Thangka of Bhaishajyaguru, the Medicine Buddha
Tibet, 14th century

Poster Packet
Department of Museum Education
Division of Student and Teacher Programs
The Elizabeth Stone Robson Teacher Resource Center
This colorful **thangka**, or scroll painting, represents the Buddha as the master of medicine and teacher of healers. As the patron deity of Tibetan medicine, he is a healer of both the body and spirit. The figure of the Medicine Buddha dominates the center of the painting. He is depicted with bright blue skin, seated in meditation on a multicolored *lotus*-flower throne, and dressed in an elegant red-and-gold robe. His eyes are partly closed, as if in deep concentration, and the palms of his hands and the soles of his feet are a brilliant orange color. In his right hand, the Buddha holds a flowering plant believed to have healing properties. Not only is this painting rich in meaning; it is a beautiful aesthetic achievement, and the harmonious use of bold, vibrant colors is characteristic of Tibetan art.

Thangkas are intended to serve as a guide for contemplative experience and to focus the mind during meditation. They also enrich religious ceremonies with color, and provide devotees with depictions of the Buddha, other important deities, and *lamas*, or highly respected teachers from the past. Buddhists might imagine themselves as the Buddha figure in the painting, using the thangka as a reference for the details of posture, attitude, color, and clothing.

**The Spread of Buddhism**

This thangka painting was created over 600 years ago by an artist in Tibet, part of the Himalayan region in Southeast Asia that is made up of high plateaus and some of the world’s tallest mountains, including Mount Everest. Previously an independent country, Tibet was annexed by China in 1951 and its official name is now the Tibetan Autonomous Region of the People’s Republic of China. As a part of southwest China, Tibet is bordered by Myanmar, India, Bhutan, and Nepal. It has always been a relatively isolated country because of its mountainous geography, but Tibetans have had continuous contact with China and India, as well as other cultures throughout thousands of years of their history.

Buddhism spread to Tibet from India in the 7th century, and it soon became the most important religion in the region. It also spread to China and other surrounding countries in part due to the movement of merchants and traders along the Silk Road, a series of trading routes that crossed central Asia. Buddhism changed and adapted to local beliefs as it spread throughout Asia, and so Tibetan Buddhist culture is somewhat different from that of other countries. The type of Buddhism practiced in Tibet is called Vajrayana Buddhism, and one of its unique characteristics is the importance of lamas, or highly respected teachers. The **Dalai Lama**, a leader whose name means “ocean of wisdom,” has traditionally been the religious and political leader of Tibet. There have been fourteen Dalai Lamas in succession, and each one is considered a reincarnation of his predecessor. The current Dalai Lama lives in exile in India, where he is free to practice his religion without the oversight of the Chinese government.

Siddhartha Gautama, the man who came to be known as the Buddha (he is also known as Buddha Shakyamuni), was born a young prince in northeastern India (now Nepal) in the 6th century B.C. After seeing human suffering around him, he renounced the privileged class he was born into in favor of living an *ascetic* life. During his lifetime, he discovered a means to escape the endless cycle of death and rebirth that, according to his teachings, is determined by an individual’s *karma*, their accumulated actions. Through meditation, the Buddha attained a state of **enlightenment**, the end of reincarnation and suffering; in fact the name Buddha means “the enlightened one.” After his enlightenment at the age of 35, Buddha traveled around India for 45 years teaching others what he had learned and suggesting a code for living. He developed guidelines for thoughts and actions to help all beings reach this state of absolute peace. In his first speech, given in 528 B.C. to a group of his followers in Sarnath, in northeast India, Buddha introduced his understanding of the Four Noble Truths:

- All life is suffering.
- Suffering is caused by desire.
- To eliminate suffering, eliminate desire.
- To eliminate desire, follow the Noble Eightfold Path.

In Buddhism, morality is left up to the individual and is expressed through accumulated actions, or *karma*. The Noble Eightfold Path is at the center of daily Buddhist
practices. It is not a ritual performed by priests but a guide for all people to live by, known as the dharma. It means adopting right (true or correct) views, right thoughts, right conduct, right speech, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness (putting aside greed and distress), and right meditation. The reward for following the Noble Eightfold Path is the achievement of enlightenment.

