside his palace, he saw for the first time people who suffered. Among them was an old man, a sick man, someone who had recently died, and a wandering monk. Following this sudden awakening to the suffering in the world, Siddhartha decided to leave his family and the safety of his palace to seek out the causes of suffering. He spent many years **meditating**, praying, and fasting. One day he became aware that people suffer when they want to hold onto material things. He realized that we should not become attached to possessions because nothing is permanent: eventually everything dies

or becomes worn out. If we think anything will last forever, we are bound to suffer. The moment Siddhartha recognized the cause of suffering, he attained **enlightenment**, or the great awakening. From that point on, Siddhartha was known as the Buddha, the “enlightened one.” He spent the rest of his life teaching in India.

As the teachings of the Buddha spread from India to other parts of Asia, two major schools of Buddhism developed: Theravada, the “teaching of Elders,” and Mahayana, the “greater vehicle.” Theravada extended in a southeastern direction and can be found today in Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, and Indonesia. In Theravada Buddhism, the Buddha is considered a great teacher, and each individual is responsible for his or her own journey



The Spread of Buddhism

towards enlightenment. Mahayana, on the other hand, traveled from India in a northeasterly direction to China, Korea, and Japan. This tradition not only recognizes the Buddha as a godlike figure but also involves devotion to other enlightened being called **bodhisattvas**.

All schools of Buddhism believe that every living beings experiences repeated lives on earth and has the opportunity to improve its next birth by performing good deeds in a current life. They also teach that after death, a being can be reborn into another form, such as an animal or insect, and will continue to be reborn until enlightenment is achieved. Enlightenment brings the ultimate goal of **nirvana**, the final death, that marks release from the cycle of rebirth and suffering. Buddhists believe that by following the **Middle Way**, the **Four Noble Truths**, and the **Eightfold Path**, freedom from the endless cycle of rebirth is possible.

The central teachings of Buddhism include:

The Middle Way

In life, you must reject the extremes of either wanting everything or giving up everything and seek the balance of the Middle Way.

The Four Noble Truths

1. SUFFERING

Existence is a realm of suffering: from birth to growing old, becoming sick, and dying — all life is suffering.

2. THE SOURCE OF SUFFERING

Suffering arises from desire. Wanting selfish pleasure, continued life, power, and/or material possessions can all lead to suffering.

3. STOPPING SUFFERING

You must completely stop wanting things in order to cease desire. Only when no desire remains is enlightenment possible.

4. THE WAY TO STOP SUFFERING

The way to attain enlightenment and stop suffering is to follow the Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path

If you follow these eight rules, the world will become a place in which all people can live in harmony.

1. RIGHT UNDERSTANDING

Only when you understand the Four Noble Truths and follow the Eightfold Path can you find true happiness.

2. RIGHT AIMS

Love and help others. Don't cheat or want things that other people cannot have.

3. RIGHT SPEECH

Always tell the truth. Listen and communicate in order to understand others.

4. RIGHT ACTION

Never kill, steal, or be jealous. Perform good acts for the sake of benefiting others, not for your own reward.

5. PROPER WORK

Do work that will not harm any living creature.

6. RIGHT THINKING

Focus your thoughts on the positive in order to overcome difficulties.

7. PROPER AWARENESS

Never let your body control your mind. Know when to say "no."

8. MEDITATION

Train your mind to concentrate and think deeply, to be inwardly attentive, and to find peace within so you will be able to learn and do many things.

Today, more than three hundred million Buddhists practice their beliefs throughout the world. The highest concentration of Buddhists is found in Asia: Japan, Korea, Nepal, China, throughout Southeast Asia, and in the Himalayan regions. A wide range of Buddhist traditions exists. Some of the practices include: making religious journeys (**pilgrimages**) to holy temples and **stupas** and walking around these sites (**circumambulating**); praying; making offerings of fruit, food, and flowers; burning incense to the Buddha and bodhisattvas in a temple; and making offerings and praying at small shrines erected in the home.

The spread and practice of Buddhism have transformed India, China, and Japan at different points in history. India, where the Buddha lived and taught, is the homeland of Buddhism. Trade and cultural exchange between India and China during the first century C.E. introduced Buddhism to China, and within a few hundred years the religion permeated all aspects of Chinese society, art, and culture. From China, Buddhism spread throughout East Asia and reached Japan. Since its introduction and assimilation in Japan in the mid-sixth century, Buddhism has been a major influence on Japanese life and art.

Mudras



DETAIL OF THE BUDDHA'S ENLIGHTENMENT (see page 20)



DHYANA MUDRA



ABHAYA MUDRA



DHARMACHAKRA MUDRA



BHUMISPARSHA MUDRA

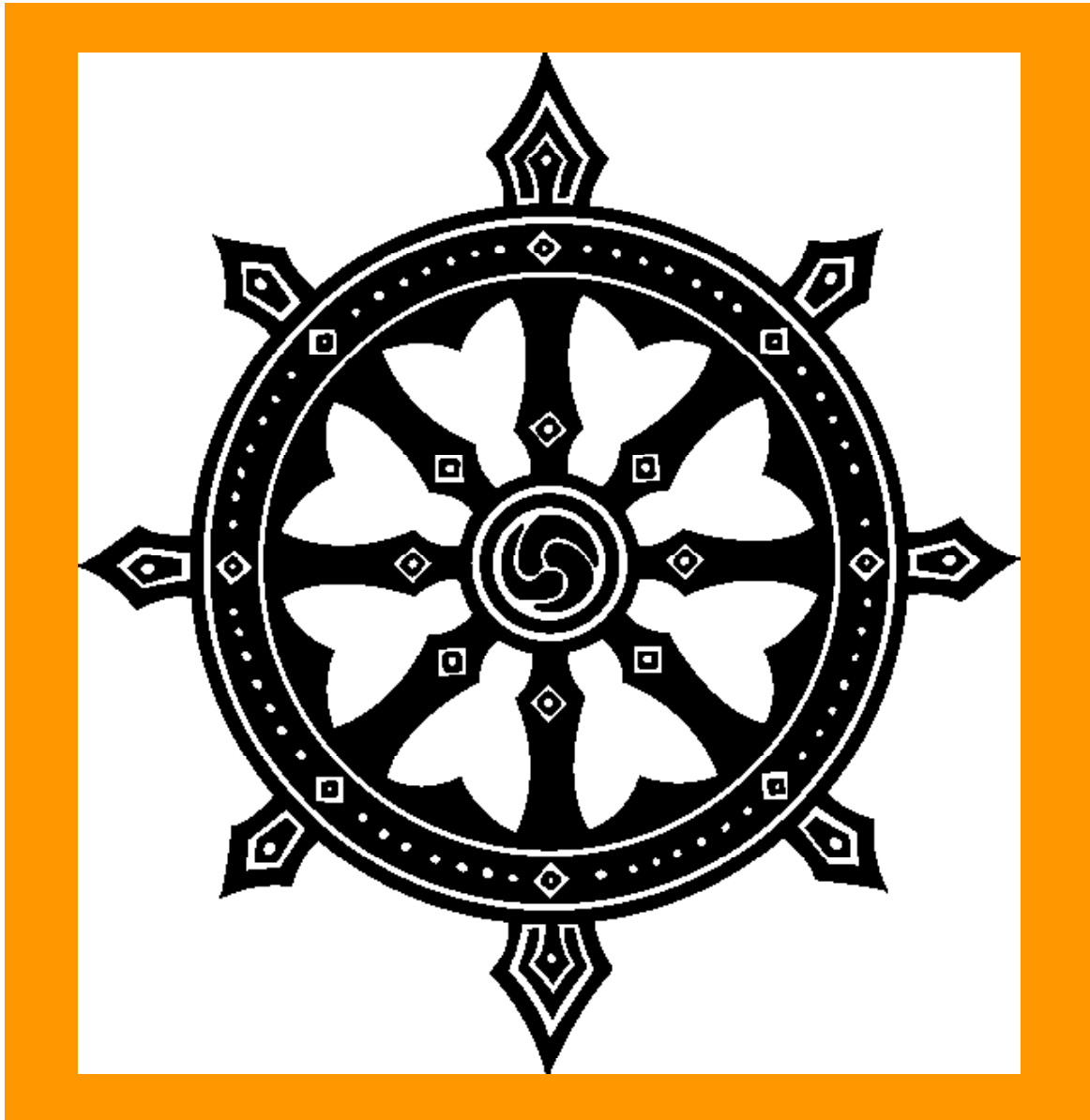
Mudras are symbolic hand gestures with special meanings seen in on artistic depictions of the Buddha and other Buddhist figures. The following four are the most common mudras used in East Asian Buddhist art.

