

## Recounting a Life in Eight Scenes



***Plaque with Scenes from the Life of the Buddha***, 12th century

Indian (Bihar or West Bengal)

Mudstone

Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Anonymous Gift, 1982, 1982.233

<b>Grades:</b>	6 – 9
<b>Subjects:</b>	English Language Arts, Social Science, Fine Arts, Foreign Languages
<b>Time Required:</b>	2 – 4 periods, 45 minutes each
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### Lesson Overview

This lesson will introduce students to the life of the Buddha and the development of Buddhism. They will learn that eight places came to be associated with key events in the Buddha's life and that these places became important sites for pilgrimage. Then the students will choose a famous person and research that person's life. Using the plaque as a model, the students will create an image of the person they choose and depict eight important events in that person's life.

## Materials

- Reproduction of *Plaque with Scenes from the Life of the Buddha*
- Pen or pencil
- Heavyweight textured paper
- Research materials: library books, a computer with access to the internet, and news magazines
- Clay: self drying or regular
- Simple carving tools: plastic knives, wooden skewers, etc.
- White glue
- Adornments or small objects

## Lesson Steps

1. Have students look closely at *Plaque with Scenes from the Life of the Buddha*. See how much students can figure out about the work when they take time to look at it, think about it, and share ideas.
2. Use a brainstorming technique, such as Pair Share, to get students started before sharing with the whole class.
  - Pair Share: Students turn to a partner and take turns making observations about the sculpture. After naming some of the most obvious things, they will begin to look more deeply and notice things that their partners did not. They should remember to share these ideas in the discussion later.
3. Use the following questions to begin a discussion.
  - What do you see? What can you find out about the work?
  - What is the work made of?
    - The plaque is carved in mudstone (clay which has hardened into rock), probably by an artist from Bihar or West Bengal in India.
  - Who is the person depicted in each of these scenes?
    - The sculpture is of Buddha. Born around 600 BCE (prior to the year 0), he was a prince named Siddhartha Gautama (sid-DAR-ta GO-ta-ma. He led a sheltered and luxurious life in his parents' palace, never venturing off the grounds. Siddhartha's father tried to protect his son from the outside world, but the Siddhartha grew curious and snuck outside the palace walls. He went out into the world and saw a poor man, a sick man, a dead man, and a monk. Recognizing that life is impermanent and full of suffering even for a prince, he decided to leave the palace and to live the life of a wandering ascetic (a person who practices self-denial as a religious discipline). In his travels, he contemplated suffering. He wondered what causes suffering and why must people suffer. In a place called Bodhgaya (bode-GUY-ah), India, he meditated beneath a bodhi (BO-dee) tree and achieved enlightenment (a state of heightened spiritual awareness), becoming the Buddha, which means Enlightened One in Sanskrit, an ancient Indian language. The Buddha went on to teach that desire is the root of suffering and that people must lead right and virtuous lives free of desire if they want to escape the cycle of suffering. Buddha had many followers in his lifetime and a religion developed around his teachings. Buddhists believe in reincarnation—that they will be reborn after they die. The goal of Buddhism is to achieve nirvana (a state of perfect enlightenment), so that people will not be reborn and will no longer suffer.
    - Later Buddhists began to associate the Buddha's life and teachings with Eight Great Sites of Wonder. These sites were marked with stupas, funerary mounds topped with spires that housed relics of the Buddha. These relics are the remains that the Buddha left behind. Visiting one of these places, a pilgrim may have acquired a plaque like this one as a memento of her/his pilgrimage. The plaque in the center depicts the Buddha attaining

enlightenment at Bodhgaya with scenes from the other seven places arranged around the central figure. It was meant to be carried as a tangible reminder of the Buddha's spiritual journey and to help simulate a mental pilgrimage to the eight sites depicted. Also, the Buddha's life became a blueprint onto which good Buddhists could map their own lives by following the Buddha's example or literally following in his footsteps.



