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Introduction

The Buddhist collection in the Chester Beatty Library offers visitors the opportunity to explore the ‘Story of Buddhism’ from its origins with the life and teachings of the historical Buddha in India in the 6th century BC to its development as it spread through the countries of Asia. Students and educators are encouraged to explore a number of themes as presented in the exhibition on display in the Sacred Traditions Gallery.

Aims

• to support educators and students with a comprehensive resource about Buddhism as reflected in the Chester Beatty Library collections
• to lend to the Department of Education and Skill’s Intercultural Education Strategy 2010-2015 for schools, with particular reference to cultural diversity in Irish schools

Objectives

• to provide an understanding of symbolism in Buddhism
• to provide the meanings of Buddhist art as found in the Chester Beatty Library collections
• to provide the opportunity for students and teachers to discuss and evaluate Buddhist art in the Chester Beatty Library collections
The Three Jewels of Buddhism

**Key Words:** The Three Jewels, The Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha, the Four Noble Truths, Nirvana, Siddhartha Gautama, Enlightenment, Noble Eightfold Path

The practice of Buddhism is based on what are called the Three Jewels: the *Buddha* (the Teacher), the *Dharma* (his Teachings) and the *Sangha* (the Spiritual Community).

**The Buddha**

Buddhism was founded in the sixth century BC in northern India by Siddhartha Gautama, who was known as the Buddha or Enlightened One. The Buddha was not regarded by his followers as a prophet or a god, but as an enlightened teacher. The Buddha taught the way to *nirvana* – enlightenment or escape from the world of suffering.

**The Dharma**

The Buddha's teachings are known as the *Dharma*. The Dharma is based on the Four Noble Truths, which explain how suffering is caused and how it can be overcome by following the Noble Eightfold Path.

**The Sangha**

The Sangha consists of all those who believe in and practise Buddhism, whether enlightened beings, monks who devote their lives to Buddhism, or the faithful lay community.

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The Life of the Buddha

**Key Words:** Siddhartha Gautama, Bodhi Tree, Enlightenment, Asceticism, Four Noble Truths, Noble Eightfold Path

According to Buddhist tradition, Siddhartha Gautama (c. 563-483 BC) was the son of a local ruler in northern India. As a young man he became aware of the human inability to escape suffering. Inspired by the example of a wandering holy man, he left his wealthy home to seek the causes of unhappiness and the way to relieve suffering.

After six years of study and asceticism (abstinence from material comforts to pursue a spiritual life) had failed to reveal the truth, he sat down to meditate under a *Bodhi* tree (tree of enlightenment), determined not to move until he had achieved his aim. He finally found enlightenment in a moment of total insight into the nature of reality. He spent the next forty-five years travelling through India teaching his message until he died at the age of eighty.

His teachings were outlined in his first sermon as the *Four Noble Truths*: life is suffering; the root of suffering is desire; suffering can be ended by ending desire; the way to end desire is to follow a life of morality and meditation known as the *Noble Eightfold Path*. This means living a life of right understanding, motive, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration.
Central to Buddhism is the concept that all living creatures must go through many cycles of birth, death and rebirth. This cyclical existence is known as samsara, and it is the law of karma (action) that keeps this endless cycle in motion. According to the law of karma, the actions of all living things have consequences in this life or in some future rebirth. Bad actions will result in an unfavourable rebirth, while good actions will result in a favourable rebirth.

The Buddha taught that the world is a place of suffering - its joys are fleeting and all lives end in decay and death. Salvation consists of escaping from the treadmill of samsara by renouncing attachment to desire and to the self. The result is nirvana (liberation or enlightenment). The Buddha believed that everyone had the potential to reach enlightenment.

After the death of the Buddha, a number of Buddhist traditions emerged across Asia, all sharing the Buddha’s basic teachings but with regional variations in philosophical emphasis and practice. From the 1st century AD to around the 7th century AD this process gave birth to three main branches of Buddhist belief which continue to exist in different regions of Asia today. The three main traditions represented in the Chester Beatty Library collections are Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism and Vajrayana Buddhism.

