

## **BUDDHIST BELIEF & PRACTICE IN THAILAND**

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GRADE LEVEL: High School      AUTHOR: Roger E. Barrows

SUBJECT: World Religions, Humanities, Asian Studies, AP Art History

TIME REQUIRED: 2 class sessions; additional days for projects

OBJECTIVES: As a result of this lesson, students will learn:

1. Buddhist beliefs and practices vary from region to region in Asia, as evidenced in the case study of Thai Buddhism.
2. Two major branches of Buddhism are Mahayana and Theravada; Thai Buddhism is Theravada.
3. Thai Buddhism has a *syncretic* quality, which reflects the culture and its influences.
4. Art and architecture reflect the culture/beliefs that create it.
5. Iconography (symbolism) helps the viewer “read” and understand sacred art.
6. Buddhism has strongly influenced Thai life and art.
7. The lessons of Thai Buddhist monks convey the essential beliefs of the religion.

RATIONALE:

1. Buddhism is one of the major religions, not only of Thailand, but of the world.
2. Buddhist art and architecture visually convey the essence of the religion.
3. Thai art and culture reveal strong Buddhist tendencies; understanding of the religion and its practices can aid in understanding the underpinnings of the culture.

SUNSHINE STATE STANDARDS:

### Visual Arts—Cultural and Historical Connections

Standard 1: The student understands the visual arts in relation to history and culture.

VA.C.1.4.1: understands how social, cultural, ecological, economic, religious, and political conditions influence the function, meaning, and execution of works of art.

### Language Arts—Reading

Standard 2: The student constructs meaning from a wide range of texts.

LA.A.2.4.2: determines the author’s purpose and point of view and their effects on the text.

### Language Arts—Writing

Standard 2: The student writes to communicate ideas and information effectively.

LA.B.2.4.3: writes fluently for a variety of occasions, audiences, and purposes, making appropriate choices regarding style, tone, level of detail, and organization.

### Social Studies—History

Standard 3: The student understands Western and Eastern civilization since the Renaissance.

SS.A.3.4.4: knows the significant ideas and texts of Buddhism

PRIMARY SOURCES:

1. Images, available on the internet, of Buddhist temples and Buddha statues from Asia
2. Buddhist lessons drawn from Ajahn Chah

GENERAL PLAN:

Lesson plans, with essential background, followed by relevant activities and essay topics.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR TEACHER:

