

LESSON PLAN

Diving Deeper into Buddhism: Western Paradise



Subjects: Social Studies

Grade Level: Middle School/Junior High, High School

Duration: 90 minutes

Dynasty: Period of Division (220–589)

Object Type: Sculpture, Stone

Theme: Traditions and Belief Systems

Contributed by: Lesley Younge, Middle School Teacher,
Whittle School and Studios, Washington, DC

Western Paradise of the Buddha Amitabha

China

Northern Qi dynasty, 550–577

Limestone with traces of pigment

62 11/16 x 131 11/16 in

Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment. Freer Gallery of Art, F1921.2

Objective

Students already familiar with Siddhartha Gautama, the Historical Buddha, will deepen their understanding of Buddhist beliefs and artwork. They will analyze and interpret works of art that reveal how people around the world live and what they value. They will identify how works of art reflect times, places, cultures, and beliefs.

Essential Questions

- What other stories are told in Buddhism beyond Shakyamuni, the Historical Buddha?
- How are beliefs in Buddhism similar to or different from beliefs in other faith traditions?
- Why are beliefs about the afterlife important in Buddhism and other religions?
- How do works of art capture and communicate the development of Buddhist beliefs in China?
- How has art inspired Buddhist believers and scholars throughout history?



Smithsonian

*Freer Gallery of Art
Arthur M. Sackler Gallery*

Background Information

Siddhartha Gautama, a prince born approximately 2,500 years ago, is recognized as the Historical Buddha, or “Awakened One.” His enlightenment freed him from the cycle of rebirth, and his teachings became Buddhism’s foundation. The religion spread with a phenomenal pace. Buddhism reached China around the second century CE and grew into a variety of schools. One of the Buddhist schools that emerged in China—the Pure Land school—focused on Amitabha, the celestial Buddha of Infinite Light. Followers of this school believe that Amitabha took a special vow to create the Western Paradise, or Pure Land (Sukhavati). Those who call upon Amitabha are reborn from lotuses into this heavenly realm where they perpetually practice the dharma. Images of Amitabha and his palace-like monastery are especially popular in China, Korea, and Japan.

Devotional worship to Amitabha and hopes of being reborn in his heavenly dwelling grew quickly in China. Believed to be one of the earliest surviving depictions of Buddhist paradise, the sixth-century relief titled *Western Paradise of the Buddha Amitabha* at the Freer Gallery once appeared above the interior entrance to a Chinese Buddhist cave at Xiangtangshan (“Shahng-tahng-shahn”) in Hebei province. Originally painted with striking mineral pigments and gold, it would have been the last thing a worshiper saw before leaving the sacred space.

This monumental limestone carving depicts a heavenly realm brimming with Buddhist deities. Framed by towering pagodas, the roughly symmetrical composition emphasizes the central figures—in particular, Buddha Amitabha (in Chinese, Amituo), who raises his right hand in a gesture of teaching. He sits on a large lotus blossom behind a square pool, alongside which are his two chief attendants, the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (Guanyin) and Mahasthamaprapta (Dashizhi). Based on the prominence of these three figures, we know that the setting is Sukhavati, Amitabha’s Western Paradise, or Pure Land. In the pool, lotus blossoms open to reveal the fortunate who are being reborn into this heavenly realm.

Vocabulary

Amitabha: literally, “Infinite Light”; the Buddha of the Western Paradise. Widely revered in Mahayana Buddhist traditions, Amitabha enables his followers to be born into his paradise and attain Buddhahood in one lifetime.

Avalokiteshvara: literally, “The Lord who Looks Down [from on High]”; the widely worshiped bodhisattva of compassion, who protects and saves all beings.

bodhisattva: an enlightened being who chooses not to proceed to Nirvana but instead remains on earth to guide others in their paths toward Enlightenment.

Buddha: literally, “Awakened One”; a being who has awakened to the true reality of existence and is thereby liberated from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. A Buddha teaches others the path to Enlightenment.

deva: literally, “divinity,” “heavenly being”; the most pleasure-filled among five rebirth destinies. Rebirth as a deva is granted for good deeds performed during the previous lifetime.

dharma: the Buddha’s teachings or doctrines.

