

The Buddhist path

SIDDHARTHA GAUTAMA, THE FOUNDER of Buddhism, lived in the 6th century B.C.E. in northern India. He was brought up to become a king and married a beautiful princess who bore him a son. As a young prince, his father protected him from all the sadness of the world outside his palaces. However, while his son was still young, Gautama managed to slip out, and encountered the "Four Sights." First was an old man, second a man sick with disease, and third a corpse being carried to the cremation ground. Finally, he saw a religious beggar with a shaved head, wearing a simple yellow robe but radiating peace and joy. It was then that Gautama made his "Great Renunciation," leaving his family and life of great comfort to find the answers to this suffering he had seen. For six years he tried and failed, until he went to meditate under a bodhi (or bo) tree, where he received his "Great Enlightenment" and became Buddha, which means "Enlightened One."



THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH
The eight-spoked wheel is a symbol of the Eightfold Path, which is a summary of the Buddha's teaching about how to escape suffering and find enlightenment. The eight stages to follow were: right thought, right understanding, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right concentration, and right contemplation.

Eyes cast down to show he is meditating; face calm and peaceful

RENUNCIATION
Gautama's decision to leave his family is known as the Great Renunciation. For the next six years, he tried to find release from the weariness of existence. He was reduced to skin and bones but could not reach this goal. So he left his companions and went to meditate under a bodhi tree near the river Ganges.

Right hand points down, asking the Earth to witness his enlightenment

The Buddha, meditating: in meditation Buddhists seek to empty their minds of all distracting thoughts and to gain perfect peace.

Buddha's cross-legged position is called the lotus position

Halo, one of the marks of Buddhahood



ENLIGHTENMENT
While meditating under the bodhi tree, Gautama learned "the Four Noble Truths": that all life is suffering; that the cause of suffering is desire; that the end of desire means the end of suffering; that desire can be stopped by following the Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path is also called the Middle Way because it avoids both living for pleasure and too much self-denial.

BUDDHISM

ONE GOD?

No, but many spiritual beings

THE AFTERLIFE?

Rebirth – we are endlessly reborn in new bodies, unless we achieve "Nirvana"

FOUNDER?

Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha ("Enlightened One"), lived in India c.560–480 B.C.E.

SCRIPTURES?

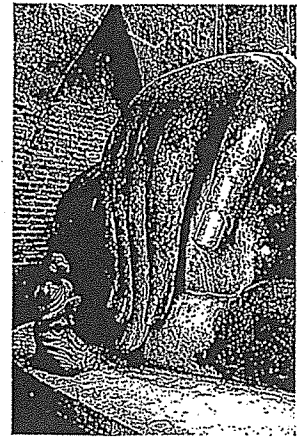
The teachings of the Buddha

PRIESTS?

None

Cultivating enlightenment with the pure mind of meditation... you will completely pass beyond the suffering of this world.

GAUTAMA BUDDHA



BUDDHA IMAGES

Here, a Buddhist monk kneels in prayer before a large Buddha image. As Buddhism spread from north India across Asia, the Buddha came to be venerated rather like a god. More and more images of him were made.

The Lord of Death holds the wheel to symbolize the limits of life

The Wheel of Life, or the Everlasting Round

Pictures in outer circle teach about karma

Pictures in inner circle show the six realms (states) of existence

The pig, cock, and snake represent the poisons of greed, delusion, and hatred, the three ingredients of ignorance that underlie all forms of suffering

The Realm of Humans: full of selfishness, ignorance, and desire, but there is also the path to enlightenment

The Realm of Beasts, ruled by ignorance,opathy, and instinct

The realm of the Denizens of Hell, full of hatred and anger; a Buddha preaches patience and hope

The Realm of the Gods, happy and proud

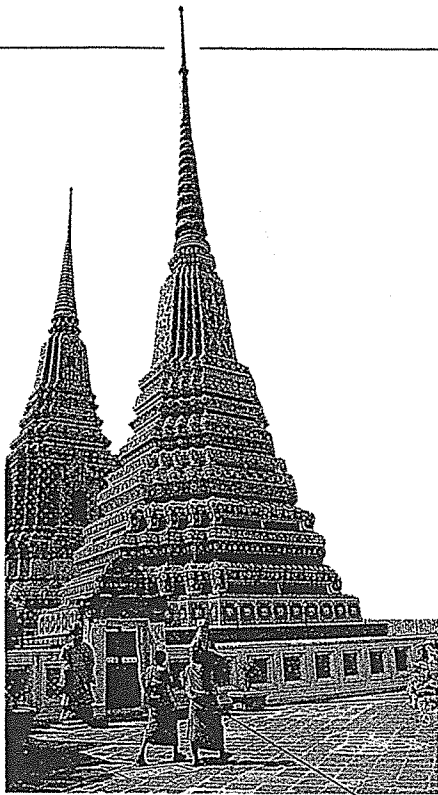
The Realm of the Titans, in which demi-gods fight endlessly, motivated by envy