### I. Siddhartha Gautama—"the Buddha"

- A. He was born into a Hindu family, circa 500 B.C. in India.
- B. Prophets foresaw Siddhartha growing up to become either a world king or a spiritual leader.
- C. Preferring the former, his father raised Siddhartha in a world of beauty, keeping him within the palace compound.
- D. At age 29 (married with 1 son) and discontent, Siddhartha ventured out of the palace and saw four sights—an old man, a sick man, a dead man, and an ascetic/beggar; he was astonished at each sight and returned to the palace.
- E. He departed from the palace for good, beginning a journey in search of answers: what is happiness? what causes people to be unhappy?
- F. He studied with the best teachers, tried ascetic practices, and finally turned to meditation; he sat under a bo (bodhi) tree and became Buddha ("the awakened one" or "enlightened one").
- G. He reached nirvana—defined as "true peace and contentment"; "extinction of all craving, resentment, and covetousness"; "the state of spiritual and physical purity necessary to attain freedom from the ongoing cycle of suffering and rebirth."
- H. Someone stopped him on the road, seeing his luminous quality, and asked, "Who are you? A god?" His response: "I am awake."
- I. He found "The Middle Path" of harmony between the extremes of life: over-indulgence (passions & sensuality) and asceticism
- J. He became a teacher, saying, "I teach only two things: suffering and release from suffering."
- K. He taught that suffering is the result of a lack of harmony—not accepting the world as it is.
  1. Our cravings are the cause of human suffering; people who crave cannot be free and are thus not really happy.
  2. To gain self-knowledge, we should look for the cause of our craving and remove the cause.
- L. He taught the Four Noble Truths
  1. Life is tainted by suffering (dukkha): aging, death, sickness, sorrow, grief, despair, not getting what one wants. We try to hold on to things— power, beauty, wealth—as if they are permanent. Things that are beautiful cause suffering because we want to hold on to them, but they don't last forever.
  2. Suffering is caused by craving—a selfish desire for gratification of the passions, for success in this life, or for things that only serve to disappoint us.
  3. There is a method to eliminate this suffering: eliminate the craving.
  4. This can be accomplished by following the Eightfold Path:
    - a. right viewpoint – use your mind to understand the universe as it is
    - b. right aspiration – want only what is worthwhile (love & kindness)
    - c. right speech – speak honorably, without gossip and slander
    - d. right behavior – act with justice and mercy
    - e. right livelihood – follow an occupation which does not harm others
    - f. right effort – apply your energies to what truly matters
    - g. right mindfulness – focus your mind on what is important and true
    - h. right contemplation – control your own mind through meditation
- M. These last two steps of the Eightfold Path comprise the essence of the Buddhist life, as they involve meditation, the heart of Buddhism. Through meditation, you can see beyond appearances and recognize the world for what it really is. The Buddha described himself as "awake," but most of us are half-asleep. Waking up demands that we practice the discipline of meditation, through which an individual can develop an alert and calm mind. Meditation is not an escape from the world, but a discipline that helps us focus on being fully alive every moment.
- N. The ultimate aim of Buddhism is the achievement of nirvana. The Buddha called nirvana "indescribable, inconceivable, unutterable." Why is it indescribable? Attaining nirvana means entering a consciousness beyond what we now know, so words we have to explain our present

understanding of reality are insufficient. Nirvana is a state beyond our present thoughts and feelings. "From earthly thoughts, you cannot conceive of nirvana; in nirvana, you cannot think earthly thoughts." (-Diana Eck)

- O. His last words: "Be lamps unto yourselves." What does this mean? You must seek truth for yourself; you cannot discover truth through someone else's experiences, or from sacrifices or sacred texts. You must forge your own path and see for yourself, reach your own enlightenment.
- P. Humans have a tendency to cling to things, to views, to familiar ways; these provide security. However, the way to liberation is not by hanging on, but by letting go.
- Q. The Buddha has always been seen as a great teacher. He taught people to learn for themselves. A woman came in grief to the Buddha because her child had died. She expected the Buddha to use some sort of power to bring the child back. He sent her to get a mustard seed from a house that had seen no sorrow. She went from house to house, and in listening and caring about others, she realized that everyone has suffered, and she found solace in helping others.

## II. Case Study: Belief to Practice—Buddhism in Thailand

- A. Buddhism spread from India through Sri Lanka into Thailand.
- B. Theravada Buddhism became the state religion with the establishment of the Thai kingdom in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. See charts and map below for differentiating Theravada from Mahayana Buddhism.
  - 1. [http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/fastfacts/differences\\_theravada\\_mahayana.htm](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/fastfacts/differences_theravada_mahayana.htm)
  - 2. <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/snapshot02.htm>
  - 3. <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhistworld/schools1.htm>
- C. Thai Buddhism is syncretic.
  - 1. Syncretic means "the attempted reconciliation or union of different or opposing principles, practices, or parties, as in philosophy or religion."
  - 2. Thai Buddhism attempted to reconcile and integrate different beliefs existing in Thailand at the time Buddhism was introduced into the country.
  - 3. Hinduism from Cambodia influenced both Thai society and religion; the presence of shrines to Brahma and Ganesha in Buddhist wats is an example of this influence.
  - 4. Local folk religion and animism became integrated with Buddhism, as evidenced in the erection of spirit houses to appease nature deities, as well as in the wearing of charms and amulets.
- D. Thai Buddhist Practices
  - 1. Unlike most western religions, there is no Sabbath day in which everyone congregates in a holy place. Most Thai homes have an altar or Buddha at which many Thais pray each day.
  - 2. Prayer generally consists of reading or reciting scripture and paying respect to the Buddha.
  - 3. On special days or as individually desired, Thais will visit their local wai (Buddhist temple compound), where they may pray, meditate, and/or listen to a monk's preachings.
  - 4. See [http://www.buddhanet.net/thai\\_cal.htm](http://www.buddhanet.net/thai_cal.htm) for Thai Buddhist calendar and rituals.
  - 5. Merit making occurs when a Buddhist does some action which helps bring about good karma. One common way that Thais make merit is by offering food and supplies to monks, who beg for their food. The following list is from a survey in which Thais ranked the most important ways of making merit (from <http://thaibuddhist.com/making-merit.html>):
    - a. Becoming a monk
    - b. Contributing enough money for the construction of a monastery
    - c. Having a son ordained as a monk
    - d. Making excursions to Buddhist shrines throughout Thailand
    - e. Contributing towards the repair of a monastery
    - f. Giving food daily to the monks and giving food on holy days
    - g. Becoming a novice
    - h. Attending a temple on all holy days and obeying the eight precepts on these days
    - i. Obeying the five precepts at all times
  - 6. Buddhists are guided to follow the five precepts, or moral principles, in their daily lives.
    - a. Do not kill.