**Buddhist Art**

One important aspect of traditional Tibetan Buddhist culture is the practice of creating images to be used in worship, like this thangka painting. A thangka is a painted or embroidered Tibetan banner that was hung in a monastery or over a family altar and was also carried in ceremonial processions. In Tibetan the word “than” means “flat” and the suffix “ka” means “painting.” A thangka is usually painted on cotton and framed in silk brocade, and is meant to be a portable icon. Because thangkas can be rolled, they can travel easily with monks who move from village to village. Their vibrant colors brightened the often dark interiors of temples and monasteries.

Thangkas are created in a careful and systematic way, involving six steps. The first step is to apply a priming layer of paint to the cloth to prepare the surface to be painted. Then the artist creates a separate sketch, laying out the figures and structure of the design in great detail. After that, the artist draws a grid of lines onto the cloth and transfers his design. The artist then applies the first layers of paint; the pigments are ground from semiprecious stones and other natural materials. Gradually more layers of paint are added for shading and outlining until the painting is complete.

Artists throughout Asia have created a standard way to depict the Buddha, so that people could always recognize him when looking at a painting or sculpture. The Buddha can be recognized by his ushnisha (prominent bump on the top of his head) and urna (dot or mole on his forehead), signifying his extraordinary wisdom. Short hair and elongated earlobes represent his renunciation of the princely life in which long, beautiful hair and heavy earrings (which stretched the earlobes) were desired. Although images of the Buddha have similarities, artists have created many versions, and if you look closely no two depictions are exactly alike.

Other typical characteristics of the Buddha include mudras, or hand gestures that signal his various roles of teaching, meditating, protecting, and urging generosity. Every mudra symbolizes something different. In this painting, the Medicine Buddha’s right hand is in the meditation mudra, resting in his lap. His left hand rests upon his knee with the palm facing outward in the mudra granting blessings, and holds the stem of a flowering plant believed to have healing properties.

In this work of art two bodhisattvas, or compassionate beings, flank the Buddha. A bodhisattva is a person who has attained enlightenment, but chooses to remain in the cycle of life and death in order to help others escape the cycle of human suffering. A bodhisattva provides help to other beings over a series of lifetimes, transferring his own karmic merit, or buildup of good deeds, to other beings. Their gold and silver complexions represent the bright splendor of the sun and the moon, and they act as the eternal helpers of the Buddha. These figures wear the sparkling gold jewelry of princes, showing that they still reside in the earthly realm.

A number of other figures of deities surround the central figure of the Medicine Buddha, arranged in neat rows. Seven more Medicine Buddhas, a goddess, and a sword-carrying god are directly above the Buddha’s head, in the top center. Below them a number of bodhisattvas wearing elaborate crowns gather in adoration. The side edges of the thangka are patrolled by two vertical rows of protective deities riding various animal mounts. These figures are directly derived from Hindu gods who have been incorporated into the service of the Buddha. Along the bottom of the thangka are two rows of Jambhala wealth deities who hold jewel-spitting mongooses, and four armored figures in the two lower corners represent the cardinal directions—North, South, East, and West. At the base of the Buddha’s lotus throne a green carpet overflows behind a small figure. This is Padmasambhava, a legendary mystic who formally introduced Buddhism to Tibet from India. The whole composition is set in shallow space almost like a stage, and all of the figures appear very close to the picture plane in their own small red niches.

There is no signature on this painting, and we do not know the name of the artist who created it. Buddhist art is made primarily for religious ceremonies and meditation, and for many Tibetan painters individual expression is not as important as following traditional designs and depicting a particular deity correctly. The artist’s goal is to complete a painting that includes the details necessary to serve its proper religious function.
**Bhaishajyaguru, The Medicine Buddha**

Originally, there was only one Buddha (Shakyamuni). However, according to later Buddhist doctrine an infinite number of Buddhas work in multiple universes (past, present, and future) for the benefit of all beings. Artists have depicted many different types of Buddha images as subjects for devotion, and one of the most popular of these is the Medicine Buddha, who represents the Buddha’s ability to embody healing for all beings. The Medicine Buddha is said to “heal humanity of all sins and unpleasant circumstances.” He has many of the features of a typical Buddha image, including a lotus flower throne and an urna on his forehead, as well as his own distinctive attributes.