Dhyana mudra: meditation. In this mudra of meditation, the hands are positioned palms up, right over left, in the lap. One of the elements of the Eightfold Path, meditation is the practice of relaxed concentration.

Abhaya mudra: fearlessness. This gesture of a raised right hand and a lowered left hand, palms forward, is a gesture of protection and lets viewers know that they should “have no fear.” In the third panel of four scenes from the life of the Buddha, the Buddha holds his right hand in a variation of this mudra.

Dharmachakra mudra: teaching. In this mudra, the right hand is raised, the left hand is lowered, palms are forward, and the thumb and forefingers touch. This gesture is intended to recall the teachings of the Buddha, particularly his first sermon in Deer Park. The wheel shape created by the thumb and forefinger represents the wheel of dharma, a symbol of the Buddha’s teachings.

Bhumisparsha mudra: calling the earth to witness. In this gesture, the right hand is draped over the front of the right leg, palm facing the leg, and the left hand, palm up, is positioned at waist level. This mudra refers to the event of Siddhartha’s enlightenment. When he attained enlightenment, Siddhartha called on the earth to be his witness by touching the ground with his right hand. For an example of this mudra, see seated Buddha (page 23). The second panel of four scenes from the life of the Buddha (page 20) also depicts the Buddha holding his right hand in another version of this mudra.



The Wheel of Dharma: Symbol of the Buddha's Teachings

See examples on either side of the dome's capital in *Worship at a Stupa* on page 17 and on the pedestal directly beneath the seated Buddha in the third panel of four scenes from the life of the Buddha on page 21.

The Birth of Buddhism in India

Stupa

The stupa is not only a Buddhist shrine but also a symbol of the Buddha's attainment of nirvana. A site of worship and pilgrimage, a stupa may contain some of the cremated remains of the Buddha or other great Buddhist teachers, as well as other sacred objects. When Buddhist pilgrims approach a stupa, they walk slowly around it in a clockwise direction (circumambulate) as an act of devotion. For example, *Death of the Buddha, Parinirvana* (page 17) shows pilgrims in the act of circumambulating the stupa as they worship the Buddha. This stone relief is a portion of a fence railing that once surrounded a stupa in India.

Typically, Indian stupas have a dome or anda (literally, "egg"), a pillar with stone umbrellas on top of the dome, and a wall or fence encircling the dome. The dome is in the shape of the burial mound of the Buddha. Sometimes, the surrounding wall of a stupa is decorated with important figures, symbols, and even jataka tales.

As Buddhism spread beyond India, the shape of the stupa evolved. Pagodas in China, Korea, and Japan are simply variations on the original domed stupa built in India.

The fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E. marked a time of worldwide intellectual activity. It was an age of great thinkers, such as Socrates (ca. 470–399 B.C.E.) and Plato (ca. 428–348 B.C.E.) in Greece and Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.) and Laozi (sixth century B.C.E.) in China. In India, it was the age of the Buddha, who inspired a religion that eventually spread far beyond his homeland.

After abandoning his life as a prince and reaching an understanding of the suffering in the world, the Buddha, or Enlightened One, spent the remaining forty years of his life teaching people about his Middle Way. Those who follow the middle path reject the extremes of luxury and poverty, and pursue a life of good intentions and actions. After the Buddha's death, his cremated remains were placed within mounds called stupas. These burial mounds eventually became the focus of Buddhist monasteries and attracted pilgrims from far and wide.

In the earliest Buddhist art in India, the Buddha is not represented in human form. Instead, his presence is indicated by a footprint, an empty seat, a parasol, or another sign. For example, in *Worship at a Stupa* (page 17), the stupa represents the presence of the Buddha. By the first century C.E., followers of the Buddha had elevated him to the



Photograph by Mary Slusser

status of a god. The human figure of the Buddha wearing a monastic robe began to dominate the art of India. The figure always bore signs of his superhuman perfection. The **ush-nisha**, the bulge or topknot on the Buddha's head, represents his great knowledge, and the **urna**, or dot on his forehead, symbolizes his ability to understand all things. (See four scenes from the life of the Buddha [page 20] and seated Buddha [page 23].)

Symbolic image of the Buddha's footprint.



Photograph by Stephen T. Eckerd



INDIA

From the fourth to the sixth century C.E. in northern India, an ideal image of the Buddha emerged, showing him with a downward glance and a serene aura, his hair arranged in tiny curls and a curvaceous body visible beneath a thin robe. This Buddha type served as the model for future generations of Buddhist artists in India, Nepal, Thailand, and Indonesia (see seated Buddha, page 23).

The Buddhist faith evolved over the centuries to include an expanded array of divinities, including enlightened beings known as bodhisattvas and a range of protective deities, many of whom are quite frightening in appearance. With time, Buddhism evolved significantly from its simple beginnings. Even though Buddhism declined in popularity in India during the twelfth century, it flourished in many other Asian countries.

A Jataka Tale

A jataka story demonstrates some element of the Buddha's teaching, usually a moral or a spiritual point. More than five hundred known jatakas (literally, "birth stories") represent the Buddha in one of his former lives. In many of his past lives, the Buddha was reborn as a bird or an animal, but no matter what his form, he is always a creature of great wisdom and compassion. The story of the Monkey King told here stresses the importance of self-sacrifice and putting other people before yourself.

The Monkey King

A great tribe of monkeys once lived high in the Himalayan mountains. Every night they went to a giant mango tree that grew beside a river to eat its juicy fruit.

One night they saw something that made them stop eating immediately and stare in horror. On the ground down below were many soldiers, and they were all pointing spears and arrows up into the branches of the giant mango tree.

"Help!" the monkeys cried. "They'll kill us all!"

"They won't if we keep calm," replied the king of the monkeys. "There is a way to escape. Wait here."

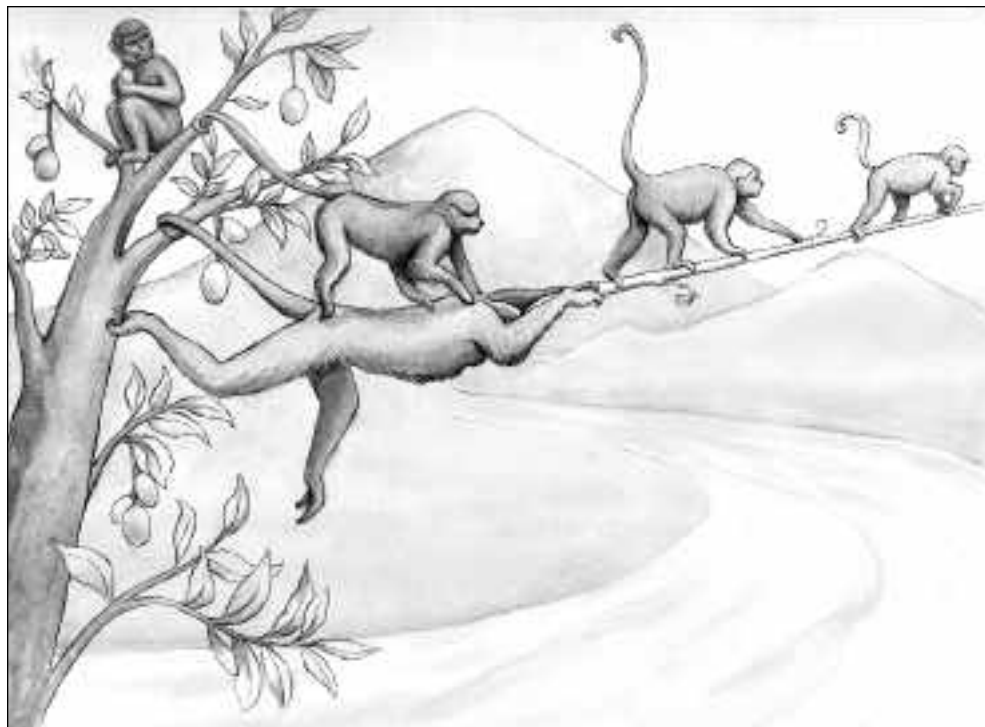
Climbing to the very top of the tree, the monkey king made a great leap right across the river into another tree. There he found a long vine. After making sure the vine was strongly attached to the tree, he gripped the end of the vine in his teeth and leapt back over the river into the giant mango tree.

