

Enlightened – The Realm of the Buddhas

The Buddha seated on a lotus throne is one of the oldest and to date best-known representations of Buddhism. Buddhist teachings emerged in northern India in the last pre-Christian millennium. From there it spread across Central and East Asia as far as Indonesia within a matter of 1,200 years. Today, Buddhism has over 380 million followers spread over the entire globe.

Who was the Buddha and what was his message? How many Buddhas are there and how do they differ from one another? Is a Buddha always male? What is understood by enlightenment?

The exhibition invites visitors to follow up on these and similar questions and explore the immense variety of Buddhism. At the centre stand the Three Jewels: the Buddha, his teachings, and the Buddhist community. The encounter with numerous Buddhas from South, Central, and East Asia will reveal that representations of the Buddha do not merely have a decorative function. They form the pillars of a spiritual practice and convey complex and intricate teachings.

On his journey from prince to religious founder, Buddha Shakyamuni searched for the origin of suffering and for ways of overcoming it. Since his pursuit began roughly 2,500 years ago, a multitude of symbols and images of him and his teachings have emerged. What a Buddha had to look like was defined very early in various Indian writings. Unto this day, artists still follow these templates which makes recognizing a Buddha quite easy.

At the same time, one is surprised again and again at the huge variety of representational modes which emerged with the spread of Buddhism and its encounter with local artistic expressions and ideas. Contemporary works by Sanae Sakamoto, Sonam Dolma Brauen, and Seoungho Cho enter into a dialogue with historical pieces.

“There is no path to happiness – happiness is the path.” (Thich Nhat Hanh)

The exhibition is accompanied by a digitorial: erleuchtet.mkb.ch

The Buddha – The Awakened One

The term **Buddha** is an honorific title and stands for the Awakened One. It describes a human being who has freed himself from the evils of greed, hate, and ignorance and attained ultimate insight, nirvana, in his lifetime. Upon death, he is liberated from the painful and eternal cycle of rebirths, samsara.

The path to supreme insight is lost and forgotten time and again. To remedy this, a worldly Buddha emerges in each age and proclaims the teachings anew. According to tradition, Buddha Shakyamuni was neither the first nor the last Buddha.

Buddha Shakyamuni is venerated in South and Southeast Asia as a teacher and role model. Buddhism reached Sri Lanka from India as early as the 2nd century BCE, making it the country with the oldest, unbroken tradition of Buddhism. From the 3rd century on,

the Buddha's teachings also reached Thailand and Myanmar. Unto this day, Theravada Buddhism, the Path of the Elders, is the main tradition in these countries.

In Central and East Asia, the **Buddha concept** experienced an extension in the sense that the worldly Buddha was complemented by the Adi-Buddha and the Five Transcendental Buddhas who accompany adherents on their path to enlightenment. The Adi-Buddha is the embodiment of pure wisdom, the Five Transcendental Buddhas convey this wisdom along with liberation through the art of meditation. Following trade and pilgrimage routes, Buddhism reached China in the 4th, and Korea and Japan in the 6th century. Mahayana Buddhism, meaning the Great Vehicle, is based on the old Buddhist ideas and values, but extends and reinterprets them. Vajrayana Buddhism, the Diamond Vehicle, emerged around the middle of the first millennium by inclusion of a range of ritual techniques. Today, the Vajrayana tradition is represented principally in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, Mongolia, and Japan.

In Himalayan countries, **Ushnishavijaya** is venerated as the mother of all Buddhas and as the embodiment of the Buddha wisdom. This manifestation raises the controversial question whether a Buddha can also appear in female form.

Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future

The first images of Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future, appeared almost at the same time as representations of Buddha Shakyamuni. Maitreya stands for loving kindness and affection. He is depicted sitting in deep contemplation with his hands folded in the gesture of meditation (dhyana mudra). Instead of a monk's robe he is wearing the garment and adornment of a prince. The vessel in front of him contains the Nectar of longevity.

1 Ghandara, Pakistan; probably 1st/3rd c.; stone; collected by P. Wirz, gifted in 1939, Ila 828

Siddhartha Gautama in meditation

Siddhartha Gautama attained supreme insight into the causes of suffering and the way how to overcome it after weeks of meditation under a bodhi tree, a sacred fig tree. It was at this moment that he became Buddha Shakyamuni, the Awakened One.

2 Gandhara, Pakistan; 3rd/ 6th c.; stone; collected by P. Wirz, on permanent loan from FMB 1939, Ila 832

Buddha Shakyamuni

The first human representations of the Buddha emerged in various parts of South Asia around the turn to the Common Era. In Gandhara, a region in the borderlands of what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan, Buddhist contents became merged with European elements thanks to cultural exchanges with the Mediterranean region: the protuberance on the crown of the Buddha's head marking wisdom is reminiscent of the topknot on ancient Greek and Roman statues, the aureole at the back of the head emphasizes his spiritual greatness. His facial features bear comparison with ancient Greek gods, so does the fold of his garment.

3 Gandhara, Pakistan; 3rd/4th c.; stone; collected by G. u. M. Kinzel, bequest in 2006, Ila 11491 11491

Buddha Shakyamuni with the gesture of encouragement

With the gesture of encouragement (abhaya mudra), the Buddha invites followers to step closer and offers protection against fears concerning the eternal cycle of rebirths.

4 Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka; undated; metal; collected by P. Wirz, purchased in 1935, Ila 672

Buddha Shakyamuni showing the gesture of teaching encouragement

The Buddha in the standing position reminds us of his role as a teacher. It conveys dynamics and attentiveness. The gesture of teaching (vitarka mudra) is a reference to his first discourse in the deer park at Sarnath. The event is said to have set the Wheel of Law in motion.

5 Kandy, Sri Lanka; undated; metal; collected by P. and F. Sarasin, gifted in 1898, IIa 160

The Buddha with the gesture of meditation

In the gesture of meditation, both hands are placed on the crossed legs in front of the body, with the right hand resting on the left as a sign of concentration and wisdom.

6 Thailand; 1st half of 20th c.; metal, cotton, plastic; collected by W. Kumm, gifted in 2009, IIc 14832

Buddha Shakyamuni seated in earth witness gesture

7 Thailand; probably 19th c.; metal, gilded; collected by G. Kuhn, bequest 1975, IIb 3172

8 Myanmar; undated; wood, gilded, pigments; collected by J. R. & M. E. Nötzlin-Werthemann, gifted in 1903, IIb 42

9 Malayan peninsula, Thailand; 19th/20th c.; wood, gilded, pigments; collected by W. Rothpletz, acquired by bequest in 1980, IIb 3462

Buddha Shakyamuni showing the gesture of encouragement and protection

10 Myanmar; undated; wood, gilded; collected by J. R. Geigy-Merian, gifted in 1854, IIb 4

The Buddha performing the gesture of meditation

The meditating Buddha is adorned with royal jewellery. The image refers to the Buddha as chakravartin, that is, as a ruler who embodies not only the power of a king but also supreme spiritual authority. His serene facial expression and his hands poised in the gesture of meditation emphasize his state of deep contemplation.

11 Lopburi, Thailand; probably 19th c.; stone, traces of gilding; collected by R. Eisenhofer, gifted in 1931, IIb 315

Buddha Shakyamuni seated in earth witness gesture

Buddha Shakyamuni is seated in meditation on a lotus throne, his right hand stretched out in the earth witness gesture (bhumisparsha mudra). The gesture refers to a specific incident in the Buddha's life: while meditating, the demon Mara attempted to distract Shakyamuni by tormenting him with visions. However, the Buddha did not flinch and stuck to his meditation up to the moment of his awakening. Upon that, he invoked the earth goddess to attest to his Buddhahood. As a mark of enlightenment, every Buddha is shown with a protuberance at the top of his head, often crowned by a flame or a jewel.

12 Myanmar; undated; alabaster, pigments, gilding; collected by J. R. Geigy-Merian, gifted in 1854, IIb 12

13 Myanmar; undated; alabaster, pigments, gilding; collected by J. R. Geigy-Merian, gifted in 1854, IIb 11

14 Myanmar; undated; alabaster, pigments, gilding; collected by J. R. Geigy-Merian, gifted in 1854, IIb 7

15 Myanmar; undated; alabaster, pigments, gilding; collected by J. R. Geigy-Merian, gifted in 1854, IIb 10

16 Myanmar; undated; alabaster, pigments, gilding; collected by J. R. Geigy-Merian, gifted in 1854, IIb 8

17 Northeast India; alabaster, pigments, gilding; Basel Mission collection, gifted in 2015, IIa 9838

Buddha Shakyamuni seated in earth witness gesture

18 Mawlaik, Myanmar; undated; wood, pigments; collected by P. Wirz, purchased in 1935, IIb 614

19 Thailand; undated; metal; collected by W. Rothpletz, acquired by bequest 1980, IIb 3460

The Buddha performing the gesture of meditation

20 Thailand; undated; metal; collected by W. Rothpletz, acquired by bequest 1980, I Ib 3460

Buddha Shakyamuni showing the twofold gesture of encouragement and protection

Buddha Shakyamuni has both hands raised in the gesture of encouragement and protection. It expresses goodwill and encourages people to follow the Buddhist path fearlessly.

