

Buddhist Traditions Educator Resource

GRADE 7



Shakyamuni as an Ascetic, late 13th–early 14th century. China; wood with lacquer, gilding, and traces of color, Overall: 11 3/4 × 8 1/8 × 6 1/2 inches (29.8 × 20.6 × 16.5 cm), City of Detroit Purchase, 29.172.



DETROIT
INSTITUTE
OF ARTS

LEARNING TARGET

In this lesson, students are introduced to the story of the Buddha and his teachings. Using objects in the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts, students learn about the diverse Buddhist traditions that developed throughout Asia up to 1500 CE, and the roles works of art play in Buddhist history, culture, and practices.

STUDENT OUTCOMES

Students will:

- describe the life story of the Buddha, his birth, enlightenment, teaching, death, and past lives.
- explore the diverse teachings and practices across Buddhist traditions.
- trace the spread of Buddhism throughout Asia, examining some of its cultural forms through object-based case studies.

MICHIGAN MERIT CURRICULUM

ART.VA.IV.7.1 Recognize, describe and analyze, and evaluate how art contributes to and reflects all societies and cultures at an emerging level.

ART.VA.IV.7.2 Articulate an understanding of the historical, social, and cultural contexts of artwork with an emerging level of aesthetic sophistication.

ART.VA.V.7.5 Analyze and describe ways in which the principles and subject matter of other disciplines taught in school are interrelated with the visual arts at an emerging level.

MICHIGAN STATE SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

7 – W3.2.1 Identify and describe the core beliefs of major world religions and belief systems, including Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Sikhism and Islam.

7 – W3.2.2 Locate the geographical center of major religions and map the spread through 1500 CE.

21st CENTURY LEARNING SKILLS ALIGNMENT

Creativity

Collaboration

Communication

Critical Thinking

Literacy Skills

INTRODUCTION

Why is it important for students to learn about religion?

Learning and teaching about religion—distinct from the theological study of religion—promotes religious literacy, encourages civic responsibility, and prepares students to engage in a diverse public life. Students today are growing up in an increasingly religiously diverse country. Despite this demographic shift, Americans do not have a high level of religious literacy, which is the ability to recognize and analyze the intersections of religion and social, political, and cultural life. Religiously literate people have a basic understanding of the history, practices, texts, and ideas of religious traditions found throughout the world and can understand those traditions in broader cultural contexts. Research shows that teaching about religion in an academic setting increases religious literacy. Therefore, teaching students about the diversity of religious traditions is vital to preparing them to be informed, engaged, responsible, and respectful community members.

Why learn about Buddhism?

Learning about Buddhist traditions is important to understanding global history and culture, but it is also important to understanding American history and culture. Buddhism was historically one of the largest and most geographically widespread religions in the world. Its presence in the United States dates to the mid-19th century when Chinese laborers arrived during the California Gold Rush. In the century after, public awareness of Buddhism grew. Today, Buddhist concepts, imagery, and figures are common in popular culture, but there is still a lack of general understanding of its ideas, practices, and history. Some of the Michigan teachers the DIA surveyed while researching this project said they did not feel equipped to teach about Buddhist traditions, either because they did not have a foundational understanding, or they felt uncomfortable teaching about a tradition they did not personally engage with or see in their communities. This learning resource provides materials to support teachers covering Buddhist traditions in their classrooms.

How can art build a better understanding of religion in general and Buddhism in particular?

A nuanced understanding of Buddhist traditions is impossible without engaging with Buddhist art and culture. Despite the importance of books, sculptures, and ritual objects in Buddhist thought and practice, in American classrooms, Buddhism is often taught primarily through its doctrine—its core tenets or beliefs—separate from the contexts in which that doctrine developed or the physical objects by which it spread throughout the world. This trend is not particular to teaching about Buddhism. It stems from the modern understanding of religion as a mostly private experience, which relies on beliefs found in a core text or texts. This model of religion developed from colonial expansion that brought predominantly Protestant Europeans into contact with non-Western traditions. Their efforts to contextualize and categorize these diverse traditions formed the foundation of the “World Religions” framework. Religious studies pedagogy is developing alternatives to the World Religions model, because that framework limits understanding of the complexity of religious traditions. Incorporating works of art when teaching about religious traditions supports a more nuanced approach.

Engaging with Buddhist traditions through art provides an important antidote to earlier text-centric approaches by focusing on materiality and embodied practices. The Buddhist Traditions Educator Resource is grounded in the DIA’s collection of Buddhist works. This foundation will help students understand how religious traditions spread through their texts, sculptures, ritual objects, and relics. The Educator Resource approaches the Buddhist traditions as internally diverse, not uniform; changing and evolving over time, not static or ahistorical; and embedded in culture, society, and politics, not separate from them. While aspects of this history and these dynamics of transmission are particular to Buddhism, student understanding of any religious tradition will benefit from this materially grounded exploration.

PRE-VISIT ACTIVITIES | 5 Class Periods

Essential Question: How have objects played an essential role in the development and spread of Buddhism?

