

Buddhism

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1 - Temple plaques

15th century

Pegu, Myanmar (Burma)

A series of lead-glazed plaques that relate the story of the Buddha's temptation prior to his awakening. These plaques were displayed in niches in the inner walls of the Shwegugyi and Agapalacetiya pagodas.

2 - Carved figures

Acquired in the 19th century

Mandalay, Myanmar (Burma)

These tall wooden carvings represent awakened beings in monastic robes. Their hand gestures (*varadamudra*) symbolise charity and the fulfilment of all wishes. They are standing on lotus pedestals.

3 - Gautama Buddha (*hpaya*)

Late 18th/ early 19th century

Southern Myanmar (Burma)

This is one of three large drylacquer Buddhas in Britain. A common depiction of the seated Buddha, his left hand reflects his state of meditation whilst his right hand is calling the Earth to witness his virtue just prior to his awakening.

4 - Guan Yin and child

Made between 1750 and 1850

China

Guan Yin has its roots in Avalokitesvara. He is the Bodhisattva of Compassion whose name means “he who hears the cries of those who need help”. His first appearance in a female form was seen in China in the 10th century.

5 - Pair of bodhisattvas

Made about 1770

Ch’ing dynasty, Beijing, China

These cast and gilded bronze inspirational figures were likely made for Tibetan Buddhists. A bodhisattva is a selfless being who is motivated by compassion and love and who seeks enlightenment.

6 - Shrine box (*gau*)

Collected before 1949

Tibet

A portable shrine that would have held a Buddhist figure or sacred tablet wrapped in silk. This would have been worn as a protective amulet around the neck or placed upon an altar.

7 - Horn

Late 19th/ early 20th century

Tibet

Pairs of such horns were used in sacred dances and other ceremonies. Larger horns (radong) were an important part of liturgical music, providing a continuous low tone.

8 - Shawm (gyalin)

Collected before 1931

Tibet

Oboe-like, this shawn is played in Tibetan monasteries during puja, a devotional time of prayer and fasting, for sacred dances and morality plays. It reminds the faithful of their daily duties but is also used for emergency calls.

9 - Drum (damaru)

Made before 1872

Tibet

The inclusion of human skulls in this drum reminds the believer of the transience of human life. The drum made sounds when it was shaken, suggesting spiritual power.

10 - Votive tablets (tsa-tsa)

300-400

Likely excavated in north-west India. Made of clay and mixed with the ashes of dead lamas it was pressed into a mould. These tablets depict the figures of Dharmapala and Dhyanī Buddha. Such tablets were offered to pilgrims at the shrine and were often carried in a case (see 6).

11 - Votive tablets (tsa-tsa)

19th century

Kyelung monastery, Lahul, Tibet

Clay mixed with human ashes pressed into a mould. The image is of Fajrapani, the Bodhisattva with thunderbolt (dorje). It was probably made in the monastery of Kyelung, Lahul, and offered to pilgrims at the shrine.

12 - Book and case

Printed in 1869

Beijing, China

This book was printed from woodblocks on paper. It bears the title “An index to the Mahayana sutras.” Printing was an important tool of missionary work in China. Another example can be found in the Finder Keepers? gallery.

13 - Prayer stone (mani)

19th century

Tibet

This flat carved stone bears a Buddhist mantra in Tibetan script. The text reads “om mani padme um”, which means “jewel of the lotus”. Mantras are groups of sacred syllables and sounds that have particular power. This one ensures spiritual well-being.

14 - Religious book

Acquired before 1931

Tibet

Used exclusively in monasteries, this book is written in the Tibetan script and is printed on paper (*Daphne cannabiensis*). It contains an illustration of a monk and a spirit guardian of the Buddhist law (dharmapala).

15 - Copper tea urn

Early 20th century

Nepal

Ceremonial urn used for serving butter-tea or water. The handle and spout are made of gilt metal and take the form of dragons. Additional decoration includes Tibetan script and inlaid turquoise stones.

16 - Thunderbolt sceptre (dorje)

Made before 1945

Tibet

This sceptre is crucial to Buddhist ritual and is held in the follower's right hand symbolizing stability, whilst a bell (see 17) is held in the left hand. The dorje represents the union of the spiritual and material worlds.

17 - Bell (drilbu)

Early 20th century

Tibet

The handle is in the form of a thunderbolt (dorje). The bell symbolises the world of the senses. In ceremonies, officiants insert a separate dorje (see 16) into the bell so it can act as a clapper.

18 - Prayer wheel (chorten)

20th century

Tibet

The hollow decorative cylindrical metal body of this ritual object contains the chos-khor. These are sacred texts that are written on paper. The wheel is rotated in a clockwise direction. The wheel emits a rhythmic sound to match the pace of the follower's prayer.