21 Ayutthaya, Thailand; undated; metal; collected by R. Eisenhofer, purchased in 1930, I Ib 311

Buddha Shakyamuni seated in earth witness gesture

22 Thailand; undated; metal, traces of gilding; collected by L. Paravicini, acquired by bequest 1951, I Ib 1634

The Buddha on the serpent's throne

During a week-long storm, the serpent king Mucalinda came to the aid of the Buddha: He wrapped his body around the Buddha, thus protecting him from the rain and cold. He raised his seven heads behind the Buddha, sheltering him with the unfurled skin of his neck.

This motif spread across Southeast Asia from the seventh century on and gradually became one of the most significant representations of the Buddha. Serpent-like beings were often part of local, non-Buddhist myths and were successively integrated in the Buddhist teachings.

23 Thailand; 16th/17th c.; metal, traces of gilding; collected by F. Sarasin, gifted in 1940, I Ib 1523

Buddha Shakyamuni with a mirror

Buddha Shakyamuni is holding a mirror. It reflects all things in the world, only to reveal their insubstantiality. In Buddhism, the mirror signifies the clarity of consciousness.

24 Thailand; probably 19th c.; metal, gilded; collected by F. Sarasin, purchased in 1915, I Ib 578

Buddha Shakyamuni

Buddha Shakyamuni is crowned by a multi-tiered imperial parasol. The parasol is one of the Eight Auspicious Symbols. Originally a symbol of royal power and material affluence, it stands for spiritual strength and protection. In allegorical terms, the parasol provides shelter from the heat of suffering, sickness, and destructive forces.

25 Thailand; undated; metal, gilded; collected by P. und F. Sarasin, gifted in 1898, I Ib 21

Buddha Shakyamuni seated in earth witness gesture

26 Mawlaik, Myanmar; undated; wood; collected by P. Wirz, purchased in 1935, I Ib 621

The reclining Buddha

The image of the Buddha in death is peculiar to Theravada Buddhism. Buddha Shakyamuni attained nirvana already in his lifetime, the certainty of being liberated from all suffering. Upon parinirvana, that is, complete liberation, the Buddha escaped from the eternal cycle of rebirth.

27 Bangkok, Thailand; undated; wood, gilded, mirror glass, pigments; collected by P. Wirz, purchased in 1937, I Ib 839

Vijaya stupas

This stupa is topped by a vessel containing the nectar of longevity. It is a reminder of the Buddha's power to extend life. The central axis of a stupa signifies the world axis as well as a human being's spine. It joins the human microcosm with the macrocosm.

28 Tibet; 18th c.; metal, fire-gilded, semi-precious stones; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14056

29 Tibet; 18th/19th c.; metal, fire-gilded; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14057

Stupa

Buddhism started to spread in Sri Lanka from the 2nd century BCE on. The shape of the dagoba, as stupas are referred to in Sri Lanka, began to change: the original hemispherical shape was drawn out into a bell-like form featuring a smooth, undecorated surface. This form then spread from Sri Lanka to Southeast Asia where it is still common today.

30 Kandy, Sri Lanka; undated; metal; collected by P. und F. Sarasin, gifted in 1898, IIa 30a+b

Mahaparinirvana stupas

These stupas serve as a reminder of the Buddha's death and his complete liberation. After his death Buddha's ashes and physical relics were spread between several burial mounds. From these mounds the stupa derived: on a circular or angular base rises a square-shaped treasury chamber filled with votive offerings or relics. The stupa's tip in form of a conical spire is topped by a crown.

31 Tibet; 16th c.; metal; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14061

32 India or Tibet; 12th c.; metal; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14060

Vijaya stupa

33 Nepal; 11th c.; brass; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14055

Buddha Shakyamuni

Buddha Shakyamuni is seated in the vault of a stupa which serves as a reliquary shrine. The stupa signifies the Three Jewels: the Buddha, his teachings, and the Buddhist community. In this depiction, the symbolic and figurative representation of the Buddha and his teachings become blended.

34 Kashmir, India; 11th/12th c.; metal; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13892

Buddha Shakyamuni with a double aureole

Displaying the dynamic posture of a ruler, Buddha Shakyamuni is standing on an elevated lotus throne. His right hand is raised in the gesture of protection. The double flaming aureole is a peculiarity of the Buddhist art of Kashmir.

35 Kashmir, India; 10th/11th c.; metal; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13890

Standing Buddha

This Buddha figure from Ladakh reveals signs of frequent touch on its face and body. It is believed that the Buddha's spiritual energy passes over into an adherent through touch.

36 Ladakh, India; probably 7th c.; metal; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13885

Stupa

Reliquary shrines remind of the Buddha, his teachings, and his pursuit of nirvana. The stupa's stepped form signifies the slow but steady path to enlightenment. Depending

on size, stupas serve as cherished objects of veneration and as important pilgrimage sites.

37 Sri Lanka or Myanmar; undated; metal; collected by P. u. F. Sarasin, gifted in 1898, Iib 22

Padmakataka stupa

This stupa serves as a reminder of the emergence of the Buddha and his first teaching. At the base there are eight snow lions, the national emblem of Tibet. The stupa's tip consisting of thirteen parasols symbolizes the Buddha's awakening.

38 Tibet; 18th c.; metal; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, Iid 14063

Vijaya stupa

This stupa merges the notion of a shrine with the image of a temple cart drawn by two horses as commonly used for feasts and processions in Nepal. In the shrine's window one discovers Ushnishavijaya, the female guardian of the Buddha wisdom; she symbolizes longevity and the becoming of a buddha.

39 Nepal; 1910; metal; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, Iid 14058

Pratiharya stupa

This stupa is borne by eight snow lions. At the centre, four Transcendental Buddhas step forth on a lotus throne, while a fifth one is amidst them but only in thought. This type of stupa calls to mind the Buddha's steadfastness in the face of all the temptations he was subjected to while in meditation under the Tree of Awakening.

40 Nepal; 19th c.; metal, fire-gilded; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, Iid 14065

Buddha Shakyamuni as a prince

This statue is modelled on one that stands in the Jokhang temple in Lhasa. It is a rare representation that shows Buddha Shakyamuni as a prince: he is adorned with jewellery and the precious robe of a ruler. At the same time, his peaceful and inward-looking countenance is a sign of deep meditative contemplation.

41 Tibet; 16th c.; metal, fire-gilded, semi-precious stones; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, Iid 13889

Buddha Bhaishajyaguru

The Medicine Buddha, or Master of Healing, Bhaishajyaguru, enjoys special veneration in Mahayana Buddhism in Tibet, Japan, and China. He is invoked for the purpose of healing from physical and spiritual suffering and for liberation from ignorance and other spiritual afflictions. His attributes include a medicine bowl and the fruit of the Harad tree, an important medicinal plant in traditional Tibetan healing practices.

42 Tibet; 18th c.; metal, pigments; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, Iid 13900

43 Tibet; 16th c.; metal; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, Iid 13901

Transcendental Buddha Ratnasambhava

Buddha Ratnasambhava, the Jewel Born, embodies the fulfilment of wishes. In his left hand he is holding the wish-fulfilling jewel, his right hand is displaying the gesture of generosity (varada mudra). He has the power to transform the evils of greed and pride into the wisdom of equanimity. transformieren.

44 Tibet; 16th c.; metal, pigments, semi-precious stones; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, Iid 13883

Transcendental Buddha Amithaba

Buddha Amithaba, the Infinite Light, embodies all-pervasive wisdom. He has the power to turn the evils of lust and passion into the wisdom of equanimity. His hands are folded in his lap in the gesture of meditation. Transcendental Buddhas stand outside the eternal cycle of rebirths and can only be experienced in meditation.

45 Tibet; 15th c.; metal, semi-precious stones; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13882

Transcendental Buddha Amoghasiddhi

Buddha Amoghasiddhi, the Unfailingly Accomplished, embodies infallible success on his path to enlightenment. He has the power to turn the evil of greed into accomplished wisdom. His right hand is raised in the gesture of encouragement and protection, his left rests in the gesture of meditation.

46 Tibet; 15th c.; metal, traces of colouring; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13884

Transcendental Buddha Akshobhya

Buddha Akshobhya, the Unshakable, embodies the indestructability of enlightenment. He has the power to transform the evils of hate and anger into the wisdom of equanimity. His right hand is performing the earth witness gesture, his left hand in his lap the gesture of meditation. Transcendental Buddhas are manifestations of the Adi-Buddha.

47 Tibet; 14th c.; metal, silver, semi-precious stones; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13881

Transcendental Buddha Vairocana

Buddha Vairocana, the Shining One, embodies omniscience. He has the power to transform the evils of ignorance and illusion into the wisdom of insight. His hands are showing the gesture of highest wisdom (bodhyangi mudra) as a sign of enlightenment. Unlike human Buddhas, Transcendental Buddhas wear precious garments, a five-petalled crown, and further jewellery.

48 Tibet; 14th/15th c.; metal, gilded, pigments, semi-precious stones; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13879

Transcendental Buddha Amoghasiddhi

Buddha Amoghasiddhi is seated on a lotus throne surrounded by eight bodhisattvas. He is wearing a crown and jewellery, attributes of a Transcendental Buddha. To his right is Maitreya in the shape of a bodhisattva, holding a vessel with the nectar of immortality. Opposite him is the bodhisattva Padmapani holding a lotus blossom and a pearl.

