

Know Self

Buddhist Lessons from an American Museum

Robert E. Gordon

Realms of the Dharma: Buddhist Art Across Asia

May 11, 2025 to July 12, 2026

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

REALMS OF THE DHARMA TAKES ITS viewers on an aesthetic journey through time and space. It is a terrestrial trek—from South and Southeast Asia to Nepal, Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan—that has metaphysical implications. The exhibition’s wide-ranging scope succeeds in illuminating the diversity of Buddhist artistic expression in Asia. Museumgoers learn that “Buddhism” does not denote a singular belief system, but rather a variety of cultural traditions, religious expressions, and spiritual paths. The beautifully crafted environment houses some of the most striking artworks the religion has to offer. Its spatial and luminescent arrangements showcase the various Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, mandalas, and objects large and small from LACMA’s permanent collection (with some loans) in an exquisite fashion. The rooms are as full of life and beauty as they are spacious and erudite, inviting one to contemplate, speculate, and even venerate. Within its curated setting, the exhibition both

“thinks and dreams at the same time,” as Lokesh Chandra once wrote about the relationship between time, space, and architecture.¹

In this regard, I would like to explore what else the exhibition is telling or doing to us. Museums are institutions of power as well as knowledge. And the strength of the show ultimately rests on the ideas its artifacts aesthetically communicate. For because the exhibition is something presented to the public for viewing, and not simply an illustrated academic paper, we should consider what the general public might take away from the given experience. How can the average American viewer understand the images, terms, and faces they encounter while walking through the exhibit?

¹ Lokesh Chandra, *Cultural Horizons of India: Studies in Tantra and Buddhism, Art and Archaeology, Language and Literature*, Vol. 1, ed. Tara Chandrika (New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture and Aditya Prakashan, 1990), 9.



Figure 1. Eleven-Headed Avalokiteshvara, 16th century. Central Tibet. Gilt brass inlaid with turquoise and other gemstones; cold gold paste and paint, 30 1/4 x 14 3/4 x 6 7/16 in. (76.8 x 37.46 x 16.35 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Harry Kahn, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

The question is a relevant one, in my experience. When teaching Asian art in the university, I notice a pointed ambivalence towards Buddhist art and the religion's precepts. Some students definitely take an interest, but many others balk at Buddhist concepts such as no-self, cessation, and emptiness. The bodhisattva ideal— particularly the multi-armed versions—often seem too strange or uncouth (some have even told me “evil”) to those unfamiliar with the religion's visual history (Figure 1).

While an Asian viewer within the exhibition might feel nostalgic or comforted by the art and objects from their homeland, an uninitiated Westerner is likely to feel bewildered, like a wanderer on an exotic and mysterious expedition. Wall inscriptions help make the experience less esoteric. Yet, these textual islets primarily provide historical context rather than any spiritual insight into the religion.² Recognizable terms like karma, rebirth, and nirvana greet viewers as they enter the show. But phrases such as “cultivating mindfulness of the illusion of duality” and “the merging of a sentient being with the void out of which reality emerges” roll off the unsuspecting mind like the water of the flowing river so often used in Buddhist thought as a metaphor for the transience of all phenomena.

Thus, it might be helpful to the Western personality to learn why such an exhibition, as “something presented to the public for viewing,” is perfectly in keeping with Buddhism's goal to provide a path to the cessation of karmic rebirth (*nirvana*). This is because, as the essayist and historian of ideas Pankaj Mishra puts it, “The Buddha was, broadly speaking, an empiricist.”³ As best as we can tell from the religion's earliest extant writings, the Buddha (“the Awakened One”) was a pragmatist, much as most Americans

are generally considered to be. His goal was to improve the lives of those he encountered through his ideas: “He had spoken...of ordinary human experience: of how neither the individual self nor the world is stable, and how human individuals could achieve liberation, nirvana, by freeing themselves from greed, hatred and delusion.”⁴

An empiricist takes observation and experience as a primary way to acquire knowledge. While experiencing the various artworks throughout LACMA's exhibition, one cannot help but observe the multiplicity of human figures on display. Buddhist practitioners have relied heavily on the human figure in their artworks since the beginning of the Common Era. In the first instance, therefore, the artifacts tell us that Buddhism is about being human: the human ability to be mindful of our actions and aware of the Buddha's spiritual message.

Whereas Bodhisattvas (“Enlightened Beings”), with their elaborate headdresses and bangles, are meant to appear somewhat otherworldly, images of the Buddha often represent him as humble, human, and of this world as we are (Figure 2). Such depictions of the Buddha show us, through bodily illustration, how meditation can help us find transcendental awareness. They tell us that this is something *we* can do as fellow humans, that we too can be Buddhas. In other words, Buddhism tells us something about ourselves.