Module 1: The Many Lives of the Buddha

Module 2: What Did the Buddha Teach?

Module 3: The Spread and Diversity of Buddhist Traditions

Module 1: The Many Lives of the Buddha

Guiding Question: How do the stories and images of the Buddha's life story provide lessons and inspiration for Buddhists?

MATERIALS

- **Buddhist Traditions Presentation Slides**
- Copies of **Student Handout A: The Life of the Buddha**
- Copies of **Student Handout B: Jataka Tales**
- Student notebooks
- **Teacher's Notes: The Life of the Buddha and The Jataka Tales**

DAY ONE | 55 minutes

Hook | 10 minutes

1. Using the **Buddhist Traditions Presentation Slides**, project **Slide 3: See, Think, Wonder** chart and ask students to copy it into their notebooks. Next, project **Slide 4** of Shakyamuni and have students fill out the chart. After a few minutes, ask some students to share their responses with the class. At the end of the discussion, tell students we will revisit this image later.

Introduction | 10 minutes

2. Tell students, "Over the next few days, we are going to learn about the Buddhist traditions, which began in India more than 2,500 years ago. Buddhism spread throughout Asia, and today is found around the world, including in the United States and in Michigan. We are going to begin by learning about the life story of the Buddha Shakyamuni, who lived in India around 500 to 300 BCE. He was an important teacher whose life and lessons inspired others and are the foundation for the Buddhist tradition. We will study what the Buddha understood about the way the world works and what he taught to others. We will also get the chance to look at Buddhist works of art, like paintings and sculptures, so we can think about why they were made, how they were used, and what they can tell us about Buddhist history, culture, and practices around the world."
 - a. Optional: At the end of this lesson, we will get to visit the Detroit Institute of Arts to see some of the art you'll study in person!
3. Project **Slide 5: The Life of the Buddha**. Guide students through a discussion of close looking and visual discovery. After each student response, elicit visual evidence by asking "*What do you see that makes you say that?*"
 - a. What's going on in these images?
 - b. What are people doing in these images?

- c. What feelings might people be expressing?
- d. Based on these images, what might we expect to learn about in this unit?

Summarize the life story of the Buddha based on the **Teacher's Notes** and referencing the illustration.

Jigsaw Reading Activity | 10 + 15 minutes

4. Divide the class equally into small groups and pass out copies of **Student Handout A: Life of the Buddha**. Each student group should receive one of the four readings. Ask students to read through their assigned text and jot down notes on the main points as they read. Then, ask students to check their own understanding by discussing the main points and questions in the readings with their group.

Next, students will “jigsaw” into groups of four so that each of the four readings are represented in each group. Instruct students to present the main points of their reading to their new group, taking turns until they have each taken notes on all four sections. Remind students they will need these notes later in the lesson.

Facilitated Discussion | 10 minutes

5. Project **Slide 4** of Shakyamuni again. Layer questions by asking students, “*After learning about the Life of the Buddha, what do you now notice about this object? Do you see anything differently?*”
 - a. *Which part of the Buddha's life story do you think this object relates most closely with? What do you see that makes you say that?*”

DAY TWO | 55 minutes

Hook | 10 minutes

1. Introduce the lesson by giving students a quick write: *Explain a time when you learned a skill, but it required a lot of practice. What did it feel like to try again and again?* Ask some students to share their responses.

Jataka Tales | 25 minutes

2. Just as students spend time practicing a skill to strengthen it, the Buddha spent lifetimes strengthening his skills, or virtues, to achieve enlightenment (see **Teacher's Notes: Jataka Tales** for more information). Tell students they will read one popular story out of hundreds written about the many lives of the Buddha. These stories are called jatakas. They are often told as entertaining stories illustrating a moral, like fables or fairy tales, rather than as devotional religious teachings. In each jataka tale, the Buddha is reincarnated as a different living being, usually an animal or human. By the end of each story, he learns an important lesson or skill, such as generosity, wisdom, or patience, which will help him achieve enlightenment.
3. Divide students into pairs and pass out the **Student Handout B: Jataka Tales**. Allow students 25 minutes to read and respond to the reflection questions.
 - a. Alternatively, read the story to the class and have them respond to the questions as you read.
 - b. Optional: Project **Slide 7: The Jataka Tales** illustration during the activity.

Facilitated Discussion | 10 minutes

4. Questions from the reading:
 - a. What is this story about?
 - b. What did the king learn from the monkey about being a good leader?
 - c. In jataka tales, the bodhisattva develops the skills and qualities necessary to become a buddha.

- What skills or qualities do you think the monkey developed during this lifetime?
- d. Think back to the story of the life of the Buddha. Do you think the Buddha possessed any of these qualities? Why or why not?

Exit Ticket | 10 minutes

5. Use the Guiding Question as the exit ticket: *How do the many lives of the Buddha provide examples of ways to live for Buddhists?* Ask students to provide a piece of evidence from readings.

Module 2: What Did the Buddha Teach?

Guiding Question: What are some of the truths the Buddha realized when he achieved enlightenment?

