

## Encountering Buddhism

**A Buddha is a very distinctive figure. Mind you, there are more than just the one Buddha. The exhibition “Enlightened – The Realm of the Buddhas” at the Museum der Kulturen Basel (from 20 November 2020 to 23 January 2022) highlights the diversity of Buddhism and presents objects that play a significant role in Buddhist practice.**

Buddhism has roughly 380 million followers today. Meditation and mindfulness are practised across the globe, including the digital world. In addition, one regularly comes across Buddha figures in living rooms, gardens, shopping centres, as well as wellness spas.

The exhibition “Enlightened – The Realm of the Buddhas” takes the popularity of this school of thought as the occasion to introduce visitors to the Buddha and his teachings. As the title of the show and the roughly 280 exhibits indicate, there is not just the one Buddha and not only one path to enlightenment. Buddhism looks back on more than 2,000 years of history in the course of which it succeeded in adapting to new regional conditions and circumstances time and again.

On display are select sculptures and images from the museum’s own collections which play an important role in Buddhist practice, among them numerous objects from Gerd-Wolfgang Essen’s famous Tibet collection.

The exhibition offers unique encounters with more than fifty Buddhas in an amazing meditative setting. It provides an opportunity to learn about the different schools of Buddhism, to expand on one’s knowledge, and to discover a completely new world.

### **The Three Jewels**

The exhibition centres on the Three Jewels of Buddhism: the Buddha, his teachings, and the Buddhist community. The Buddha is the subject of the largest gallery. Besides impressive portrayals of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, it also features representations from various other Asian countries which show how Buddhism absorbed and adapted to local ideas and concepts in the course of its spread.

One of the highlights is a monumental Buddha statue from Japan. Stephanie Lovász, the curator of the exhibition, especially likes an 8 cm small, standing Buddha figure from 7th century Kashmir: “He exerts tremendous positivity and seems so close and alive.”

Buddhist teachings and the Buddhist community each have their own gallery, too. From the first century on, Buddhist teachings, dharma, were held in writing in manuscripts like the ones on display from various parts of Asia. In this respect, Buddhist teachers, who guide practitioners on their path to enlightenment, also play an important part. The teachings are borne and disseminated by members of the Buddhist community, sangha. In view of the important role of the community, the exhibition presents a selection of objects which are important to religious practice, ranging from an itinerant altar and prayer wheels to ritual artefacts and sacrificial offerings.

The next gallery deals with male and female bodhisattvas. These are compassionate beings who have decided to delay their own awakening in order to support others on their path to enlightenment. One example is the 14th Dalai Lama, who is said to be an embodiment of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara.

### **Religion and Politics**

The intertwinement of religion and politics is another exciting topic in the exhibition. It reaches back to the beginnings of Buddhism: the historical Buddha was the son of a local ruler and destined to follow in his father’s footsteps. Instead, he set out on a spiritual quest in search of enlightenment. Contemporary artists reflect critically on the connection between religion and politics in their works and question the legitimacy of traditional hierarchies and power relations.

Finally, visitors set out on a pilgrimage around the Japanese island of Shikoku and get the opportunity to practise zazen, a Zen meditation conducted in the lotus position.