The most distinctive feature of the Medicine Buddha is the deep blue color of his skin, painted from the blue of the gemstone lapis lazuli. Asian and European cultures have greatly prized this semiprecious stone for more than 6000 years. An aura of mystery surrounds it, perhaps because it is very rare and comes from a remote area of northeast Afghanistan. Traditionally this beautiful stone was used to symbolize something that is pure or rare. It is said to have a curative or strengthening effect on those who wear it against the three poisons of desire, hatred, and delusion, and its natural smoothness allows it to be polished to become highly reflective. For all these reasons lapis lazuli is the principal color of the Medicine Buddha.⁴

**Tibetan Medicine**

Tibetan medicine is one of the oldest medical systems in the world. It is a science, art, and philosophy that promotes a holistic approach to health care. In Tibetan medical practice, mental well-being is just as important as physical well-being, and the two are believed to be intimately connected. For Tibetan Buddhists, many things in the physical world, including the state of one’s body, is determined by a person’s mindset. All disease and illness is the result of negative karma from past bad deeds. The role of the doctor is to guide the patient toward greater self-awareness. As one Tibetan philosopher has written, “True healing begins when we discover within ourselves that place where we are linked with the larger forces of the universe.”⁵

In Tibet, the Medicine Buddha is revered as the source of the healing arts, for it is through him that the teachings embodied in the Four Medical Tantras, the basis of Tibetan medicine, came into being. The practice of the Medicine Buddha is not only a very powerful method for healing and increasing healing powers both for oneself and others, but also for overcoming the inner sickness of attachment, hatred, and ignorance. Tibetans hope for health in order to live a long life and thus have more time to progress on the spiritual journey toward enlightenment.⁶ If you are ill, a Tibetan doctor might advise you to change your diet or your behavior. The treatments a Tibetan doctor would prescribe include natural medicines made from plants, minerals, and animals. From as early as the 7th century, dialogue between the leading physicians of India, China, Nepal, Byzantium, Persia, and Tibet resulted in a large body of accumulated knowledge, making the Tibetan medical tradition one of the richest in the world.

Although you cannot usually see it, there is an inscription on the back of this painting in Tibetan that is over 100 lines long. It includes prayers and religious verses that honor the Medicine Buddha. The authors of this poem asked to be liberated from the suffering of the earthy world, reborn in the paradise of the Medicine Buddha, and purified of all sins. They also request to improve their own karma and the karma of all living things, and to be blessed with great compassion.⁷ Although we do not know the names of the patrons who commissioned this painting, the inscription tells us how important the image of the Medicine Buddha was to them.

Notes
Discussion Questions
A discussion of this work of art is an excellent way to introduce students to the basic principles of Buddhism, Asian geography, the differences between Eastern and Western medical beliefs and practices, and the traditional Tibetan artistic technique of thangka painting. Below are some examples of possible discussion questions:

• What shapes, symmetry, and organization can you find in this painting? (shapes include circles, ovals, straight lines, and rectangles; the Buddha figure is placed centrally on the vertical axis, and the figures are arranged in rows)

• Why is color so important in this work of art? Why did the artist choose these particular colors? (blue and orange are complementary colors, the artist makes the blue Buddha figure stand out by placing an orange background behind him)

• Look closely at the painting. What animals and people can you see? (orange peacocks on either side of the Buddha’s head; white lions below the Buddha; small deities are riding on horses, cattle, an elephant, a deer, large birds, and other real and imaginary animals.)

• What does the size and placement of the figures tell you about their importance? (Larger, centrally placed figures are the most important.)

• What is the general mood of the painting? Make a list of adjectives you could use to describe this work of art. (possible answers: calm, soothing, ordered; some of the figures at the bottom appear violent, aggressive, chaotic, etc.)

• How can you tell this is an image of a Buddha? Using works suggested in the Related Resources section, find other images of the Buddha from other cultures and time periods and place them next to each other on a bulletin board. What similarities and differences can you find? (Many images of the Buddha have an urna, an usnisha, elongated earlobes, and sometimes a ring of flames behind the Buddha’s head.)

• Find Tibet on a map and research Tibet’s geography. What is unique about this country? How big is it in comparison to the United States? To Illinois? (Tibet is often called “the roof of the world.” It averages over 4,950 meters above sea level with peaks at 6,000 to 7,500 meters, including Mount Everest. The area of the Tibetan Autonomous Region is 1.22 million square kilometers, while the US is 9.63 million and Illinois is 145,800 square kilometers.)

