Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

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BUDDHISM H306/C

Meditation Cushion

People sit on the floor to meditate in Buddhism. The meditators use cushions or mats to sit on. The cushion in this collection comes from Throssel Hole Priory in Northumberland, which belongs to the Zen tradition.



Monk's Robes

Buddhist monks and nuns wear robes. Different traditions wear different colours - these robes were kindly given to the Museum of Reading by Amaravati Buddhist Centre in Hertfordshire, where the community belongs to the Theravadan Buddhist tradition - the common tradition of south Asia (Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos). In this tradition only monks can attain true enlightenment.



The Theravadan community wear saffron, the Zen community wear black and the Tibetan community wear maroon/red. Traditionally Theravada monks receive the cloth annually from lay people at a festival called Kathina. Lay people gain more merit by donating to ordained monastics than they would to lay people.

The monk's set of robes goes back to the Buddha's own time. It comprises an inner garment or waistcloth (the smallest piece of cloth), which is secured to the waist with a flat waistband, an upper robe and outer robe. Head coverings are also sometimes worn.

Reading Borough Council

Heritage Lottery Fund

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The Wheel of Life Image.



This complex image is widely used to teach people the Buddhist understanding of existence. A full description of this image can be found in the book *Buddhist Iconography* included in this box (pages 43-59).

The wheel is held by a hideous monster. This is Mara (or Yama) a sort of devil figure, who tempted the Buddha. Mara is the ruler of desire and death, the two evils that chain man to the wheel of ceaseless rebirth.

At the centre of the wheel are three animals, which represent the three evils that cause the endless cycle of existence.

- The cock represents craving or greed.
- The snake that signifies hatred and aggression.
- The pig is a symbol of ignorance.

The next circle out from this central image shows the six realms of existence. Starting at the top and then travelling in a clockwise direction there are

- The Realm of the gods. The Pali and Sanskrit words which are usually translated as 'god' come from a root which means 'to shine.' The gods are the shining or radiant ones who live in unalloyed happiness and pleasure. It is more difficult to reach enlightenment if you are born in the realm of the gods than if you are born as a human - life is too nice!
- The Realm of the Titans (Asuras). The titans know only warfare. Not content with what they possess these giants rush upon the gods of the sensuous realm and try to grab from them their happiness and delight. They try to capture the heavenly tree which fulfills all wishes.
- The Realm of the Animals. In the realm of the animals, life is the life of the body. All endeavour is directed to the satisfaction of physical desires and the business of self-preservation.
- The Realm of Hell. A place of intense pain and torment, where its victims are subjected to the most excruciating tortures, inflicted on them by presiding demons. Flames engulf the entire realm which is unbearably hot, though there are regions of ice also, which yield the painful experience of cold.

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- The Realm of Hungry Ghosts. Ghosts have distended bodies, which are the colour of smoke, and they appear insubstantial as if made of mist. These pathetic creatures are obsessed with perpetual hunger and an unquenchable thirst. They stagger on their feeble limbs in search of sustenance. Driven by their overwhelming hunger and thirst, the hungry ghosts live out their lives for no other purpose than food and drink.
- The Realm of Human Beings. The human realm is the world of everyday experience. A human birth is considered the most favourable at the outset of one's spiritual life because it contains a balance of pleasure and pain. Since human life gives us such rare opportunities for spiritual realisation, Buddhism teaches that it is very precious indeed.

People move from one realm of existence to another in different lives, depending on the actions they have performed. The outer circle - the Chain of Causation - is divided into twelve units, each depicting a phase of the peculiar cycle of cause and effect which keeps one trapped in the six realms of cyclic existence mentioned above. The man with the stick, for example, represents Ignorance.

Refuge Tree Image

This image was made by the Western Buddhist Order. This organisation was founded in 1967 by Dennis Lingwood (born 1925), who has adopted the name Sangharakshita, and aims to integrate traditional Buddhism with the culture of modern Europe. Sangharakshita can be seen in the centre of the picture at the bottom. Around him his teachers are shown. Above this group are the Buddhas past, present and future. Above and around these Buddhas are various other figures - arhats, bodhisattvas and gods - too many to specifically identify! The figure at the very top, for example, is Buddha Vajrasattva - the Buddha of purification. This style of tree is based on those used in Tibetan tradition.

Buddhists use the idea of 'taking refuge' to describe the action of turning to Buddhism. 'Going for refuge in the three jewels' means to make the Buddha, the Dharma (the Buddha's teaching), and the Sangha (the Buddhist community) the guides of life. The basic prayer of Buddhist commitment is the refuge prayer:

Namo Buddhaya
Namo Dharmaya
Namo Sanghaya

I go for refuge to the Buddha,
I go for refuge to the Dharma,
I go for refuge to the Sangha.