

## **BUDDHISM: IMPACT ON KOREAN CULTURE**

**GRADE LEVEL:** 9-12

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**SUBJECT:** History, Geography, Comparative Religion

**TIME REQUIRED:** 2-3 weeks

### **OBJECTIVES:**

1. Understand the central features of Buddhism
2. Relate Korean Buddhism to important periods of Korean history
3. Investigate how Buddhism has influenced the culture of Korea
4. Research a specific cultural artifact or location
5. Relate Buddhist culture in Korea either to Buddhist manifestations in other Asian countries or to some aspect of Christian culture in the West

### **MATERIALS REQUIRED:**

- A brief overview of the essential principles of Buddhism
- A historical survey of Buddhism in Korea, especially during the Silla and Koryo Dynasties
- References that explain terms and concepts of Buddhist art and doctrine
- Travel books and brochures about Korea, which are available in libraries, bookstores, the Korean National Tourism Corporation
- Photographs of important Buddhist images, temples and relics in Korea for use in research and presentation (slides preferred if available)
- Recordings of Buddhist ritual chants, which are available from Omni Records or other series of international sacred recordings

### **BACKGROUND:**

China introduced Buddhism to Korea in the fourth century, and it has been an important feature of Korean history and culture ever since. Its greatest influence was exerted during the Silla and Koryo Dynasties, which extends from the seventh to the fourteenth centuries. In order to understand its distinct features and its impact on Korean cultural life, Korean Buddhism must be placed within a larger religious and historical context. This lesson should provide opportunities to investigate historic, artistic, religious and social manifestations of Buddhism in Korean culture.

The “Three Jewels” of Buddhism are the Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama), the *dharma* (sacred scriptures and teachings) and the *sangha* (the monkhood and community of believers). A myriad of paintings and sculpture of Buddha exist in Korea; the most prominent being the Sokkuram Grotto outside the city Kyongju. This monumental sculpture of the Buddha, which was made during the Silla dynasty, its grotto with various other images, and its location are all indicative of the veneration given to the Buddha himself during this period of Korean history.

The *dharma* is the focus of a detailed study of the Tripitaka Koreana, a remarkable collection of over 81,000 carved wooden printing blocks that contains all Buddhist sutras and teaching. Completed in 1251 during the Koryo period, the Tripitaka is currently housed in Haein-sa, a temple complex in the Kaya Mountains. Several features of the complex,

including the architectural style of the buildings, their functions and the remote woodland location, symbolize various aspects of Buddhist teachings.

Finally, to provide a more modern emphasis, examine the role of the *sangha* in contemporary Korean rituals. These Buddhist rites often involve chanting accompanied by a unique wooden gong called the *mokt'ak*. Korean Buddhist music, while often using sutras commonly found in other countries, is unique in its notation and use of the gong, which is popular tourist souvenir. Other aspects of temple worship, such as showing veneration for the images, giving offerings, bowing and prostrating, should also be considered in the understanding of contemporary Buddhist practices in Korea.

## **PROCEDURE:**

### **INTRODUCTION: Tenets of Buddhism and History of Korean Buddhism**

Have students read a general history of Buddhism, such as that contained in Huston Smith's *The World's Religions*. Students should become well acquainted with the life of the Buddha, including the "Four Noble Truths," which comprise of his teachings, and with the spread of Mahayana Buddhism from India to Korea.

Then address the development and historical impact of Buddhism in Korea. This information can be found by reading an overview of the topic in a history book of Korea or in a more detailed study, such as the introductory chapters of *A Buddha from Korea*, which is a collection of Zen writings by T'aego, a fourteenth-century Korean Zen priest.

After the fundamentals of Buddhism have been discussed and established, divide the class into three groups so that each group researches a separate aspect of the "Three Jewels." Once all the students have thoroughly researched their assigned topics, each group should share their findings with the rest of the class. Then lead a discussion on the material. Context may be provided in these discussions by comparing and contrasting Buddhist practices with similar features of the students' own religions and beliefs.

