

# FIVE FAITHS PROJECT



**Buddhism**

**ACKLAND**  
ART MUSEUM

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## Introduction to Buddhism

### The Life of Siddhartha

*May every creature abound in well-being and peace. May every living being, weak or strong, the long and the small, the short and the medium sized, the mean and the great, May every living being, seen or unseen, those dwelling far off, those near by, those waiting to be born, May all attain inward peace.*

*Buddhist prayer on Loving-kindness, taken from the Sutra on Loving-kindness.*

Pali: Metta-Sutta

According to traditional Buddhist stories, Siddhartha Guatama was born to a noble family in the 6th century BCE, in the foothills of the Himalayan mountains just inside the borders of modern-day Nepal. Long after he died, his followers understanding him to be the Buddha, a title which means “awakened one,” pieced together a basic chronology of his early life from the many stories they knew about him, his life and his teaching. Some of these stories are attributed to the Buddha himself and are included in written versions of his teachings. Others grew out of the oral tradition which supported his followers in the years after his life and death. While none of his teachings were written down until long after his death, there are many loving stories recorded in Buddhist texts which speak of Siddhartha's birth and the experience of his awakening. In an attempt to understand some of the foundations of Buddhism, this text focuses on an abbreviated retelling of the stories which speak of his life in his father's court, his subsequent search for answers to human suffering and his awakening. Within Buddhism, it is said that Siddhartha lived to be 80 years old. During the last 45 years of his life, he walked through much of the Northern Districts of India teaching men and women the path to liberation that he had found.

According to these recorded stories, at the time of his son's birth, Siddhartha's father wanted to know how best to raise this child. He sought the counsel of priests. These men advised the king that his son did indeed have a destiny marked with an important choice. If the boy stayed in the world, he would grow up to be the greatest of all rulers, reuniting all of the known world under his leadership. If on the other hand, Siddhartha chose to turn away, he would become a perfectly enlightened teacher. Siddhartha's father wanted him to remain active in the affairs of the world. He did not want him to become a mendicant, one who rejects his home and family. He built a palace of elaborate wealth for his son and surrounded it with a high wall. Whenever Siddhartha left the palace, the king made certain that the streets were cleaned and only the most beautiful sights remained out and in view. Nothing should be allowed to turn his son's attentions away from the world around him. Siddhartha grew up in this palace, married and had a son.

## The Four Sights

One of the central stories in Siddhartha's early life focuses on his growing awareness of human suffering. Despite his father's efforts to shield him, Siddhartha was still exposed to suffering in the world. One story tells of a day when Siddhartha and one of his servants went out for a chariot ride. While passing through the very streets his father had so carefully maintained, Siddhartha saw something he had never seen before. He asked his servant what it was. The servant told him the truth. It was a feeble old man. Siddhartha had never seen old age before. Even though the king continued to make every attempt to protect his son, on a second journey, Siddhartha saw a man suffering, lying on the ground by the side of the road. Again he asked his companion what he was seeing. The answer, disease. On a third journey, he saw a decaying corpse in a funeral procession. Siddhartha had never seen death before, and again his servant helped him to understand what he was seeing. On the fourth journey, he saw a monk, robed in ochre fabric, with his head shaved as a sign of his renunciation of the world. The monk held a begging bowl in his hand. Siddhartha asked his servant to explain. The servant said the monk was a man who had turned from the distractions of the material world in order to search for deeper meaning and truth, to find solutions to the problems of old age, illness and death.

## Siddhartha's search for answers

These four sights: old age, disease, death and renunciation, are said to have created a deep longing in young Siddhartha. He found that everything within him longed to discover a way to end suffering. He knew that even the vast luxuries which his father had provided for him could not solve the problem. His own heart remained deeply troubled and the suffering of others haunted him. So, moved by compassion, he made the decision to leave the comfort and pleasure of his life in order to search for a solution. At the age of 29, he silently said goodbye to his wife and child in the middle of the night as they slept. He left the palace. He rode off on a white horse, bringing one attendant with him. At dawn, a good distance away from his home, he changed clothes with a hunter who happened to be passing by, shaved his head as a sign of his renunciation, and sent the horse and servant back to the palace. He continued on alone. Siddhartha spent the next six years of his life searching for a solution to the problem of human suffering.

He sought out two spiritual masters, asking for their wisdom. When he came to realize that he had learned all that they had to teach him, and still he had no answer, he left their company. Then, he joined a small group of ascetics who practiced extreme forms of self-mortification. He adopted their rigorous practice of self-denial. So completely did he embrace the denial of his body that he grew thin and weak. Still he did not see the answers he sought. One night, weak from extensive fasting, he fell into a faint. Had it not been for the kindness of the daughter of a village chieftain, who offered him rice-milk gruel, he might have died. Reflecting on the experiences of his

life, still, Siddhartha found no answer. He knew that luxury and indulgence could not keep suffering away, nor could the extreme denial of asceticism. He left the company of the ascetics, and traveling some distance, found a tree and sat down beneath its branches. He closed his eyes. He decided that he would not open his eyes, nor would he move from the spot until he found what he was seeking.

## **The Awakening**

He turned all of his attention within, seeking to find a new consciousness and perception. As he moved deeper and deeper into himself, he began to see the truth of existence. He came to see all things as they really are. Demons came to tempt him to stop, but Siddhartha would not be moved. The earth and all the elements of the cosmos supported the search. In his meditation, he saw the endless cycles of birth, death and rebirth. He saw his own connection to every living thing that had ever lived and everything yet to live. At last, he entered the final hidden aspects of reality. He saw that all things in the world and all things inside him are without independent, substantial being. All things are interconnected by various causes and supporting conditions. In this state of profound meditative awareness, the unconditional reality of Nirvana was revealed. At this moment, in the here and now, Siddhartha became the Buddha, the Awakened One. He was transformed. He knew that his experience could not be described with mere words or thoughts. Nirvana must be experienced.

For a total of 49 days, he remained under the Bodhi Tree. At the end of those days, he opened his eyes, stood, and walked back to the company of people, determined to offer what he had learned. He came to a small garden, encountered a tiny group of monks, the same monks who had been his companions when he practiced self-denial. He sat with them and there gave the first of a lifetime of sermons and talks. This first sermon is recorded as a discourse called "Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dharma (teachings)." In it, he spoke in the common language of the people and employed simple analogies to explain his new understanding.

## **The Four Noble Truths**

At the core of the Buddha's teaching is an explanation of the nature of things as they really are. The Buddha called this the Four Noble Truths. First, he said, all of life is suffering. All human life is steeped in sorrow and longing. He said our own ignorance and selfish desires cause all of our longing, sorrow and suffering. Then he explained that there is a way to put an end to suffering. And he offered the way. This teaching made sense to the listeners. Followers of the Buddha agreed that life was filled with suffering. They could understand that this suffering was caused by their own desires for personal comfort and safety. They agreed with the Buddha when he taught that all human beings suffer pain, discomfort, disease and death, and with them, a pervasive sense of sorrow and longing.

## The Three Jewels of Buddhism

Sometimes followers of the Buddha refer to him as the doctor, offering a healing cure for illness. Buddhists affirm his teachings to be practical, tested and tried. Like a medicine offered to cure an illness, Buddhists believe his teachings are for all human beings, men and women, young and old, regardless of class or caste. If the Buddha is the doctor, his teachings, called dharma, are the medicine. He said that the way to end the suffering was to follow the Middle Path. The Middle Path is an eight-fold set of actions, behaviors and intentions which, when practiced, will bring an end to the pain under which all individuals suffer. The Buddha was concerned with both individual suffering and the corporate suffering of all sentient beings. He taught that people needed one another in order to find and practice the Middle Way. The Buddhist monastic community is called the sangha. Together with the Buddha himself, and the dharma, it comprises the Three Jewels of Buddhism.

*Good is the sight of noble ones,  
Their company is always pleasant.  
Dhammapada XV, 206*

Here is what the Buddha taught as the way to end suffering. He said that each person, with the assistance of a community of friends and allies, must attempt to live his or her life according to the eightfold path. Buddhists believe that in following this path they can be assured that they will live wiser and more caring lives, set free from the endless suffering of existence.