Enlightenment: a moment of great wisdom and understanding; the highest level of consciousness, believed to be achieved through meditation and adhering to the basic moral teaching of Buddhism.

kalpa: literally, “age”; a period of time spanning four different stages of the universe: formation, existence, destruction, and non-existence. This period is composed of many intermediate kalpas.

Mahasthamaprapta: literally, “One who Has Attained Great Power”; bodhisattva who represents wisdom. He is usually depicted with Buddha Amitabha and bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. His crown is often decorated with a small water vessel.

Nestorianism: a Christian sect that originated in Asia Minor and Syria around the fifth century CE.

Nirvana: a spiritual state of perfect peace beyond selfish attachments to worldly possessions; reaching Nirvana frees one’s soul from the Buddhist cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

Pure Land: also called Western Paradise, or in Sanskrit as Sukhavati; one of the auspicious places in which to be reborn.

Siddhartha Gautama: the given name of Shakyamuni, literally “Sage of the Shakya Clan,” the Historical Buddha. He lived in north-eastern India sometime after the fifth century BCE.

three evils: greed, hate, ignorance.

Upata: literally, “exuberance,” “satiety.”

Procedure

1. Provide students with a blank drawing paper, and project or have students access the high-resolution digital image of *Western Paradise of the Buddha Amitabha*. You can also distribute image copies.
2. Separate students into large or small groups, and have them examine the artwork, answering **Describe** and **Analyze** questions.
3. Have students choose a small section to sketch. Share the sketches and discuss as a group. What parts of the artwork stand out to them?
4. In groups, have students examine the readings on Sukhavati, the mythical place known in Buddhist scripture as “The Pure Land” or “Western Paradise.” Each group may have the same reading or choose different ones. Another option is a jigsaw discussion activity in which students read different texts and share insights with each other.
5. Have students return to the artwork and reinterpret what they see based on their new knowledge from the readings. What do they notice now? What else would they add to their drawing? Give them time to sketch further and perhaps annotate their drawing with quotes or information from the readings.
6. Distribute and have students fill out the Connect, Extend, Challenge sheet. How does this artwork **CONNECT** to what they already know about Buddhism? How does it **EXTEND** their thinking about Buddhism? How does it **CHALLENGE** their thinking?
7. Returning to a whole group configuration, ask students to develop questions for further inquiry. What are they left wondering? What do they still not know? What do they want to know? How might they continue to dig deeper?

Discussion Questions

Describe

- What type of artifact is this?
- What shapes and colors do you see?
- What textures are visible?
- What images do you see?

Analyze

- What story is being told?
- What is clear? What is unclear?
- Where do you imagine this artwork was first displayed?
- What do you think this artwork is made out of, and how was it made?
- Who do you think created this artwork and for what purpose?

Interpret

- What do the materials and the design of this artwork tell us about this time in Chinese Buddhist history?
- What would have been the purpose of creating a visual image of the Western Paradise?
- Are there similar objects or images used in other faith traditions you are familiar with?
- How does this image connect to, extend, and challenge your current understanding of Buddhism?

Inquire

- Is the Western Paradise a physical place?
- Do all Buddhists believe in the Western Paradise?
- How does modern Buddhist art depict the Western Paradise?
- What would it be like to encounter this artwork in its original cave? How might seeing it in a museum be different?

Extensions

Visual Arts

- Draw, paint, or sculpt your version of a Pure Land or paradise. What would it look like? What would it feel like? How might you depict that in a work of art?
- Experiment with creating images in relief using clay or other sculpting material. What changes when a picture is three-dimensional? Why might this have mattered to Buddhist artists?
- Compare and contrast this sculpture to other depictions of the Western Paradise, such as the Mogao cave monastery murals: <http://public.dha.ac.cn/quanjing/vr/320/vtour/tour.html>.
- How do different materials and mediums communicate ideas about similar topics?

English Language Arts

- Write a poem or story that captures your ideas of what a paradise would be and what it would take to get there.