49 Tibet; 13th c.; linen, gouache, brocade, wood, leather, silk; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13646

Buddha Shakyamuni

Buddha Shakyamuni is seated on a lotus throne borne by snow lions. In his left hand he is holding an alms bowl, marking him as the founder of a monastic order. His right hand is performing the earth witness gesture. The wheel with eight spokes before him signifies the Buddhist teachings. Next to the throne are his pupils Shariputra and Maudgalyayana, representing the Buddhist community. The Buddha, his teachings, and the Buddhist community are referred to as triratna, the Three Jewels.

50 Tibet; 19th c.; linen, gouache, brocade, wood, leather, metal; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13650

The Buddhas of the Three Ages

The Buddhas of the past, present, and future stand for the eternal validity of the Buddhist teachings. At centre, Buddha Shakyamuni is seated performing his typical earth witness gesture. In his left hand he is holding an alms bowl, with the world-mountain as a sign of his universal rule. In the top left-hand corner, we see his predecessor, Buddha Dipankara, who lit the light of knowledge before him. His right hand is raised in the gesture of teaching. At the top right is Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future. The gesture of his hand indicates that he will restart the Wheel of Law.

51 Tibet; 19th c.; linen, gouache, brocade; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13648

Ushnishavijaya

Ushnishavijaya is the female guardian of the Buddha wisdom, which is seated in the protuberance on the crown of the head (ushnisha) of all Buddhas. With her eight hands she is performing the gestures of teaching, generosity, and encouragement. In addition, she is shown with various attributes, including a diamond sceptre that stands for the lucid quality of knowledge, and over her right shoulder a figure of Buddha Amitabha. The vase in front of her belly contains the nectar of immortality.

52 Tibet; 19th c.; metal, fire-gilded; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13956

Adi-Buddha Vajrasattva

Buddha Vajrasattva, the Diamond Being, represents the untainted purity and consistency of the highest Buddha wisdom. In his hands he is holding a diamond sceptre and a bell. These attributes stand for male and female cosmic energy as well as for wisdom and the path to ultimate insight. erfahrbar.

53 Tibet; 17th c.; metal, pigments, semi-precious stones; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13878

Adi-Buddha Vajradhara

Buddha Vajradhara, the Diamond Bearer, is seated on a throne borne by eight lions. He embodies the diamond-like, indestructible nature of all Buddhist teachings. In his hands he is holding a diamond sceptre and a bell. Adi-Buddhas represent the ultimate reality, which is only experienced at the moment of awakening.

54 Tibet; 16th c.; metal, pigments, semi-precious stones; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13883

Buddha Maitreya

Buddha Maitreya is the Buddha of the Future and the embodiment of all-embracing love. Just like the historical Buddha Shakyamuni he will make his appearance as a teacher and once more voice the Buddhist teachings, as indicated by the gesture of the turning of the Wheel of Law (dharmacakrapravartana mudra). He is the only one seated in a posture with both feet touching the ground.

55 India; 9th/10th c.; metal, silver; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13895

Buddha Nageshvararaja

The Buddha as the king of serpents is enthroned on seven snakes that rise up behind him and once formed a baldachin over his head. The image bears evidence of the integration of local narratives and meanings into the Buddhist teachings. Thus, for instance, Buddha

Nageshvararaja commands the spiritual power to awaken the kundalini energy imagined as a coiled snake for the purpose of attaining enlightenment.

56 Tibet; 16th c.; metal, pigments; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13899

The Buddha displaying the gesture of meditation

Many Buddhas are shown performing the gesture of meditation (dhyana mudra) where the right hand rests on the left, indicating the merging of dualities. The right hand stands for the male principle in the cosmos, the left hand for the female principle.

57 China; undated; metal, traces of gilding, pigments; collected by H. Burckhardt-Burckhardt, bequest in 1923, IId 1285

Buddha Shakyamuni displaying the gesture of teaching

Gestures are called mudras and assigned symbolic significance: in the gesture of teaching and discussion (vitarka mudra), the middle finger and the thumb of the right hand touch.

58 China; undated; metal; unknown collector, purchased in 1908, IId 433

The Buddha with the gesture of meditation

59 China; undated; wood, traces of gilding; Basel Mission collection, gifted in 2015, IId 8937

Standing Buddha

60 China; undated; wood; collected by J. Eggmann, gifted in 2003, IId 14762

Buddha Shakyamuni

In his hands, which are folded in meditation, Buddha Shakyamuni either holds a stylized alms bowl that marks him as a founder of a monastic order, or the Jewel of Teaching, which makes all wishes come true.

61 Lalitpur, Nepal; undated; metal, gilded, pigments; collected by W. Rothpletz, acquired by bequest in 1980, IIa 7850

Buddha Amitabha

In Japan, Buddha Amitabha is referred to as Amida Nyorai; he is particularly popular in East Asia. He is the Buddha of Infinite Light and all-encompassing love who supports all beings on the path to enlightenment. Adherents invoke him with the wish to be reborn in his Pure Land.

62 Japan; undated; wood, gilded; collected by W. Kumm, gifted in 2009, IId 14848

The Buddhist Community – Sangha

The first orders of monks and nuns were established already during the lifetime of Buddha Shakyamuni. Later, the community of all Buddhists came to be referred to as sangha. The Buddhist teachings avoid exclusion in any form which means they are open to all. Tutoring was offered in the local languages and not, as in other Indian religions, in a ritual language such as Pali or Sanskrit.

The monastic life of monks and nuns form a cornerstone of Buddhism. To this day, these communities are key to the practice, support, and spread of the Buddhist teachings. They are supported by Buddhist laymen and women who, depending on region, contribute to the sustenance of these religious communities or even enter an order for a limited period of time.

Spiritual practice offers monks, nuns, and laypersons different ways of inner development. Reciting mantras, meditation, visualizing and venerating divine beings, pilgrimages, and donations provide followers the opportunity of gaining spiritual merit. All these practices are geared to end suffering and attain enlightenment, bodhi.

Offerings and ritual paraphernalia reflect religious practices in all their diversity. They provide the means to perform rituals independent of time and place, and convey key concepts of the Buddhist teachings.

Two temple bells

The sound of bells in temples and monasteries herald the opening of the gates in the morning and the start of ceremonies. The large and heavy bells are sounded by monks and nuns with the aid of a mallet. The bells' ephemeral sound signifies transience.

- 63 China; Qing dynasty (1644-1911); metal; on permanent loan from Museum BL 1998, IId 13420
64 China; before 1873; metal; unknown collector, gifted in 1873, IId 41

Three conches

The sound of the conch calls monks and nuns to prayer. Its sound spreads across the universe like the Buddha's words and is believed to awaken people from the slumber of ignorance. The conch is one of the Eight Auspicious Symbols of Buddhism. It is featured on the instrument set in silver together with the other symbols: lotus blossom, wheel, endless knot, parasol, victory banner, treasure vase, and a pair of fish.

- 65 Japan; before 1910; conch shell, metal, textile; collected by W. Baader-Meyer, gifted in 1910, IId 643
66 Uva, Sri Lanka; undated; conch shell; collected by F. und P. Sarasin, gifted in 1902, IIa 330
67 Tibet; undated; conch shell, silver, coral, turquoise; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14352

Diamond sceptre and bell

Diamond sceptre and bell are part of many Tantric rituals and ceremonies. The bell called ghanta is held in the left hand, the diamond sceptre known as vajra in the right. The bell stands for female cosmic energy and wisdom, the sceptre for male energies and the indestructability of the Buddhist teachings.

- 68 Tibet; undated; metal, textile; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14093.01-05

Temple bells from Myanmar

- 69 Myanmar; undated; metal; collected by A. Buxtorf, gifted in 1904, IIb 53

Small hand cymbals

Small cymbals are used in private and tranquil rituals. Their high and bright sound has the quality of an offering. On travels, they are stowed away and carried in a small sachet.

- 70 Tibet; undated; metal, beads, leather, textile; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14083a-c

Hand drum

The two-headed drum damaru is used in prayer recitations. The sound is produced by two cloth balls striking the membrane when the drum is rotated energetically. It is normally used to appease wrathful tutelary deities. The five-coloured cloth band stands for the five cardinal points, that is, east, north, west, south, and centre.

- 71 Tibet; 19th/20th c.; wood, leather, silk; collected by M. Wagner, gifted in 1993, IId 11466

Slit gong

The Chinese term for slit gong is muyu. It means wooden fish and is derived from the instrument's form and material. Because fish have no eyelids and never sleep, they stand for spiritual alertness in Chan and Zen Buddhism. The gong's rhythmic sound often accompanies prayer recitations in temples.

72 China; undated; wood, pigments; collected by P. Sarasin, gifted in 1905, IId 411

Daruma

The monk Bodhidharma (440-528) is regarded as the founder of Chan and Zen Buddhism, two schools in the Mahayana tradition of East Asia. In Japan, Bodhidharma goes by the name of Daruma. He is often depicted without arms and legs because, according to legend, he meditated for so long that his extremities gradually withered away. He is revered for his endurance and steadfastness.

73 Japan; probably 19th c.; wood, pigments; collected by A. Keller, gifted in 1944, IId 2807

Budai

The figure of Budai traces back to the legend of the mendicant monk Qici who handed out presents to children and the poor although being poor himself. In China he is revered as a manifestation of Buddha Maitreya. The image of the smiling, pot-bellied monk is particularly popular as talisman in China and Japan.