The monkey king planned to use this vine to make a bridge, but unfortunately it was a bit too short. After thinking for a moment, he saw that he could use his own body to fill the final gap. When everything was ready, he called the other monkeys.

“Now step onto my back and climb across the vine to safety on the other side of the river,” he told them.

The monkeys did as he said and they all escaped — all except one, that is. His name was Devadatta, and he had never liked the monkey king. Now he saw his chance to hurt him. Taking a running leap, Devadatta jumped with all his might onto the monkey king’s back. Crack! The monkey king’s back broke, but he held onto the vine long enough to be certain Devadatta had escaped safely to the other side.

Standing under the tree, a great ruler of the kingdom and his soldiers had witnessed all of this activity. The ruler ordered his soldiers to lay down their weapons and gently bring the wounded monkey king down from the top of the giant mango tree.



“Although you are only a monkey, today you taught me how a true king should behave,” this human king told the monkey king. “You put the safety of your subjects before your own welfare. That was truly noble. From now on, I shall try to live up to your example.”

With that, the monkey king smiled, closed his eyes, and peacefully passed into the next world.

Objects of Indian Buddhist Art

Worship at a Stupa

India, Bharhut, early 2d century B.C.E.

Stone

47.5 x 51.9 x 8.0 cm.

Purchase F1932.26

Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

In early Buddhist art, the Buddha is rarely depicted in human form; instead, symbols represent his presence and his teachings. The stupa is one of many images used to indicate the presence of the Buddha. This raised sandstone carving from a fence rail that once encircled a stupa refers to the continuing presence of the Buddha on earth. At the center of the carving is the Buddha's funerary mound, or stupa. Worshipers stand to the left and right of the stupa. Celestial figures fly overhead and offer garlands and flowers in adoration. Two pairs of flowering sal trees frame the scene and add to its visual symmetry. Some scholars think sal trees grew in the grove where the Buddha left his physical body and ascended into nirvana. Their presence here helps the viewer to identify the scene with the Buddha's death and his passing into the state of nirvana. Along the base of the dome are nine right hands — nine is an auspicious number in many ancient traditions — that represent worshipers encircling the stupa. One way of showing reverence for the Buddha is to walk slowly around the stupa and place your hands at its base.



Objects of Indian Buddhist Art

Four scenes from the life of the Buddha

Gandhara (present-day Pakistan), 2d century B.C.E.

Stone

67.0 x 290.0 cm. overall

Purchase F1949.9a-d

Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

With the incorporation of the Buddha's human image into art after the first century, sculptors began to depict legends surrounding the youth of Siddhartha, including stories of his birth and death. These legends and historical events were eventually consolidated into a clear story line that usually centers on four main events in the Buddha's life, referred to as the Four Great Miracles. Thereafter, these four events were frequently depicted on narrative relief panels such as this. Such panels were often placed around the base of important stupas and can be considered in chronological order.

1. The first of these four panels represents the miracle of the Buddha's birth. Siddhartha, complete with halo, emerges from the right hip of his mother Maya as she stands beneath a tree. The baby's halo, which signifies divine radiance, is a symbol of honor that routinely appears on South Asian images of deities and royalty. Artistic and cultural elements borrowed from ancient Greek and Roman art include the wreaths around the women's heads, the long-sleeved blouses and gowns, and the cornucopias held by several figures.

2. The miracle of the Buddha's enlightenment appears in the second relief. The Buddha sits beneath a tree in meditation. Mara, the evil one, stands in the foreground, ready to draw his sword. Meanwhile, Mara's fearsome demon armies attack the Buddha from all sides. Notice the array of animals and half animal-half human creatures that make up Mara's army. Despite all this activity around him, the Buddha remains serene. Two soldiers underneath the Buddha's elevated platform are stricken down by the power of the Buddha's awesome presence. With his mudra, or hand gesture, of touching the ground, the Buddha calls the earth to witness his realization of enlightenment and thus his victory over the evil Mara.

3. Illustrating the miracle of the first sermon, the third panel shows the Buddha preaching to a crowd of monks and ordinary citizens. The deer depicted underneath his platform identify the location of the sermon: Deer Park at Sarnath. Between the two deer, which appear to be as mesmerized by the Buddha's teachings as the people gathered, is the wheel of dharma. The wheel is a pre-Buddhist symbol of kingship, and some Hindu gods are shown holding one. Although the Buddha gave up his earthly possessions and kingdom, this wheel refers to his spiritual authority and teaching. His first sermon is thus referred to as "the first turning of the wheel of the dharma [or law]."

4. In the final relief showing the miracle of the Buddha's journey to nirvana, local chieftains appear above him and express their intense grief. The monks, on the other hand, seem to be at peace. One monk sits directly under the Buddha's couch and calmly meditates, thus signifying his understanding that the Buddha's passing is not death but rather a release from the endless cycle of rebirth.





Panel 1—The Birth: Queen Maya gives birth to Siddhartha, the Buddha-to-be.



Panel 2—The Enlightenment: Siddhartha resists Mara's evil forces and with a gesture asks the earth to witness his enlightenment.



Panel 3—The First Sermon at Deer Park: This event is also referred to as “turning the wheel of dharma.”



Panel 4—Death of the Buddha: The Buddha passes from the endless cycle of rebirth into nirvana.

Objects of Indian Buddhist Art

Seated Buddha

Central Tibet,* 14th century

Gilt copper with pigment

45.0 x 34.0 x 27.0 cm.

Purchase—Friends of Asian Arts in honor of the 10th Anniversary of the

Arthur M. Sackler Gallery S1997.28

Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

This Buddha was created to grace the altar of a Buddhist monastery in Tibet. Sitting serenely with one hand in his lap, the Buddha extends his other hand to touch the earth in a traditional symbol of his enlightenment. To ensure that worshipers recognize this figure as the historic Buddha, the square pattern on the robe recalls the patchwork of fabric scraps that were sewn together for the only garment the Buddha wore as he wandered the land. Characteristic signs of the Buddha's superhuman perfection include the tightly curled hair covering his ushnisha, the bump on the top of his head that symbolizes his immense knowledge. The dot in the middle of his forehead, called an urna, indicates his understanding of all things. His long earlobes, which were caused by the heavy earrings he wore when he was a prince, refer to his rejection of his earthly wealth.

This hollow-cast copper figure was covered in gold using a complex gilding process that is still in use today. A mixture of gold and mercury was applied to the surface of the copper figure, then heated over a smokeless fire until the mercury evaporated and the gold adhered to the surface. The gilded surface was then polished with a smooth stone. Relics or charms could have been inserted into the figure's hollow body before it was sealed with a thin metal plate. Such relics might have included holy texts, precious objects, and ashes or bits of bone left over after the cremation of an enlightened being or great Buddhist teacher.

* Buddhism had been introduced into Tibet from India as early as the seventh century.

Tibet looked to eastern India, Nepal, and Kashmir for spiritual and artistic inspiration.



Buddhism in China: A Process of Transformation

The history of Buddhism in China is a complex story of how a foreign religion was imported and transformed into a Chinese system of beliefs. Buddhism reached China from India by the first century C.E., but it did not flourish until the political and economic upheavals of the Six Dynasties period (220–589). In those troubling times, Buddhism's emphasis on personal salvation and rejection of worldly ties attracted believers from every walk of life. At other times, Buddhism prospered when an emperor chose it as his official religion, but its foreign origin led other rulers to persecute believers. Buddhism survived these periodic challenges and continues to flourish in China today.

At first, Chinese Buddhist beliefs and temple art were quite similar to the ideas and images brought from India. These ideas traveled to China from India along the Silk Road (see page 26) and via a southern sea route. Many Indian Buddhist concepts were somewhat changed to better mesh with the existing Chinese traditions, such as **Confucianism** and **Daoism**. For example, unlike the Indian emphasis on personal salvation acquired by living a celibate life, Chinese Buddhists encouraged filial piety to complement the Chinese tradition of ancestor worship.