THERAVADA
Theravada Buddhism (the Doctrine of the Elders) is based on the earliest recorded version of the Buddha’s doctrine, the Tripitaka (The Threefold Canon), written in the Pali language 500 years after the death of the Buddha, in the 1st century AD. Theravada Buddhism emphasises meditation and the monastic life, and the quest for individual salvation by overcoming desire and hatred. Theravada Buddhism remains strong today in Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Burma) Thailand and Cambodia.

MAHAYANA
Mahayana Buddhism is also known as the Bodhisattva Path, as it emphasizes devotion to bodhisattvas as one of its central features. Bodhisattvas are people who have achieved salvation but, out of compassion for humanity, postpone their own entry into nirvana in order to help others on the path to spiritual awakening.

In Mahayana Buddhism the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, is accompanied by a host of divine beings, available for worship to all. These include Buddhas of past and future eras; heavenly Buddhas believed to rule over paradises that can be entered simply by chanting the Buddha’s name with faith; and numerous other beings deemed worthy of enlightenment, such as the ascetic, saintly arhats (worthy ones) and bodhisattvas (awakened ones who help others). Mahayana Buddhism travelled from India in a north-easterly direction to China, Japan and Korea.

VAJRAYANA
Vajrayana Buddhism or the ‘Diamond Vehicle’ is named after the vajra or ‘diamond sceptre’, a symbol of the ultimately indestructible nature of the enlightened state. Vajrayana developed in northern India and was both a product of the great monasteries of the region and of lone, wandering ascetics. The advanced meditation practices of the ascetics, known as yogis or mahasiddhas, combined the use of mantras (powerful ritual prayers) with breath control and visualisation to form a powerful and fast path to enlightenment. Vajrayana Buddhism is practised in Tibet, Mongolia and the surrounding regions.
Buddhism in China

Buddhism first arrived in China around the first century BC, introduced from northern India by monks and traders along the ancient trade routes of Central Asia such as the Silk Road. Buddhism was in many ways very different from native Chinese Confucian and Daoist beliefs, but it gradually took root in China, partly because of the exotic appeal of concepts such as karma (action) and the promise of enlightenment. It proved highly adaptable to Chinese beliefs and developed distinct forms, including the fusion of Buddhism and Daoism known as Chan (in Japanese: Zen) Buddhism.

Buddhism reached its peak in China during the Tang dynasty (AD 618-907), when many Buddhist monasteries were built, many Buddhist texts were translated into Chinese, and Buddhist painting and sculpture flourished.

Chinese Buddhist Object

IN THE CHESTER BEATTY LIBRARY COLLECTION

Jade (nephrite) with gold
1732
24.0 x 9.1 cm
CBL.C.1006

Jade has been revered in China since prehistoric times. Because of its beauty, hardness and rarity, it was associated with immortality and believed to have magical and healing properties. This jade book consists of fifty-three tablets (equivalent of pages except each tablet is made of jade), engraved and gilded with the full text of the Buddhist doctrine known as the Perfection of Wisdom (Prajñāparamita) Sutra. This image shows the Buddha seated and surrounded by followers and heavenly guardians.
2. Guardian King or Temple Guardian
Carved wood, lacquer, polychrome and gilt with bronze fittings
19th-20th century
China or Japan
CBL J 1080
This sculpture is a guardian figure or protective deity from a temple. Figures such as these are often found at the entrance to monasteries and temples in China and Japan. The dynamic posture, wrathful appearance and head of a lion or demon depicted on the central part of the elaborate armour are all typical features of such figures, symbolising their power to overcome evil and protect believers.
3. Portrait of a Buddhist Priest

Colours on silk
18th or 19th Century
China
CBL C 1142

Here, a Buddhist priest is shown seated and holding a ruyi sceptre. The priest’s face is finely drawn and the artist has used shaded modelling, characteristic of the Western-influenced Chinese portraiture of the 18th century. Ruyi means ‘as you wish’ and is a token of good fortune.
Buddhism in Japan

**Key Words:** Prince Shotoku, Shinto, Shintoism, Zen Buddhism, Daruma, Bodhidharma, Meditation, Netsuke, Gesso, Stupa, Bodhisattva, Kannon, Satori, Zazen, Koans, Zushi

Buddhism arrived in Japan from China and Korea during the sixth century AD. It was adopted as the official state religion by the imperial regent, Prince Shotoku (AD 574-622), who encouraged Buddhism in the belief that it would bring to Japan much of the sophisticated culture of continental Asia, particularly literature, music, art and architecture.