Social Studies

- Research and write a paper comparing and contrasting the paradise doctrines of two different religions. What do other faith traditions say about an afterlife?

Resources

Paths to Perfection: Buddhist Art at the Freer|Sackler. Washington, DC: Freer|Sackler, the Smithsonian's museum of Asian art, 2017, pp. 13, 37, 223–27.

DuBose, Hampden C. *The Dragon, Image, and Demon: Or, the Three Religions of China: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, Giving an Account of the Mythology, Idolatry, and Demonolatry of the Chinese*. New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1887. <https://archive.org/details/dragonimagedemon1887dubo/page/n4>.

Buddhist cave temples at Xiangtangshan. <http://xts.uchicago.edu/>

Murals with Pure Land image, visual tour in Mogao grottoes. <http://public.dha.ac.cn/quanjing/vr/320/vtour/tour.html>

The Art of Buddhism. A Teacher's Guide. Smithsonian Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery. <https://asia.si.edu/edu/ArtofBuddhism.pdf>

View this object online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1921.2/>

Learn more at <https://asia.si.edu/teachingchina>

Sukhavati, the “Pure Land” and Western Paradise of Amitabha

The following are excerpts from the writings of American missionary Hampden C. DuBose, who lived in China for thirty-eight years. They were published in the 1887 book *The Dragon, Image, and Demon, or the Three Religions of China: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism*.

Reading 1. Amita and the Western Heaven

The most striking difference between northern and southern Buddhism is the doctrine of the Western Heaven and of Amita (Amitabha). It is an innovation of later centuries, probably a thousand years after Buddha, and it is certain that this tenet does not come from India, as this god is unknown in that country and Ceylon. The most plausible theory is that it was borrowed from the Nestorians, whom the Buddhists likely met in Central Asia. In Japan, Buddhism is concentrated in the worship of Amita. In China the fronts of the temples have the inscription in great characters, Na-mo o-me-to-fuh (Honour to Amita Buddha). There is little homage given by the populace to Shakyamuni compared with what is rendered to this deity, and whole prayer-books and sutras have been manufactured and falsely ascribed to the head of the church as if he were their author.

Amita, Kwanyin, and Mahasthama (called Tashuchi, one of Amita's court) form a loving triad, and their images are seen together in the temples of Paradise. Amita means “boundless light,” so called because “his brightness is boundless, and he can illumine all kingdoms. His life, boundless and shoreless, extends through many kalpas.” Amita is also called the “boundless-age Buddha,” but his common designation is “the guiding Buddha,” the one who directs his followers to a Paradise in the great West.

(DuBose, 298–99)

Reading 2. The Magic Name

In every temple the sound you hear is o-me-to-fuh; when you speak to a priest, he utters, o-me-to-fuh; the response in prayer is o-me-to-fuh; as the monk beats on his fish-head the name is called, o-me-to-fuh; as he counts his beads it is o-me-to-fuh; as the prayers are read, the women join in o-me-to-fuh; as a company of priests assemble at vespers, it is o-me-to-fuh; calling the name, they dot the circles on the papers; for every 10,000 times there is one degree of merit obtained.

While o-me-to-fuh is pronounced, the mind must be fixed on Amita, and the thoughts concentrated on him like a thread running through beads or like an arrow flying to its mark. The effort is to see how many times o-me-to-fuh can be called in one breath, and you sometimes hear the priests calling the name at railway speed. Not long since I asked a priest, “How often do you say o-me-to-fuh a day?” and he answered, “Oh, about twenty or thirty thousand times.” This is the “vain repetition” of the Buddhist; almost the only prayer the heathen knows is o-me-to-fuh.

(DuBose, 300)

Reading 3. The Paradise of the West

The doctrine of the Western Heaven is diametrically opposed to the teachings of Buddha about Nirvana, and proves that the heart could not deal with such abstractions, and that men must have happiness set before them in a more real, substantial form. This Paradise of Amita is not situated within the pale of this solar system. The sacred book says (translated): Ten million miles to the West there is an earth called Paradise, the home of Amita.