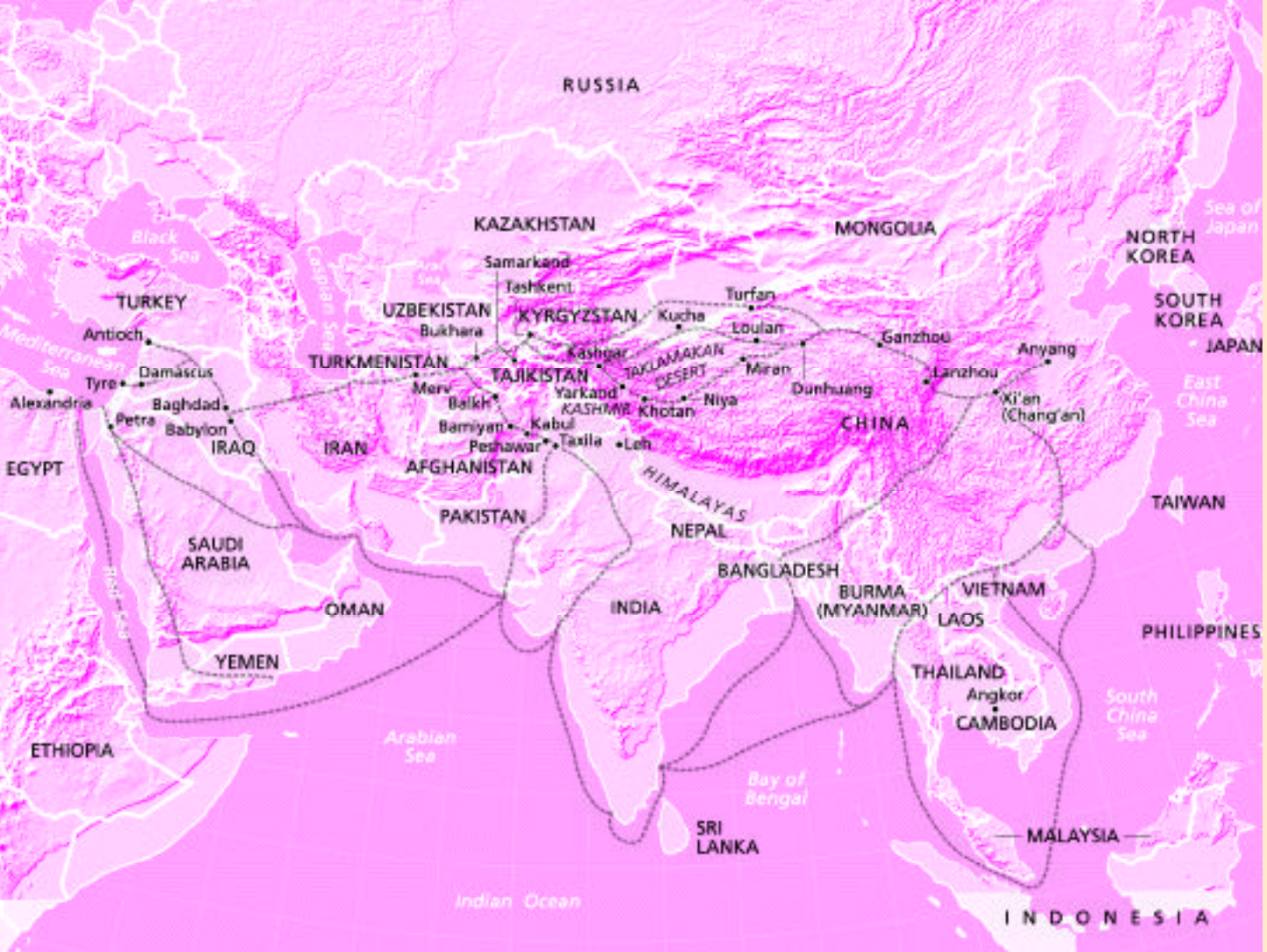
Styles in Chinese Buddhist art alternated between an emphasis on native Chinese influences and non-Chinese traditions from India, Central Asia, and Tibet. The more naturalistic modeling of human forms was a foreign characteristic that clearly can be seen in the figure of the Bodhisattva of Compassion (Guanyin, in Chinese) (see Guanyin of Eleven Heads, page 35), while the Chinese tradition of clearly delineated, rhythmic lines is evident in the standing bodhisattva holding a lotus bud (see page 31).

While the Buddhist pantheon of deities was largely the same in India and China, some deities took on new forms in China, and others were created. For example, Guanyin was always portrayed as a male in India, but he gradually took on feminine attributes in China (see Guanyin of Eleven Heads, page 35). Over time, a completely female version of this deity evolved in China.

Buddhism went through a process of becoming Chinese while it retained many of its distinctly foreign attributes. This gradual process is seen in Chinese art, for Buddhism became a cultural force that inspired some of China's most outstanding paintings and sculptures.



CHINA



THE SILK ROAD: LAND AND SEA ROUTES

The Silk Road

The Silk Road, also called the Silk Route, refers to a network of roads used by merchants and travelers in ancient times. At its peak, this trade route extended from Rome through the Middle East and Central Asia to China. By the third century C.E., silk and spices, as well as precious stones and metals, were traded along these routes. Few merchants traveled the entire route. Instead, they sold some goods and purchased others at points along the way. Goods changed hands many times before reaching their final destinations. New styles, products, and ideas flourished in regions bordering the Silk Road.

Buddhism spread from India to China along the Silk Road. By the fifth century, Indian Buddhists traveled the route to China, and Chinese Buddhist pilgrims journeyed to India to find Buddhist holy texts (**sutras**) and to visit the sacred places of the Buddha's life. Examples of Buddhist art and architecture are found along the former Silk Road at monasteries and cave grottoes that Buddhist monks, pilgrims, and merchants built as they made their way across the continent. Trade on the Silk Road decreased by the seventh century, but Buddhism was already well established in China by that time.

A Chinese Buddhist Story

Chinese beliefs often blend elements of **Confucianism**, **Daoism**, and **Buddhism**. Confucian teachings emphasize proper moral conduct and filial piety — honoring and caring for parents and ancestors. Daoism stresses the importance of finding the Way of the Universe and living a balanced life. Buddhism focuses on the life of the Buddha, following the **Middle Way**, and living in a manner that minimizes suffering. Thus, many traditional Chinese stories have themes and morals that incorporate one or more aspects of these belief systems.

The following story describes one of the great Buddhist **bodhisattvas**, enlightened beings who, in human form, postpone entrance into nirvana to help others reach enlightenment. Although Guanyin was originally an Indian deity known as the Bodhisattva of Compassion, he is also one of the central figures of Chinese Buddhism. In one Chinese incarnation and in this story, Guanyin takes on female form.

The Kindhearted Guanyin

A long time ago, there was a girl named Guanyin, who had a kind heart.

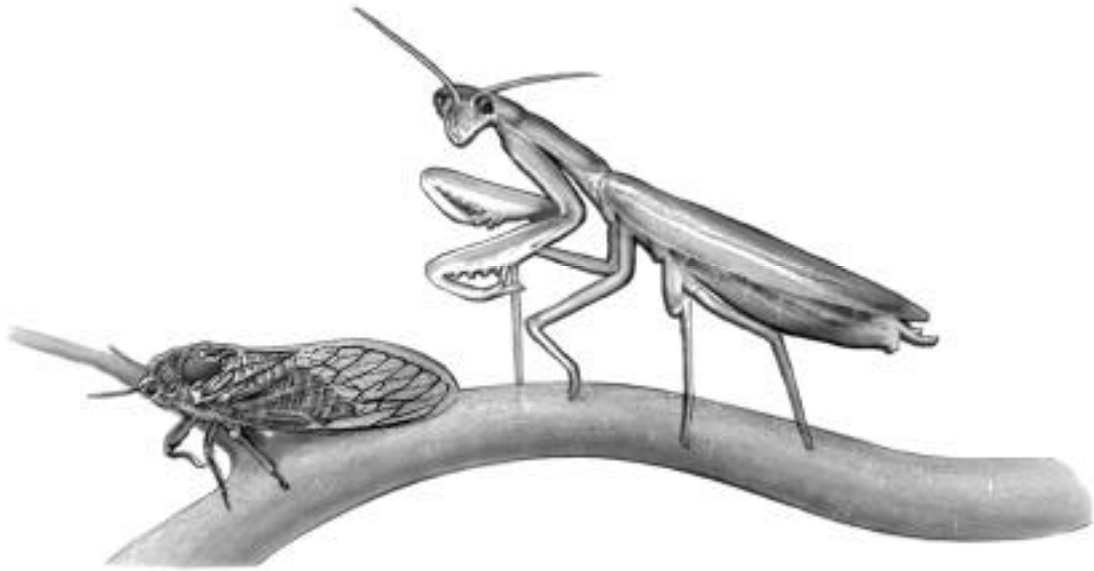
Once when she was young, she tried to save a cicada from being eaten by a praying mantis, but she tripped and fell, knocking her head against a stone. This left a red scar in the middle of her forehead. People used to say, “What a pity! A scar on such a beautiful face,” but Guanyin did not care. She only wanted to help others and make their lives better.