74 China; undated; porcelain, pigments; Basel Mission collection, gifted in 2015, IId 8866

Four monks

In Buddhism, ignorance is considered the source of all suffering. In order to overcome ignorance and attain enlightenment, monks and nuns devote their entire life to meditation and the study of the Buddhist teachings. Renouncing material goods, alcohol, and drugs make up part of the monastic rules, as do a pledge to honesty and non-violence.

75 Tibet or Nepal; undated; metal, gilded; collected by M. Stampfli, purchased in 1933, IIb 583

76 China; undated; metal; unknown collector, IId 35

77 Myanmar; undated; wood, gilded; collected by W. Rothpletz, acquired by bequest in 1980, IIb 3459

78 Tibet; probably 19th c.; metal; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13990

Damarupa or Tilopa

Damarupa and Tilopa both rank as mahasiddhas, great Indian masters of Buddhist knowledge. In the raised right hand, they hold an hourglass drum which they use for reciting mantras, sacred phrases, and blessings. The skull bowl in the left hand and the triple-skull crown show them to be tantric masters.

79 Tibet; 19th c.; metal, fire-gilded, pigments, turquoise; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14003

Guru Padmasambhava

According to tradition, the scholar Padmasambhava (Born from a Lotus) lived in the eighth century. He introduced Buddhism to the countries of the Himalayas. Being a tantric master, he had the power to tame demons and recruit them for the Buddhist cause. In his left hand, Padmasambhava is holding a skull bowl filled with blood, in his right hand a diamond sceptre – the sign of supreme, unequivocal insight.

80 Tibet; 18th c.; wood, pigments; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14269a-d

Guru Padmasambhava and two consorts

The tantric master Padmasambhava is depicted here as the Invaluable Teacher. He is seated on a lotus blossom, accompanied by two of his consorts in wisdom: to his right, the Indian princess Mandarava, to his left, the Tibetan queen Yeshe Tsogyal. All three are shown holding a skull bowl filled with nectar, indicating that they are fully versed in the tantric teachings and no longer prone to taste the bitterness of death.

81 Tibet; 17th c.; metal; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14009

Milarepa, the mystic

Milarepa (1040-1123) led the life of a hermit and gained his meditative knowledge through song. He is revered as a mystic and poet to this day. He is recognizable by the gesture he is performing: a hand cupped to his ear in order to catch the sound of the Buddha's teachings.

82 Nepal; 18th c.; metal, traces of pigments; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14016

The scholar Phagmo Drupa

Phagmo Drupa (1110-1170) was an influential Buddhist scholar in Tibet. He spent a large part of his life in meditative contemplation. Here he is shown performing the earth witness gesture.

83 Tibet; 13th/14th c.; metal, pigments; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14035

The monastic founder Sakya Pandita

Abbot Sakya Pandita (1182-1251) followed the invitation of the Mongolian prince Godan Khan and spent some time living at his court. Together with his nephew he developed a script that allowed translating Buddhist texts into the Mongolian language. Here Sakya Pandita is flanked by two lotus blossoms bearing the attributes Flaming Sword and Book of Sutras; they mark him out as the re-embodiment of Bodhisattva Manjushri.

84 Tibet, 15th c., metal; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14025

The monastic founder Tsongkhapa

The Tibetan scholar Tsongkhapa (1357-1419) attempted to restore Buddhist teachings to their original form. He introduced strict monastic discipline and emphasized the significance of scholarliness as a path to liberation. Succession by means of conscious rebirth became institutionalized under Tsongkhapa. Among others, this led to the reincarnation lineage of which the present Dalai Lama is part.

85 Tibet; 19th c.; metal, fire-gilded, pigments; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14017

A monk as mountain warrior

In Japan, monks living a secluded life in the wilds are referred to as mountain warriors. They strive to attain Buddhahood in their lifetime by following a regime of strict ascetic and ritual practice. They often use their healing powers in support of the local people.

86 Japan; 18th c.; wood, gesso, *urushi* lacquer, gold leaf, metal; collected by I. A. Strohl, gifted in 1953, IId 4239

Three Japanese travel altars

These altars for Buddha Amitabha and Bodhisattva Kannon are styled after Japanese house altars. In Japan, these mobile shrines are called zushi. They are used for personal prayers while travelling.

87 Japan; 19th c.; wood, lacquer, pigments, gilded; collected by K. R. Hoffmann, bequest in 1944, IId 2811

88 Japan; 19th c.; wood, gilded; collected by A. Keller, gifted in 1976, IId 8742

89 Japan; 19th c.; wood, lacquer, pigments, gilded; Basel Mission collection, gifted in 2015, IId 9465

Three Tibetan travel altars

Small altars accompany travellers on their journeys or pilgrimages, or are kept at home where they are placed on the house altar. Inside they often contain the figure of a Buddha or bodhisattva which has been consecrated in a monastery. The front is commonly adorned with mythical animals or with the Eight Auspicious Symbols.

- 90 Tibet; 18th c. (Padmasambhava), undated (shrine); metal, gilded, clay, pigments; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14137a+b, IId 14268
- 91 Tibet; 14th c. (Buddha Shakyamuni), 19th c. (shrine); metal, silver, semi-precious stones; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14138.01+02
- 92 Tibet; undated (shrine & deity); metal, silver, gilded; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14141.01+02

Amulets

Small amulets are worn on or under one's clothes. In Tibetan they are called ga'u. They contain consecrated or otherwise powerful items such as texts with votive offerings. They protect their owners from all kinds of danger and misfortune.

- 93 Tibet; undated; metal; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14148
- 94 Tibet; 19th/20th c.; metal; collected by E. Handschin, gifted in 1994, IId 3619
- 95 Tibet; 19th/20th c.; silver, turquoise; collected by M. Wagner, gifted in 1993, IId 11490

Prayer wheels

Prayer wheels are among the ritual items most often used by Tibetan men and women. Inside, the cylinders contain prayers printed on strips of paper. By turning the wheel clockwise, the prayers are activated. People do this not only for their own good but for the welfare of all living beings.

- 96 Tibet; undated; metal, wood, paper, cloth; collected by J. Eggmann, gifted in 2003, IId 14755
- 97 Tibet; 19th/20th c.; metal, wood, leather, mollusc shell, paper, cotton; collected by M. Wagner, gifted in 1993, IId 11469
- 98 Tibet; undated; metal, silver, wood; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14149
- 99 Tibet; undated; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14150.01
- 100 India or Nepal; undated; metal, turquoise, textile, paper; collected by A. Buxtorf, gifted in 1904, IId 82

Buddha Maitreya

Buddha Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future, has been popular in modern Myanmar since the ninth century. On this votive tablet, he is forming with his hands the gesture of the turning of the wheel. His throne is surrounded by reliquary shrines. The tablet has the shape of a leaf of the tree under which Buddha Shakyamuni was awakened to ultimate insight.

- 101 Bagan, Myanmar; probably 12th c.; clay; collected by R. Vogel-Sarasin, gifted in 1900, IId 34

The Buddhas of the Three Ages

The Buddhas of the Three Ages have been a popular motif on votive panels in Southeast Asia since about the eleventh century: it shows Shakyamuni, his predecessor Dipankara, and the future Buddha Maitreya. They express the timeless nature of the Buddhist teachings.

- 102 Chiang Mai, Thailand; undated; clay, collected by R. Eisenhofer, purchased in 1930, IId 312

Buddha Shakyamuni as a teacher

Representations of Buddha Shakyamuni usually serve as remembrance to him and his teachings. This votive tablet is encircled by monks. Probably he is shown flanked by his two favourite pupils, Shariputra and Maudgalyayana.

- 103 Thailand; undated; clay; collected by F. Sarasin und R. Iselin, gifted in 1932, IId 324

Buddha Shakyamuni

At the centre of this votive tablet, Buddha Shakyamuni is shown seated in the temple of Bodhgaya, India, performing the earth witness gesture. The temple is encircled by branches of the very tree under which he attained enlightenment. Above his head is an parasol with fluttering banners. The inscription on the lower margin is probably a Buddhist profession of faith.

104 Bagan, Myanmar; probably 12th c.; clay, collected by R. Vogel-Sarasin, gifted in 1900, I Ib 35

Votive tablet with the striding Buddha

Images of the striding Buddha have been a peculiarity of the art of Thailand since around the thirteenth century. One can interpret it to represent either an alms procession or the years of wandering to which the Buddha set out on for the purpose of spreading his teachings after attaining enlightenment.

105 Thailand; undated; metal; unknown collector, purchased in 1941, I Ib 1525

Votive offerings in the shape of stupas

Votive offerings in the shape of stupas are particularly valuable. Often the ashes of deceased people or medicine substances are mixed in with the clay. They are usually undecorated and occasionally used to embellish monumental shrines.

106 Indonesia; 8th/9th c.; clay; collected by A. Bühler and E. Sutter, gifted in 1950, I Ic 13496

107 Tibet; undated; clay; collected by P. Wirz, on permanent loan from FMB, 1939, I Ib 1445

Moulds for making votive tablets

Votive tablets made of fired clay are called thsa-thsa in Tibet. The tablets are formed with the aid of wooden or metal moulds and often painted or gilded after drying. The work is accompanied by prayers and regarded as spiritually meritorious. The tablets are to be found on altars, in monasteries, or at sacred sites.