**Stupa at Lumbini (where Buddha was born)**

- What is the Buddha doing in each scene?
  - Each scene relates to one of the Eight Great Events in the Buddha's life. The central image portrays the Buddha at the moment of his enlightenment (Bodhgaya). He sits in meditation and touches the earth, asking it to bear witness to his enlightenment. Moving clockwise from the bottom left, the other scenes depict: his miraculous birth from his mother's side (Lumbini), his first sermon (Sarnath), his taming of the elephant Nalagiri (Rajagaha), and Buddha's death (Kushinagar). The missing carvings along the right would have shown his descent from heaven (Sankasya), the miracles he performed (Savasti), and his acceptance of a monkey's offering of honey (Vasali).



**Map of the Eight Great Sites of Wonder**

- In the central figure, the Buddha sits on a lotus blossom. Because the flower grows up from mud and water into an exquisite bloom, it became an important metaphor for the Buddha's own life; his enlightenment (represented by the lotus) grew out of worldly suffering (represented by mud).



**Lotus blossom**

- How was this object used? Why is it so small?
  - Pilgrims carried these plaques with them, so the objects needed to be portable. They are sacred mementos of pilgrimage and represent the events in the Buddha's life that are important to pilgrims. These objects traveled far and wide across Asia and India. Pilgrims might travel to India to visit a site associated with the Buddha's life. There, they might acquire an object like this one and bring it back as a reminder of the journey. This artwork served as a tangible reminder of a difficult physical as well as spiritual passage.
- What modern day reminders might you have from a journey?
  - Today a traveler might bring home a postcard, photos, or other souvenir. A passport that is stamped upon entering or exiting a country is also a tangible reminder of one's journey.
- What impact might objects like this have had on the development of Buddhism?
  - Although this plaque was carved in India, it was discovered in Burma (present day Myanmar), where it had traveled with a returning pilgrim. In this way, art helped communicate ideas across geographic divides. While local pilgrimage traditions sprang up across Asia, art objects like this plaque popularized and codified the tradition of the Eight Great Sites of Wonder.

## Activity

1. Have the students look closely at the events in the Buddha's life depicted on the plaque.
2. Ask them to think about these events, why they are important, and how they contribute to the overall identity of the Buddha.
3. Have students then research (using library books, a computer with access to the internet, and/or news magazines) the life of a famous or important person, looking specifically for eight important events in that person's life.
4. Use a slab of clay (self hardening or regular) to create your own plaque.
5. Students can carve into the clay using a pencil, plastic knife, skewer, or sharp stick.
6. In the center is the central figure.
7. Then in smaller vignettes that form a semi-circle around the central image; students should mold the other seven events. Tell the students to consider the most important elements of each event. They should strive



to use a concise visual language so that their works will be readable.

8. Students may wish to press small objects into the clay to symbolize or illustrate one of the attributes of the figure depicted.
9. If using self hardening clay, let the artwork air dry. If using regular clay, place in kiln or paint with a thick coat of white glue to glaze the work and allow to air dry for about 3-5 days.

**Optional:** If clay is not available, students could use heavyweight paper with a pen or pencil, to draw the most important event in their subject's life. This drawing should be large and in the center of the page.

#### **Expanding the Lesson**

- Have the students present their carvings (or drawings) to the class. Using their artwork as a visual guide, the students should talk about the life of the important person, the events they chose, and why.

## **Vocabulary**

**ascetic:** a person who practices self-denial as a religious discipline.

**Eight Great Sites of Wonder:** places where significant events in the Buddha's life occurred. After the Buddha's death, they became important sites of Buddhist pilgrimage.

**enlightenment:** a state of heightened spiritual awareness. The enlightened individual understands suffering, its cause, and the way to end suffering.

**lotus blossom:** a flower that became an important symbol for Buddhism. It grows in mud and water just as enlightenment grows out of worldly suffering.

**nirvana:** state of perfect enlightenment. Having achieved nirvana, Buddhists will no longer be reborn into suffering.

**reincarnation:** belief in rebirth after death.

**stupa:** a funerary mound that houses relics of the Buddha and marks an important spiritual place.

## **Illinois Learning Standards**

English Language Arts  
4 – Listening and Speaking

Social Science  
16 – History  
17 – Geography  
18 – Social Systems

Fine Arts  
26 – Creating and Performing  
27 – Arts and Civilization

Foreign Languages  
29 – Culture and Geography