The Realm of the Hungry Spirits: consumed by greed, they suffer permanent hunger and thirst

In each realm a Buddha-figure appears and helps the beings there

WHEEL OF EXISTENCE
According to the Buddha's teaching, when people die, they are reborn into one of the six realms of existence. Which realm depends on how they behaved in their previous life. This is called karma: the law by which actions are rewarded or punished as they deserve, the law of cause and effect in moral life. Your karma determines whether your next life will be better or worse than this one. The aim of Gautama's search was to escape this cycle of rebirth, to find the state of happiness known as Nirvana.

Devotion and meditation



AS BUDDHISM SPREAD OUTWARD from India, it developed into two different branches. They are often called “vehicles” since Buddhist Dharma (teaching or law) is thought of as a raft or ship carrying people across an ocean of suffering to Nirvana – a “Beyond” of salvation and bliss. Theravada, the “Little Vehicle,” is mainly found in Southeast Asia. It emphasizes the life of meditation lived by the monk, and its teaching tends towards the view that people are essentially on their own in the universe and can reach Nirvana only by their own efforts. Mahayana, the “Great Vehicle,” is dominant in Tibet, China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. Mahayana Buddhists believe that people are not alone and must help one another. They can also receive help from the Buddha, other buddhas, and from bodhisattvas (almost-buddhas who have paused before Nirvana to assist others). Salvation is available to all through faith and devotion.

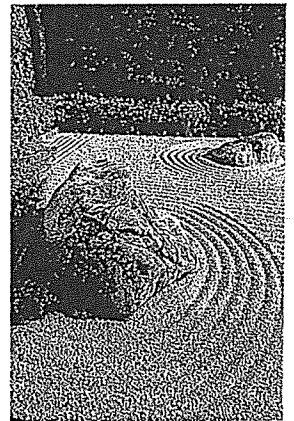
PLACES OF WORSHIP

After the Buddha’s death, his body was cremated and his ashes distributed among his followers. They formed the original relics (holy objects) and were housed and worshiped in stupas (great sacred mounds). In parts of Asia stupas are called pagodas. Later, temples were built where worship was offered in the presence of Buddha images and bodhisattvas.

Monks in the precincts of the Wat Po temple in Thailand

PLACES OF MEDITATION

Buddhism gave rise to numerous sects and practices within and outside the two main vehicles. One is Zen, which originated in Chinese ways of meditation. Zen is widespread in Japan, and there are Zen gardens across the country. Zen meditation has strict rules. The most important are to sit in the lotus position and to address riddles that have no answer (these help in breaking free from the mind). For example, “When you clap hands, you hear a sound. Now listen to one hand clapping.”

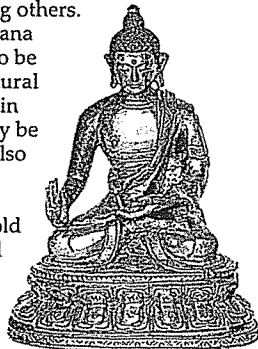


FOCUS OF DEVOTION

Originally the Buddha was a famous and greatly honored human being devoted to working out his own salvation and teaching others. Eventually, in Mahayana Buddhism, he came to be revered as a supernatural being. His image sits in temples. Beside it may be other buddhas, and also bodhisattvas, beings who have reached enlightenment but hold back on the threshold of Nirvana to help others find salvation.



Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (which means “The Lord Who Looks Down”)



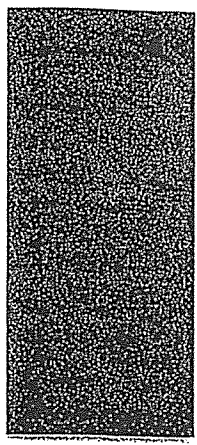
Buddha Amoghasiddhi, one of the five “Meditation Buddhas”



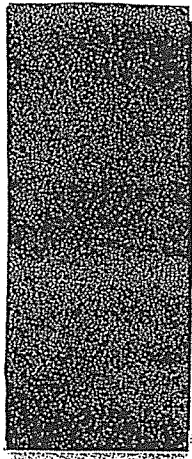
Dipankara Buddha (the “Causer of Light”)

Seven other bodhisattvas

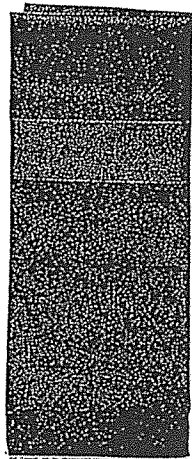




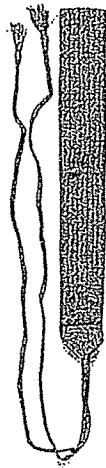
Worn around hips



Worn over shoulder



Worn on top for ceremonial occasions or for traveling



Belt or girdle

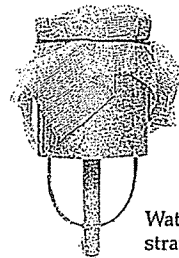
Needle and thread



Sharpening stone



Razor

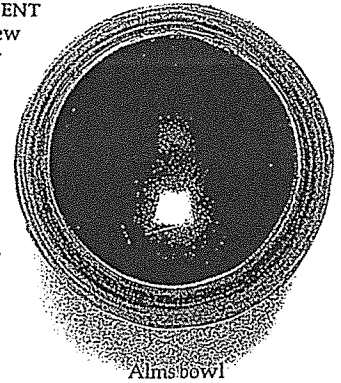


Water strainer

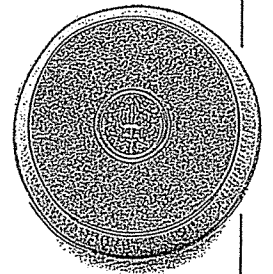
*To the Buddha for refuge I go,
To the Dharma for refuge I go,
To the Sangha for refuge I go.*

GAUTAMA BUDDHA

THAI MONK'S EQUIPMENT
Buddhist monks have very few possessions and live very simple lives. In their daily devotions, both monks and lay people (non-clergy) undertake not to cause injury, steal, consume intoxicating things, engage in wrong sexual behavior, or deceive.