108 Tibet; undated; metal, wood; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, I Id 14156

Votive tablet with Buddhas and divinities

On this votive tablet, Jambhala, the god of wealth, is featured at the centre, flanked by Buddha Shakyamuni and Buddha Amithaba. Above are the Buddhas of the Three Ages. Below, to the left and right, two Buddhist abbots are depicted, and between them Prajnaparamita, the guardian of the Buddha wisdom. The inside of the frame is inscribed with the mantra “om mani padme hum”.

109 Tibet; undated; clay, wood, pigments, gilded; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, I Id 14338

Bodhisattva Sita Tara

The lotus-leaf-shaped votive tablet features the White Tara and her twenty most significant manifestations, ranging from peaceful to wrathful. Sita Tara accompanies those in search of liberation and supports them on their journey through numerous rebirths.

110 Tibet; undated; clay, pigments, gilded; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, I Id 14336

Buddha Shakyamuni in meditation

111 Thailand; undated; clay, pigments; collected by F. Sarasin and R. Iselin, gifted in 1932, I Ib 325

Buddha Simhasvara

In Mahayana Buddhism, it is assumed that up to a thousand Buddhas are to be born in the course of this aeon. The magnificent votive tablet shows Buddha Simhasvara. He is believed

to be the 843th Buddha who is destined to proclaim the Buddhist teachings once more, but only in the distant future.

112 Tibet; 18th c.; clay, pigments, gilded; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14334

Thsa-thsas displaying Buddha representations

113 Tibet; undated; clay, pigments; collected by P. Wirz, on permanent loan from FMB, 1939, IId 1441

114 Tibet; undated; clay, pigments; collected by P. Wirz, on permanent loan from FMB, 1939, IId 1427

For a long life

This votive tablet features at the top Amitayus, at bottom right Ushnishavijaya, and at bottom left Sita Tara. Grouped around a shrine flanked by the sun and the moon, they represent longevity. The tablet's shape is reminiscent of the Three Jewels: the Buddha, his teachings, and the Buddhist community.

115 Tibet; undated; clay, pigments; collected by P. Wirz, purchased in 1939, IId 1519

Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara

The four-armed Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara is invoked in ritual and meditative practices in search of support on the path to enlightenment.

116 Tibet; undated; clay, pigments; collected by P. Wirz, on permanent loan from FMB, 1939, IId 1430

The scholar Tsongkhapa

Not only Buddhas and bodhisattvas are featured on clay votive tablets but also important spiritual masters. The headgear and attributes of this monk suggest that we are dealing with the scholar Tsongkhapa.

117 Tibet; probably 19th c.; clay, paint residues; collected by P. Wirz, purchased in 1939, IId 1520

Compassionate Wisdom — Bodhisattvis & Bodhisattvas

The path to Buddhahood is a long one. Countless rebirths are experienced before the achievement of bodhi, the awakening to supreme knowledge. Buddhists believe a cycle of rebirths shapes the lives of all beings. The actions and ethical attitude of individuals in a previous life – karma – determine the type of rebirth they experience. Ultimately, the goal is to break free from the cycle of rebirths known as samsara.

Both the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions of Buddhism hold that practitioners are not alone on their spiritual path. They are aided by “enlightened beings” who take on either human form or appear as visions during the practice of meditation.

Bodhisattvis and Bodhisattvas are characterized by wisdom, generosity, patience, and boundless compassion. They forgo the opportunity to achieve nirvana and instead experience countless rebirths so that they can aid other beings still striving for supreme knowledge. As a sign of their affinity with all beings and as a consequence of their previous good deeds and moral conduct, their karma, bodhisattvis and bodhisattvas are usually portrayed as splendidly clad and bejewelled figures. Depending on their function, they can appear either in a peaceful or a wrathful form.

Taras and dakinis are female bodhisattvis, who support those on the path to spiritual illumination. They are invoked in a crisis and offer protection from all kinds of danger. Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri and Vajrapani are among the best-known male bodhisattvas.

Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara as Kannon

Kannon Bosatsu is the name of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara in Japanese. His full name is Kanzeon Bosatsu, He Who Hears the World's Sounds. To help as many individuals as possible and in any type of crisis, Kannon appears in up to 33 different forms, both male and female.

118 Japan; 18th/19th c.; metal; collected by E. Hoffmann, acquired by bequest in 1984, IId 10473

Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara as Guanyin

Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara is known as Guanyin in China, and appears there either in male or female form, or can combine both male and female features. Guanyin is one of the main bodhisattvas, personifies universal compassion, and is invoked by those in danger.

119 China; 13th/14th c.; wood, stone, pigment, glass; collected by M. Hartmann, gifted in 1949, IId 3585

Bodhisattva Guanyin

120 China; undated; gilded metal; collected by A. Krayer-Förster, gifted in 1864, IId 12a

Bodhisattvi Guanyin

As Mahayana Buddhism spread across East Asia, male and female representations of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara merged. During the 13th/14th century, Guanyin was increasingly portrayed as female.

121 China; undated; metal, gilded; collected by P. Wirz, purchased in 1937, IId 1561

Bodhisattvi Guanyin

122 China; undated; metal, gilded; collected by R. Iselin, acquired by bequest in 1963, IId 5877

Bodhisattvi Guanyin

123 New York, USA; undated; porcelain, pigments; collected by S. Lovász and F. Jenni, purchased in 2010, IId 15019

124 China; undated; porcelain; collected by H. M. Roth, gifted in 1938, IId 1643

Bodhisattvi Guanyin

125 China; undated; metal; collected by P. Wirz, purchased in 1936, IId 1555

Dakini Vajravarahi

Dakinis, which literally means Sky Dancer, are female deities and guides on the path to liberation. They embody the female Buddha qualities of wisdom and insight. They appear to practitioners of meditation in visions to offer advice or protection. Identified by the sow's head behind her right ear, Vajravarahi stands in a dancing posture upon a human corpse lying within a sun disk.

126 Tibet; 18th c.; cotton cloth, gouache, brocade; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13732

Dakini Simhamukha

Lion-headed Simhamukha is surrounded by flames as an expression of her fury that consumes ignorance and passion. Her crown of skulls and bone jewellery pieces serves as reminder of the transience of life. Her nudity represents the naked truth; the dark colouring of her body symbolizes the emptiness of all phenomena. The sceptre resting in the crook of her arm indicates her supernatural powers. She dances upon a corpse, the symbol of ignorance.

127 Tibet; 19th c.; cotton cloth, gouache, brocade; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13726

Dakini Kurukulla

Brilliantly red Kurukulla holds great appeal for those filled with passion. By means of meditation it can transmute into wisdom. Kurukulla's red body alludes to her close association with Buddha Amithaba, who sits enthroned above her flaming aureole. Kurukulla has the ability to appease stubborn opponents.

128 Nepal; 19th c.; cotton cloth, gouache, brocade; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13729

Bodhisattvi Sita Tara

129 China or Tibet; undated; plaster, pigments; collected by Naas, gifted in 1901, IId 370

130 Tibet; 16th c.; sandalwood, traces of gilding, pigments; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14267

Bodhisattvi Sita Tara

Sita Tara, or White Tara, sprang from the tears of Avalokiteshvara and is considered to be the manifestation of his compassion. She is the patroness of healing of the sick and a symbol of purity. In addition to her natural eyes, she has five others, one each on her forehead, the palms of her hands, and the soles of her feet. These eyes help her to see and ease the suffering of all beings.

131 Tibet; 19th c.; metal, fire-gilded, pigments, turquoise, beads; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13957

Bodhisattvi Prajnaparamita

Bodhisattva Prajnaparamita is the personification of the Buddhist writings that Buddha Shakyamuni entrusted to the care of nagas, serpent-like divinities. His writings would be discovered only when the time was ripe for them. Legend has it that the nagas presented the Prajnaparamita sutras, the Perfection of Insight, to the Indian scholar Nagarjuna.

132 Tibet; 14th c.; metal, traces of fire-gilding; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13955

Bodhisattvi Shyama Tara

Shyama Tara, or Green Tara, bears the signs of Buddhahood on her forehead, palms, and soles. She is the personification of compassion who offers assistance in any situation, and is believed to have evolved from a star by which travellers along the Silk Roads took their bearings. Now she guides those seeking spiritual enlightenment.

133 Tibet; 14th/15th c.; metal, gilded, silver, turquoise; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13959

Bodhisattvi Shyama Tara

Tradition holds that Shyama Tara was a committed Buddhist. It was suggested to her that she should strive to be reborn as a man as only a man could become a Buddha, she was told. Tara refused, however, and vowed to perpetuate her female incarnation until all beings achieve liberation.

134 Nepal; undated; metal; collected by W. Rothpletz, acquired by bequest in 1980, IIa 7849

Bodhisattva Padmapani

Bodhisattva Padmapani holds a ewer in his right hand, a lotus flower in his left. The animals surrounding him — an elephant, a peacock, a lion, a sea monster, and a snake-devouring eagle — are intended to symbolize power and triumph over negative forces.