## The Eight-fold Middle Path

*Whatever deeds a man may do,  
be they delightful,  
be they bad,  
They make a heritage for him;  
deeds do not vanish without a trace.  
Dhammapada*

In Buddhism, the eight steps on the path are not separate, to be taken one at a time or in some particular order, but rather offer a whole new way of living every aspect of one's life. To illustrate this, there is a story in which the Buddha drew a circle on the ground divided by eight spokes to make it clear that the eight steps are all interconnected and create one whole way of living, a full course of treatment for the ills of life. Followers of the Buddha attempt to live their day to day lives according to these precepts. The eight spokes on the wheel are:

- Right View: recognizing and understanding the nature of things as they are. This understanding is based in the Four Noble Truths. The root meaning of the word in Sanskrit used to mark this step is "to see."
- Right Thought: maintaining thoughts or intentions free from hatred, greed or cruelty, and an awareness of the single most important task: the end of all suffering.
- Right Speech: paying attention to what might be said, and then controlling one's words, in order that there be no lies, angry words, idle chatter, gossip, or other mean-spirited talk.
- Right Action: tirelessly examining all personal actions; no action should be taken which harms any person or animal. The Buddha gave specific examples, including these five: Do not kill. Do not steal. Do not lie. Do not be unchaste. Do not be intoxicated.
- Right Work: work and occupation must never cause suffering to any other life.
- Right Effort: always thinking before any effort is made, individuals must give the right amount of effort to every task in order to develop the good and eliminate the bad within. Too much effort and people will injure themselves, too little and they will never accomplish the goal. In addition, endurance is always at issue. It may take a lifetime of right effort to fulfill the task.
- Right Mindfulness: the Buddha tirelessly reminded his followers that the mind and its capacity for awareness, are central to life on the Middle Path. Followers of the Buddha must always keep the mind awake and alert to the experiences of life. Mindfulness develops an expanded awareness of how all things in the external world and everything inside human beings is imperfect, impermanent, and not the true self. With right mindfulness, every moment becomes valuable, every experience a teacher.
- Right Meditation: the mind must be kept open, calm and focused, it must be carefully attended to in order that the world can be clearly seen and appreciated. Right meditation refers specifically to the actual practice and discipline of meditation.

Central to Buddhist teaching is the understanding of the Buddha's stories and teaching as accurate, truthful and practical. The Buddha is said to have told the small gathering that everything he was teaching, he himself had experienced. He also assured them that he would never lie to them. Buddhists believe that all life is a teacher, and when seen with the right state of mind, all experiences will lead toward understanding. For the next 45 years, he spoke, taught, answered questions and



established a community of followers, until, at the age of eighty he died. The Buddha, like so many ancient teachers, never wrote any of his ideas down. Instead, he lived according to his understanding and shared his insights with those who sought his counsel.

## **Following the teachings of Buddha**

Buddhism, the practice of following the teachings of the Buddha, rapidly grew and flourished throughout India. He offered his followers a way to achieve nirvana, the state of perfect awareness reached by all individuals who have experienced and achieved awakening. He was clear that nirvana was available to everyone, young and old, male and female, regardless of the positions and classes of society into which they were born. He taught that the experience of nirvana is like waking from a lifelong dream, suddenly seeing things as they really are and knowing the truth behind everything that is seen.

Buddhists try to live in such a way that in every aspect of daily life, in work, in rest, in meditation and in relationships, they are selfless, concerned with the well-being of all. There are literally thousands of stories in the Buddhist tradition that support these goals. In one, there is a house burning with three fires: hatred, greed and ignorance. To put out the fires, Buddhists chant, meditate and are kind to others. These things reduce the fires. When the house is no longer ablaze, all the unhappiness ends, and the whole household enters nirvana.

In another story, the Buddha overheard a group of his followers trying to remember if the Buddha had said this or that particular saying. When he heard this, he turned to them and said in all of his life he had not said a single word. He wanted to help his followers to remember that being tangled in ideas and quotes and sayings was not the path. They should not allow themselves to be distracted by words, even words he had spoken to them. Rather, they should return to the practice of life described in the eight-fold Middle Path.

## **Developments in Buddhism**

After his death, the Buddha's followers continued to establish communities of people who were dedicated to his teachings. Two major schools of Buddhism were established: the Theravada and the Mahayana. Both schools share belief in the Three Jewels of Buddhism, but they differ in their interpretations of the Buddha's teachings and in the particular practices which they employ. The Theravada School focuses attention on the efforts of the individual will, on wisdom, on centering one's practice in meditation, on the use of minimal rituals and on maintaining minimal concerns for the metaphysical. The Theravada School holds that great concentration is required in order to achieve enlightenment, and that the highest attainable goal is that of a personally enlightened sage or noble one. In addition, the Theravada School



contends that the Buddha was the supreme and inspired teacher, and he remains in nirvana perpetually after death. The Mahayana School, which is also divided into many lesser strains, maintains that all people can achieve the teachings of the Buddha as the teachings are relevant to all aspects of every life. Mahayanans focus their attention on compassion as a guiding principle and believe that Buddhas and bodhisattvas endlessly support all human aspirations toward nirvana. Buddhists within this tradition believe that whenever a human being enters nirvana, he or she becomes a bodhisattva, and may return to aid other humans on their path to enlightenment. The bodhisattvas listen to and answer prayers. Employing more ritual and metaphysics, Mahayana Buddhism includes practices of petitionary prayer, and sees the Buddha himself as the divine savior of the world.

## **Buddhist practices and rituals**

Both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhists have many practices which help them to pursue the Middle Path. Buddhists often worship at sites dedicated to the Buddha and to the bodhisattvas. When the Buddha died, his body was cremated and his remains were taken to eight locations in India. At each spot a stupa, a Buddhist shrine, was built to commemorate his life and his offerings. Later, an emperor named Ashoka took the pearl-like pieces of the Buddha's remains, believed to be reflections of his extreme purity, and redistributed them to new stupas all over India. In temples, candles surround images of Buddha and the bodhisattvas. These candles represent to Buddhists the light of the Buddha's teaching and its capacity to dispel the darkness of ignorance. Flowers are often placed at altars dedicated to the Buddha, as reminders of the impermanence of all things. Buddhists recognize that while the flowers may look beautiful and fresh for a time, they will surely fade and wilt. Devotees offer gifts of food to be eaten by the monks so that they may continue their journey without hunger. In Buddhist practice, all these gifts are given as tokens of thanksgiving for the gifts the Buddha gave in his lifetime, and the gifts the bodhisattvas continue to give. Particularly in Mahayana Buddhism, chanted prayers, bells and other implements are employed as part of devotions. Mandalas, complex circular drawings, are sometimes used to help Buddhists understand the intricate mysteries of life. Buddhist devotions are also practiced in homes, where Buddhists may have an image of the Buddha or a bodhisattva set in a special place. In addition, many Buddhists find meditation to be a central part of their discipline. Practiced both privately and in gatherings, some Buddhists visually focus on an object, a flower or a candle, to help concentrate the mind. Buddhists may also chant as a part of their practice. Some Buddhists touch a mala, or recitation beads as they chant. A mala is constructed of 108 beads. The beads may be used for counting the repetitions of certain words or prayers used in Buddhist practice.

## **Buddhist sacred texts**

After the death of the Buddha, many followers began to write down his teachings. Theravada Buddhists hold the Pali Canon, a collection of writings in the ancient language of Pali, as their most sacred text. Mahayana Buddhists have their own set of scriptures, originally written in Sanskrit, and now existent in Chinese and Tibetan. The Chinese began making translations in the first century and the Tibetans began the process in about the 8th century. The Chinese text, called the Taisho, or "Great Treasury of Sutras," is the most authoritative text in the Mahayana tradition. All of these texts have been translated into many other languages, making the teachings of Buddhism available to people throughout the world.