One night the Buddha appeared to Guanyin in a dream. He told her that on a faraway mountaintop, she would find a magic lotus flower and a little medicine vase made of a white stone called jade. “Go fetch these treasures,” said the Buddha, “for then you will be able to help all people who are suffering.”

The next morning, Guanyin set off for the long journey to find the magic lotus flower and the medicine vase on the mystical mountain. Guanyin’s family didn’t want her to go, and when she did, they missed her greatly.

The journey was long and hard. On the way, Guanyin gave away her food to hungry birds, so she lived on wild berries and nuts. Then Guanyin offered her shoes to a poor person. For the rest of her journey she went barefoot. Stones cut her feet, and they bled.

At last she reached India and found the mountain in her dream, where the magic lotus flower and the little jade medicine vase could be found. The mountain was very steep and covered with snow and ice, but Guanyin struggled to the top.



When she arrived at the top of the mountain, the Buddha appeared to her. “You are indeed a kind and thoughtful person. Here is the magic lotus flower and the little white jade medicine vase.” The Buddha then told Guanyin to take them back to the temple in her home village and to live there as a nun. “When water appears in the vase and a willow branch grows from it, on that day you will rise up to Heaven,” he told her.

Guanyin did as the Buddha instructed. She returned home and became a nun. She placed the little white jade vase on the temple altar and planted the lotus flower in the temple pond. She continued to help people who were suffering. Word of her kindness traveled far, and many people came to the temple to ask for Guanyin’s assistance.

One day, a friend of Guanyin told some people the story about the vase and how when it filled with water and a willow grew from it, Guanyin would rise up to Heaven. Upon hearing this, a naughty boy named Shenying decided to play a trick on everyone. That night when the temple was empty, he poured water into the vase and placed a willow branch in it.

The next morning, everyone was excited. “Look, there is water and a willow growing in the vase” they said. Shenying laughed to himself. Guanyin sat down by the pond and started to pray. Soon, there was music in the air, and the lotus flower began to open. It got

bigger and bigger until it was almost as large as the pond itself. Guanyin stepped onto the lotus flower. Then slowly, the lotus started carrying her into the sky. Everyone was amazed, especially Shenying. As the lotus flower reached the clouds, Guanyin looked down at him. “Thank you, little boy,” she said, and she flew into Heaven to become the Bodhisattva of Compassion, so she could forever continue to help people in need.



Objects of Chinese Buddhist Art

Standing bodhisattva holding a lotus bud

China, Henan Province, Northern Qi dynasty (550–577)

Limestone

173.3 cm.

Gift of Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer F1968.45

Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Lotus

Many varieties of the lotus flower grow in water in South and Southeast Asia. The lotus became a symbol of Buddhism and enlightenment because its beauty emerges from muddy water. Just as a lotus rises from the mud through water toward sunlight, one seeking enlightenment moves from ignorance toward full presence of mind.

The lotus has also come to represent purity and is associated with the Buddha's infancy. According to one Buddhist myth, when the Buddha took his first seven steps, seven lotus flowers sprang from the earth under his feet.

The lotus is a recurring symbol in Buddhist art. The Buddha and other Buddhist figures are often depicted sitting on large lotus blossoms (see *bosatsu*, page 43) or holding lotus flowers in their hands (see the standing bodhisattva holding a lotus bud, page 31).



Photograph by A.Garborino

This sculpture of a bodhisattva, or enlightened being, is from Xiangtangshan (pronounced she-ang tahng shan), a well-known archaeological site in China where many Buddhist chapels were built into mountainside caves. Holding an offering of a lotus bud, this figure would have stood next to an image of the Buddha. Its almost rigid dignity and somewhat introspective expression are characteristic of the high artistic accomplishment of the Xiangtangshan sculptors. The figure wears a skirt, or dhoti, fastened at the waist by a knotted sash. The cloth falls in a fluid, simple manner, forming a scalloped pattern with its hem. The bodhisattva's upper body is partially covered by a long

stole draped around the shoulders and alongside the body. The deity also wears a simple but heavy necklace. The presence of jewelry often distinguishes an image of the Buddha from that of a bodhisattva. Since the Buddha rejected earthly wealth, he is never shown wearing any form of jewelry. A

bodhisattva, on the other hand, is usually crowned or bejeweled because he chose to return to earth to assist others in attaining salvation.



The headdress consists of three parts, with ribbons descending over the shoulders and mingling with the carefully placed strands of hair. The rough surface found on the back of this bodhisattva indicates that the sculpture was originally attached to a wall in one of the caves at Xiangtangshan.

Objects of Chinese Buddhist Art

Buddhist altarpiece

China, Sui Dynasty, 597

Gilt bronze

32.1 x 14.1 cm.

Gift of Charles Lang Freer F1914.21

Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

These three gold-covered figures share a low platform and stand atop pedestals within a few inches of one another. The figures in this altarpiece include a central standing Buddha flanked by standing bodhisattvas. The upper bodies and pointed halos of all three incline forward slightly. This impression of active involvement is reinforced by the smiling, friendly expressions on their faces. The central Buddha's hands are in the Abhaya mudra ("fear not"), and his simple monastic robes clearly contrast with the elaborate gowns of the bodhisattvas. The smaller figures wear intricate headdresses with long ribbons and scarves that seem to flow alongside their willowy bodies.

The central Buddha's physique and adornment are simple in comparison. He stands upon an inverted lotus that fits into an elaborate base, which, in turn, fits onto a low, rectangular stand. In contrast, the bodhisattvas stand on long-stemmed lotuses that project out from the rectangular base into space. A long inscription on the front of the pedestal reads: "On the twenty-fourth day of the tenth month in the seventeenth year of Kaihuang [December 8, 597], donor Wu...had an image made." The inscription then goes on to list the fifteen donors after "donor Wu," two of whom were women of some standing in the imperial court, and many of whom share the same family name.



Objects of Chinese Buddhist Art

Guanyin of Eleven Heads

China, Shaanxi Province, Tang dynasty, ca. 703

Limestone

108.8 x 31.7 x 15.3 cm.

Gift of Charles Lang Freer F1909.98

Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, holds a flower in his raised right hand and grasps the end of a long scarf with his left hand. The deity wears a thin skirt, or dhoti, tied around the hips, and jeweled arm rings and necklaces adorn the body. The sensuous style of the sculpture reflects the influence of Indian art in China.



detail

The hair is arranged into a high cone, and ten small bodhisattva heads are scattered throughout the hair (see detail at left). The heads represent different stages on the path to enlightenment, while Guanyin's head stands for its final attainment. The halo and the two celestial beings flying overhead refer to divine radiance and enlightenment. Guanyin stands upon a lotus flower pedestal, a symbol of purity and divinity.

Guanyin is one of a few bodhisattvas that became an independent deity and attracted a following, much as the Buddha himself did. Guanyin is of great importance in the realm of Chinese Buddhism. This sculpture once adorned the Seven Jewels Pagoda, which was built in the Tang dynasty (618–907) capital, present-day Xi'an.



Japanese Buddhism: Selective Adaptation

By the time Buddhism arrived in Japan from Korea and China in the mid-sixth century, nearly a thousand years had passed since the **Buddha** lived on earth. The religion had grown, evolved, and spread throughout Asia, developing a rich diversity of imagery and beliefs. The Japanese continued this process of modifying Buddhism to fit their particular cultural preferences.