Buddhism quickly took root in Japan, largely because it incorporated elements of the native Shinto religion (the Way of the Gods). Buddhist temples were often built near Shinto shrines and many local gods were absorbed into Buddhism. Shintoism and Buddhism co-exist to this day.

**ZEN BUDDHISM**

Introduced from China (where it is called Chan) in the twelfth century, Zen Buddhism appealed to the Japanese warrior class because of its lack of complex rituals and spiritual dogma and its focus on personal discipline. With its emphasis on spontaneity, simplicity and the beauty of nature, Zen has had a great influence on Japanese culture, especially in architecture, garden design, the tea ceremony and the arts.

Zen Buddhism emphasizes meditation and self-discipline over sacred texts and rituals. The goal of Zen is sudden, spontaneous enlightenment, or satori. This can be achieved through a form of strict meditation known as zazen and the study of koans – paradoxical riddles intended to stimulate flashes of insight into the ultimate truth.

**DARUMA**

Daruma is the Japanese name for Bodhidharma, the Indian Buddhist missionary credited with introducing Zen Buddhism to China in the sixth century. It is said that he meditated continuously for nine years, remaining seated for so long that he lost the use of his legs. The humorous depiction of the meditating Daruma is a popular subject of Japanese art. Usually shown with a swarthy, foreigner’s face, he is frequently depicted without legs and with a scowling expression that is meant to show the fierce concentration of the Zen practitioner.
1. Daruma Meditating

Toggle (netsuke)
Wood
Signed: Masayoshi (1819-65)
Japan
CBL. J 183

Daruma is seated in the posture of meditation. During a nine-year long meditation his legs were said to have rotted away.
In AD 764, the empress Shotoku ordered one million miniature wooden stupas (memorial mound or prayer object) to contain prayers of thanksgiving for a victory in battle. The Buddhist prayer strips were printed with wood and copper plates and are the oldest surviving examples of printed material from Japan.
3. Portable shrine (push) to Kannon, Bodhisattva of Compassion

Wood with gold and red lacquer
18th-19th century
Japan
CBL J 751

Miniature image shrines containing figures of Buddhist deities were used by monks, pilgrims and travellers, suspended from the belt or around the neck. The larger portable shrines would have been used inside temples or private homes.
Buddhism in Tibet & Mongolia

**Key Words:** Vajrayana, Lama, Tantra, Mandala, prayer wheel, Dalai Lama, Panchen Lama, Brahma, thangka

Vajrayana Buddhism (the Diamond Vehicle) is practised in Tibet, Mongolia and the surrounding regions. Buddhism was introduced into Tibet from India in the seventh century AD. It interacted with the local Bon religion (a pre-Buddhist religion with strong shamanistic and animistic traditions), incorporating many of its ritual elements and magical aspects, as well as numerous local spirits and demons. Vajrayana Buddhism emphasises complex rituals, ceremonies and meditation techniques, which promise a direct path to nirvana.

Monks or lamas play a very important role in Tibetan Buddhism, by guiding the initiate through complex rituals and meditations, and interpreting the cryptic language of the sacred texts known as tantras.

Tibetan Buddhist teachings are kept a closely guarded secret, passed along in a spiritual lineage from master to pupil. A distinctive feature of Tibetan Buddhism is the system of succession by incarnation for high-ranking lamas such as the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama.

**THE MANDALA**

In Tibetan Buddhism, the universe is often symbolically represented as a mandala or sacred circle, an elaborate geometrical arrangement of squares enclosed within a number of concentric circles. Mandalas have many levels of meaning, but are primarily symbolic palaces for the deity or deities depicted at the centre. They are used in special rituals and as a focus for meditation. Mandalas come in many forms including paintings, works in sand or as three-dimensional objects, taking the form of metal sculptures or even whole monastic complexes.