Alms bowl



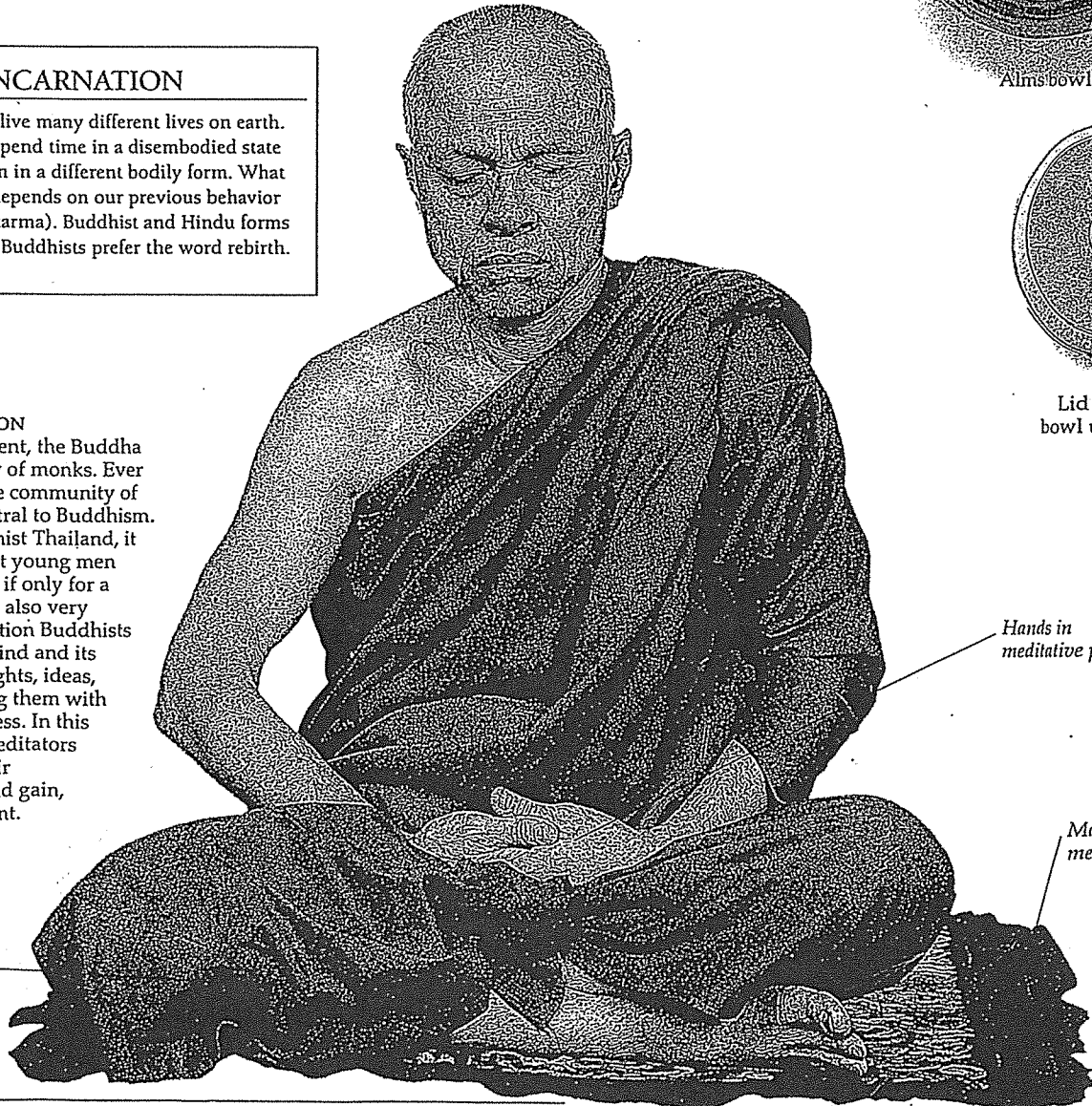
Lid from alms bowl used as plate

REINCARNATION

The belief that we live many different lives on earth. When we die we spend time in a disembodied state before being reborn in a different bodily form. What we are reborn as depends on our previous behavior (this is the law of karma). Buddhist and Hindu forms of this belief differ. Buddhists prefer the word rebirth.

MONK IN MEDITATION

After his enlightenment, the Buddha formed a community of monks. Ever since, the Sangha, the community of monks, has been central to Buddhism. Even today, in Buddhist Thailand, it is customary for most young men to enter a monastery, if only for a month. Meditation is also very important. In meditation Buddhists attempt to still the mind and its endless flow of thoughts, ideas, and desires, replacing them with a state of inner stillness. In this stillness, it is said, meditators become aware of their fundamental state and gain, in time, enlightenment.



Hands in meditative position

Mat for meditation

Legs crossed in half-lotus position

The Buddhism of Tibet



TIBET AND BEYOND
In modern times Tibetan Buddhism has had an increasing influence abroad. Tibetans and Buddhists of different traditions, such as these monks in Shanghai, are happy to share their experience and wisdom.

BUDDHISM CAME TO TIBET from India in the eighth century. By that time Indian Buddhism had adapted a complicated set of rituals and "magic" from folk religion to help people find their way to Nirvana. This form of Buddhism was written in sacred, secret books called tantras, so it was called Tantrism. It included the use of mystic diagrams, called mandalas, and sacred phrases or sayings called mantras, which disciples said over and over again. The religion that came to dominate Tibet was a mixture of Tantric and other Mahayana teachings. In Tibet, it was developed further by spiritual leaders called lamas, who are usually monks. Lamas belong to a number of different groups, or schools. These schools are based around various powerful monasteries. Their ideas and practices vary, but they have usually existed in harmony. One of a lama's tasks is to guide a dying person's spirit in the time between death and rebirth. Lamas spend many years learning and meditating to gain this wisdom.

Vairochana, foremost of the Meditation Buddhas, perfects knowledge

Ratnasambhava, "The Beautifier," perfects goodness and beauty

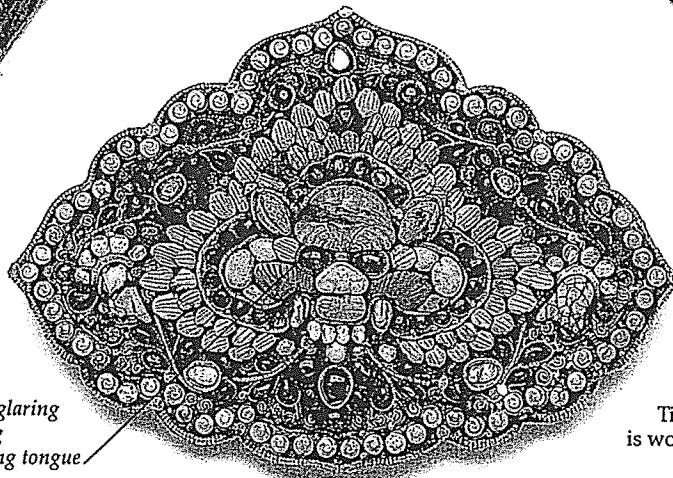
Amitabha, "Infinite Compassion," perfects speech