135 Tibet; 11th/12th c.; metal; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13918

Bodhisattva Padmapani

136 Tibet; probably 11th c.; metal; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13918

Bodhisattva Vajrapani

Vajrapani, the bearer of the diamond sceptre, is among the oldest of bodhisattvas. He is the personification of the energy of all Buddhas. In Tibet, he is often portrayed in wrathful form and is considered to be the guardian of the truth of Buddhist teaching. The serpents around him signify his fearlessness.

137 Tibet; 12th/13th c.; metal; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13937

Bodhisattvas Manjushri, Padmapani, Vajrapani

The bodhisattvas Manjushri, the Gentle Prince, Padmapani, The Lotos Bearer, and Vajrapani, the Bearer of the Diamond Sceptre, are often portrayed together. They personify the three great virtues of Mahayana Buddhism: love and compassion; wisdom and insight; will and energy.

138 Tibet; 12th c.; metal, pigments; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13933

Bodhisattva Manjushri

Bodhisattva Manjushri is typically shown wielding a sword with which he dispels not only the clouds of ignorance and the fog of self-delusion, but also drives out demons and ushers in the power of insight.

139 India; 12th/13th c.; metal; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13911

Bodhisattva Manjushri performing the gesture of teaching

140 Tibet; 15th c.; metal, pigments; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13914

Bodhisattva Manjushri

Vagishvara-Manjushri, distinguished by his mastery of speech, is the bodhisattva of wisdom. The patron of scholars and learners, he offers them inspiration and insight. In relaxed pose, he is enthroned upon a solar disc and a lotus. The text of the Perfection of Wisdom rests upon a lotus flower above his left shoulder.

141 India; 12th c.; metal; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13910

Bodhisattva Maitreya

Bodhisattva Maitreya, the Loving Kindness, is the Buddha of the future, as indicated by the stupa in his crown. His right hand is raised in the gesture of discussion and transmission of Buddhist teaching (vitarka mudra). In his left hand he holds a lotus flower upon which rests a vessel containing the nectar of longevity.

142 Tibet; 12th c.; metal; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13929

Eleven-headed Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara

Avalokiteshvara, He who looks down in compassion, is the best-known bodhisattva. He personifies universal compassion. Legend has it that Avalokiteshvara was so shaken by the suffering he saw in the world that his head burst into a thousand pieces. His spiritual father Buddha Amitabha re-assembled the pieces so as to produce ten heads, upon which he placed his own head. With so many eyes, eleven-headed Avalokiteshvara is able to see all suffering and offer assistance.

143 Tibet; 15th/16th c.; metal, traces of pigment; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13927

Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara

Sadaksari-Avalokiteshvara is the Lord of the Six Syllables: om mani padme hum. This mantra is chanted in Tibet to honour him and to request his assistance. One pair of hands performs the gesture of greeting (anjali mudra) with which he appeals to all Buddhas to accompany beings on their path to liberation. A second pair of hands holds a rosary that represents limitless love and compassion, as well as a lotus flower as the symbol of his purity.

144 Tibet; 14th c.; wood, pigments; collected by G.-W. Essen, 1998, IId 14274

Bodhisattva

This bodhisattva's face and body have been rubbed away. The spiritual energy of sacred figures "rubs off" on devotees who touch them. The pose and attributes suggest this was originally a representation of a four-armed Avalokiteshvara.

145 India; undated; metal; collected by W. Kumm, gifted in 2009, IId 14831

Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara

146 China or Tibet; undated; metal; collected by A. Kraye-Förster, gifted in 1864, IId 268

Thousand-armed Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara

In his manifestation as Sahasrabhuja-Lokeshvara, Avalokiteshvara has one thousand arms and eleven heads. With eyes in the palms of his hands, he is able to see all human suffering. In front of his breast, he clasps the wish-fulfilling jewel. He also holds the Wheel of the Law and a vessel containing the nectar of longevity. His bow and arrow symbolize meditation and wisdom; the rosary and lotus flower indicate his spiritual illumination. Sword-wielding Manjushri and Vajrapani bearing the diamond sceptre stand either side of him.

147 Tibet; 19th c.; clay, pigments; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14330

Eleven-headed Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara

Avalokiteshvara holds several attributes, including a vessel containing the nectar of longevity, various weapons, a begging bowl, lotus flowers, and a representation of Buddha Amitabha. His front hands are held together in a gesture of prayer.

148 India; 11th c.; metal; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13928

Bodhisattva Amoghapasha

Amoghapasha-Lokeshvara, He whose Noose is Unfailing, is an eight-armed manifestation of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. Using the noose in one of his right hands, he captures those who are undecided, and guides them towards spiritual awakening; moreover, he catches demons so as to prevent them from causing harm. One hand is raised in the gesture that communicates protection, while another performs the gesture of generosity.

149 Nepal; 15th/16th c. (?); stone; collected by J. Eggmann, gifted in 2003, IIa 11343

The Universal Ruler — Chakravartin

Religious systems are variously associated with social and political hierarchies and power structures. It was prophesied that Prince Siddhartha Gautama would become a chakravartin, a ruler who would set in motion the wheel of a universal sovereign. In defiance of his family's wishes, he chose to follow a spiritual path, and went on to become the Buddha, the Awakened One.

The life of the historical Buddha was shaped by material austerity and withdrawal from politics. Nevertheless, without the support of Indian princes and kings, his teachings would not have circulated. In return, rulers used Buddhism as a form of legitimisation of their secular power, symbolized by the wheel, chakra, that represents Buddhist teachings and ideas of kingship.

The association between secular and spiritual power is illustrated by the example of Tibet: Songsten Gampo, a patron of Buddhism in the eighth century, is now considered to be the country's first dharma-rajā, or one who rules in accordance with Buddhist principles. Starting in the 13th century, a number of Tibet's spiritual rulers were also politicians with military power. With the help of Mongol khans and Chinese emperors, they were able to maintain their authority into the 18th century.

The social tensions and conflicts that arise from the close association between religion and politics are revealed by contemporary artists in various ways.

The work of Sonam Dolma Brauen examines the Buddhist ideal of non-violence and the consequences of violence as well as patriarchal power structures and the status of women.

The life of Buddha Shakyamuni

150 Tibet; 18th c.; canvas, gouache, wood, metal, silk, cotton; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13652

Birth of the Buddha

Siddhartha Gautama, who would later be known as Buddha Shakyamuni, is believed to have lived in the fifth century BCE. Legend has it that at Lumbini his mother Queen Maya gave birth to him from her right side when she was travelling to her parents' home. Already able to speak and walk, the newborn was welcomed by the gods Indra and Brahma who presented him with a white cloth.

Propheesied to become a world ruler

Amid palatial surroundings, Siddhartha sits on his mother's lap. Asita, an Indian hermit, arrives and recognizes the child's special qualities. The hermit prophesies that the child will become a world ruler, a chakravartin, a king who will rule in harmony with religious laws for the benefit of all humankind.

Educating a young prince

The son of a royal family, young Siddhartha Gautama received a good education and practised sports. Here he is shown in the company of his cousins practising archery, swimming, and encountering some wild elephants that he is able to pacify.

Four excursions

Cosseted and shielded from misery, the prince out of curiosity one day left the palace in his chariot. His first encounter was with a woman and her newborn child; next he encountered a frail old man; then he crossed the path of someone suffering illness; and, finally, he saw his first corpse. These encounters showed him that suffering was a prevalent aspect of life.

The first sermon

Buddha Shakyamuni is shown here in the centre in his role as teacher. When he achieves enlightenment, the gods Indra and Brahma appear by Buddha's throne and ask him to share his message with all beings from a sense of compassion. With his gesture, he symbolically sets in motion the Wheel of the Law, and proclaims the Four Noble Truths

about suffering and its cessation. To this day, they remain the foundational propositions of Buddhism.

Escape from the royal palace

Paintings showing episodes from the life of the historical Buddha are found in many temples and monasteries. The four shown here are part of a series of fourteen from the Dao Khanong temple in Bangkok.

On one of his excursions from the palace, Prince Siddhartha Gautama meets a monk who is content to lead an ascetic life. The encounter strengthens Siddhartha in his resolve to turn his back on life at his father's court and to leave his family. That very night, veiled in cloud and accompanied by only a few servants, he flees the palace on his favourite horse. This marks the beginning of his spiritual quest at the end of which he will become the Buddha, the Awakened One.

151 Dao Khanong temple, Thon Buri, Thailand; undated; teak, pigments; collected by T. Meier, purchased in 1962, Iib 2124

Spiritual awakening

Siddhartha Gautama sits in lengthy meditation. As he does so, the demon king Mara attempts to prevent Siddhartha's spiritual awakening by having his army assail him, and by calling on the seductive daughter of the god of love, Kama, to test him. Siddhartha is unflinching in his meditation, however, and achieves spiritual awakening. By touching the earth with the extended fingers of his right hand (the gesture of bhumisparsha mudra), he asks the earth to witness his Buddhahood.

152 Dao Khanong temple, Thon Buri, Thailand; undated; teak, pigments; collected by T. Meier, purchased in 1962, Iib 2126

Begging for alms

Many people followed Buddha Shakyamuni and his teaching even during his lifetime, so he felt prompted to establish communities of monks and nuns. The large alms bowl marks the Buddha out as the head of the order. Helped by monks, he is seen accepting alms and blessing those who give them. Renunciation of possessions, celibacy, and itinerant wandering are still elements of monastic rules. In many Southeast Asian countries, begging for alms remains a daily part of monastic life.