**TIBETAN RITUAL OBJECTS**

Ritual objects are used as a focus for meditation and for the many rites and ceremonies which are an essential part of Tibetan Buddhism. The huge variety of ritual implements includes prayer wheels, musical instruments and symbolic objects such as sacred daggers and vessels. They are usually displayed on altars and tables within temples. Many ritual objects are associated with particular deities and are often depicted in paintings or statues.

**TIBETAN RITUAL TEXTS**

Tibetan ritual texts convey the sacred teachings of Buddhism and reciting these sacred texts forms an essential part of a monk’s daily routine. When not in use, the texts are wrapped in protective silks between wooden covers, and then stored in bookcases next to the main altar of a monastery.
1. Mandala of Mahamaya, ‘The Great Illusion’

Colours on cotton (thangka)
18th - 19th century
Central or eastern Tibet
CBL Tb 1847

The white figure at the centre of this mandala is Mahamaya, a Tibetan form of Brahma, creator of the universe.
The prayer wheel is one of the most characteristic objects of Tibetan Buddhism. It consists of a hollow cylinder containing tightly rolled paper, on which is written or printed sacred invocations. Each clockwise rotation of the prayer wheel scatters these prayers to the four winds.
Buddhism in South and South East Asia

Key Words: Theravada, Jataka, Khoi, Parabaik, Kammavaca, Pali

The dominant form of Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia is Theravada Buddhism, ‘The Doctrine of the Elders’. As the teachings of the Buddha spread from India to other parts of Asia, the Theravada school extended in a south-easterly direction and can be found today in Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia and Indonesia.

THAI MANUSCRIPTS
In Thailand the folding book was used for Buddhist subjects such as the life of the Buddha and jataka tales (stories of the Buddha’s previous lives), as well as for secular texts such as literary works and official documents. Thai folding books are made from local paper made from the inner bark of a bush known in Thai as khoi. Long sheets of paper were joined together in a concertina format.

Thai manuscripts were also made from palm leaves. Long, thin palm leaves were cut to size and dried, then incised or written upon in ink. Palm leaf manuscripts in Thailand were used almost wholly for Buddhist texts.

BURMESE MANUSCRIPTS
The folding book (called parabaik in Burmese) and the palm leaf manuscript were also used in Burma. Burmese parabaiks included subjects such as the life of Buddha, jataka tales, and court scenes and amusements. Covers of these books were often stiffened and some were decorated with gilding and raised patterns, inlaid coloured glass, tooled leather or painted geometric designs. Palm leaf manuscripts were typically used for Buddhist texts but legal, historical and literary texts were also recorded on palm leaf.
1. Birth Tale 3, “Sama” (from “Ten Birth Tales” or Thotsachat)

Colours and gold on paper
Late 19th century
Thailand
CBL TH 1312

The future Buddha once came into the world as a gentle young man named Sama, who looked after his blind parents in the forest. One day, while fetching water accompanied by a tame deer, Sama was killed with a poisoned arrow by the demon king, who had been out hunting.
At the age of twenty-nine, Prince Siddhartha became curious about life outside the royal court. Setting out beyond the palace grounds, he was shocked by the sight of an old man, a sick man, and a corpse, and resolved to leave his life of ease to seek the causes of human suffering.
Buddhism in South and South East Asia

IN THE CHESTER BEATTY LIBRARY COLLECTION

3. The Future Buddha as a Flying Horse

Jataka Tales
Burmese text
Colours and gold on paper
Mid-19th century
Burma
CBL Bu 1206

The Jataka stories are legends concerning the many previous incarnations of the Buddha. Each illustrates a major Buddhist virtue perfected by the future Buddha during that lifetime. Here, the future Buddha comes into the world as a flying horse, and rescues a group of five hundred shipwrecked merchants who had been kidnapped by she-goblins.
4. Monk’s Ordination Text (Upasampada kammavaca)

Pali text in Burmese square script
Lacquered cloth from a discarded monk’s robe, inlaid with mother-of-pearl
18th century
Burma
CBL Bu 1248

When one of their sons became a monk, wealthy Burmese families often commissioned a copy of the kammavaca ordination service, to be presented to the monastery. Expensive materials, such as silk, metal and ivory, were generally used. This text, with its inlay of mother-of-pearl, is very rare.
Buddhist Symbols

Key Words: Mudras, Asanas, Lakshanas

There are many special postures (asanas), gestures (mudras) and special marks (lakshanas) depicted in the Chester Beatty Library’s Buddhist collection.

