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BUDDHISM H306/A

Two Buddha Statues

Buddha statues are used to help illustrate Buddhist teaching. Different postures and even tiny details refer to ideas or particular moments in the Buddha's life.



The Buddha is often represented meditating. A meditation statue which shows Buddha with both hands together at the chest with fingers on one hand forming a circle represents Buddha giving his first sermon. The circle made by the fingers represents the wheel of law (karma). This statue is a variation on this theme. Buddha's hands are resting together on his lap, symbolising perfect balance of thought and tranquility. At the same time the thumb and index finger of both hands form a circle to represent the wheel of law.



The other statues show Buddha with one hand touching the earth. This refers to the moment of the Buddha's enlightenment, when the Buddha called the earth as a witness. In Burmese temples murals of the moment of the Buddha's enlightenment shows the seated Buddha being challenged by an army of demons summoned by the devil, Mara. The Buddha's hand touches the ground to summon the Earth Goddess who wrings out her hair to unleash a flood that sweeps away the demons. Another version of the story has Mara verbally challenging the Buddha: 'Who knows that you have attained enlightenment?' The Buddha touches the ground and calmly replies: 'Mother Earth knows.' The gesture symbolises unshakable faith and resolution and is the most common posture for South East Asian temple images.

Other details of the statues are invested with meaning. For example, the elongated ears refer to the period in Buddha's life when he was a prince and wore jewellery, including ear rings. The protuberance at the top of the head - *ushnisha* - symbolises the Buddha's great mental power and enlightenment. The mark in the centre of the forehead, called the urna, represents the Eye of Wisdom.

The small statue is of a style that suggests it originates in Thailand, or close by.

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Ordination Sash



In traditional Asian Buddhist cultures the community is divided between monks and nuns, who can be seen as the full-time Buddhists, and lay people, who attain some merit by supporting the monks and nuns.

This sash - called a kesa - is from the Western Buddhist Order, whose badge is embroidered on it. It symbolises the ideals at the heart of Buddhism, which are collectively known as the Three Jewels, or the Three Treasures. These are the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. It is by making these the central principles of one's life that one becomes a Buddhist. The Buddha refers both to the historical Buddha and to the ideal of Buddhahood which is open to all. The Dharma primarily means the teachings of the Buddha. The Sangha is the Buddhist community.

The three 'jewels' are represented by the three tear-drop shaped objects, in yellow, red and green. Below them is an lotus blossom, symbolising enlightenment. Behind them is a flame. Fire is a symbol of desire, which is viewed negatively in Buddhism. Nirvana - the aim of Buddhist devotion - means extinction, or the snuffing-out of the flame of desire.

The Western Buddhist Order has rejected the division between ordained and lay Buddhists. People can become ordained into the Western Buddhist Order, but they no longer have to give up their possessions or refrain from sex, as a traditional monk or nun would. A sash like this is given to members when they commit themselves to Buddhism. They wear it slung around their neck when making offerings or attending classes and other public events.

Prayer Beads



Buddhist prayer beads are often called mala beads. Traditionally, they consist of 108 or 111 beads and are made from a variety of seeds, wood, and semiprecious stones. For some reason this set has 109 beads! The large bead (usually with a tassel) is called the 'guru bead' and symbolises the teacher. The 111 bead malas include three spacing beads. Beads are used to help a person count prayers or other devotional practices such as prostrations. This set was made in Nepal.

Bell



A hand bell and a symbolic object called a vajra (right, below) are often used together in Buddhist meditation and ceremonies. The handle of the bell is, in effect half a vajra. So, if you imagine a small metal rod which, at either end, looks similar to the handle of this bell, then you will get a sense of what a vajra looks like.

A vajra is a symbolic thunderbolt. In Hinduism the vajra/thunderbolt, was the chief weapon of the sky-god Indra, just as with the sky gods Zeus in Greek mythology and Thor in Norse mythology, who are always shown with a thunderbolt/hammer in their hand. The vajra was envisaged as a double-headed pronged weapon. However, according to a Buddhist legend, the Buddha took the vajra weapon from Indra and forced its wrathful open prongs together, thus forming a peaceful Buddhist sceptre with closed prongs at either end. The Buddhist vajra represents the unbreakable and indestructible power of the thunderbolt combined with the indestructible state of enlightenment or Buddhahood.