### **GROUP 1: The First Jewel-The Buddha**

Students should research the Sokkuram Grotto, which is located in the mountains near Kyongju and which contains a monumental figure of the Buddha. The group should provide a history of the statue's construction, visuals to give the class an idea of its artistic quality, and some concept of how its creators during the Silla period would have venerated the image. Pose the following questions to investigate the significance of this image and its place in Korean cultural history:

1. What does the sculpture reveal about the attitudes toward the Buddha? Describe the facial expression of the image and relate it to the ideas in the "Four Noble Truths."
2. Why was the grotto built in such a remote location? Why does the image face east? What does the halo behind the sculpture's head reveal about the image?
3. Examine the *mudra* (the placement of the Buddha's hands on the sculpture) and its significance in understanding the *dharma*.
4. Identify and explore the significance of the other statues and images in the grotto. How do they complement the central image?
5. Evaluate the artistic quality of the main statue (i.e. by comparing it with other famous images of the Buddha, such as the monumental Buddha at Kamakura, Japan, the sculptures on the Borobodur Monument in Central Java, or those from the Gupta period in India).
6. Compare and contrast the uses of the Buddha images prominent in Korean culture with depictions of Jesus in Western art and churches. What purposes do they serve for each culture?

### **PART 3: The Second Jewel-The *Dharma***

This group of students should investigate the Tripitaka Koreana, which is housed in the Haein Temple complex in the Kaya Mountains. The presentation should explore the reasons the Tripitaka Koreana was carved, the nature of the Buddhist scriptures included in it, the preparation of the wooden blocks and the printing process, and the way the blocks are preserved and housed at Haein-sa. If possible, translations of Buddhist sutras should be offered for reading and commentary. Tripitaka means "three baskets" and includes three sections: the Vinaya Pitaka, which gives the rules for the sangha; the Sutra Pitaka, which contains the scriptures and teachings; and the Abhidhamma Pitaka, which contains theoretical doctrines and metaphysics. (The Tripitaka Koreana has not appeared in an English translation, but it includes sutras that have been translated from Chinese, Pali and Sanskrit.) Pose the following questions as the basis for class discussion:

1. What does the creation and preservation of the Tripitaka Koreana reveal about the importance of the *dharma* to Korean culture?
2. How does the Tripitaka Koreana (i.e. the ways in which the wooden printing blocks were carved and the extent of its scriptural completeness) illustrate reverence for the Buddhist scriptures?
3. Compare and contrast the location of the Haein-sa temple complex and the Sokkuram Grotto. Why were remote natural settings preferred for these important creations?
4. How are the blocks printed? Explore the quality of the calligraphy in reproductions of the printed text.
5. Analyze the architecture of the buildings housing the collection of wooden blocks. What qualities of air circulation and humidity are important in the design of the buildings? How are other buildings in the temple complex fashioned to show various aspects of the Buddhist doctrines?
6. Read aloud passages of important Mahayana scriptures (e.g. the Diamond Sutra or the Heart Sutra) and discuss how they embody the "Four Noble Truths." Also examine their quality as poetry and what they communicate to a Western audience by comparing and contrasting them with Biblical passages.

### **PART 4: The Third Jewel-The *Sangha***

This group of students should investigate contemporary Buddhist rituals that are practiced in Korea. The most readily available means is probably through recordings of Buddhist chants and sacred music. Videotapes often include short passages of Buddhist festivals, but a more detailed process of research may be conducted if recordings are available. The compact disc series entitled *Prayer to Buddha*, which are sold in the vicinity of the Chogyesa Temple in Seoul, includes chants of monks to the accompaniment of the *mokt'ak*. Explain the rituals of circumambulation, of prostration and bowing, of offerings, etc. and how such rituals may have been performed in earlier periods.