Vajrasattva, "The Unchanging," perfects wisdom

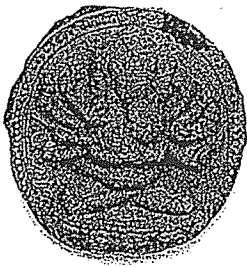
Amoghasiddhi, "Almighty Conqueror," perfects action

THE FIVE BUDDHAS
This Tibetan lama's ritual headdress displays the "Buddhas of Meditation." According to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, these buddhas dwell in the heavenly worlds. Each personifies an aspect of "Divine Being," the ultimate reality or wisdom. They meet a dead person's spirit, and the spirit's reaction shows how enlightened the person is and decides how the person will be reborn.

The demon has glaring eyes, protruding tusks, and jutting tongue



RITUAL PROTECTION
In Indian mythology, the god Shiva creates a demon who will be the supreme destructive force of the universe. The grotesque face of this demon, called "the face of glory," is often placed on temples of Shiva as a protective device. This ritual amulet is a Tibetan adaptation of the Indian symbol and is worn to terrify demons and protect the wearer.



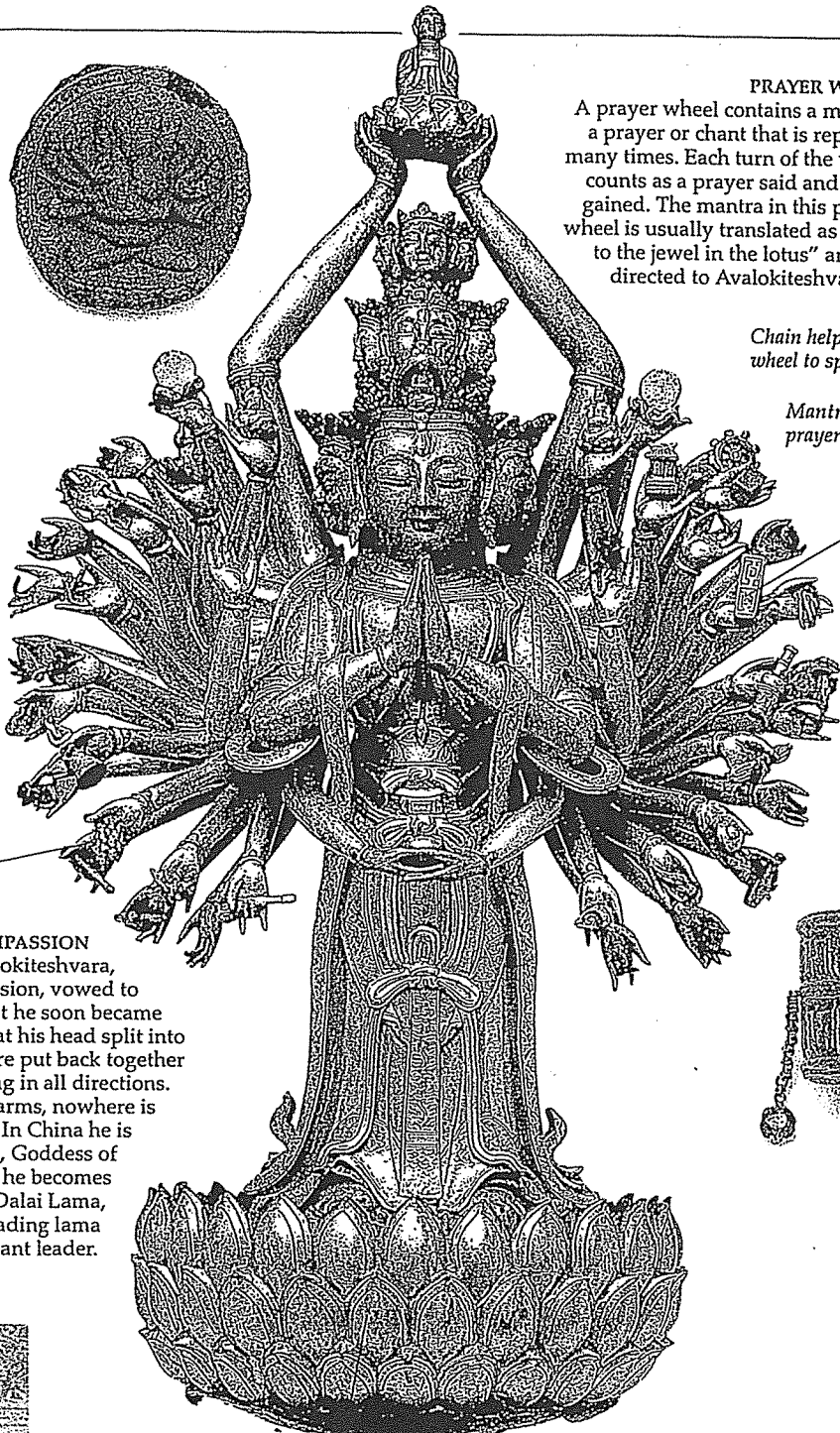
VENERATING RELICS

Soon after the Buddha's death, Buddhists began to collect the physical remains and belongings of holy persons and to venerate them as relics. Here, impressions of shrines and Buddha images have been molded from lama ashes. After the cremation of a lama, his ashes are collected, mixed with clay, molded into tablets, and placed in cases or shrines.

Bodhisattvas have graceful bodies, wear long robes and jewelry, and hold religious implements

BODHISATVA OF COMPASSION