Indeed, one need not be a monk or recluse to find such self knowledge. The esteemed Buddhist scholar Wapola Rāhula confirms that “However noble and pure Buddhism may be, it would be useless to the masses of mankind if they could not follow it in their daily life in the world of today.” And that,

2 Maxwell Votey also makes this observation in his November 14, 2025 review, www.asianart.com/articles/votey/index.html

3 Pankaj Mishra, *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World* (New York: Picador, 2005), 28.

4 Ibid, 43-44.



Figure 2. Buddha Shakyamuni, 11th century. Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu, India. Granulite, 29 1/2 x 14 1/2 x 17 in. (74.93 x 36.83 x 43.18 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. Anthony A. Manheim, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA



Figure 3. Buddha Shakyamuni or the Jina Buddha Vairochana, c. 725-750. India, Jammu and Kashmir, Kashmir region. Brass inlaid with silver, 16 x 8 1/2 x 3 5/8 in. (40.64 x 21.59 x 9.2 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, From the Nasli and Alice Heeramaneck Collection, Museum Associates Purchase, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

The artifacts tell us that Buddhism is about being human: the human ability to be mindful of our actions and aware of the Buddha's spiritual message.

"There are numerous references in Buddhist literature to men and women living ordinary, normal family lives who successfully practiced what the Buddha taught, and realized Nirvāṇa."⁵

Other artworks show the Buddha preaching his Dharma: the truth and reality that all things are impermanent, even what we think of as permanent and everlasting, like our soul or self. In fact, according to Buddhist thought, what we call the soul or self does not really exist (a doctrine called *anatta*, or "no-self"). This Buddhist precept is probably the most difficult to understand and accept for those in the West, where the presumption of a clearly defined self (as in Descartes' philosophical conclusion, "I think, therefore I am,") is taken as dispositive fact.

Many people in the U.S. first encounter Buddhist thought through the martial arts, whether they know it or not, and therefore in my classes, I introduce the "no-self" concept using the film *Enter the Dragon* (1973). The movie is known for its incredible fighting sequences, and so viewers often miss the profound scene in the beginning where Bruce Lee answers a question from his teacher, who asks: "What are your thoughts when facing an opponent?" To which Lee's character answers, "There is no opponent...because the word 'I' does not exist." The statement comes across as an enigma, since observation verifies it is in fact spoken by someone who *does* exist.

Yet, Lee is teaching us a fundamental Buddhist tenet, just as the various figures do in the LACMA exhibition. Buddhism asks

us to think deeply about what we take for granted as real, to "cultivate mindfulness of the illusion of duality." On this view, focusing on the self creates a false mental impression of its permanence that unduly separates things dualistically into "this versus that," which heightens desire and causes suffering (unhappiness, dissatisfaction, struggle). Buddhists believe that such illusory attachments constitute life's basic presupposition. In fact, the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism claim that life is full of suffering stemming from desire and attachment, a reality that can be overcome through various Buddhist practices (the Eight-Fold Path).

Lee goes on to tell his teacher "A good fight is like a small play, but played seriously." The fight here is a metaphor for our struggles against suffering, while "the play" is symbolic of the dramatic action/practices we must earnestly engage in to combat it. This is in fact the purpose and meaning of the entire film/play and its dramatic fighting scenes! Lee says, "a good martial artist" (that is, the Buddhist practitioner) "is not tense but ready, not sleeping, but not dreaming, ready for whatever may come." Here, then, Lee describes precisely what meditation and mindfulness entails. Whether in the filmic, martial, or plastic arts, Buddhist representation exists to illustrate and teach us to free ourselves from the "I" that does not exist. The human figures in the LACMA show—through their assorted poses, hand gestures, and smiles—exhort us to see the ultimate reality of existence the Buddha taught (*dharma*), and to reassure us that liberation from dissatisfaction is available to everyone, regardless of what realm we come from (Figure 3).

Of course, the stated "realm" of the exhibition is Asia, where the religion began and continues to thrive. The "Great Circle of Buddhism," as leading Buddhist scholars articulate it, maps the religion's historic spread across South Asia and Eastern Eurasia via overland and maritime travel routes.⁶ However, the empiricist in us cannot overlook the fact that the museum is located in North America, and that there is a growing Buddhist population emerging in the United States. Large Buddhist temple complexes have been constructed in California and elsewhere, such as the Odiyan Buddhist Retreat Center in Sonoma County, Fo Guang Shan's Hsi Lai Temple in Hacienda Heights, and Chuang Yen Monastery in New York State. Many large-scale Buddhist stupas, like the small votive example in the exhibition (Figure 4), exist and are being constructed all across the U.S., a great majority of which derive from the Tibetan diaspora. These reliquary monuments date back to the very beginnings of Buddhism's history, "which embodied the Buddha's presence and became a site for the visual elaboration of his biography and teachings," as the exhibition catalogue states.⁷ Thus, their existence in the United States situates both the Buddha and Buddhist spirituality firmly within the North American continent, suggesting that The Great Circle of Buddhism is expanding in a meaningful way.