• Find stories in recent newspapers and magazines about Tibet. Why is Tibet politically controversial today? (Tibet is controversial because its leaders want to regain independence from China and preserve traditional Tibetan culture and religion, while the Chinese government wants to exert control over the region. The construction of highways linking Tibet to China that began in the 1950s has brought modern technology, goods, and outside influences into Tibet, but these changes have also disrupted traditional culture.)

Classroom Applications
Art Activity: Make a Personal Mandala
• Explain to students that one important art form in Tibet is a mandala, which is used as a guide to meditation. A mandala helps believers visualize the universe and their place in it, often in relation to a specific deity found in the center of the image. It is a symmetrical, geometrical form consisting chiefly of circles and squares, and uses four colors: white, yellow, green, and red. Show students various images of mandalas. Images of mandalas can be found at http://www.himalayanart.org. Go to the index and look up “mandala.”

• Ask each student to design their own personal mandala that will reveal their interests and unique qualities. Remind them that it should follow some of the basic principles of Tibetan art; it should be symmetrical, colorful, and each figure or object included should have a symbolic meaning.

• Have each student take a square piece of poster board, and using a ruler draw lines that bisect the square vertically, horizontally, and diagonally. Then let students create their own geometric patterns and draw their personal symbolic images in each space.

Writing Activity: Understanding Buddhism
• Ask students if they have heard of Buddhism or the Buddha and ask them to talk freely about what they may know about this religion and its founder. Ask if they have ever seen images related to Buddhism in books, at home, or in an Asian restaurant, for example.
• Explain to students that the Buddha was a Hindu prince who challenged existing beliefs when he learned about suffering around him. Briefly describe the story of Buddha’s enlightenment. Ask students why they think it might have been desirable to the Buddha for humans to escape the cycle of death and rebirth, and discuss the concept of enlightenment. Then ask the students if they have experienced an event that has led them to a new and better way of thinking. Have students write a narrative essay describing the experience and how it changed them.

Health Connection: How Do You Stay Well?
• Ask students to imagine what advice the Medicine Buddha would give for staying healthy, both physically and mentally. Eating healthy foods, exercising and playing outdoors, drinking lots of water, and going to the doctor’s office are some examples of ways to stay physically healthy. In Tibetan medicine, good actions are also important. To be healthy, one must treat others with compassion, generosity, respect, and understanding. For example, sharing with your friends and classmates, following your parents’ instructions, and telling the truth are examples of good actions.

• After researching Buddhism and Tibetan medicine, as well as thinking about their own family’s culture and traditions, have students make two lists: one of good habits for physical health and one of good habits for mental or spiritual health, and discuss how these habits can be related.

Glossary
ascetic (n/adj)
one who rejects worldly attachment, going without basic needs and experiencing hardship, in the belief that this deprivation will lead to spiritual wisdom; adopting the ways of an ascetic

attribute (n)
object or characteristic closely associated with or belonging to a specific person or thing; in art, often used to identify representations of known individuals, such as gods or saints

Buddha Shakyamuni (n)
Historical figure named Siddhartha Gautama who lived in India in the 6th century B.C. He was born into a wealthy family but chose to give up a life of privilege in order to find a way to relieve human suffering. According to his teachings, he discovered a means to escape the endless cycle of death and rebirth that is determined by an individual’s karma. Through meditation, the Buddha attained a state of being known as nirvana, meaning enlightenment. In this state a person’s inner spirit merges with the void from which all reality is said to emerge; literally, “the enlightened one.”

Buddhism (n)
religion born of the Buddha’s teachings

bodhisattva (n)
compassionate being destined to become a buddha who refrains from entering nirvana to guide others on the path to Buddhahood

Dalai Lama (n)
The governmental and religious leader of Tibet. While China occupies Tibet the Dalai Lama is living in India where he is able to freely practice his religion.

deity (n)
a supreme being, such as a god or goddess

enlightenment (n)
attainment of perfect knowledge and integration with the universe, the spiritual goal of Buddhism; literally “to become extinguished.”

holistic (adj)
relating to or concerned with wholes or with complete systems rather than with the analysis of individual parts; holistic medicine attempts to treat both the mind and the body as an interconnected whole

icon (n)
object of worship in the form of a picture, image, or other representation, often of a sacred being

karma (n)
the total effect of a person’s past actions and conduct; the influence of past deeds in determining one’s status in this life and the next

lapis lazuli (n)
an azure blue semiprecious stone composed mainly of the minerals lazurite and calcite; a sky blue color
lotus (n) graceful flowering water plant, which has been a symbol of purity, perfection, and enlightenment in India and other eastern civilizations since its growth in ancient times. Its blossom, which grows on top of the water, symbolizes the enlightened state. Its roots in the mud below symbolizes earthly existence.