## **Buddhism today**

There are approximately 400 million Buddhists in the world today. Following the teachings of the Buddha, each seeks to practice the life of the Middle Path. By paying attention to the Buddha's teaching, the experiences of life and the needs and concerns of all sentient beings, Buddhists try to organize their every thought and every aspect of their lives to reflect the generosity and compassion of the Buddha's awakening.

## Further Research & Points for Discussion

- Buddhism is a tradition filled with stories. Students may wish to research additional stories of the Buddha, his life and teachings.
- The Four Sights: Ask students to find contemporary images of the four sights: illness, old age, death and monks or others who have renounced a life in the mainstream world in order to seek the truth. Do these images shock students? Why? Why not? Ask students to consider what shocking events or sights in their own lives have caused them to wonder about the future of humanity? How might the Buddha have responded to their concerns?
- The Buddha taught that men and women need a community of people who will help one another and support common goals in order to reach awakening. Ask students to consider the benefits of having such a community. Are they members of a community that helps to support their goals? Do their friends and family support the goals they have in their lives? What roles can peer groups play in reaching goals? Why might it be important to have teachers as well as peers? In what specific ways can a teacher aid a student in achieving goals?
- The Buddha taught that there is an eightfold path which will lead to the end of suffering. Ask students to find examples in their own lives, in the lives of their families, in the newspaper, of someone who appears to be living one or more of the steps on the path. Or, ask students to find examples of situations or people who may not be following this path. What might the Buddha say to each of these? How might the Buddha respond to anger, to violence, to other concerns in modern America?
- The Lotus flower is a common symbol within Buddhism. Students may wish to research how and where lotus flowers grow. Generally, lotus flowers grow in ponds, with their roots reaching down into the mud. Some say that this symbol reminds followers of the Buddha of the nature of human life and the enlightenment available to human beings. How does this flower demonstrate the possibility of awakening?
- Using a contemporary map of India and the surrounding regions, students may wish to locate the places associated with the life of the Buddha. Identify: Lumbini Grove (the place of his birth); Bodh Gaya (the place of his enlightenment), Sarnath (the place of his first teaching), Kushinagar (the place of his death). These locations continue to be destination points on Buddhist pilgrimage. Ask students to research and design a journey to these places.

- In the 6th century, Buddhism began in China and several hundred years later spread to Japan. Tradition says that Venerable Bodhidhasma, the 28th Patriarch of India was also the first Patriarch of China. Zen means meditation, and in this part of the Buddhist tradition, meditation is seen as a central discipline. Zen gardens developed in Japan as places where followers of the Buddha can sit and meditate. Within a Zen garden, gravel covers the main parts of the garden in much the way American gardens are covered with grass. The gravel is raked into patterns which help to focus concentration. Students may wish to look for images of Zen gardens in textbooks, gardening books and other print media, as well as on the Internet. Students may wish to design and create a small, tabletop garden, using stones, artfully arranged, and sand raked into patterns around the stones. In the past few years, these tabletop gardens have become available in specialty shops. Why might a businessperson or a homeowner want a little Zen garden in his or her office or living room? What benefits might it give to the owner?
- Consider the mudras on the Buddhism poster. What hand signals do we use in contemporary society? How effective are they in communicating ideas, needs or desires? Examples: waving, putting hands palm to palm indicating prayer, the okay sign, thumbs up, thumbs down, pointing, thumb out for hitchhiking.
- Also consider symbols used to express ideas. In Buddhism, the wheel symbolizes the Buddha and his teaching. Do we have symbols in American culture which are highly recognizable and readily understood? Example: the Nike check or the American flag. Ask students to consider and make a symbol which stands for them. Each student may wish to make his/her own symbol, or students may work as a group to create a class or school symbol.

## Contemporary Research Options

- *The Little Buddha*, *Seven Years in Tibet* and *Kundun* are contemporary movies which explore some of the questions of Tibetan Buddhism. Teachers may wish to include all or parts of each movie in this study. In each, students find examples of Buddhist compassion. In *Seven Years in Tibet*, students will be introduced to the story of the current Dalai Lama, the leader of Tibetan Buddhism, who in the 1950's was exiled from Tibet. Locate Tibet on the world map. Ask students to find information about the current Dalai Lama. Find out where he lives and what he has done in his lifetime. In what ways can his life be seen as an exemplar of Buddhism?
- Check local newspapers and other resources to find centers for meditation near you. Also, check local hospitals and medical centers to see if they offer classes in meditation. Many modern health care professionals support the idea that meditation is good for human health.

### **The Offering of the Four Bowls to the Buddha, 2nd century**

**Indian, Gandhara Region**

**schist, 16 3/4 x 18 7/16 x 3 5/8 in**

In this image four princely guardians of the heavenly quarters offer the Buddha bowls of food. In the story, the Buddha refuses to accept the bowls because they were made of gold and were too fine. The four guardians changed the bowls into stone, a material associated with monastic life, and the Buddha accepted them. Before he began to eat, the Buddha transformed the four bowls into one, in order that no one offering might be favored over the others.

The Gandhara region of India is east and north of the Indus River. Because of the trade routes that connected Europe and the East, this region was an affluent and influential religious area in the early part of the Common Era. Not only did inhabitants travel to faraway places, but people came to the Gandhara from Europe and the East, seeing it as one of the religious centers of Buddhism, five hundred years after the Buddha's death.



- The Buddha is seated underneath a tree. Flowers decorate the ground beneath him.
- The Buddha has his hand raised in this frieze. This mudra represents the Buddha's offering of assurance: Fear not.
- The three Wheels beneath the Buddha symbolize the three jewels of Buddhism: the Buddha himself, his teachings, and the community. In other similar objects, the three wheels have been consolidated into one, with deer on either side. This represents the Buddha's first teaching in the Deer Park.
- This piece would likely have been one of several originally placed side by side, depicting the stories of the Buddha's life. His birth, his awakening, his teaching, and his death are common themes.

A frieze is a relief sculpture which forms a decorative horizontal band in architecture. This frieze comes from a part of India called the Gandhara region. It is north and east of the Indus River. In the early part of the Common Era, this region was a part of the trade routes that led from Europe to Asia. Rulers of this area profited from these trade routes, and artisans learned new techniques and styles. The works from this part of the world during this time hold examples of Roman influence. One example of this is the flowing garments on the figures within the work. This style of representation is not found in earlier Indian images. Due to its age, and perhaps exposure to the weather, this sculpture is worn, and some of the figures are difficult to see, but originally, as was common for this type of piece, the sculpture may have been coated with stucco and painted, creating a much more vivid image than is visible today.





Unidentified Artist, India, Gandhara; The Offering of the Four Bowls to the Buddha, 2nd century; Gray schist; 16 3/4 x 18 7/16 x 3 5/8 in.; Ackland Art Museum, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Gift of Clara T. and Gilbert J. Yager and Ackland Fund, 90.35

**Head of Buddha, 15th century****Thai****gilt bronze, 38 1/4 x 16 3/8 x 17 5/8 in**

This head of the Buddha was originally part of a large seated or walking Buddha. Thai artists pay close attention to human proportion, which helps to explain the realistic and lively appearance of this piece. When the Buddha is represented in his human body, he is depicted carefully, with attention paid to the auspicious signs listed in the Pali Canon, but also with an eye to showing that he was not a god, but a man.

The Buddha is also represented symbolically, by an eight-spoken wheel in some art objects. Many of the same attributes surround the wheel as surround the image of the man. He is often seen with lotus flowers nearby. His followers are often in attendance, particularly in relief sculptures.

How does the artist convey the Buddha's compassion in this piece? Carefully consider the facial expression of the Buddha? What might such an image suggest about the nature of meditation?



- The Pali Canon lists 32 auspicious signs of the Buddha. Several can be seen in this piece:
  - The Flame – his enlightenment
  - The bulge on his head – a sign of extra knowledge
  - Golden skin
  - Large ears – a sign of his listening well to the concerns of life
  - Long earlobes – a sign of his royal lineage
  - A parrot nose
  - A chin like a lime
- The Buddha's eyes are not closed. He is aware of his surroundings. The general expression on his face is one of kindness and compassion.