153 Dao Khanong temple, Thon Buri, Thailand; undated; teak, pigments; collected by T. Meier, purchased in 1962, Iib 2129

The Buddha's parinirvana

The Buddha's death and entry into parinirvana, the complete liberation, are depicted at left: with his head supported, he lies on one side, and serenely contemplates his end. His followers and companions take their leave of him. The interment of his ashes in a gold reliquary shrine is shown at right.

154 Dao Khanong temple, Thon Buri, Thailand; undated; teak, pigments; collected by T. Meier, purchased in 1962, Iib 2134

King Songtsen Gampo

Songtsen Gampo (reigned 617-649) unified Tibet. He was the first patron of Buddhism in the country, and was supported in his efforts by his two Buddhist wives, Bhrikuti, a Nepalese princess, and Wencheng, the niece of the Chinese emperor. Songtsen Gampo is credited with

introducing the writing system that permitted the translation of Indian Buddhist texts into Tibetan.

155 Tibet; 14th c.; metal, semi-precious stones, pigments; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14045

Symbols of rulership

The seven treasures of world rulership serve as the emblems of an ideal ruler. In the Buddhist tradition, they stand for the seven stages on the path to spiritual awakening: supreme mindfulness, supreme distinction of the nature of reality, supreme energy and effort, supreme joy, supreme mobility, supreme concentration, and supreme equanimity.

156 Tibet; undated; canvas, gouache; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14390a-g

Incarnation lineages record lines of reincarnated spiritual dignitaries. Tibet has known them since the thirteenth century. They served not only to ensure the unbroken transmission of spiritual knowledge, but also to concentrate political power in the country's monasteries. In the West, the most famous incarnation lineage is that of the Dalai Lamas, who are considered to be manifestations of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara.

The Mongol ruler Altan Khan conferred the honorific title of Dalai Lama on his spiritual teacher Sonam Gyatso in 1578. He in turn applied the title retrospectively to his two predecessors. The monk Tenzin Gyatso is the current incarnation as the fourteenth Dalai Lama and lives in the Indian town of Dharamsala.

The second Dalai Lama

Gendün Gyatso (1476-1542), the second Dalai Lama, is shown holding a Buddhist text while instructing two monks. During the lesson, a vision appears to him: a dakini, a guiding intermediary, appears before him and proffers a Tibetan manuscript.

Two scenes in the background depict an eleven-headed Avalokiteshvara and a crowned Buddha Shakyamuni in Lhasa's Jokhang Temple. In the presence of the second Dalai Lama and a gathering of monks, the Buddha statue prophesies its own rebirth.

157 Tibet; 19th c.; canvas, gouache, wood, metal, brocade, silk, leather; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13815

The fifth Dalai Lama

Ngawang Lobzang Gyatso (1617-1682), the Great Fifth, was descended from a noble Tibetan family and was immensely influential as a spiritual teacher. The Mongol ruler Güshi Khan acted as benefactor to the youngster who would become the fifth Dalai Lama, and in 1642 installed him as the country's absolute leader. Clever political moves ensured the Dalai Lama also secured the support of the Chinese emperor Shunzhi.

Construction of the Potala Palace in Lhasa started under the fifth Dalai Lama, and was completed only after his death. The palace was the seat of the Dalai Lamas and the Tibetan government until the fourteenth Dalai Lama fled the country in 1959.

158 Tibet; 18th c.; textile, wood, metal, leather; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13816

The eighth Dalai Lama

The tenure of the eighth Dalai Lama, Jampal Gyatso (1758-1804), was shaped by the political strife between the Himalayan kingdoms and the Chinese Qing dynasty's expansionary policy. Closer relations developed between Tibet and China, whose influence on Tibetan politics increased.

Here the eighth Dalai Lama performs the gesture of teaching. Symbolizing spiritual purity and wisdom, a Buddhist manuscript rests upon a lotus blossom behind his right shoulder. The wheel in his left hand identifies him as a religious leader.

159 Tibet; early 19th c.; canvas, silk, brass, wood, leather, pigments; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13820

Buddhist teachings — Dharma

There is the truth of suffering,
the truth of the cause of suffering,
the truth of the end of suffering,
and the truth of the path that leads to the end of suffering.
(Four Noble Truths, Buddha Shakyamuni)

Theravada Buddhism, the Way of the Elders, requires followers to realize Buddhahood through their own efforts. Renunciation of possessions, celibacy, and meditation are central features of its practice. The traditional path to spiritual awakening is followed by the monastic orders of monks and nuns known as sangha.

To this day, Theravada remains founded on the Pali canon, the earliest extant collection of the Buddha's teachings. They were written down on palm leaves in Sri Lanka during the first century BCE. The canon is divided into monastic rules, vinaya, discourses, sutras, and philosophical commentary, abhidharma.

Mahayana Buddhism, the Great Vehicle, became established in Central and East Asia. In it, older Buddhist concepts and values were subject to re-interpretation. On the path to liberation, compassion, karuna, and wisdom, prajna, became key concepts. In the Mahayana tradition, every being bears the seed of enlightenment within itself, meaning that enlightenment is no longer the preserve of monks and nuns, and can be achieved by all. The Prajnaparamita sutra, the Perfection of Transcendent Wisdom, are among its most significant texts.

Vajrayana Buddhism, the Diamond Vehicle, is characterized by a wealth of complex rituals. Spiritual teachers are essential for instruction in them. The techniques they teach permit the realization of a higher state of consciousness. Tantric Buddhist literature contains texts on spiritual growth, medicine, and astrology.

Upper book cover

The inside of this book cover depicts five richly adorned bodhisattvas. Many Buddhist texts to this day are comprised of unbound leaves that are often protected between two elaborate book covers. The format of these books traces its origins back to Indian palm-leaf manuscripts. Depending on the size of a monastery, such texts are stored either beside the main altar or in a separate library.

160 Tibet; 14th c.; wood, pigments; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14364

Bottom book cover

The Eight Auspicious Symbols are contained in a treasure vase at the centre of this book cover. The eight stupas above them refer to locations of the Buddha's life. Also included

are the seven wish-fulfilling jewels associated with a universal ruler. The pages of text and the top book cover are lost.

161 Tibet; 15th c.; wood, gilded, pigments; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14361

Upper book cover

This carved book cover depicts Buddha Shakyamuni (at left), Prajnaparamita (in the middle), and Green Tara (at right). Each sits on a lion throne and is surrounded by an arch formed by mythical beasts.

162 Tibet; 15th/16th c.; wood, traces of gilding; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14367

The sermon of the Buddha

The Satipatthana Sutta is among the discourses given by the Buddha on the subject of the four foundations of mindfulness: contemplation of the body, of physical and mental sensations, of mind, and of phenomena respectively, as well as the arising and cessation of desire and aversion. This part of the Pali canon is recited on holidays and serves as a meditation guide.

163 Part of the Pali canon, Majjhima Nikaya (Middle-length discourses) 10; Kandy, Sri Lanka; undated; palm leaf, metal, cord; collected by P. und F. Sarasin, gifted in 1898, IIa 22

Buddhist text

This manuscript from Myanmar (former Burma) contains a dual-language Buddhist text; it is written in Pali and Shan.

164 Myanmar; early 20th c.; wood, parabaik paper, glass, gilded; collected by R. Bettenhausen, purchased in 1968, IIb 2610

Wheel of the Law with a pair of gazelles

The Wheel of the Law in Sanskrit is dharmacakra; it is found as an ornamental motif on many altars and monastery gates. Flanked by two gazelles, it recalls the first discourse given by the Buddha in the Deer Park at Sarnath. Symbolizing Buddhist teaching and the path that leads away from the painful cycle of rebirths, the wheel's eight spokes represent the Eightfold Path, which recommends moderation in lifestyle, moral conduct, and spiritual practice.

165 Tibet; 19th c.; silver, coral, turquoise; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14091
Tibet; undated; silver; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 13987.01+02

Initiation cards

Called tsagli in Tibetan, these initiation cards depict Indian scholars and yoga masters. The miniature paintings are used during initiation ceremonies. While reciting mantras, a spiritual teacher either places them one after the other upon the head of an initiand or in the initiand's hands.

166 Tibet; undated; canvas, gouache; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14388a-z

Illuminated dedication sheet

This Tibetan book is dedicated to Manjughosa, the bodhisattva of Enlightened Wisdom. The author of the text (now lost) is Baso Djedung Ngawang Konchog Nyima, a scholar of Tibetan Buddhism. A miniature representation of him in gold is seen at left; the miniature opposite is that of China's Jiaqing Emperor. An adherent of Tibetan Buddhism, he ruled from 1796 to 1820.

167 China; 19th c.; paper, silk, brocade, indigo, gold dust, pigments; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14379

Excerpt from the Diamond Sutra

The text is the fourth section of the Diamond Sutra, whose full title is the “Sutra of the Perfection of Wisdom that Cuts like a Diamond”. Written in the first century, it is one of the foremost texts of Mahayana Buddhism. The earliest extant printed version of it comes from Tibet and dates to the year 868. It deals with the concept of shunyata, the emptiness of all phenomena. In the form of a dialogue, Buddha Shakyamuni urges his followers to acknowledge the reality underlying earthly phenomena.

