

Four Scenes from the Life of the Buddha

Narrative

Students will . . . consider the importance of storytelling in building community by creating shared memories.

Birth of the Buddha

Enlightenment at Bodh Gaya

First Preaching

The Buddha Leaves the Cycle of Existence



Scenes from the life of the Buddha
India, Gandhara (modern Pakistan and Afghanistan), Kushan dynasty, late 2nd–early 3rd century
Stone
Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment
National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Freer Collection, F1949.9a-d

As Buddhism spread throughout Asia and beyond, artists produced depictions of the Life of the Buddha. Despite regional interpretations and stylistic differences, the core ideas of the story remained the same.

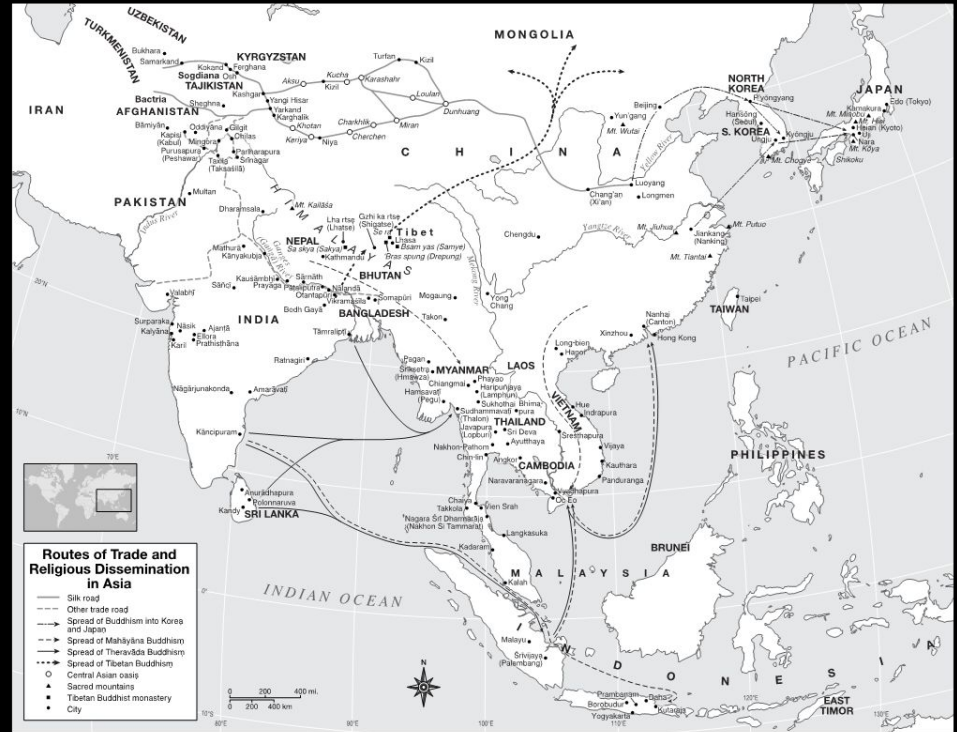


Image Source: Robert E. Buswell, Jr., *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Macmillan Reference (2004, xxxv)

Compare and Contrast: Do these images tell the same story? How do you know?



National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Freer Collection,
Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment, F1949.9a-d



Birth of the Buddha Shakyamuni
Pakistan (ancient region of Gandhara), Kushan period, ca. 2nd century
Stone
Gift of Steven Kossak, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Kronos Collections, 1987

Why might artists depict the earthly and enlightened Buddha in different ways?



Scenes from the life of the Buddha, detail
National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Freer Collection,
Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment,
F1949.9a-d



Central Tibet, 12th century
Brass with colored pigments
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Zimmerman Family Collection, Purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace, Oscar L. Tang, Anthony W. and Lulu C. Wang and Annette de la Renta Gifts, 2012

These scenes depict the Buddha's leaving forever the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth to enter nirvana; the event is known as *parinirvana*. What visual elements of the event are consistent over time? Why do you think this narrative endures?



Scenes from the life of the Buddha, detail
National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Freer Collection, Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment, F1949.9a-d



Scenes from the Buddha's Life
from a Prajnaparamita
Manuscript
Northeast India, early 12th
century
Opaque watercolor on palm leaf
Purchase—Charles Lang Freer
Endowment
National Museum of Asian Art,
Smithsonian Institution, Freer
Collection, F1930.88

How are these images of the Buddha's death similar? How are they different?



Scenes from the life of the Buddha, detail
National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Freer Collection,
Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment, F1949.9a-d



Nirvana of the Buddha, Shaka
Nehan Ogawa Ritsu
(1663–1747)
Japan, late 17th century
Color and gold on paper
Gift of Robert and Betsy Feinberg
National Museum of Asian Art,
Smithsonian Institution, Freer Collection, F2003.4a-c

While the Buddha's mortal body dies, he is considered a part of the everlasting Buddha Vairochana, an omnipresent and timeless Buddha who both encompasses our world and exists beyond it.

How does this understanding of an everlasting Buddha add meaning to the images we have studied?

The Buddha Vairochana with the Realms of Existence



[The Cosmic Buddha](#) - [Click here to Explore in 3D!](#)

At the core of every religious tradition is a good story that adapts to time, space, and purpose. Buddhism is no exception.

How do consistent religious storytelling principles contribute to a sense of community? How or why might different people tell the same story differently, even within a single community?