There are differing accounts as to the covering of the Buddha's head. In India, tradition says that when Buddha shaved his head as a sign of his renunciation, the hair grew back in tight curls.

In Japan, the story says that while he was seated in meditation, the sun beat down upon his shaved head. First the fish and then frogs tried to offer him covering from the sun. They could not. But snails came and lined up on his head to keep it covered from the sun during the day and the cold night.





Unidentified Artist, Thailand; Head of Buddha, 15th century; Gilt bronze; 38 1/4 x 16 3/8 x 17 5/8 in.; Ackland Art Museum, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Ackland Fund, 91.2

**Buddha Calling Earth to Witness, 13th century****Burmese****Stone (yellow pyrophyllite), 6 1/2 x 4 1/8 x 1 5/8 in**

This sculpture is quite small and therefore difficult to see in the museum setting. It depicts the Buddha, in the center, with his hand in the mudra which "calls the earth to witness". The Buddha is surrounded on the right and left by images taken from the Jataka Tales, a collection of stories of the Buddha's previous lives. On the right side are figures which represent his human life events, on the left are images of his death and other realms in the Buddhist wheel of life. This sculpture focuses on the many cycles of Buddha's birth, death and rebirth. Note that the Buddha has slightly different physical qualities in this sculpture. This work is Burmese, and the norms for depicting the Buddha are changed, reflecting the different culture of origin.



- It is typical in relief sculptures to see the Buddha sheltered. This is done to remind the viewer that creation protected the Buddha as he meditated and achieved awakening. In addition, the shape of the covering is reminiscent of the stupa. Because this piece contains a small relic, the piece itself may have been a portable stupa, used by followers of the Buddha as a focus for meditation and devotion.
- When the Buddha is seen touching the earth, it means that he is calling the earth to witness all of his lives, his teachings and the experience of his awakening.
- On the inside of this sculpture, there is a cavity containing a small manuscript of the Buddha's teaching.





Unidentified Artist, Burma?, Myanmar; Buddha Calling the Earth to Witness, 13th century; Stone (yellow pyrophyllite); 6 1/2 x 4 1/8 x 1 5/8 in.; Ackland Art Museum, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Ackland Fund, 97.14.1

## Voices of Faith

### The Brave Little Parrot

#### Summary

In this story, the Buddha, in a previous lifetime as a parrot, models compassion by attempting to save the forest and all its inhabitants from a forest fire.

#### Research Option

There are many stories of the Buddha's previous lives. Students may wish to find additional stories. In each story, one or more aspect of the Buddha's nature is demonstrated.

#### Discussion Questions

- What qualities does the little parrot possess?
- Who learns the lesson in this story?
- How might this story encourage acts of compassion in Buddhists?
- Why would this story be an appropriate introduction to the Buddha's nature?

Transcript of recorded story: The Brave Little Parrot

My name is Louise Omoto Kessel. I come from a mixed heritage family. My mom is Japanese. She was born and raised in Hawaii and raised Buddhist. My father comes from a Russian Jewish family. We moved to North Carolina when I was ten years old. Now, I make my living as a storyteller and live on a working farm in Chatham County.

Long ago, the Buddha was born as a friendly little parrot. He delighted in flying among the tangled branches of his forest home. Everywhere he went he greeted other creatures with joy. He was glad to be alive and glad to have been given the gift of flight.

One day over the parrot's forest home, the sky darkened, and, without warning, a terrible storm thundered down. The wind howled and whistled. Lightning flashed, and one ancient tree burst into flames. The wind blew the sparks everywhere, and pretty soon the whole forest was on fire. And the parrot, seeing the flames and smoke, instead of flying off into safety, he flung himself into the fury of the storm, calling out to the animals below, "Fire, Fire, run to the river. Fire, Fire, run to the river." And many animals just below heard that call, and they made their way to the safety of the river. But there were others trapped in the flames and smoke, not knowing which way to run or hide. And so the little parrot continued to circle - circle over the fire - seeking some means of helping those trapped below. Finally, a desperate idea came to him. Flying to the river that flowed along the forest's edge, the little parrot dipped his body and wings into that dark water and then flew back over the fire, which was now raging like

an inferno. And, dropping down low among the flames, the little parrot rapidly shook his wings. A few drops of water still clinging to his wing feathers tumbled down into the fire like little precious jewels. And then the parrot turned and went back to the river, and again he dipped his body and wings in that dark water, and again he flew back over the fire and shook his wings. Again and again and again the little parrot flew from the river to the fire, from the river to the fire, from the river to the fire until his wings were ragged and greasy and black. His eyes burned like coals. His mind danced as dizzily as the spinning sparks. His lungs ached from breathing the smoke. And still the little parrot continued to fly from the river to the fire, from the river to the fire. After all, he said, "What can a bird do at a time like this but fly? And so fly I shall, and I won't stop if there's even a chance of saving a single life."

High above the parrot, in the heavenly realm, the gods looked down upon the world, and they saw this little parrot flying to and fro, to and fro, and they laughed. Does he think he can put out a fire like that with a few drops of water from his wings? But one of those gods was strangely moved by what he saw. Turning himself into a golden eagle he allowed himself to be drawn down into the parrot's fiery path. The parrot was on his way from the river to the fire when a golden eagle appeared above him. "Turn around, turn around, get away from that fire. Fly to safety, save yourself," said the golden eagle. But the little parrot just flew steadily on through the flames. "Turn around, get away from that fire. Save yourself." But the little parrot just flew on. "I don't need advice like that from a golden eagle," he said. "Why, I could have had advice like that from my own mother and father long ago. What I really need is for someone to pitch in and help." And the golden eagle, seeing that brave little parrot flying so steadily on through the flames - he suddenly felt shame for his own privileged kind. He could hear the laughter of the gods echoing above while frightened animals cried out just below. And suddenly he didn't want to be a god or a golden eagle or anything else. He just wanted to be like that brave little parrot and to help. Moved by these new feelings, the golden eagle began to cry. Streams and streams of shimmering tears cascaded down on the fire, on the forest, on the animals, on the little parrot himself. Washed and bright, he rocketed about the sky like a little feathered sun. "Now that's more like it," he said. Teardrops dripped from the parrot's wing-feathers and fell to the earth like falling flower petals. Teardrops dripped from the charred ends of tree branches where new leaves unfurled. Teardrops dripped to the forest floor where new grass pushed its way up beside still-glowing cinders. And the animals, they looked around at one another, all were well and whole, and they looked up to see their friend the parrot. He was looping and soaring and flying on and on, and they said, "Hurray, hurray for that brave little parrot. And for that sudden miraculous rain."

## Voices of Faith

### The Elephant

#### Summary

In this story, students are introduced to another of the stories of the Buddha's previous lifetimes. In this lifetime, he is an elephant living alone in a forest. One day, he meets a group of people who have been exiled from their homeland and are without food and water. After he learns of their plight, he instructs them to travel to a distant place and food and water will be there for them. When they arrive at the place the elephant suggested, they find the elephant. The elephant gives his body to them for nourishment and his entrails for water bags, so that they may carry water on their journey.

#### Research Option

Some of the people in the story suggest that they should give the elephant a ritual cremation rather than use his body for food. Students may wish to research the role of cremation in Indian culture.

#### Discussion Questions

- What qualities does the elephant possess?
- What motivates his decision to sacrifice his own life for the people? How does the elephant describe his sacrifice?
- Why would the storyteller include the response of the flowers and trees at the death of the elephant?
- Examine the implications of the moral of the story as offered by the storyteller.

Transcript of recorded story: The Elephant

My name is Imali Sirisena, and the story that I'm going to tell is called "The Elephant." I'm originally from Rocky Mount, North Carolina, but my family is from an island called Sri Lanka, which is a small country off the coast of India. And it is a predominantly Buddhist country, so that's where a lot of these stories are told. And this particular story, "The Elephant," is a re-incarnation story, which means it's a story of one of the lives of the Buddha, because he was reincarnated many times and lived in many different forms.