Play samples of Buddhist sacred music and examine how followers of Buddhism show reverence to the Buddha with their chanting and music. Pose the following questions for class discussion:

1. What does a typical Buddhist worship service in Korea constitute? What role do images and paintings of Buddha have? What role does chanting have? Incense or candle lighting? The priests?
2. What musical instruments are part of a modern Buddhist worship ceremony? How is the *mokt'ak* used to call the congregation to attention, to establish rhythms, and to keep time?

3. If available, play recorded examples of *sutra* (a Buddhist invocation), *hwach'ong* (a chant based upon folksongs) and *pomp'ae* (a long solemn chant), and listen for differences among the types. Speculate about the purpose of each chant.
4. Relate the ritual practices of chanting and music to the veneration of the Buddha images and to the practice of the *dharma*. How are all these elements integrated into a cultural/religious framework in modern Korea?
5. What qualities of craftsmanship and art are evident in the construction of the *mokt'ak*, temple bells, drums or other instruments used in Buddhist rituals? To what extent may these qualities be linked with those found in sculptures of the Buddha, the wooden blocks of the Tripitaka Koreana, temple architecture, etc.?
6. Compare and contrast the forms of worship in Korean Buddhist temples with those in Christian churches or Jewish synagogues in the United States. What role do music and musical instruments play in each?

#### **EVALUATION:**

- Students will be evaluated by the quality of the group presentations and each student's written summary of individual research, which should be thoroughly documented to demonstrate the depth and extent of his/her study and contribution.
- Participation in discussions should also be weighed as well as a possible unit test to measure each student's mastery of the lesson as a whole.

#### **ENRICHMENT:**

- Students can compare/contrast how the "Three Jewels" are manifested in other forms of Buddhism, such as in Tibetan Buddhist art and rituals, the Theravada traditions of Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries, as well as those of China and Japan.

#### **RESOURCES:**

Cleary, J.C., trans. *A Buddha from Korea: The Zen Teachings of T'aego*. Boston: Shambhala Press, 1988.

\*\*Provides an accurate and concise overview of the development of Korean Buddhism through the Koryo period.

Conze, Edward, trans. *Buddhist Scriptures*. New York: Penguin, 1959.

\*\*A brief introduction to Buddhism and translations of major Buddhist texts, including the Heart Sutra and the Diamond Sutra.

Easwaran, Eknath, trans. *The Dhammapada*. Tomales, California: Nilgiri Press, 1985.

\*\*Provides a comprehensive introduction to the life and teachings of the Buddha along with a brief consideration of the divergence of the Mahayana and Theravada traditions.

*Haein-sa, Reflection on a Calm Sea Temple*. Lotus Lantern International Buddhist Center., trans. Haein-sa: Haein-sa Press, 1994.

\*\*A tourist guide to the temple complex with a concise history of the Tripitaka Koreana.

Hyun, Peter, ed. *Introducing Korea*. Seoul: Jungwoo-sa, 1987.

\*\*Contains beautiful photographs of the Tripitaka Koreana and essays on the Sokkuram Grotto and the Haein-sa complex.

*Prayer to Buddha Series, Vol. 1*. Compact Disc from Omni Records.

\*\*Contains chants with a *mokt'ak* accompaniment recorded in Seoul.

Sadie, Stanley, ed. "Korea: Buddhist Ritual Music." *New Grove Dictionary of Music and*

*Musicians*. Vol. 10. London: Macmillan, 1980.

\*\*Gives detailed information about different types of sacred music used in Buddhist temples in Korea, along with descriptions of traditional instruments used in rituals.

Smith, Huston. *The World's Religions*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991.

\*\*A thorough and accessible account of the Buddha's life and the origins of Buddhism for students.

Storey, Robert. *Lonely Planet: Korea*. Hawthorn, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications, 1997.

\*\*A brief but useful historical introduction that outlines the periods of Korean history and the impact of Buddhism; also contains facts about the Sokkuram Grotto, Haein-sa and other significant Buddhist sites in Korea.