**Mudras**
Every hand gesture or mudra has a particular meaning and represents a key moment in the Buddha’s life. Here are some examples.

- Earth Witness – When the Buddha achieved enlightenment, he called on the earth to be his witness by touching the ground with his right hand.
- Giving – This symbolises the giving of blessings and charity. The right hand is lowered with the palm facing outward.
- Meditation – This is a well-known mudra where the Buddha's hands are positioned palms up, right over left, in the lap.
- Bestowing Fearlessness – This gesture of protection is made with the right hand raised and the left hand lowered, palms forward.
- Teaching – This gesture is intended to recall the teachings of the Buddha. The right hand is raised, the left hand is lowered, palms are forward, and the thumb and forefingers touch.

**Asanas**
The Buddha is usually shown in a stylised pose or asana.

- Seated - a pose with seated knees apart and both legs pendent
- Reclining – often used to symbolise the death of Buddha, or when he is resting and sleeping
- Meditating – a seated position, legs folded, hands in meditation pose, it is also known as the lotus position
- Standing – one hand is often raised in blessing and reassurance

**Lakshanas**
The Buddha is considered a ‘Great Being’ who was believed to bear marks that represent qualities such as strength, beauty, and wisdom. These special bodily features are known as lakshanas.

- Wisdom Bump – This symbolises Buddha’s wisdom and his spirituality.
- Third Eye – The Buddha can see things that ordinary people cannot.
- Curled Hair – The Buddha meditated under a Bodhi tree, unaware of the hot sun. A group of snails saw him and, realising his importance, gathered together on top of his head to protect him from the heat. The snails died and are therefore considered martyrs. In some images of the Buddha his hair curls are somewhat similar to the shape of a snail.

**Symbols**
Here are some common symbols found in Buddhist art.

- Vajra and Bell - The vajra symbolises the unbreakable absolute. Paired with the bell, they symbolise compassion and wisdom.
- Wheel of the Law - The wheel represents the cycle of birth, death and rebirth.
- Lotus – Lotus flowers symbolise purity and goodness.
- Footprints – These were one of the earliest representations of Buddha before statues were made. The footprints symbolise Buddha’s presence as they are believed to be his imprints left on the ground.
- Stupa – This is a burial mound where Buddhist relics are kept. It is also a votive structure or object.
Suggested Activities in the Chester Beatty Library or in School

For Teachers

Draw up a lesson plan based on the learning resource using key points described in Buddhism. These include the following:

- What are the learning outcomes you wish your students to achieve?
- What is your method of delivery?
- What tasks can you provide pupils?
- What are the learning resources available?
- How do you assess the activity?

Simple lesson plan

1. Use the CBL Buddhist Learning Resource as a starting point, you may wish to draw up a simplified version for your class. What are the significant similarities and differences between the various schools of Buddhism? Are there examples of these illustrated in the Chester Beatty Library collection?

   Explain the similarities and differences to your students; i.e. the depiction of Buddha and Buddhism can vary from country to country yet there is a unifying element found throughout Buddhist art in its symbolism e.g. mudras etc.

2. Explain to your students the significance of symbolism in Buddhist art and that depictions of the Buddha are not supposed to be realistic.

3. List the different attributes, symbols and gestures of Buddha and Buddhism for your students and use them on a visit to the Chester Beatty Library as well as refer to them by using the images in this Learning Resource e.g. lakshanas (symbols), asanas (poses) and mudras (gestures).

4. Your students can be divided into smaller groups, provide them with paper, clipboards and pencils. They can be encouraged to draw the various lakshanas (symbols), asanas (poses) and mudras (gestures) in the galleries. They can also be referred these various symbols in this Learning Resource which you can print out in advance of your museum visit or lesson.

5. Your students may also be able to report back to their group by comparing and contrasting their explorations in a journal or workbook when back in the classroom.

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