- b. Do not steal.
  - c. Do not engage in improper sexual conduct.
  - d. Do not make false statements.
  - e. Do not drink alcohol.
  - f. See <http://thaibuddhist.com/thai-buddhism/breaking-the-five-precepts.html> on these precepts, as well as the precepts for novices and monks.
  - g. See also <http://www.suite101.com/content/the-five-precepts-of-buddhism-a82977>.
7. Many young Thai men over age 20 become monks for a self-determined period of time, typically three months.
    - a. This is a way of honoring and making merit for his parents.
    - b. It is also a way of learning the Buddhist way before entering into his worklife.
    - c. See <http://www.thaibuddhist.com/ordination.htm>.
  8. While Thai spirit houses are a product of spirit worship/animism rather than of Buddhist thinking, many Thai Buddhists erect spirit houses outside their homes and workplaces to appease the nature spirits.
  9. Meditation is considered by many Thais to be the single most essential practice in Buddhism.

### III. Buddhist Sculpture: a Thai Seated Buddha

- A. "A Buddha image is not a picture of the historical Buddha. We are all Buddha beings; all things are Buddha beings. So, an image of the Buddha is not a graven image to be understood concretely. It is a meditation tool, something to be seen through. It is a support for meditation on the Buddhahood within you, not a depiction of any historical Buddha 'out there'." (–Joseph Campbell)
- B. Not an idol, but an object that helps in meditation
- C. Expresses essential message of Buddhism: inner peace and contemplation
- D. Buddhist iconography (symbols)
  1. Lotus – because it grows out of the mud (ignorance) into the sunlight (enlightenment)
  2. Split and elongated earlobes – renunciation of riches (when Buddha was a prince, he used to wear heavy jewels)
  3. Mark (sometimes jewel) on forehead – the third (or inner) eye of enlightened vision
  4. Ushnisa - protrusion on top of head – wisdom
  5. Closed eyes – looking inward
  6. Smile of peace
  7. Common mudras (hand positions)
    - a. Palms together – worship
    - b. Right hand up as if illustrating a lesson – teaching
    - c. Raised right hand, palm forward – "fear-not"
    - d. One hand touching earth – moment of enlightenment
    - e. One finger wrapped in other hand – finger symbolizes the world and hand symbolizes world of Buddhism – unity
  8. Thai Seated Buddhas are distinguished from those of India, China, and Japan due to the flame of enlightenment emanating from the top of the head and to the often gilded surface.

### IV. Buddhist Temple Architecture: The Wat

- A. A Buddhist temple compound found in Southeast Asia.
- B. There are many thousands of wats in Southeast Asia, and while they are all different, many have the following features.
  1. Wall and Gate
    - a. Typically, a wall around a wat separates the sacred from the secular; as you leave the busy world and enter the gate, you should prepare for a spiritual experience.
    - b. The gate symbolizes the initial step on the path towards enlightenment.
    - c. The gate is usually very fancy and glittering. Reflective mosaics and even mirrors drive away evil spirits; the spirits see their own reflection and are frightened off.