Two main stages mark the development of Buddhism in Japan. First, from the sixth through the twelfth century, the governing regime used Buddhism as part of a strategy to centralize control. Within one generation of its introduction into Japan, Buddhism became the official state religion. It took a few more centuries for the Buddhist belief system to permeate society and truly coexist with native **Shinto** beliefs. By the eighth century, the

Shinto, “The Way of the Gods”

Shinto beliefs may be as ancient as the Japanese people themselves, extending back thousands of years. Its doctrine is based on the idea that *kami* (literally, sacred power) is present in living as well as in inanimate objects. Thus, kami can reside with one’s ancestors or in a sacred place, such as a special cave or a mountain stream. Early Shinto practices varied widely by region, and individuals worshiped and received protection from their local kami.

two religions existed in relative integrated harmony. At this initial stage, imagery used in both Buddhist painting and sculpture reflected the tastes of the social elite. The majestic and awe-inspiring images tended to focus on divine hierarchies, meditative paths to **enlightenment**, perceptions of **afterlife**, and similar themes. The development of Japanese Buddhist culture and art was also greatly influenced by Tang dynasty (618–907) China, which was in the midst of a golden age. All of Asia emulated China during this time of peace, cultural and artistic achievement, and intellectual activity. Japanese Buddhist schools established close ties with Chinese schools, for example, and for a time the many students and teachers who traveled between China and Japan exchanged Buddhist ideas and art.

The second major stage in the development of Japanese Buddhism occurred in the late twelfth century, when political control shifted from the imperial court to a rising warrior class. During this period of unrest, two major Buddhist movements gained prominence: popular forms of Buddhism adopted by ordinary people and **Zen** Buddhism (Chan, in Chinese), which had been imported from China.

In the popular Buddhist schools, Japanese worshipers preferred images with visual narratives stressing the compassionate and approachable nature of the Buddhist gods. These narratives recorded the founding of certain temples or told the life stories of saints and related how the divine miraculously intervened in everyday life. *Amida Buddha*,



JAPAN

Haiku

Haiku is an unrhymed poem with three lines of text when translated into English—the first of five syllables, the second of seven syllables, and the third of five syllables—although the seven-syllable pattern is often lost when translated (see below). It emerged in the sixteenth century, but it did not become popular until a century later, when Basho (1644–1694), a famous Japanese traveler and student of Zen Buddhism, wrote prolifically in the form. Basho is recognized as the master of haiku, and his ability to infuse verse with subtle allusions led to haiku being widely adopted as a discipline in the study of Zen Buddhist philosophy. Haiku written after the seventeenth century deals almost exclusively with nature as a metaphor for reflection and usually includes a word or phrase that refers to one of the four seasons.

Lightning gleams
and a night heron's shriek
travels into darkness
—Basho

Blown from the west
fallen leaves gather
in the east
—Basho

This phantasm
of falling petals vanishes into
moon and flowers
—Okyo

Attended by Kannon and Seishi, Welcoming Souls to Paradise (page 45) demonstrates this involvement of the divine in everyday life.

By the thirteenth century, in addition to having a new warrior class in control of the government, Japan suddenly experienced a significant influx of Chinese Zen monks. These monks had fled their homeland as a result of the persecution of Buddhism under the newly established Mongol regime in China. The Japanese ruling class of warriors was drawn to the stark, rigorous aspects of Zen that emphasized teachings transmitted from master to disciple (rather than depending on texts or pictures) and enlightenment through **meditation**. An entirely new genre of art forms was deeply affected by Japanese acceptance of Zen beginning in the thirteenth century. These art forms were simpler, often reflected nature, and encompassed a wide array of pursuits, including **haiku** poetry, painting, gardening, flower arranging, archery, and the tea ceremony.

Buddha or Bodhisattva?

After reaching enlightenment, **bodhisattvas** (“bosatu” in Japanese) choose to be reborn and return to earth to help others find their path to enlightenment. These earthbound beings, who have not yet entered nirvana (“nehan” in Japanese), are usually shown wearing earthly riches, such as jewels, crowns, and elaborate clothing. The Buddha, on the other hand, has attained enlightenment and passed on to nirvana and is always shown in simple monastic clothes with no jewelry. This plain appearance symbolizes the Buddha’s rejection of earthly riches and his complete detachment from this world. It is easy to discern the bejeweled bodhisattvas from the simply clad Buddha in the scroll *Amida Buddha, Attended by Kannon and Seishi, Welcoming Souls to Paradise* (page 45). The two bodhisattvas in the Buddhist altarpiece (page 33) are similarly discernible from the more simply clad Buddha of the trio.



BODHISATTVA



BUDDHA

Objects of Japanese Buddhist Art

Guardian figures

Japan, Kamakura period (1185–1333)

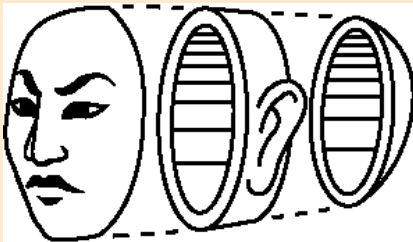
Wood

226.4 cm. (F1949.20), 233.5 cm. (F1949.21)

Purchase F1949.20 and .21

Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

These powerful figures with ferocious expressions are “guardian” images that once flanked the entrance gate to a Buddhist temple near Osaka, Japan. Such guardians are meant to ward off evil spirits and protect the sacred ground of the temple. The practice of placing guardian figures at a temple entrance has origins in a legend about the Buddha, which says powerful guardians attended him as he taught and traveled throughout India. In China and Japan, these guardian figures frequently appear in



pairs, often in the form of larger-than-life, half-naked warriors who raise their clenched fists and sometimes hold weapons. These particular statues were once painted dark red, but the color has worn off due to centuries of exposure as they stood guard at the temple gates.

The Japanese produced Buddhist images in wood that range in size from monumental statues to miniature, devotional images intended for portable shrines. Many times figures were not carved from one piece of wood; rather, numerous uniquely shaped wooden blocks were seamlessly joined together without the use of metal (see illustration). For example, the heads of these guardians consist of three separate pieces: the mask or face, the back of the head, and a hollow ring on the sides of which are the ears.



Objects of Japanese Buddhist Art

Bosatsu

Japan, Heian period (794–1185)

Wood

Image, 98.0 x 75.0 x 50.8 cm.; overall, 206 x 114.0 x 114.0 cm.

Purchase F1962.21

Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

This wood sculpture represents a bodhisattva (*bosatsu* in Japanese) seated in meditation on a lotus-shaped pedestal. The halo behind the figure still shows traces of its original gold-leaf decoration. Both the bodhisattva's facial expression and the hand gesture are intended to convey reassurance and peace. This figure, which would have been placed on the altar of a Buddhist temple, exemplifies the simple, elegant style prevalent in Japanese Buddhist sculpture late in the Heian period. The wooden figure consists of seven separate parts. The elaborate lotus-shaped pedestal is made of eight components, but it was not a part of the original design for this statue. The entire figure was once covered with black lacquer and gold leaf, which have worn away over the past thousand years.



Objects of Japanese Buddhist Art

Amida Buddha, Attended by Kannon and Seishi, Welcoming Souls to Paradise

Japan, Kamakura (1185–1333) or Muromachi (1333–1573) period

Hanging scroll; color and gold on silk

110.0 x 49.3 cm.

Purchase F1954.9

Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Japanese belief in salvation by the Buddha of Infinite Light, who was known as Amida in Japan, reached its height during the Kamakura period of warrior rule. Amida was believed to descend to earth at the moment of a person's death to greet the soul and carry it to paradise, where it would be reborn. Two or more bodhisattvas often accompanied Amida.

Buddhist priests frequently carried paintings such as this one to a believer's deathbed as a final assurance of salvation. This painting depicts Amida Buddha welcoming the souls of the faithful into paradise. Amida is the central figure; his two attendants — the bodhisattvas Kannon and Seishi — form the base of the triangular composition. Amida stands with his right hand raised in the Abhaya mudra, a hand gesture that means "fear not." His left arm is lowered in a welcoming mudra. The combination of these two gestures — the raised hand represents the heavenly realm and the lowered hand the earthly world — suggests that Amida is capable of saving both those in the heavens and those on earth.