The contemporary status of the Buddhist religion and its art is a noticeable lacuna of the LACMA show, but an understandable one, since the exhibition's goal is to survey Asian Buddhism using its impressive collection of art and objects, of which only a small number date from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In terms of the present-day U.S., the popularity

and sales associated with the annual Asia Week in New York City suggest that Asian artworks and artifacts in general retain an aesthetic and market appeal in the capitalist West. Historically, since the nineteenth century, the West has looked to the East as an ancient place of spiritual depth and wisdom as a counterpoise to industrialism and an overwhelming technoscientific materialism. Today, Asian spiritual ideas permeate American culture: yoga, Zen, feng shui, the martial arts, the New Age Movement, and more. This foundation of Asian and Buddhist practices and ideas is part of the meta-sphere of the Los Angeles exhibition.

The point of the above analysis is to demonstrate that, like the Los Angeles exhibition itself, Buddhist art and its lessons have moved beyond the sphere of its Asian origination. The broken circle on the wall surrounding the show's title while entering its galleries tells me that the museum is aware of this as well. This is because Buddhism is a human phenomenon. Its spiritual precepts are applicable to everyone *as humans*. Indeed, the common theme of the artworks in the exhibition is the humanity it puts on display. The distinctive faces and personages one meets while walking through the exhibits—whether Tibetan, Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Indian, or others—tell us that arbitrary national and terrestrial designations do not matter, that something more fundamental is at work behind their observable forms.

For in the end, the message that the assorted artworks LACMA presents from across time and space transcends their corporeal solidity. In *Enter the Dragon*, after observing an exhibition of Lee's martial abilities, his teacher states, "I see your talents have now gone beyond the mere physical level. Your skills are now at the point of spiritual insight." The key for any museumgoer who visits the *Realms of Dharma* exhibition is to also try to discern the spiritual insights being communicated through its artworks—to come to truly know yourself beyond dualistic delusion by meditating on the Buddhist lessons being didactically and dramatically illustrated.

⁵ Walpola Rāhula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), 88-89.

⁶ Buddhist Maritime Silk Road - New Media Art Exhibition, Fo Guang Shan Buddha Museum, Kaohsiung, Taiwan, www.fgsbmc.org.tw/maritime/en-bmsr.html

⁷ Stephen Little and Tushara Bindu Gude, *Realms of the Dharma: Buddhist Art Across Asia* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2025), 63.



Figure 4. Votive stupa, 2nd century. Pakistan, Gandhara region. Gray schist, 5 7/8 x 3 1/2 in. (14.92 x 8.89 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Indian Art Special Purpose Fund, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA



Figure 5. Pensive Bodhisattva, c. 200-300. Pakistan, Gandhara region. Gray schist, 22 x 11 x 6 1/4 in. (55.88 x 27.94 x 15.88 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Henry and Ruth Trubner in honor of the museum's twenty-fifth anniversary and to honor Dr. Pratapaditya Pal, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

One of my favorite themes within Buddhist art is the Pensive Bodhisattva, a subject found across the different Asian traditions, particularly Korean (Figure 5). In the version on display in the exhibition, the enlightened being points to his mind, the site of enlightenment, as he contemplates and reflects. It is a metaphysical lesson in human form. A detail of this artwork is shown as the very first image in the exhibition catalogue, which lets us know what, where, and who the curators believe is the ultimate goal of the artifacts being presented for viewing. This transcendent being not only points to his mind—counseling us to be diligent in our thoughts and actions—but as a human ideal he is in fact pointing to any person who has taken the time to observe him. His physical human form is simply an

artifice or pretense, just like the “I” to which we tend to cling but does not really exist.

The Pensive Bodhisattva is quite often associated with the Buddha Maitreya, the future Buddha to Come, as Buddhists believe that the historical Buddha of our time (Siddhartha Gautama) is just one of many Buddhas that emerge in different eons to teach humanity the Truth, Law, and Ultimate Reality (*dharma*). But as a representation of the future, the Pensive Bodhisattva communicates the potential enlightened future that we all have within us as sentient beings, as the wall inscription states at the entrance of the exhibition: the cessation of our inherent suffering, and the “merging of our being with the void out of which reality emerges” (*nirvana*). A