MATERIALS:

- **Buddhist Traditions Presentation Slides**
- Copies of **Student Handout C: Key Concepts Graphic Organizer**
- Copies of **Student Handout D: Hexagonal Thinking Activity**
- Scissors
- Student Notebooks
- Optional: Copies of **The Wheel of Life**
- Optional: Glue or tape

Hook | 10 minutes

1. Using the **Buddhist Traditions Presentation Slides**, project **Slide 9: Observe, Reflect, Question** graphic organizer and ask students to copy it into their notebooks. They will complete the top three sections while they examine the image, leaving the “Further Investigation” area blank for now. Then, project **Slide 10: The Wheel of Life**. Ask some students to share their responses with the class.

Wheel of Life Analysis | 15 minutes

2. Project **Slides 11–21: The Wheel of Life**. Move through the three concentric circles in the Wheel of Life. Explain each highlighted section of the Wheel for students, building off their observations during the “hook.” Instruct students to complete the “further investigation” portion during this discussion. See **Teacher’s Notes** for additional information on the Wheel of Life.

Introduce Vocabulary | 10 minutes

3. Guide students through the **Student Handout C: Key Concepts Graphic Organizer**, giving them time to complete the empty sections.

Hexagon Vocabulary Activity | 15 minutes

4. Pass out copies of **Student Handout D: Hexagonal Thinking Activity**. Instruct students to cut out the hexagons, build connections between the key concepts, and explain why they’ve made those connections. There are many possible connections between concepts! Ask for some students to share their responses with the class.

Wrap Up | 5 minutes

5. Project **Slides 23–31: What Did the Buddha Teach?** infographic. Go through each key concept with students. End with the infographic. Ask students a series of questions:

- a. What connections are you seeing that are like the ones you made?
- b. What connections do you see that are different from the ones you made?
- c. Are there any connections that are surprising to you? Explain.
- d. What questions are bubbling up for you as you look at this infographic?

Module 3: The Spread and Diversity of Buddhist Traditions

Guiding Question: How do objects help spread the Buddhist traditions?

MATERIALS:

- **Buddhist Traditions Presentation Slides**
- Copies of **Student Handout E: Object Analysis**

Hook | 10 minutes

1. Project **Slide 33: Buddhism's Spread Throughout 1500 CE**. Ask students to look closely at the map and respond to the following questions:
 - a. What does this map show us?
 - b. What region of the world does this map depict?
 - c. What trends or patterns do you notice?
2. Using Slides 33–34, lead a short discussion about the spread of Buddhism. Refer to the **Teacher's Notes** regarding the different Buddhist traditions.

Object Analysis | 30 minutes

3. Explain to the class that students will now get into pairs to examine two objects from the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts. After students examine these two objects, they will compare and contrast them. Students should be prepared to share their findings with the class.
 - a. *Please note:* On the Object Analysis handout, students are asked who created this object, however, the maker is not known for any of these objects. This is possibly because documenting the creator or creators was not meaningful or significant like it often is for artists today.

Revisit the Map | 5 minutes

4. Project **Slides 36–37**. Ask students:
 - a. Notice where your objects are on the map.
 - b. What color arrow leads to your object? What might this indicate?
 - c. Looking at this map for a second time, are you noticing anything differently?

Facilitated Discussion | 10 minutes

5. In a whole-class discussion, ask students to use their notes to help answer the following questions. Remind students to support their responses with visual and / or textual evidence. Optional: **Project Buddhist Traditions Presentation Slides 38–45** for each object set.
 - a. What can these objects tell us about the core beliefs of early Buddhists?
 - b. What can these objects tell us about how Buddhists practiced their religion prior to 1500 CE?
 - c. What can these objects tell us about the regional spread of Buddhist traditions prior to 1500 CE?

GUIDED TOUR EXPLANATION & RATIONALE:

Engaging with sacred objects can reveal complex stories about the devotional practices from which they emerge. Designed for grades 3–12, this tour lets students broaden their understanding of diverse devotional and religious traditions across the world.

Book a guided field trip experience [here](#).

POST-VISIT ACTIVITY:

For the post-visit activity, ask student to create an artistic response to the Essential Question: How have objects played an essential role in the development and spread of Buddhism?

Students can draw, use mixed-media, or other creative methods. The scene must include the following elements:

- A person who practices Buddhism (e.g. the Buddha, a bodhisattva, a monastic person, a jataka tale character, etc.)
- Five key concepts
- Two objects to place in your scene,
 - *Votive Tablet with Buddha at the Moment of Enlightenment*
 - Two pages from *Manuscript of the “Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Verses”*
 - *Shakyamuni as an Ascetic*
 - *Buddhist Prayer Wheel*
 - *Buddha's Descent from the Trayastrimsas Heaven*
 - *Portable Shrine to Bodhisattva Kannon*
 - *Sutra Scroll from Jingo-ji Temple: The Buddha's Teaching at Anupiya*
- A 1–2 sentence caption explaining how the scene is a response to the Essential Question.

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