2. The *bot* is a building reserved for monks to worship; symbolically, it is the finest and most decorated building of a wat.
  - a. It usually contains the most beautiful Buddha statue in the wat.
  - b. The roofs are typically made of red tiles and are stacked in odd numbers, which are considered lucky.
  - c. Traditional belief that evil travels in straight lines; curved roofs intended to stop evil from entering building
  - d. Grimacing guardian figures (yaks) outside of the bot ward off evil spirits.
  - e. Often, serpent figures called Naga are outside the bot; Naga was said to protect the Buddha when he was meditating.
2. The *viharn* or *vihara* is the congregational center for listening to lessons or sermons from the monks. It is usually the largest building in the complex.
3. The *Chedi*, or stupa, is the tallest building in the complex
  - a. It is used to store relics.
  - b. It is in the form of a lotus, symbolizing the rising beauty and enlightenment rising out of the world.
  - c. It typically has a base (symbolizing hell), a middle portion (symbolizing humanity), a peak (symbolizing the heavenly state), and the space beyond (symbolizing nirvana).
4. Other buildings can be found at <http://www.thaiworldview.com/wat/wat.htm>.
5. Also often found in a wat
  - a. Donated objects, as a way for people to make merit; these may include food left before a statue or items placed on the statue.
  - b. Hindu images, such as Brahman and Ganesha, indicating the influence of Hinduism in Thailand.
  - c. Chaofah, decorative swan-like birds rising from the temple roof peaks, are thought to protect the temple from flying demons.
  - d. Paintings and relief sculptures telling the story of the Buddha or mythological tales.
  - e. Vendors selling birds or fish, which Buddhists can buy and set free, as a way of making merit.
6. Temples are generally positioned in harmony with nature
  - a. A place of peace
  - b. A place of inspiration for spiritual journey

#### LESSON PLAN PROCEDURE:

- A. Teacher uses Background Information and pictures to lead a lesson on Buddhism, its art and architecture, encouraging shared discussion and individual insights.
- C. In small group or full-class discussions, students and teacher read and discuss the Buddhist similes of the Venerable Ajahn Chah and two Buddhist anecdotes.
- D. Teacher encourages students to participate in short, in-class meditations (non-religious) to experience “wakefulness” and the common difficulty of maintaining focus. Meditations are exercises to develop the mind. There are thousands of kinds of meditation. The Buddha taught “the right medicine for the right person.” Our minds are like a wild stallion running around the corral; the aim of meditation is to calm it. There are several possibilities:
  1. Seated meditation – with spine erect but the body comfortable, attempt to empty the mind and center attention on breathing in and out.
  2. Eating meditation – eat raisins consciously, with complete mindfulness; take one in hand and experience it with all senses; consider the journey it’s been through; put in mouth and let it sit on tongue, then begin chewing it slowly, noticing all reactions; finally swallow.
  3. Walking meditation – walk very slowly, focusing on walking: “lifting, moving, placing”; keep saying these silently in your mind; brings enhanced awareness of simple activities of the body. Avoid all distractions.
- E. Students should then work individually or cooperatively on any of the following activities:

1. Create an illustrated dictionary of Buddhist iconography.
2. Interpret several postcards or photocopies of Buddhist images.
3. Compare a Thai Seated Buddha to an Indian or Chinese Seated Buddha. Create a chart for comparison, using the following headings: materials used, mudras used, symbols used, other differences.
4. Compare the smiles of the Buddha and the Mona Lisa.
5. Compare the layouts of a wat and Chartres Cathedral: what does each convey about its religion's beliefs?

#### EVALUATION:

In addition to evaluating the activities above, the following essay questions will reveal students' understanding of the lesson:

1. Identify and discuss the parts of a Thai wat.
2. Discuss the essential tenets of Buddhism and ways in which Thais practice their religion.
3. Identify and interpret the iconography of the accompanying image of the Buddha, and discuss what this figure conveys about Buddhism.
4. Discuss how the traveler's journey through a wat is comparable to the Buddhist's spiritual journey towards enlightenment.