Why is it called Paradise? Answer: Because all the creatures born there have no sorrow. There are seven rows of balustrades, seven rows of precious trees around, and seven precious lakes with golden sands. The streets are a compound of gold, silver, pearls, and crystal. There are towers and pavilions adorned with gold, silver, pearls, crystal, and agate. In the lakes are lilies the size of wheels, azure, yellow, red, and white. Six hours of the day and six hours of the night there is a rain of flowers. The inhabitants gather them in their robes in the morning, take them to other lands to the ten billion other Buddhas, and return, being absent about as long as it takes to eat rice. The birds of Paradise, variegated in plumage, are famous; white cranes, peacocks, and parrots chant the Buddhist prayers. These birds have no original sin. In that happy land the three evils are unknown—not even the names of the three evils are known.

(DuBose, 300–302)

Reading 4. Born of a Lily

The beautiful lotus is the flower of Paradise. It is never said, “go to heaven,” but to be “born in heaven.” Those who believe must record a vow to be born in the “pure land,” at which time a lotus springs up in a pond, and if he is diligent in calling the name of Amita (o-me-to-fuh) the flower will flourish, and when he dies a man will be born out of the flower.

The exhortation is given in the sutra: At the approach of death, do not fear it; always think this body has many sorrows; it is made filthy by sin, wound round and round; if this dirty body can be thrown off and you be born in a pure land, is it not a happy event? It is like throwing off old clothes and putting on a new suit. If anyone will call the name of Amita for seven days with fixed heart, at death Amita with his holy throng will appear before him; his heart will not be turned upside down, but he will be born in Paradise. This is the Buddhistic account of the “pure land.”

(See: DuBose, 303–4)

Reading 5. Buddhist Hymn about Pure Land

The Pure land of the West, say, what language can tell
Its beauty and majesty? There ever dwell

The men of this world, and the Devas of heaven,
And to each has the same wreath of glory been given.

The secrets of wisdom unveiled they behold,
And the soil that they tread on is bright yellow gold;

In that land of true pleasure the flowers never fade,
Each terraced ascent is of diamond and jade.

The law of great Buddha sung by each bird,
From thicker and grove in sweet music is heard;

The unwithering Upata, fairest of flowers,
Sheds fragrance around in those thrice-lovely bowers.

There, each from the world that he governs, are found,

Assembled in conference long and profound,
 The ten supreme Buddhas, who cease not to tell
 The praise of the land where the genii dwell:
 For there is no region so happy and blest
 As the heaven of Amita far in the West.
 On the moment of entering that peaceful scene,
 The common material body of men
 Is exchanged for a body eternal and bright.
 That is seen from altar to be glowing with light.
 Happy they who to that joyful region have gone,
 In numberless kalpas their time flows on;
 Around are green woods, and above them clear skies,
 The sun never scorches, cold winds never rise,
 And summer and winter are both unknown
 In the land of the Law and the Diamond Throne.
 All the errors corrected, all mysteries made clear,
 Their rest is unbroken by care or by fear;
 And the truth that before lay in darkness concealed,
 Like a gem without fracture or flaw is revealed.

(DuBose, 302–3)

Reading 6. Hymn to Amita in the Home of the Blessed

See, streaming forth radiance for thousands of miles,
 Ever sits the compassionate Buddha and smiles,
 Giving joy to victims of sorrow and strife,
 Who are saved by his law from the evils of life.
 All his features of beauty no words can express,
 For the sands of the Ganges in number are less;
 The flowers of the lotus encircle his seat,
 As if of themselves they spring up round his feet.
 Whoever would enter the home of the blest,
 In his innermost thoughts should incessantly rest
 On that beautiful form like the moon on high,
 When she marches full-orbed through an unclouded sky.
 By that halo of light that encircles his head,
 On all living beings a radiance is shed;
 The sun at noon-day is less glorious than he,
 His compassion resembles a bottomless sea.
 His golden arms are outstretched to relieve
 The sufferers that weep and the hearts that do grieve;
 His mercy is such as none else can display,
 And long years of gratitude cannot repay.

(DuBose, 299–300)