The story is told of how Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, vowed to save all conscious beings, but he soon became so overwhelmed by the task that his head split into a thousand pieces. The pieces were put back together again to form eleven heads, looking in all directions. With these heads and a thousand arms, nowhere is out of reach of his love and mercy. In China he is Kuan Yin and in Japan Kannon, Goddess of Love and Mercy. In Tibet today he becomes incarnate in the person of the Dalai Lama, now in exile but still the leading lama and Tibet's most important leader.



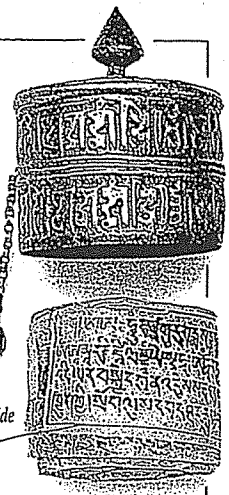
This Avalokiteshvara stands on a lotus-flower throne, which rises on a stalk out of swirling waters

PRAYER WHEEL
A prayer wheel contains a mantra, a prayer or chant that is repeated many times. Each turn of the wheel counts as a prayer said and merit gained. The mantra in this prayer wheel is usually translated as "Hail to the jewel in the lotus" and is directed to Avalokiteshvara.

Chain helps wheel to spin

Mantra fits inside prayer wheel

He holds objects that illustrate Buddhist truths



As the wheel is spun, the heavy head spins fast

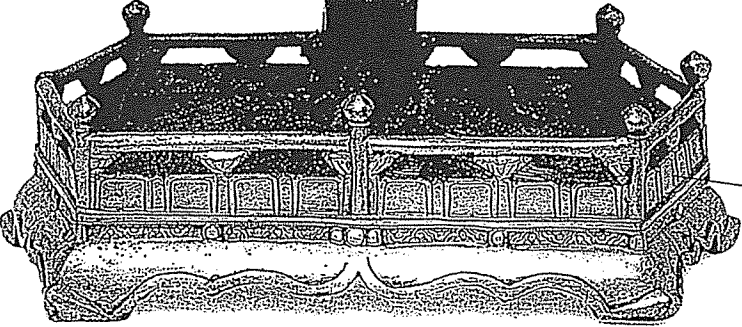
*When the breath has ceased...
the Knower will be
experiencing the Clear Light
of the natural condition.*

TIBETAN BOOK OF THE DEAD, 1.1



YOUNG LAMAS

Tibetan Buddhism has had a strong spiritual and moral influence on Tibetans. Since the Communist Chinese takeover of 1950, monasteries have been destroyed and the influence of religion weakened. Many do still practice their devotions, however, and a strong movement continues among refugees. Here, young lamas blow horns as part of a monastic ritual.



This 18th-century statue is made of gilt bronze