The use of the bell and vajra differs according to the ritual performed. Sometimes the bell is rung to drive away evil spirits. Bells are also sometimes used in meditation. The vajra represents the compassion of the Buddha, the masculine principle; and the bell represents wisdom, the female principle. To achieve enlightenment, those two principles must be combined. The bell is visualised as the Buddha's body, the vajra is visualised as his mind, and the sound of the bell is visualised as Buddha's speech in teaching of the Dharma. While chanting, the vajra is held between the thumb and the palm of the right hand, which faces down, and the bell is held in a similar way in the left hand, which usually faces up, and they are moved in graceful gestures. Sometimes the hands are held with the wrists crossed over each other, against the chest. This represents the union of the male and female principles.

As with many Buddhist objects, the design of the bell incorporates many symbolic images. It is traditionally topped by a half-vajra. Underneath is the face of Buddha Viarocana - the incarnation of universal truth (Dharma). On the shoulder of the bell are eight lotus petals with syllables in them. The lotus leaves represent the eight great Bodhisattvas and the syllables are their consorts. A Bodhisattva is an enlightened being who chooses not to enter nirvana, but to remain in the world to help others attain enlightenment.

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Prayer Wheel



Prayer wheels are used in Tibet, where they are called mani wheels. Rolls of thin paper, imprinted with many copies of the mantra (prayer) 'Om Mani Padme Hum' are wound around an axle inside the protective container at the end of the handle. Spinning the wheel is held to be the equivalent of chanting the prayer written within and the person doing so spreads blessings and earns merit.

The prayer 'Om Mani Padme Hum' is said to contain the essence of Buddhism, but also to be untranslatable. Some have rendered it as 'Behold! The jewel in the lotus!' Others as 'Om Jewel in the Lotus Hum' or 'Praise to the Jewel in the Lotus.' Clearly simply translating it doesn't explain its meaning!

This prayer wheel has the mantra also carved on the outside cover of the wheel. The mantra is usually written in either the ancient Indian Ranjana script or in Tibetan script. In this case the script is Ranjana.



Larger wheels, which may be several metres high and one or two metres in diameter, can contain myriad copies of the mantra, and may also contain hundreds of sacred texts. Wheels are also placed where they can be spun by wind or by flowing water. Smaller mounted wheels can be spun by the heat rising from a flame or by steam from a stove, or placed on a tabletop to be spun by hand. They can also be put on CDs and spun in a computer's hard drive!

Incense Sticks



Incense sticks are burned across the Buddhist world for a variety of reasons. They can be used to purify a room before a ritual, or to time a period of meditation, or even as a mosquito repellent! One tradition says that during one of the Buddha's sermons a monk heedlessly swatted a mosquito. Buddha ordered that, in the future, incense ought to be lit in order to keep the flies away, so that people could concentrate more easily on Dharma teachings, but also to prevent the needless taking of lives. These sticks were made in Nepal by members of the Buddhist community exiled from Tibet when the Communist Chinese regime took over their country in 1950.

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Incense Holder

This incense holder is in the shape of a stupa (see below).



Model of a Stupa

A stupa is a Buddhist religious monument. Originally a stupa was a burial mound made up of mud or clay, or a cairn in barren areas. After the 'passing away' of the Buddha his remains were cremated and the ashes divided and buried under eight stupas with two further stupas encasing the urn and the embers. In the third century BC, after his conversion to Buddhism, the South Asian emperor Ashoka had the original stupas opened and the remains distributed among the several thousand stupas he had built. Over time stupas have become destinations for pilgrimage and places for meditation. Though stupas often became elaborate and complex, in their purest form their plan consisted of a circle within a square - features which are reflected in the incense holder in this box. The model of a stupa, with its tall, thin spire, is of a style that is found in Burma.



Lamp

Flowers and incense are often given as a devotional offering at Buddhist temples and stupas. Another common offering is a lighted lamp. The light symbolises enlightenment, which drives away the darkness of ignorance.



Six Offering Bowls

Offerings are frequently made using bowls like these. Another common offering is simply a bowl of water, which symbolises purity. Generally these bowls come in sets of seven.