168 Thimphu, Bhutan; 19th/20th c.; paper, pigments; collected by A. Scheidegger, gifted in 1996, IId 13156

Buddhist manuscript

The inside of this carved (upper) book cover depicts the three bodhisattvas Manjushri, Padmapani, and Vajrapani. Miniatures decorate both title pages: Buddha Shakyamuni and Bodhisattva Manjushri on page one, the bodhisattvas Avalokiteshvara and Vajrapani on page two. An invocation of Bodhisattva Aryamanjushri, the text is written in verse form and contains the Buddha’s teaching on how to achieve transcendent wisdom.

169 Tibet; 15th c.; wood, paper, indigo, gold dust, pigments; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14375a-c

Buddhist manuscript

This Buddhist manuscript contains four different yet thematically linked discourses of the Buddha that were transmitted to him by different divinities. On the title page, Buddha Shakyamuni is seen at left; the embodiment of highest insight, the Bodhisattvi Prajnaparamita, is seen at right. The second page depicts the bodhisattvas Manjushri and Maitreya. The book covers are decorated with relief carvings of the Five Transcendent Buddhas.

170 Tibet; 16th c.; wood, paper, pigment; collected by G.-W. Essen, purchased in 1998, IId 14376

The Shikoku pilgrimage route in Japan

The island of Shikoku lies east of Kyushu and southwest of Osaka on the main island of Honshu to which it is linked by several bridges. There has been a pilgrimage route around Shikoku since the sixteenth century; it traces its history back to a monk called Kobo Daishi (774-835). Some 1,200 kilometres long, the circular route takes in 88 Buddhist temples. Pilgrims can also visit numerous Shinto shrines to pay homage to the natural forces.

The pilgrimage route became hugely popular in nineteenth-century Japan. Nowadays pilgrims from abroad also frequent the route. Many walkers don the traditional pilgrim’s garb of a white tunic, a conical bamboo hat, and a staff.

Letting go is a central focus of the pilgrimage. The aim is to leave behind one’s suffering, to clear the mind, and to achieve a higher state of consciousness. On their progress, pilgrims receive support from local residents in the form of small gifts, food, or shelter.

Pilgrim’s hat

Called sugegasa in Japanese, the pilgrim’s conical hat affords protection from the sun and rain, while the inscription wards off harm from every direction. The hat’s wide and low brim prevents distraction, allowing pilgrims to focus on their meditation. If need be, they can turn their hat over and use it as a basket.

171 Japan; 2019; bamboo, sedge, cotton, plastic, wire, ink; collected by R. Mathez, gifted in 2020, IId 15730

Pilgrim's staff and bell

Called kongozue in Japanese, the pilgrim's staff is said to represent the monk Kobo Daishi accompanying pilgrims on their progress. As such, it is treated with respect: at the end of each day's journey, it is carefully cleaned and stored safely for the night. When a pilgrim crosses a bridge, the staff is lifted up because Kobo Daishi might be asleep under the bridge and the sound of the staff striking it might wake him! To focus the pilgrim's attention on the present moment, a small bell is attached to the top of the staff.

172 Japan; 2019; wood, ink; collected by R. Mathez, gifted in 2020, IId 15736
Japan; 2019; metal, synthetic fibre, plastic; collected by R. Mathez, gifted in 2020, IId 15733

Pilgrim's booklet

At each of the 88 temples on the Shikoku pilgrimage route, pilgrims can have their pilgrim's booklet stamped and signed for a fee. The stamps confirm that a pilgrim has visited a temple and serve as proof of spiritual practice.

173 Ryozen-ji Temple; Shikoku, Japan; 2019; paper, ink, pigments; on loan from R. Mathez

Images from the Shikoku pilgrimage route

Regina and Christian Mathez took these photographs of the Shikoku pilgrimage route in autumn 2019.

174 All images © Christian Mathez, 2019

How about a bit of meditation?

Mindfulness exercises and meditation are becoming ever more popular, and have now even gone online. But just what is meditation exactly? And what is its appeal?

Meditation is a way of taking control of the mind. Those who meditate "listen in" on their bodily sensations and seek to develop awareness of them as a whole. Their aim is calmly to observe what is happening within them in the present moment without attempting to stop, change, or judge it.

Zazen is a sitting meditation technique in Japanese Zen Buddhism. Practitioners adopt an upright and stable posture. By focusing on their breathing, they can concentrate on the present moment and calm the stream of their thoughts. The peace of mind this produces allows them to become aware (albeit briefly) of their own Buddha nature. Why not give it a try?

Take a seat on one of the meditation benches. Place your hands on your thighs. Close your eyes and relax your face.

Let your breath flow gently and naturally. Try to release tension each time you breathe out. Follow your breath from your nose into your stomach and back. If your thoughts wander, gently re-focus your attention on breathing in and out.

"Breathing in, I calm body and mind. Breathing out, I smile." (Thich Nhat Hanh)

Works of contemporary artists on display

Buji

Sanae Sakamoto; 2016; Indian ink on hand-processed Japanese paper, purchased in 2020, IId 15759

The Japanese ideogram buji means “to accept”. Accepting is a prerequisite of becoming awakened, a first step to spiritual tranquility, inner peace, and freedom.

“The way it is, is good,
everything has its place, everything its time.”
(Koan of Rinzai)

Enso

Sanae Sakamoto; 2016; Indian ink on *fusuma* paper; purchased in 2020, IId 15758

This ink circle was made in a single, fluid brushstroke. Images produced in this way are an expression of spiritual practice. In the words of the artist:

“The circle is the symbol of completeness,
the infinity of the universe.
No beginning no end,
Unity and perfection.”

Scrumped

Seoungho Cho; 2016; Video, 17:52 min.; on loan from the artist

Buddhist rituals are complex and layered. Here rhythmic percussion and chanting soundtrack a succession of images of a winter landscape and monastery life. Alternating images of near and far, light and shade, warmth and cold convey the intimacy, intensity, and energy with which the rituals are charged. External perceptions and internal images blend in the interplay between soft and sharp focus.

“My intention with this video project is to produce a work of art using Buddhist rituals; it’s a work that is no more than the performance of the rituals themselves – it’s a visual meditation”, the South Korean video artist says.

Yishen 42

Sonam Dolma Brauen; 2015; acrylic on canvas; on loan from the artist

The word *yishen* in ancient Chinese means “to abandon one’s body”. It is the title of a series of abstract paintings on which the artist has worked since 2013. Taking her own experience of flight and homelessness as her starting point, she explores the despair and self-immolation of Tibetan monks and nuns. However, in the pictures it is not these terrible acts that are emphasized, but the “afterglow” and silence that followed. The paintings seek to counteract oblivion and remind us of Tibet’s difficult political situation.

Boomerang

Sonam Dolma Brauen; 2010; empty cartridges; on loan from the artist.

Non-violence towards all sentient beings is a core Buddhist principle.

“It is no secret that arms manufacturers very often sell weapons to countries and groups that are at war. In many cases, allies become enemies who turn their weapons on former friends. As a Buddhist, I believe in *karma*: we reap what we sow”, the artist says.

Boomerang implies that the violence we commit on others will find its way back to us.

Tower of Babel

Sonam Dolma Brauen; 2009; plaster, wood; on loan from the artist: www.sonambrauen.net

The artist’s inspiration was the biblical story of the pretensions to power and hubris of men. At first glance, we see a neat, ziggurat-like construction; on closer inspection, it turns out to be composed of plaster models of phalluses and cartridges. Here the artist’s intention is to challenge the power relations between genders, and patriarchal structures – including those in Buddhism.

My Father’s Death

Sonam Dolma Brauen; 2010; used monks’ robes, plaster; on loan from the artist

This installation consists of 49 folded used monks’ robes from Lhasa. For 49 days after a death, Tibetan Buddhists say prayers for the deceased.

At the centre of the installation there are nine white *thsa-thsas*, votive offerings made to look like reliquary caskets. To make and offer clay *thsa-thsas* is part of spiritual practice in Tibet, and the ashes of the person being mourned are often added to the clay mixture. The *tsha-tsha* model used by the artist is one of the few objects her family took with them when they fled Tibet.

This installation serves as a reminder of the artist’s father, a Buddhist monk. After leaving Tibet and working in road construction as an exile in India, he died when his daughter was aged six. At the same time, the installation gives physical form to the Buddhist concept of transience.

Shambala of Modern Times

Gonkar Gyatso; 2009; four-part Giclée print in silkscreen technique with gold and silver foil on paper; purchased in 2020; IId 15897

The work “Shambala of Modern Times” mirrors the growing popularity of Buddhism in the West and the transformation of the Buddha figure into an icon of pop culture. The Buddha head and the nimbus serve as projection surface for Tibetan and Western ideas and concepts. Or, as the artist puts it: “For me, the figure of a Buddha is a vessel.”

Gonkar Gyatso grew up in the Tibet Autonomous Region and studied classical Chinese and Tibetan painting in China, Tibet, and India, before moving to London in 1996. In his works, he processes the different cultural contexts that have shaped him and his life. He merges Tibetan and Chinese culture with emblems of pop culture and the iconography of modern, globalized consumer society.