Below her left hand is the smaller figure of the bodhisattva Kannon. Her body is turned and bent slightly forward, and she holds a lotus blossom in her hands, upon which she will receive the faithful souls. The deity wears a crown and many jewels in typical bodhisattva tradition. The bodhisattva Seishi to Amida's right forms the third corner of the pyramid. The same size as Kannon, Seishi is similarly clothed and bejeweled and is depicted in a similar stance of humble devotion. Seishi differs from Kannon, however, in that the hands are pressed together with her fingers extended in front of the chest in a mudra of prayer and devotion.



Buddhism is currently practiced by over three hundred million people worldwide. Founded in India in the sixth century B.C.E., its practice had diminished there by the twelfth century, partly due to the gradual absorption of Buddhist figures and beliefs into the Hindu tradition and the introduction of Islam. Today there are very few Buddhists in India.

Asia is now home to most of the world's Buddhist population. The practice of Buddhism spread from India to the East, and currently China, Japan, Korea, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Tibet, and Thailand all have large Buddhist populations. Perhaps the Buddhist traditions best known to Westerners are Japan's Zen Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism.

Buddhism is also practiced outside Asia. Academic scholarship and East Asian immigrants to the western United States introduced Buddhism to this country in the mid-nineteenth century. During the 1960s, Asian aesthetics, music, and religious traditions became popular in Europe and North America. This influx of Asian culture generated great interest in Buddhist thought among people of non-Asian descent.

Here are interviews with four practicing Buddhists from the Washington, D.C., area. These interviews reflect the diversity in background, tradition, and perspective of those who practice Buddhism today.



La Tasha Harris

is a textile conservator who is currently working on the Star Spangled Banner Preservation Project at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History. She has been a practicing Buddhist of the Tibetan Gelupa tradition since 1996. Ms. Harris feels that Buddhism answers spiritual questions that were not addressed in her former faith. In this interview, she speaks about the challenges that her practice presents and the way Buddhism has helped her to recognize how all things are interconnected.

When I lived in New York City, I developed a friendship with a woman who moved into the apartment downstairs from mine. One night I went to meet her for dinner, and she was dressed in her nun's robes. It had never come up in conversation that she was a nun. She was the first Buddhist that I'd ever met, or that I knew I'd met. It started a different set of conversations for us. At that point in my life there were issues of spirituality that had emerged, and the traditional faith I had grown up with answered the "hows" more

often than the “whys.” That wasn’t enough for me. From what I could see, and what she told me, a lot of her “whys” were getting answered. My interest in Buddhism evolved from there.

Recently, I’ve had to deal with my grandmother having knee replacement surgery, and my mother having a heart attack and going through a depression due to that heart attack. I think that the teachings of Buddhism have given me a better foundation to be a resource for them. My mother had a lot to deal with when she was really sick and had to make a lot of choices. Through Buddhism, I could give her another way of approaching or defining the situations around her.

I think that I’m at an advantage and at a disadvantage finding Buddhism as an adult. I don’t get it right a lot of the time, and I’m still very new at this, but I like that it’s work. It allows me to interact with my faith and not just have it handed down to me. In this tradition, you don’t have to accept anything you’re given. You’re allowed to let it “cook,” to analyze it based on meditation and what you see happening in your world.

I engage with my faith constantly to keep it current. There are vows you take that make you a Buddhist. I check my vows every two-and-a-half hours throughout the day. I pull out a little book and I pick six vows for the day. Then I evaluate how well I’m keeping them during that day. Doing this forces me to take time and sit with myself and not hold on to angry or upsetting thoughts.

I think it’s important for people to realize that you can be Buddhist and anything else. I know people who are Jewish and Buddhist; I know people who belong to other faiths and are Buddhist. If you want to approach Buddhism that way, it’s just a way of integrating more of your faith into your daily life. It’s a way of engaging with it more. It forces you to look at yourself, and the way you interact with others, in a different way. The longer you study, the harder it is to think of any person you encounter, or any event in your life, as incidental. There is nothing in your world that is causeless, so you become conscious of trying to plant seeds that will cause more beautiful things to flower in your world for yourself and the people around you.



Ryan Pijai

is a senior in high school at Georgetown Day School in Washington, D.C. He attends Wat Thai (Thai Temple) in Silver Spring, Maryland, where he is a member of a traditional Thai orchestra. Ryan feels that Buddhism enables him to approach activities mindfully and to be aware of the consequences of his actions.

Because both of my parents are Buddhists, I was born one. My parents are from Thailand, so they took me to the Wat Thai temple in Silver Spring at a very young age. There I attended Sunday and summer school with other kids. In the mornings, we learned to pray in the ancient Bali language. During the daytime, aside from learning Thai, we also learned Buddhism as part of Thai culture. We spent a portion of each day in the Buddhist monastery meditating. I recall the meditation songs we were taught, because as children our minds would constantly wander as we sat in silence. I remember the pain I would feel in my toes as I sat properly to pray — most likely another method of keeping one focused on the present. Growing up as a Buddhist, the religion seemed simple to me, and yet very practical. There were no leaps of faith I had to take. There were no supernatural occurrences I had to believe in. Buddhism was basically a philosophy for life.

As a Buddhist, I am not required to go to the temple at any specific time or day. I am always welcomed there and encouraged to join in daily chants and to speak with monks. Occasionally, I attend religious ceremonies, for example, to celebrate Visakha Puja, a celebration of the birth, enlightenment, and passing away of the Buddha. After the ceremonies, the abbot gives sermons to the public, which further explain the teachings of the Buddha.

Everything I learn about Buddhism can be applied to my daily life. I practice Buddhism by being kind and helpful to others and by being mindful of everything I do. Meditation has taught me to focus on my daily activities and not to be careless. Even when I study for exams, I use meditation to help me do well. Through Buddhism, I have learned the true meaning of cause and effect. I use Buddhism to help me reach my fullest potential.

The ultimate goal of being a Buddhist is to stop all sufferings, such as sorrow, hatred, distress, and anxiety. I know that these sufferings are detrimental to my health and that the only way I can overcome them is by accepting them and moving on. The three basic teachings of Buddhism have always been a guide for me.

1. Refrain from doing bad deeds.
2. Perform good deeds.
3. Purify one's mind.

The basic premise of Buddhism is the belief that one who performs good merit will be rewarded, while one who performs the opposite will suffer from the consequences. I have taken that to heart and use it as a rationale for conducting myself appropriately. Buddhism guides me spiritually and physically to do what is right. I will be very proud to teach my children the Buddhist way of life.



Kennon Nakamura

is the Director of Congressional Affairs for the American Foreign Service Association. He is one of the founders, and current president, of the Ekoji Buddhist Temple, a temple of the Jodo Shinshu Buddhist tradition, where he has taught Sunday school since 1978. In this interview, Mr. Nakamura shares how Buddhist practice helps him stay conscious of how his actions and interactions are affected by his individual perspective. He also recounts the experience of challenging an assumption about what constitutes religious common knowledge.

My parents and grandparents were Buddhists. My grandparents came from Japan, and my parents were born in California. They were both active in Buddhism and Buddhist churches prior to World War II. During the war they were relocated to an internment camp in Arkansas. There they helped set up Buddhist *sanghas* [religious communities] in their camps.

After the war, a large group of Japanese-Americans set up a community in Seabrook, New Jersey, and my parents helped establish the Buddhist church there, so I grew up in a Buddhist tradition. I suppose for some people, if you grow up in a tradition, you fall into it and continue on. Some people, after time, come to a question of, “Do I really buy this?” I came to that point and I decided, “Yes, I do buy it,” so I stayed.

My kids have also grown up as Buddhists. When my daughter Maya was in high school, one of her teachers was talking about the Lord’s Prayer, so she asked Maya to lead it. Maya didn’t know what she was talking about, and she felt embarrassed. She told me about this, so I called the teacher. I said, “You know, I don’t know how many times you think Maya’s been exposed to the Lord’s Prayer.” She said, “They recite it in a lot of places. Kiwanis,* for instance.” I said, “I don’t think my daughter goes to Kiwanis meetings very often.” People have certain assumptions, and so times like this may be awkward.

People have misconceptions about what Buddhism is, so you have a choice of trying to

correct a misconception or ignoring it, depending on how you feel at the time. I think we Buddhists have things to offer society at large. For me, there is peace of mind about the future and an awareness of how I relate to the world. I recognize the strength of my ego (my individual perspectives and actions) and what kinds of problems it creates for me. There is an analogy of an ocean and a wave in which the wave comes crashing to the shore. When we view ourselves as the wave, we feel that we are absolutely individual. In reality, however, the wave has always been part of the ocean. In our tradition, we remind ourselves that we are part of a greater whole, just as the wave is a part of the ocean. It's just that from our own perspective, because of our ego, we don't recognize that.