In this story, the Buddha is an elephant. When he was an elephant he lived alone in a beautiful jungle that was surrounded by a vast desert. And he lived alone with the plants and the animals, but he rarely ever saw human beings because they didn't come through the desert into the jungle. So he lived a very happy, solitary life. But then one day he was in the jungle, and he heard some noise on the outskirts of the jungle, and he wondered what it was. So he wandered over towards the edge, and he looked, and he saw hundreds and hundreds of people all with ragged clothing and



very disheveled-looking. They were all very hungry, thirsty and sick- looking, and he wondered what was wrong with these people. So he went a little bit closer, and he saw even more people, and they were all very, very tired and ragged-looking. And as he got closer the people caught sight of this huge elephant, and they all got very frightened. But they were so weak that they couldn't even run away. When the elephant realized they were all very frightened he spoke to them in a human voice, and he said, "No, no don't be frightened. I'm not here to hurt you. I want to help you. What's wrong?"

And the people said, "Oh it's a very, very sad story. The king in our homeland got very angry with us one day and forced us all to leave our homes and wander through the desert. Our king has a very bad temper. We've all been wandering, and many of the people that left have already perished because of hunger or thirst. And we're so weak we don't know what we can do." The elephant was so moved by the story of these people and their condition that he began to cry. He felt so bad that he thought and thought of something that he could do to help these people because he knew the desert was vast, and there would be no way they could cross it unless they had food and water.

The elephant thought and thought and thought. Finally he came up with a plan. He decided that he could give up his body to these people and that they could use his flesh for nourishment and his entrails as water bags to carry the water from a lake in the jungle. The elephant was going to go through with this plan, so he told the people that there was a lake with crystal blue water and many lilies and lotuses over near the mountainside. So he lifted up his great trunk and pointed towards the mountain and told them to walk towards the lake. He also told them that once they reached the lake and rested that if they looked over near the mountainside there would be the body of a dead elephant and that they could take the elephant and use his flesh as nourishment and his entrails as water bags to carry water through the rest of their journey. The people were very, very grateful and very happy, so they all thanked the elephant and began to walk towards where he had pointed.

The elephant took a back way to the top of the mountain and, as he walked to the mountain, he felt very happy and content in what he was doing because he knew that human beings had more opportunities than any other animal to do good in their lives and to reach different levels of spirituality. So he was very happy that he was going to help these people survive, and he realized that his body was just a material earthly thing and that his spirit would be able to live on. The elephant was very happy and content as he walked towards the mountainside. As he climbed up the high peaks of the mountains he made a vow to himself that he wasn't jumping off this mountain to get into heaven or to please the gods, to gain merits or even as an escape from his life, but he was doing it so that he could help these people because he felt compassion for their plight.



As the elephant reached the top of the mountain he tumbled down the high cliffs to the bottom. And all the plants and the animals in the jungle were aghast as they looked at the scene. And they said it looked like the moon had fallen out of the sky, as this huge white elephant had tumbled down the mountainside. And all the animals came to look, and some of them even cried. And the plants were all amazed. And they were so amazed by this feat that the flowers began to bloom out of season and the fruits began to come on the trees. And the jungle smelled so sweet with all the flowers and the fruits of the plants.

By this time the people had journeyed to the lake, and they were ecstatic that they had found water, and they drank and drank and drank and got well rested. And then they looked to the side of the mountain and sure enough, there was the body of an elephant. Some of the people thought, "Maybe the elephant is brother with the elephant that we saw earlier, or his father, because he looks just like the elephant we saw earlier." But then some people went closer and looked at the face and the gentle eyes and the trunk and realized that it was the same elephant they had seen earlier, and they were all very sad at what had happened. They couldn't believe that the elephant would make such a sacrifice for them. All of the people were moved with emotion at this feat. Some of the people in the group said that it would be wrong for them to eat him now, that they should give him a formal cremation to honor his death. But some of the more level-headed people of the group realized that that would not be honoring his death if they didn't do as he had wished and they would not survive if they could not eat him and take his entrails as water bags. So they felt that the best thing to do would be to do as the elephant had wished them to do and take his flesh and entrails in order that they could survive and continue with their lives. The people did as the elephant said and crossed the desert to safety. But they never forgot what the elephant had done for them. The moral of the story is that suffering can be a good if it helps other people.

## Voices of Faith

### The Life of the Buddha

#### Summary

The storyteller offers an account of the events surrounding the birth of the baby who would grow up to seek enlightenment and become the Buddha.

Research Option

#### Research Option

Within the story, Siddhartha sees a monk. Initially, he chooses to seek answers by following the path of the monk. Search for images of ascetics and other people who have rejected all worldly comforts in order to seek answers to life's questions. Many people seek answers to life's suffering. Students may wish to identify contemporary figures whose work reflects their commitment to compassion.

#### Discussion Questions

- How does the storyteller foreshadow the true nature and destiny of the baby?
- What might have motivated his father to protect his son from seeing the four sights?
- Why would it be important to note that the young boy grew up with skill in many disciplines?
- Note that in the story, the teller describes the boy feeling like a "chained elephant," just prior to seeing the four sights. Could this be a reference to the previous life of the Buddha? It is the four sights which motivate the young man to seek answers to the problems of life.
- Can you think of other people in history who have seen horrible events or images and responded by seeking solutions to the problems of human suffering?

Transcript of recorded story: The Life of the Buddha

Hello, my name is Chitpol Siddhivarn. I come from Thailand. I'm a student of the Dental School at UNCCH. Today I will tell you the story about Buddha's life.

2,500 years ago in the kingdom of Kapalivastu, in the foothills of the Himalayan mountains in India, Queen Mahamaya, wife of King Suddhadana, had a marvelous dream. She dreamt that a magnificent white elephant with six golden tusks entered her room and touched her right side with a golden lotus flower. When she woke up she described her dream to King Suddhadana and all the wise men, who agreed that it foretold a miracle. The wise men predicted, "a son will be born to you, and if the new prince remains in the royal household and follows a holy path he will become a great emperor of the world. But, if he recognizes the impermanence of life, he will seek something higher. He will leave the palace in quest of enlightenment. Then, he will find

the truth and become a great holy man, a savior of the world." King Suddhadana was troubled. In those days holy men were poor wandering teachers who begged for food. He couldn't help but think of how he might protect his son from danger, from hardship and from suffering so that the boy might become a great man who would rule the world.

One day almost ten months later, Queen Mahamaya set out to visit her parents in the city of Devadaha. At the time, it was the culture of the women to give birth at their hometowns or home city. Along the way she passed a magnificent park, and her attendants stopped to rest there in a grove of sala trees. The queen Maya stood beneath the largest, most ancient sala tree. Suddenly, white flowers and golden yellow lotus petals tumbled from the sky. It was like a rain of flowers. From the earth rose the delicate fragrance of jasmine, of rose, of cedar wood. From the air itself, the sound of music - of lutes, bells and high clear voices singing in the language of delight. At that moment the baby was born. The infant had golden shining skin and was strong enough to stand up by his own legs. And then he took seven steps to the north. At each step a lotus blossom sprang up to support his feet. He said, "I've been born to reach enlightenment and free all creatures from suffering. In this life, I shall become a Buddha."

King Suddhadana named him Siddhartha, which means every wish fulfilled. There was great rejoicing at the time of the birth of the new prince. But another prediction disturbed the king. One of the wise men came and told him there would be four signs: an old man, a sick man, a dead man and a monk. "When the prince has seen these signs, he will leave the kingdom and pursue the life of a holy man." King Suddhadana, who wanted to keep Siddhartha in the palace forever, was determined that his son would never encounter these four signs. So to ensure his happiness, he provided everything the child would ever need or want. As the young prince grew, he excelled in language, in math, in debate and many other subjects. The royal tutor soon found his pupil was beyond his instruction. His father was very proud of him and built him three exquisite palaces, one for each season - the winter palace, the summer palace, and the rainy season palace - to ensure that the prince would be happy all of his life and stay in the palace all of his life. For his father wished only that his son would be a great king of the world.

