

Buddha's Life and Early Buddhism

Proceed to First Floor. **Buddhism is founded on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama Buddha, a monk and teacher who lived in what is now India and Nepal sometime during the late 6th century B.C.E. Today Buddhism is the fourth largest religion in the world.**



Stone head, Sarnath (1930.1325 B)
This 5th century AD sculpture was excavated at Sarnath, a site where Buddha once taught. Sarnath's sculptors were hugely influential on art and depictions of Buddha in Asia.

Votive stupas, Sarnath (1930.1329)
Stupas are the main form of Buddhist monument. One was built at the site of Buddha's death to house his relics. These terracotta votive stupas were left as offerings by pilgrims at Buddhist holy sites.



The spread of Buddhism

Buddhism spread from India, through East and Southeast Asia, often travelling with merchants and scholars who brought the Buddha's teachings to new lands. Different regions' artistic styles show how local communities interpreted the life and teachings of Buddha, developing distinctive strands of Buddhism: Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana. These objects from Myanmar are part of the Theravada (Way of the Ancestors).



Buddha Statue, Myanmar

This 18th-century alabaster statue shows Buddha in what is called 'bhumisparsa mudra' or the earth-touching position. A mudra is a position or hand gesture that symbolises a deeper meaning. This statue depicts Buddha at the moment of enlightenment.



Attendant Figure, Myanmar (1959.274)

This figure came from a Buddhist temple in Myanmar. If you look closely you can see traces of original colour. Buddhist art often depicts attendants, who are shown attending to Buddha or monks; they may also be Bodhisattvas - people who are on the path to Buddhahood or enlightenment.

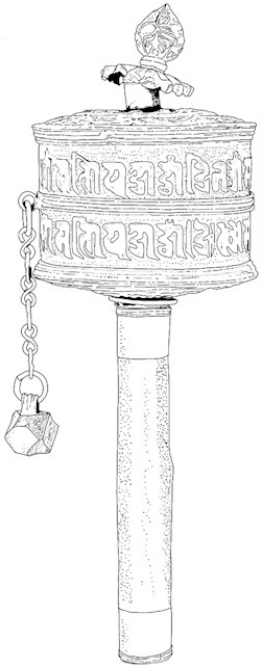
Buddhism in East Asia

Buddhists in East Asia often practice Mahayana Buddhism. However, over such a large area there is incredible diversity in practices, including many well-known schools such as Han Chinese Buddhism and Japanese Zen Buddhism. Folk beliefs and local traditions also affect how people practice.

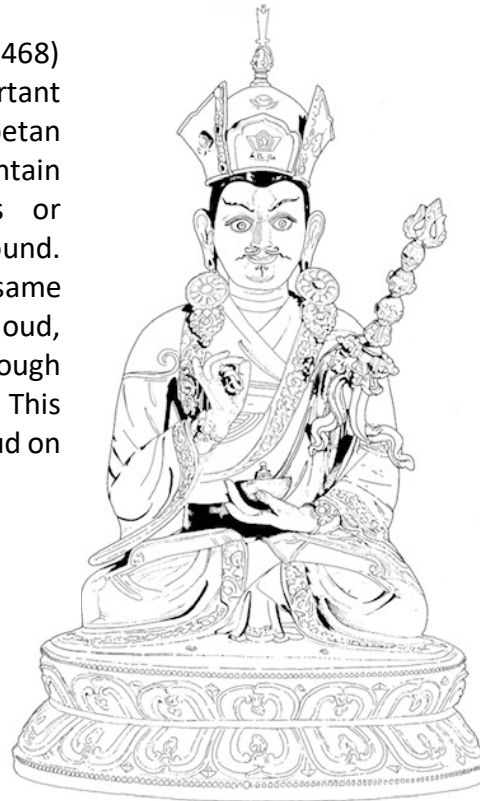
Look for the Chinese ceramic tiles decorated with Buddhist imagery (1923.16) and the Japanese portable shrine (1943.56) made for travellers.

Buddhism in the Himalayas

Buddhism in Tibet is mostly Vajrayana Buddhism, which means thunderbolt way or vehicle. Tibetan Buddhism has elements of Buddhism combined with elements of Bon, an indigenous Tibetan religion. For Buddhists, these objects are powerful and sacred.



Prayer wheel, Tibet (1937.468)
Prayer wheels are an important form of worship in Tibetan Buddhism; they contain mantras (sacred sounds or words) and are spun around. Spinning the wheel is the same as chanting the phrase aloud, and merit is acquired through this form of worship. This prayer wheel has a lotus bud on top, used to signify purity.

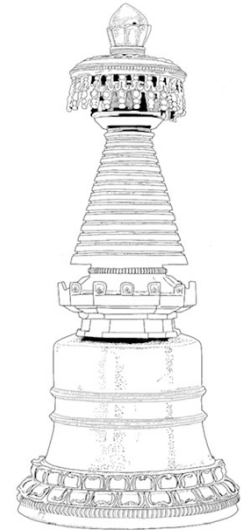


Guru Rinpoche Figure, Sikkim (D 1976.87)

Guru Rinpoche or Padmasambhava, was an extremely important figure in Tibetan Buddhism. He may have brought Buddhism to Tibet from India. This statue comes from Sikkim, which today is part of India, though culturally linked to Tibet, Bhutan and Nepal. He is depicted holding a skull cup and dorje, similar to others on display.

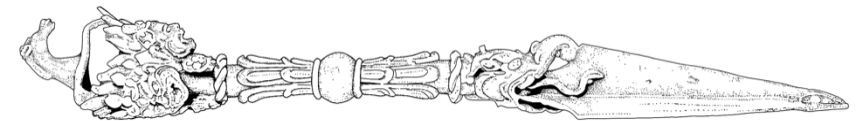
Brass stupa reliquary, Tibet (D 1976.26)

This is another miniature stupa, like the stone and terracotta ones on the second floor. However, this miniature stupa was used as a reliquary or container for relics and holds a crystal rosary. The stupa or chorten is the most sacred shape in Tibetan Buddhism. There are eight different types, and each one represents a different stage in the life of Buddha.



Brass dagger, Tibet (1947.780 A)

This ritual three-sided dagger is made of brass. The three sides represent the three evils to be defeated: ignorance, fear, and desire.



Buddhism in Mongolia and Siberia

Buddhism in Mongolia is similar in many ways to Buddhism in Tibet, but as with Buddhism everywhere there are regional differences in how the religion is practised. Shamanistic and folk religious beliefs and practices are incorporated.

Bell and dorje, Mongolia (1974.14) Not illustrated

The bell and dorje are sacred objects used by monks in prayer rituals. The dorje represents a lightning bolt and is shaken in one hand while the bell, decorated on the handle with the face of a deity, is rung with the other.