Going to the temple is like holding up a mirror to yourself. You never know if your face is dirty unless you look into a mirror. I would like to think that a lot of the thoughts, philosophy, and perspectives of our tradition are ingrained in our lives. But when you go to the temple, and you listen to the Dharma talk [the talk about the Buddha's doctrines], you think, "Wow, maybe we need some more work here." The important part is how it affects the way you live your life.

*Kiwanis is an international service organization founded in the United States in the early twentieth century.



Anh Ho

is a senior in high school at Langley High School in McLean, Virginia. He will attend college this fall, where he plans to major in biology or chemistry. For Anh, Buddhism serves as an ethical system for daily life. As a first-generation Vietnamese-American, he feels Buddhism helps him maintain his relationship with Vietnamese culture.

My parents never pushed Buddhism on me as a religion. Though I practiced, I classified myself as a Christian because my parents sent me to a Christian preschool. It wasn't until I took ninth grade world history and learned about different religions that I changed my label to Buddhism. To me, it's not so much a religion as a philosophy, a way to live one's life.

Aspects of Buddhism have always been apparent in my life, although they have been subtle, almost unconscious. It was in the way my parents carried themselves, the way they would punish me when I was bad or made mistakes, but it was never labeled a religion. It's a way of living, not a belief in Buddha or any kind of god.

Buddhism keeps me connected to my culture. With my parents at work, I couldn't pick up the Vietnamese language as readily as a few of my Vietnamese friends. Most children of Vietnamese parents can speak Vietnamese. I can't read it or speak it. I can understand more now because I'm paying more attention to what my parents are saying as the language becomes more important in my life. I've never been to Vietnam, although I hope to travel there soon. Buddhism is a way of reminding myself of who I am. However, I don't want to focus solely on my culture and block out American culture. I'm trying to keep the middle ground between American culture and my own, so Buddhism is one of those things I would like to hold on to.

The most meaningful thing to me in my practice is remembering my ancestors.* The only one I knew was my grandmother. She passed away when I was in fifth grade. I couldn't get to know her very well because of the language barrier. She spoke only Vietnamese and I spoke only English. So, to compensate for that, I pray to her in our shrine in the attic and ask her for prosperity and to protect my family. There are photographs to represent the spirits of each of my ancestors. There is one picture of my grandmother, another of my aunt and two of my uncles who were killed during the Vietnam War. In a sense I'm praying to all of them, but I didn't know any of them. I really didn't know my grandmother, and that's one of the things I regret the most about my childhood.

I try to do what I feel is right. I believe that not everyone is perfect. People will make mistakes at times, and they have to compensate for that by doing other good things. As a child, I was always mean to my little brother, so right now I try to compensate for that by helping him out. Buddhism is like a manual. There are decisions I make as a student, as a brother, as a son that are guided by Buddhism. If I look back on the decisions I make, I can see Buddhist philosophical influences.

*While this packet does not address ancestor worship as an aspect of Buddhist practice, Anh Ho finds it to be an important part of his spiritual life. The worship of ancestors is widespread in East and Southeast Asia.

Discussion Questions

Grade Level: High School

1. La Tasha Harris became a Buddhist as an adult. How did she become interested in Buddhism? According to Ms. Harris, what are some of the challenges she faced by adopting a faith when she was already an adult? What are the advantages?

2. In his interview, Ryan Pijai speaks of how Buddhism keeps him aware of the present moment, focused and mindful of his actions. What does it mean to do something mindfully? What things do you feel you must do mindfully and with focus? Why do some things require focus and not others? Can you imagine doing everything mindfully? What would that be like?

3. Kennon Nakamura recounts his discussion with a teacher who asked his daughter to lead her class in the Lord's Prayer. What do you think about the teacher's response to Mr. Nakamura? Have you ever been in a position where you were expected to know culturally specific information you did not know? How did you feel? How can we avoid these kinds of misunderstandings?

4. Anh Ho sees practicing Buddhism as one way to stay connected to Vietnamese culture. At the same time, he does not want to reject American culture. What kinds of difficulties might Anh face because of his connection to these two cultures? How can he maintain the "middle ground" that he desires? Have you ever felt that you had to balance two such important aspects of your life? What were the problems you faced? What were the rewards?

Many words in this vocabulary list are Sanskrit, Chinese, or Japanese in origin. Pronunciation is given in parenthesis where necessary.

bodhisattva (bow-dee-saht-fah): an enlightened being who chooses not to proceed to nirvana but instead remains on earth to guide others in their paths toward enlightenment. (*bosatsu* in Japanese)*

Buddha: the “enlightened one”; first known as Siddhartha Gautama (ca. 563–ca. 483 B.C.E.), a wealthy prince who gave up his family and earthly possessions to find a way to end suffering in the world.

circumambulation: an act of worship often practiced in Buddhism (and other faiths) that involves walking around a holy place, such as a stupa.

Confucianism: based on the philosophy of Confucius (Kong fuzi, 551–479 B.C.E.) that rulers have a responsibility to secure happiness for their subjects and that the family is the model for all human relationships.

Daoism: Chinese set of beliefs based on the *Dao de jing*, a book traditionally attributed to the philosopher Laozi (sixth century B.C.E.), but most likely written by different authors some time in the third century B.C.E.; philosophy propounds an ideal state of freedom from desire that can be achieved by following the *dao*, the natural path of the universe.

Eightfold Path: the basic moral teachings of Buddhism, the goal of which is to stop all suffering in the world (see page 9).

enlightenment: a moment of great wisdom and understanding; the highest level of consciousness, believed to be attained through meditation and adhering to the principles of the Eightfold Path; the ultimate goal of Buddhism.

Four Great Miracles: the four main events in the Buddha’s life: the miracle of the Buddha’s birth, the Buddha’s enlightenment, his first sermon at Deer Park at Sarnath, and the Buddha’s death.

*The “f” sound is pronounced as a “v” or a “w” in India.

Four Noble Truths: Buddhist philosophy on how to overcome endless suffering by attaining enlightenment (see page 8).

meditation: a step on the Eightfold Path; practice involves quieting the mind and focusing on the present moment in order to detach oneself from the distractions of the world (see page 7).

Middle Way: seeking a balance by rejecting the extremes of wanting everything and giving up everything.

monk: a male follower of Buddhism or any religion, who gives up worldly life to pursue a purely religious life. The place where many monks live together in a community is called a monastery. Women who give up worldly life to pursue a purely religious Buddhist life are known as nuns.

mudra (moo-drah): symbolic hand gestures with special meaning often seen in artistic depictions of the Buddha and other Buddhist figures (see page 10).

nirvana (near-vah-nah): a spiritual state of perfect peace beyond selfish attachments to worldly possessions; reaching nirvana frees the soul from the Buddhist cycle of rebirth.

parinirvana: the place where nirvana is attained.

pilgrimage: a journey to a place of great spiritual significance, such as a stupa or a site the Buddha visited during his lifetime. A person who makes this journey is called a pilgrim.

relic: an object venerated because of its association with a holy person's life or body (i.e., bones, pieces of clothing, hair, begging bowl).

Sanskrit: the literary and sacred language of ancient India. Many ancient Buddhist texts were written in this language.

Shintoism: the ancient, native Japanese belief system that kami, or natural spirits, are omnipresent (see page 36).

shogunate: a form of Japanese military government established in the twelfth century.

Siddhartha (sid-har-ta): the prince who after, in his attainment of enlightenment, became known as the Buddha.

stupa (stoo-pah): a domed religious structure that contains relics of the Buddha or other holy persons. It is a site of worship and pilgrimage (see page 12).

sutra (sue-trah): a Buddhist holy writing or text.

ushnisha (oosh-neesh-ah): a bump on the top of the Buddha's head that symbolizes his superior knowledge.

urna (ur-nah): a dot on the Buddha's forehead that indicates his special wisdom.

wheel of dharma: a symbol of Buddhist law (dharma) found in the Eightfold Path (see page 11).

Zen: a Japanese school of Buddhism that emphasizes direct transmission of teaching enlightenment from master to student. It downplays the study of religious texts and performance of rituals as a means to enlightenment.