When the prince was sixteen years old, his father thought it was time for the prince to be married. He married princess Yasodhara and the marriage was celebrated with feasting, entertaining and rejoicing. After years of living in the most beautiful palace, Siddhartha began to feel restless, like a chained elephant. He was curious about what lay outside his sheltered world. He asked Channa, his courtier, to take him for a ride outside the kingdom to see the world by his own eyes. In the morning Channa took him outside the kingdom that lay beyond the palace gates. For the first time in his life, the prince saw human suffering: an old man, a sick man and a dead man. "Does everyone become sick and old? Do we all die?" Siddhartha wondered and asked

Channa. "We all die," Channa told him. Siddhartha was overcome with sorrow. The next day Siddhartha asked Channa to take him out of the palace again. On this journey he met a man in a saffron robe who seemed completely at peace. "Who are you?" asked Siddhartha. The man, who was a monk, replied, "I'm a seeker of the truth. To find it I have given up everything on this earth." Prince Siddhartha thought, "I must also seek the truth. If I am to find peace, I have to leave my father, my family, my riches, my comfort and follow the monk's footsteps." Returning to the city in the cool of the evening, the prince's courtiers came to report to him the birth of his son. On his return to the palace, all the dancers, the musicians and the singers came immediately to entertain the prince, but his mind was free from worldly passions, and he fell asleep. When he awoke he saw his sleeping wife and child. Siddhartha's heart was torn because he knew he must follow his destiny, which did not include raising his son at all. Taking a last look at his wife and his son, he summoned nobleman Channa. He mounted his white horse, Kantha, and with Channa rode out of the palace. And the prince left his palace life forever.

In a single day the prince passed through three kingdoms. At that time the Brahmin named Cataketu appeared and offered him the necessary things for the monk. Siddhartha cast away his princely garments, put on his robe of a monk and ordered Channa and his horse to return to the palace. But Kantha, his horse, was so distressed to be sent back that he died of grief at that time. And Channa, sobbing, set out alone to give the news to his family. Siddhartha continued his journey seeking wisdom from the monks he met along the way, but he couldn't find the way of ultimate peace. Then he met five hermits in the forest. The five hermits told Siddhartha the way of the truth was to deny everything in this world. And then Siddhartha spent six years with these five hermits in the forest. He practiced many religious austerities, including extreme fasting that caused great pain to him. Soon he became extremely thin. His skin wrapped tightly around the jutting bones. But after years of denying his body food and comfort, he realized that he had come no closer to the truth. "The truth cannot be found in the mind or the body," he thought, "the truth can only be found in the innermost core of the heart, which is connected with all existence."

After spending years in the forest with five hermits, fasting, meditating, and rejecting every aspect of material life, Siddhartha was near to death on the riverbank, Nelangalar. One day in the morning he overheard a snippet of conversation. A music student and his teacher were passing by on a boat. "You must not hit the higher note, or the lower note," the teacher spoke, "Only the middle note." When he heard this conversation, he decided to practice moderation and to follow a middle path. On that morning Siddhartha accepted a bowl of lecce milk and rice from a village girl named Sujata. He ate on the riverbanks of Nelangalar and then set a boat afloat on the water and said, "If I'm truly to become a Buddha today, may this boat float upstream." And then the boat floated upstream.

## Voices of Faith

### The Living Kuan Yin

#### Summary

In the story, students are introduced to the Bodhisattva, Kuan Yin. She is a goddess of compassion and mercy. She was born an ordinary person, who in her lifetime became enlightened. In the story, the protagonist suffers the loss of his fortune and seeks the aid of Kuan Yin.

#### Research Option

Locate an image of Kuan Yin. Check the library and the Internet. Look closely at the structure of the story and the way in which the teller sets the stage, creates the action of the story, establishes the conflict and brings resolution. Students may wish to write a comparable folk story set in modern times.

#### Discussion Questions

- This story exemplifies the teaching that in caring for others, we ourselves are cared for. How does the story establish the main character as trustworthy and kind?
- If you were able to ask three questions of a wise and compassionate woman, what might they be?
- Ask students to consider if they have experienced anything like the events of this story: in taking care of others, their own needs were met.

Transcript of recorded story: The Living Kuan Yin

My name is Gayle Shimokura, and I am a third-generation Japanese American, and I've been living in the Chapel Hill/Durham area for almost fifteen years and am very proud to call North Carolina my home. Currently I am a graduate student at the School of Public Health at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. And I'd like to share a story with you today that involves an important Buddhist figure. Her name is Kuan Yin, which literally means "regarder of the cries of the world." She is a goddess of mercy and compassion. People in China and Japan and Korea, where she is particularly popular, would give offerings to her when they are in trouble, and they need some help. They said that all you need to do was recite her name and she'll come to your aid. It is also very common to make offerings to her right before undertaking a dangerous journey or when you want to have a family.

It is believed that Kuan Yin was born an ordinary person just like you or I and that within her lifetime she became enlightened, which is the ultimate goal in Buddhism. And with this enlightenment she was given special powers, which she used to help other people with their problems. And so this is the story.

Long long ago in China there was a man named Chin Pow-an. And his name fit him well for Chin means million and Pow-an means gold, and Pow-an had more gold coins than he could count. And so because of his name and family fortune he thought he would always be rich. He spent his money very freely, but not on himself. For he felt truly sorry for those who were poor and needy. All a poor man would have to do was to hold out his hand, and Pow-an would fill it with gold. And if Pow-an heard of orphaned children, he would seek them out and make sure that they would have something to eat and a place to sleep for the rest of their lives. So Pow-an gave unselfishly to all those who were in need.

Finally, though, there came a time when Pow-an's huge fortune was not enough. And he had given away so much money that he became a poor man himself. And when it came to be that all he had was a little food, he would continue to give it to those who had even less. And one day as he was sharing a bowl of rice with a beggar, he got very upset and distraught. He said to himself. "Why is it that I am so poor? I have not harmed anyone, and I haven't spent much on myself. Why is it that all I have to give this poor man is a bowl of rice?"

His question preoccupied him for days and nights. And still no answer came to him. But he did have an idea. He would go visit the beautiful Kuan Yin, the goddess of compassion and comfort who helped all those who had problems and to whom all people looked for comfort. For Kuan Yin knew both the past and the future, and Pow-an was confident that she could answer his question. And so the next day he set out to the South Sea to where Kuan Yin lived. He traveled by foot to many strange lands until one day he came to the edge of the broad rushing river. He was wondering how he was going to get across because there was no bridge to his left or to his right. When he heard a deep rumbling voice coming from a cliff behind him, "Chin Pow-an, if you were going to see the living Kuan Yin perhaps you can ask her a question for me." Now Pow-an had never refused anything to anybody in his life, and besides, he knew that the living Kuan Yin would allow him to ask three questions. And he had only one for himself, and so he said, "Oh, yes, I will." And, turning around to see who the voice had come from, to his amazement, was this huge snake towering above him with a body as wide as a temple pillar and twice as long. Pow-an was frightened. And he was really glad that he had said yes so quickly. "Well then perhaps you can ask her why I'm not yet a dragon even though I've been practicing self control and kindness for the past 1,000 years." "Oh, surely I will," said Pow-an nervously, hoping that the snake would continue to practice self-control and kindness and not gobble him up in one gulp. "But, you know, I'm not quite sure how I'm going to get across this river and I'll need to do that to go see her." And the snake said, "Oh that's not a problem. Just hop on my back and I'll carry you to the other side."