#### SOURCES:

Eck, Diana. Lecture on Buddhism. May 2001.

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Reps, Paul and Nyogen Senzaki, eds. *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones: A Collection of Zen and Pre-Zen Writings*. Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 1957.

Ross, Nancy Wilson. *Three Ways of Asian Wisdom*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1966.

Utah Museum of Fine Arts. [http://centralpt.com/upload/417/9986\\_ImagesofBuddhalessons.pdf](http://centralpt.com/upload/417/9986_ImagesofBuddhalessons.pdf)

"Wat Is It? Thai Temple Architecture." <http://aurore13.wordpress.com/2009/06/03/wat-is-it-thai-temple-architecture/>

#### THREE BUDDHIST SIMILES

[from *A Tree in a Forest: A Collection of Ajahn Chah's Similes*, by Venerable Ajahn Chah, Bangkok: Panyaprateep Foundation, 2008]

#### DEEP HOLE

Most people just want to perform good deeds to make merit, but they don't want to give up wrongdoing. It's just that "the hole is too deep."

Suppose there was a hole and there was something at the bottom of it. Now anyone who put his hand into the hole and didn't reach the bottom would say the hole was too deep. If a hundred or a thousand people put their hands down the hole, they'd all say the hole is too deep. No one would say that his arm was too short! We have to come back to ourselves. We have to take a step back and look at ourselves. Don't blame the hole for being too deep. Turn around and look at your own arm. If you can see this, then you will make progress on the spiritual path and will find happiness.

#### FISH

We don't want desire, but if there is no desire, why practice? We must have desire to practice. Wanting and not-wanting are both benefits, both problems, delusions, lacking wisdom. Buddha had desire too. It's there all the time, only a condition of the mind. Those with wisdom, however, have desire but no attachment. Our desires are like catching a big fish in a net—we wait until the fish loses strength and then we can catch it easily. But all the time we keep on watching it so that it doesn't escape.

## FLASHLIGHT

In Buddhism we are endlessly hearing about letting go and about not clinging to anything. What does this mean? It means to take hold but not to cling. Take this flashlight, for example. We wonder: "What is this?" So we pick it up: "Oh, it's a flashlight." Then we put it down again. We hold things in this way. If we didn't hold anything at all, what could we do? We couldn't do walking meditation or anything else, so we must take hold of things first. It's wanting, yes, that's true, but later on it leads to perfection.... We don't foolishly cling to things, but we "hold" them with wisdom and then let them go. Good or bad, we let them all go.

## TWO BUDDHIST ANECDOTES

[from Reps, Paul and Nyogen Senzaki, eds. *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones: A Collection of Zen and Pre-Zen Writings*, edited by Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki, Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 1957.]

### A PARABLE

Buddha told this parable:

A man traveling across a field encountered a tiger. He fled, the tiger after him. Coming to a precipice, he caught hold of the root of a wild vine and swung himself down over the edge. The tiger sniffed at him from above. Trembling, the man looked down to where, far below, another tiger was waiting to eat him. Only the vine sustained him.

Two mice, one white and one black, little by little started to gnaw away the vine. The man saw a luscious strawberry near him. Grasping the vine with one hand, he plucked the strawberry with the other. How sweet it tasted!

### MUDDY ROAD

Tanzan and Ekido were once traveling together down a muddy road. A heavy rain was still falling.

Coming around a bend, they met a lovely girl in a silk kimono and sash, unable to cross the intersection.

"Come on, girl," said Tanzan at once. Lifting her in his arms, he carried her over the mud.

Ekido did not speak again until that night when they reached a lodging temple. Then he no longer could restrain himself. "We monks don't go near females," he told Tanzan, "especially not young and lovely ones. It is dangerous. Why did you do that?"

"I left the girl there," said Tanzan. "Are you still carrying her?"