

Enlightened Digital

For a long time, there were no images of the Buddha. Today, everybody recognizes him. The Digital “Enlightened” reveals how the Buddha came to look the way he does.

The Digital “Enlightened – The Realm of the Buddhas” serves as a warm-up to the exhibition of the same name at the Museum der Kulturen Basel which opens on 20 November. In it we reveal the diversity of Buddhism with the help of a wide range of exhibits which are of significance to Buddhist practices.

Of course, the display holds a multitude of Buddha images and sculptures. The Buddha is recognizable at first sight. But what are the function and meaning of all these images? They reflect the emergence and spread of Buddhist teachings. This is the content of the Digital erleuchtet.mkb.ch – a kind of micro website. It addresses an aspect that is not discussed in the exhibition – thus providing added value, as one might say.

The Buddha is given a face

It all began without the Buddha. In the so-called aniconic phase there were no images of the Buddha. During the first centuries after the death of the historical Buddha, his teachings were communicated by means of symbols.

The Buddha himself had propagated the use of symbols and rejected the idea of personal adoration. In this Digital, users will encounter the Tree of Awakening along with the Wheel of the Law, and get to know what a stupa is.

Roughly at the same time that other world religions began fashioning images of venerated persons and deities around two thousand years ago, the first human depictions of the Buddha also appeared. It marked the beginning of the iconic phase in Buddhist art.

The Buddha comes alive

32 major and 80 minor signs hallmark the Buddha, distinguishing him as a “Great Man”. The artists of the time incorporated these characteristics in part, thus creating an idealized portrait of the “Awakened One”.

Because this model became blended with the local art traditions of the regions to which Buddhist teachings spread, the Digital includes comments on the different schools of Buddhism that emerged. Interactive maps provide additional guidance.

Selected quotations and short clickable stories shed light not only on the contents of Buddhist teachings but also on the life and nature of the historical Buddha, for instance, in connection with the story of the Buddha and the serpent king. On top of that, anecdotal Japanese koans are woven into the Digital. They refer to exchanges between Zen masters and their students and usually contain puzzling paradoxes:

A monk once asked Master Tozan: “What is Buddha?”
Tozan replied: “Three pounds of flax.”

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Furthermore, work on the Digital was made possible by the Hedi Keller-Fonds and the Freiwilliger Museumsverein Basel.