Chin Pow-an climbed on the scaly back of the snake and was soon across to the other side. And he thanked the snake and went on his way. He kept walking for a while until he got hungry, and luckily, he found an inn, and so he stopped there to order a bowl



of rice. And while he was waiting for his food he chatted with the innkeeper. He recounted the story of this huge snake who had carried him to the other side, and he found out that this was a good snake and that people liked him because he would prevent the bandits from crossing the river. It also came out that Pow-an was on his way to the South Sea. The Innkeeper said, "Oh, I would be most grateful if you could ask her a question for me. See, I have this daughter who is beautiful, kind, and clever, and yet she has reached the age of twenty without uttering a single word. Could you ask her why this is so." Pow-an could not refuse a request like that so he said, "Oh don't worry about it. I'll ask this question, and I'm sure everything will be all right." "And besides," he thought to himself, "I'm allowed two questions, and I only have one for myself." And so he continued on his way and, by nightfall, not only was he hungry again, he was also tired. But this time there was no inn. He looked around, and he knocked on the door of the largest house he could find and asked to stay the night. The wealthy owner of the house welcomed him in. Pow-an was served a great meal and something to drink and shown into a lovely guestroom. Pow-an awoke the next morning refreshed and ready to go. He thanked his host and said goodbye, and just as he was leaving the host said, "Oh, so where are you going?"

And Powan said, "Oh, I'm going to the South Sea."

"Oh," said the host, "Well if you're going to the South Sea then perhaps you'll be seeing the living Kuan Yin. And maybe you could ask her a question for me. For, you see, I have been living in this house for the past twenty years, and throughout this time I have been taking the very best care of my garden and yet never has a flower bloomed or has there been any fruit. And that's bad enough. But what's more is that the birds don't come to sing and there's no nectar for the bees to gather. So, you see, this is quite a sad place, and I would be most grateful if you could ask the goddess what I could do about this."

"I would be most honored to ask her that question," said Pow-an, and he continued on his way. For, as he thought to himself, he was allowed three questions and he had one for himself, one for the snake, one for the innkeeper, and one for the man with the garden. Uh oh. And he counted on his fingers the number of questions. And with a flutter of his heart he realized that he had four important questions to ask and that was one too many. And which one would go unanswered? I mean, if he didn't ask his own question his whole journey would be for nothing. But if he asked the snake's, or the innkeeper's, or the wealthy owner's, not only would one of them be very disappointed, but he would also be breaking a promise. And so, as he walked, he turned the problem over and over in his mind. And finally, he came to a decision. He had made his promises, and so he must keep them. And even if he didn't ask his question about why he was so poor, his journey would not be for nothing because he would be helping these two people and the snake.



So, happy with his decision, he comes to the South Sea. He asks the local people for directions, and soon he is in the presence of the living Kuan Yin. And she is so beautiful and radiating such kindness that Powan felt very meek and humble in front of her. He bowed and then quietly asked her his questions. "The serpent of the cliff," he began, 'has been practicing self control and kindness for the past one thousand years and yet he is not yet a dragon. Why is this so?"

Kuan Yin answered. "On the serpent's head there are seven pearls. If you remove six of them, he will become a dragon."

"Oh, thank you, my lady," said Pow-an.

And here's my second question. "There's a certain innkeeper who has a daughter who has reached the age of twenty without uttering a single word. Why should this be?"

Kuan Yin said, "It is because of what has happened in her past lives that it is her destiny to not utter a word until she sees the man who is to be her husband."

"Thank you" said Pow-an. "And my final question: A rich man welcomed me into his house. And he has been tending his garden for several years and yet no plant or tree has ever flowered or born fruit. Is there a reason for this?" And Kuan Yin replied, "There are seven jars of gold and silver buried in his garden. If he gives half of this wealth away his garden will become beautiful again."

And Pow-an bowed to Kuan Yin a final time and, as he was backing away, he looked up, and Kuan Yin just gave him this most beautiful smile that filled Pow-an with joy. And then he continued on his way home. The first place he came to was the man with his garden, and Pow-an recounts to him Kuan Yin's message about the seven jars of silver and gold buried in his garden. And the man was so delighted to hear about how his garden could become beautiful again that he gives half his wealth to Pow-an. And then Pow-an came to the town where the inn was, and as he was walking up to the inn, the innkeeper's daughter cries out and says, "Pow-an, how was the South Sea? What did Kuan Yin say?" And the innkeeper was so delighted to hear his daughter speak again, and the two young people fell in love at first sight, and the innkeeper insisted that they be married.

And then Pow-an, with his new wife, returns to the rushing river and tells the snake Kuan Yin's message. And the snake removes the six pearls and gives them to Pow-an. Immediately he becomes this magnificent dragon, and the one single pearl starts to give out this powerful light which fills the countryside with a soft luminous glow.

And so this is the story of how Pow-an, through his generosity and unselfishness, finds the woman of his dreams and once again becomes as rich as his name.

## Voices of Faith

### How Assanga Came to See the Future Buddha

#### Summary

In this story, the central character attempts to see the future Buddha by turning away from the world around him in the practice of asceticism and meditation. After many years, the central character despairs and leaves his isolation. On the road back to town, he is given a chance to show great compassion. When he demonstrates compassion, he achieves his goal.

#### Research Option

Locate Tibet on a world map. The storyteller mentions the wearing away of stones by water. Students may wish to gather smooth stones and research the approximate time it takes to polish a stone in a natural environment.

#### Discussion Questions

- What is the underlying message of this story?
- Why might this story be an important one for people who practice meditation? What events in the story reinforce the benefits of meditation? What events remind the listener of the limits of meditation?
- How does the storyteller establish action as a necessary part of true awareness? How does the storyteller foreshadow this principle?

Transcript of recorded story: How Assanga Came to See the Future Buddha

This is a story from Tibet. Once there was a man named Asanga who had his heart set on attaining great inner wisdom. He left his home and family to live alone, high in the mountains, in a small cave. There, he meditated in retreat for many years. He spent his time in solitude and simplicity. The greatest wish of Asanga was to see Champa, the Buddha of the future, who resides in heaven, awaiting descent to earth. Asanga believed that if he could enter a state of meditation so powerful as to receive the vision of Champa, that his life would be changed forever, that he would have great power and insight, that he'd be able to be of great service to the world. Asanga was a determined man, and he was completely devoted to his longing to see Champa. But after many years of intense meditation, even Asanga, this devoted student, started to feel an undercurrent of frustration. He so longed to attain the wisdom he desired and yet years of meditation did not seem to be bringing him closer to his goal. One day, while taking a walk outside his cave, Asanga came to a rock outside his cave. Asanga came to a rocky outcropping, where a flock of birds made their home. Asanga watched the birds landing on a nearby rock. Where the birds' wings brushed the rock as they landed, Asanga noticed that the rock had been worn smooth. Asanga smiled and reflected in wonder on the countless numbers of years it must have taken for the

soft brushing of birds' wings to make the rock smooth. When he returned to his cave, Asanga, his senses sharpened by deep meditation, heard the soft drip of water over stone. As he looked to see where this sound was coming from he found a small rivulet of water running down the rock face and, looking again, he noticed that over the years the gentle dripping of the water had cut a deep pathway into the rock. Asanga smiled again. If the brush of a bird's wings and the gentle drip of water can cut through stone, so too can I, through meditation, cut through the thought layers of the mind and attain great wisdom. So Asanga returned to his meditation with renewed energy. The years of devoted meditation continued but still without results. It seemed the more earnestly he sought wisdom, the more passionately he tried to invoke Champa, the more impossible it became.

Many years of mediation later, Asanga left his cave to search for food. Again at this time, a sense of futility had overtaken him. On this day Asanga came upon a man who was rubbing a stout iron bar with a piece of cotton. Asanga asked, "What are you doing?" The man said that he was making a needle. Asanga laughed that the man should think it possible to make a needle by rubbing soft cotton over a thick iron bar. And when he said so, the man replied "When a human being is really determined to do something, when they put all of their life energy behind it they will not be met with failure. Even if the task is seemingly impossible."