mandala (n) an ancient Hindu and Buddhist graphic symbol of the universe; a sacred mazelike diagram representing the cosmos in miniature and functioning as a powerful aid to meditation and concentration. A sacred symbol or deity is usually shown in the center. The word “mandala” comes from the Sanskrit verbal root “mand,” which means to mark off, decorate, or set off, and the Sanskrit suffix “la,” which means circle, essence, or sacred center.

Medicine Buddha (n) a representation of the Buddha that symbolizes physical and spiritual healing for all living beings

monastic (adj) characteristic of monks, or men who have withdrawn from the world for religious reasons and live (often in secluded quarters) according to particular rules of obedience

mudra (n) one of numerous symbolic hand gestures that indicate concepts, such as reassurance or meditation, of Hinduism and Buddhism

samsara (n) concept understood by Hindus and Buddhists to mean the endless cycle of death and rebirth (repeated reincarnation)

symbol (n) object, person, animal, or motif that stands for, represents, or alludes to an idea, person, culture, or nation

tantras (n) any of several books of Hindu or Buddhist religious literature written in Sanskrit and concerned with powerful ritual acts of body, speech, and mind

thangka (n) A painting on cloth designed to communicate iconographic ideas in a beautiful and practical form, particularly associated with Buddhist cultures in Tibet and other areas of Southeast Asia. A thangka painting is actually a composite three-dimensional object consisting of a painted or embroidered picture panel, a textile mounting, a silk or leather cover, and wooden dowels at the top and bottom.

urna (n) tuft of hair on the forehead of the Buddha, represented as a dot or jewel, which signifies his wisdom

ushnisha (n) prominent bump on the top of the Buddha’s head, which refers to his wisdom and openness as an enlightened being

Related Resources for Teachers

Books


Fisher, Robert. Art of Tibet. (Thames and Hudson, 1997).


Books for Young Students


Web Sites
“Medicine Buddha and Tibetan Medicine.”
http://www.tibetan-medicine.org/medicinebuddha.asp
Tibetan Medical Institute of H. H. Dalai Lama, New Delhi, India.

“The Tibetan and Himalayan Digital Library.”
http://thdl.org/
Created by the University of Virginia, this site includes a number of resources including an interactive map of Tibet and a virtual tour of the capital city, Lhasa.

“A Children’s Guide to the Buddha’s Art of Healing.”
http://www.pocanticohills.org/Tibet/tibet.htm
The 5th-grade classes of Pocantico Hills School, Sleepy Hollow, New York.

“The Art of Buddhism.”
http://www.asia.si.edu/education/onlineguides.htm
Freer Sackler Galleries of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution

www.artic.edu/artaccess
This site provides information about works in the Art Institute’s collection.

http://go.hrw.com/atlas
This online atlas allows you to look at maps of Tibet.

“Lost Treasures of Tibet.” PBS NOVA
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/tibet/
This video is also available for loan at the Art Institute’s Teacher Resource Center.

“Arts & Culture.” AsiaSource
http://www.asiasource.org
Provides resources on Asian culture, including a glossary of terms related to Hinduism, Buddhism, and other Southeast Asian religions.

“AskAsia.org.”
http://www.askasia.org
For educators and students, with pages devoted to activities, student exchanges, current events, maps, and

“Ask AsiaExperts.” Includes a teacher’s guide and a special resource for educators on Indian painting.

“Himalayan Art Project.”
http://www.himalayanart.org/nonflash.cfm
This Web site includes many images to use in the classroom, and examples of Himalayan and Tibetan art from collections around the world. The “Explorations for Kids and Friends of All Ages” section includes stories for children about the importance of kindness, generosity, and compassion.

Thangka of Bhaishajyaguru, the Medicine Buddha
Tibet, 14th century

Produced by the Department of Museum Education

Written by Grace Murray, Coordinator of Teacher Programs, Museum Education

Editors: Lara Taylor, Coordinator of Communications, Museum Education, Tanya Treptow, Research Assistant, Asian and Ancient Art

Elizabeth Boyne, Assistant Editor, Communications Services

©2006 The Art Institute of Chicago