Once again Asanga's strength was renewed. His task was surely no harder than that of the man making the needle. And so he returned to his cave and aspired to continue with his meditation and devoted himself again, this time even more completely, to his task. But after Asanga had been meditating for twelve years and still without results, Asanga finally decided to leave his retreat, to give up his meditation on Champa. He thought that perhaps he was not capable of achieving that level of meditation and clarity. For the future Buddha would not appear to him even after so many years of trying. As Asanga walked down the mountain, leaving his cave, he came upon a dog who was writhing and whimpering with pain. As Asanga approached the dog with great concern, he saw that the dog had a wound in its side that was infected and infested with maggots. Asanga felt great compassion for the dog and wished to relieve its suffering, and he thought immediately of cleaning the wound. But then he thought, "if I clean the wound of maggots, the maggots will surely die. They will have no food; they will have no place to live." Considering this, Asanga determined that he would remove the maggots to clean the dog's wound, and he would place the maggots on his own body so they could continue to live. Asanga reached out to do this and then stopped again. If I remove the maggots with my fingers, he thought, I might crush them. Asanga, then, without hesitation, acted on his next thought. Closing his eyes, Asanga leaned forward to lick the wound clean. Just as his tongue touched the dog the dog disappeared, and in its place, bathed in a pool of brilliant light, appeared Champa, the future Buddha. Asanga spoke to Champa. "Here you are. For years I lived in a cave on the mountain, alone. For years I meditated for hours each day with only the desire to see you. For so many years and in so many ways I have

tried to see you. Why do you come now? Now that I have left my retreat and given up my meditation? Why now do you appear before me?" Champa replied, "It is only now through your great act of compassion that your mind is pure and you are able to see me. In truth, I have been here the whole time."

Then Champa asked Asanga to carry him on his back into the city, so that other people might see him. And so Asanga entered the city with the future Buddha on his back, but the people, their minds clouded by impure thoughts, they could not see Champa. When Asanga cried out with joy, "Look, look and see, Champa is here, I am carrying him on my back," they thought Asanga was crazy. Yet, even so, there were a few that could see. One kind old woman looked and thought she saw a puppy on Asanga's back, and, even seeing this much, she was immediately given great riches. A poor but generous servant caught a glimpse of Champa's toes and from that moment onward attained great power and tranquility of mind. Champa then took Asanga to the heavens, where Asanga gained the teaching and insight that he had wanted for so many years. He attained great wisdom through his compassion for the smallest of creatures.

## Glossary

### bodhisattva

(Sanskrit) a being who is close to enlightenment. In the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism, the bodhisattva is one who postpones entrance to nirvana in order to aid all sentient beings in the quest for true awakening. (see Jizo, a Japanese bodhisattva on the Buddhism poster and refer to Buddhist CD, story #4) Note: the bodhisattva makes a supreme wish or vow, which varies from text to text. One of the better known versions of this vow reads:

*Living creatures are countless –  
I vow to save them all.  
Passions are inextinguishable –  
I vow to extinguish them all.  
Dharma-truths are measureless –  
I vow to master them all.  
The Buddha way is unexcelled –  
I vow to attain it.*

### Buddha

the term Buddha is taken from a Sanskrit word which means “to awaken.” This word was applied to Siddhartha, a human being who attained the awakened state and offered teachings to others who sought this way of being.

Educator's Note: The word Buddha is often considered synonymous with the individual human being Siddhartha, but the Buddhist tradition employs the word in many contexts and as a general concept. Students may wish to explore buddha nature, for example, or representations in Buddhist art of Celestial Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Within the scope of this material, the term Buddha is used solely as a reference to Siddhartha after the awakening.

### dharma

(Sanskrit: lit. meaning: “that which is established, the law”) In Buddhism, there are three general meanings to the word dharma. First, and principally in this material, the Buddha's teachings are dharma. In addition, dharma refers to duty and proper conduct in general, as well as, reality, “the way things really are.” In the section, “The Awakening” within the introduction to Buddhism, the understanding of the ways things really are is the understanding of reality. Reality, in that application and sense, is dharma.

## Four Noble Truths

1. All life is suffering.
2. All suffering is caused by selfish desire.
3. There is a way to put an end to suffering.
4. The way to end suffering is to follow the Middle Path.

Educator's Note: although these truths are generally presented in this order, they are better understood as interconnected, rather than sequential insights which offer a summary of the Buddha's teaching.

## Four Sights

the feeble old man, the one suffering with disease, the decaying corpse and the ascetic monk. In the fourth sight, Siddhartha saw a way in which he might approach his own quest for understanding the seemingly inevitable suffering of human beings.

## Mahayana

One of the two main branches of Buddhism, the other being Theravada. Among many other distinctions, Mahayana emphasizes the possibility of awakening and transcendence for all living beings regardless of class or gender.

## mala

Buddhist rosary. A string of 108 beads which are touched during chants and other Buddhist devotions.

## Mandala

(Sanskrit: lit. meaning: "round, circular") An art form comprised of circles, carefully placed within larger concentric circles. Mandalas are thought to be based on the circular nature of worship around the stupa. They are also considered to be representations of the cosmos as a series of balanced, symmetrical circles which may include likenesses of deities, the Buddha, other figures and/or symbolic representations of reality. Mandalas function as the objects of worship, as foci for meditation, and as works which help to focus the mind and raise understanding and consciousness in the act of their creation. Mandalas are used in both Hindu and Buddhist practices.

## metaphysical

supernatural, immaterial, incorporeal

## **Middle Path**

also referred to as The Eightfold Path, the comprehensive and practical discipline which constitutes the Fourth Noble Truths. The Middle Path offers a way, a path, for followers of the Buddha to attain awakening and entrance to Nirvana.

## **Nirvana**

(Sanskrit: lit. meaning: "blowing out, extinguishing") Nirvana is the state of enlightened and transformed consciousness in which all passions and desires are extinguished and the cycles of birth and rebirth ended. Nirvana is the ultimate goal of Buddhism, but also a term used by Hindus to describe release from the cycle of moksha. This state is not definable per se, but must be attained. It cannot be "known," but rather realized.

Educator's Note: It is important to remember that as often as not within the sacred texts, Nirvana is described as much by what it is NOT, as what it IS. Therefore, in discussions with students, it is critical for teachers to employ the same technique. Nirvana is not death. Nirvana is not a place, like heaven or hell. Nirvana is not a condition or state one enters after death. Nirvana is not obscure or mysterious in anyway; it is seen, enjoyed, approached; Nirvana is real. Nirvana is not some greater death – that is, it is not the death of the soul.

## **Pali Canon**

31 texts written within the first five hundred years after the life of the Buddha. Considered to be the most complete and generally regarded as the earliest of the collections of Buddhist teachings. Written in Pali, an ancient eastern language, these texts contain the core dharma of the Theravada stream of Buddhism. The text includes instructions for monastic life, discourses of the Buddha and analysis of the dharma.

## **rituals**

prescribed forms and orders for conducting religious or other ceremonies. In the context of this material, ritual is used to describe individual and corporate activities which are designed, controlled and repeated as a part of religious devotion.



## **sangha**

(Pali: lit. meaning: “assembly or community”) the community of like-minded individuals following the Buddha’s teaching. Together with the Buddha himself, and the dharma, these three form the Three Jewels of Buddhism. The Buddha established the first sangha. Often sangha refers to monastic communities, but is also applied to any group who offers the company and support of individuals who are following the Buddha.

## **Sanskrit**

the ritual and sacred language of Hinduism, also used in Buddhist writings. The Vedas represent the first use of this language. Sanskrit has the unique capacity of holding the wisdom of the sages. (see Hindu glossary)

## **stupa**

(Sanskrit: lit, meaning: “a tuft of hair” or “crown of head”) a shrine built on a mound of earth, around or over relics or the ashes of the Buddha or other holy individuals. Stupas differ from temples in that they are not entered for worship. Devotees circle the stupa, touching malas, chanting, saying prayers and performing other acts of respect and devotion.

## **Theravada**

(Pali: lit. meaning: “the way of the elders”) One of the two main streams of Buddhism, considered by many to be the more conservative of the two, with a commitment to approaching modern life with the same responses as the ancestors. Theravada doctrine maintains that while Nirvana is available to all Buddhists, it is almost impossible for anyone other than monks to achieve it.

## **Three Jewels of Buddhism**

the term used to denote the Buddha, the dharma and the sangha.