



# Visiting a Buddhist Temple

Buddhism in Every Step (B10)

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# Visiting a Buddhist Temple



Buddhist temples and monasteries are meant to reflect the aim of Buddhism: the end of all suffering. The Buddha states, “Both formerly and now, I teach only about affliction and suffering—and how to end it.” For over 2,000 years, Buddhist temples have developed in many different ways to suit the needs, available materials, and circumstances of each

time and place, yet one can still see the same foundational themes reflected in each temple's symbolism, structure, and customs. This booklet will focus on Chinese Buddhist temples and the symbols and traditions they have developed, as well as how to understand and participate in the daily events of a modern temple.

## **History of Buddhist Temples**

Buddhism began about 2,500 years ago and originated from the teachings of a young prince, Siddhartha Guatama, who left his royal palace to lead a simpler, aesthetic lifestyle; upon attaining enlightenment, he became known as Sakyamuni Buddha and proceeded to spread his teachings for forty-nine years. Temples did not exist in the earliest days of Buddhism. During the Buddha's time, monastics spent most of the year wandering from place to place, living on the edge of forests, yet close enough to towns so they could teach and receive food from almsgivers.

However, India has a three-month long rainy season that made it very difficult to travel by foot or live outside under trees. Throughout this rainy season, the Buddha's community of followers settled down in an area together; over time, these places grew and became more established and resulted in

temples. For example, the Jetavana temple is one of the most famous monasteries in India, and it was built on a large area of land purchased and donated by Anathapindika, a wealthy disciple of the Buddha. Temples were simple facilities with little more than basic living spaces, a bathing area, toilets, and a hall for the Buddha to give lectures to his disciples or for the monastic community to hold their services.

After the Buddha's final nirvana, his cremated relics were placed into stupas, large mound-shaped monuments, which stood as symbols of his awakening and teaching. Stupa structures became centers of Buddhist practice and pilgrimage across India, and many monasteries were constructed near them.

### Chinese Temples

When Buddhism was established in China during the 3rd century, the first temples continued to emphasize the stupa as the center of the sacred space. Over time, the temples adapted various Chinese influences to reflect a design locals were more familiar with. By the 7th and 8th centuries, a Main Shrine with large Buddha statues became the centerpiece of a temple, providing a space for individuals to pay respect to the Buddha. Gradually, the Main Shrine became the central space for all ceremonies in Buddhist temples. Although modern temples have developed a plethora

of designs and features, for most, the Main Shrine remains the religious center of the temple.

## **Temple Etiquette: How to Enter and Interact**

### Entering the temple

*Enter and exit temples with three-door entrances through the left or right doorways.*

Many Chinese Buddhist temples have three large doorways at the entrance. This three-door tradition originally began when government officials donated this style of building to be converted into monasteries. Originally, the emperor was the only person allowed to use the central doorway, but when temples began to reflect this design, the honor of using the central doorway shifted to the abbot or head of the temple.

### Greeting

*Joining palms and saying the Buddha's name is how Buddhists express truth and goodness toward each other.*



Many Buddhists greet each other with their hands joined together and placed at the center of the chest. This gesture symbolizes the lotus flower bud.

The beautiful lotus flower grows out of the bottom of a pond, which is full of mud and decay. Because of their origin, lotus flowers are a symbol for awakening since a human being, although born in a world of pain and suffering, has the potential to go beyond and attain liberation. Lotus flowers can be found throughout temples.

As a way to say hello, goodbye, or thank you, Buddhists often join palms and say, “Amitufofo.” Amitufofo is the Chinese pronunciation of Amitabha Buddha, meaning infinite life and infinite light.

## Monastics

*Monastics can simply be addressed as “Venerable.”*

You can easily identify monastics by their shaved heads and long, ochre colored robes. Upon becoming ordained, monastics take many vows, including one to regularly shave their heads. According to the life story of the Buddha, upon departing his home to search for the end of suffering, one of the first things he did was shave off his hair and exchange his ornate clothes for a simple robe; Buddhist monastics continue these practices to show their dedication to the Buddha’s path.

Traditionally, robes were dyed to a saffron or ochre color from vegetable matter like roots and leaves. Often, a red clay was added to give the robe a slightly orange hue. Although vegetable dyes are rarely used today, the color was influential, and most traditions of Buddhism still use shades of color between red and brown for their robes.

## Visiting the Main Shrine

*As the sacred center of the community, certain rules of etiquette apply in the Main Shrine.*



Since the Buddha is the center of the religion, it is customary for Buddhist practitioners to visit the Main Shrine before any other part of the temple. Before entering, you should cover your shoulders and legs, and check to see if shoes should be removed and if photography is permitted. Show respect by removing hats, silencing phones, and keeping voices low. Eating and showing the bottoms of the feet toward Buddha or bodhisattva images is also considered impolite. Visitors should sit with feet flat on the floor or in a cross-legged meditation posture.

### Offerings

*According to Buddhist culture, devotees visit the temple to make offerings.*



Most commonly, candles, incense, flowers, or fruit are placed on the altar in front of a bodhisattva or Buddha statue. Other traditional offerings include lamps, tea, gems, beads, and cloth. Each type of offering has a symbolic meaning behind it. Fruit symbolizes awakening or the spiritual fruit of our dedicated practice. Flowers offerings allow devotees to feel cleansed and refreshed. Candles are a symbol of wisdom, and incense is a symbol of mental and ethical purification. While making an offering, a practitioner also consciously develops a giving attitude within. The act of offering, although for personal development, also benefits the entire Buddhist community; for example, food offerings are used to feed the monastic and lay staff of a temple.

Since many devotees offer incense, in a courtyard or in front of the Main Shrine, there may be a large

incense burner for incense offerings. There is also a specific way Buddhists offer incense. Facing the Buddha or bodhisattva images, the incense stick is held at the chest, while a short prayer or intention is set; then, the incense is raised up to the position between the eyes, returned back to the chest, then placed into the incense burner. Again, you may also simply ask someone to help you make an incense offering.

### Bowing before the Buddha

*To show respect to the Buddha for teaching the path to awakening, Buddhists often bow and or prostrate before Buddha images.*



These gestures are not an act of worship but a way to develop humility, as well as to recognize our own potential to become awakened. Prostrating is also called “touching the Earth” because it humbles individuals and serves as a reminder that we are part of the Earth and a greater lineage. Prostrations are generally done in sets of threes with a half bow at the waist before the first and after the last prostration. They are an important part of Buddhist practice. If you would like to learn how to properly bow and prostrate, simply ask a volunteer to show you.

## Eating

*Since Buddhism emphasizes the end of suffering for all sentient beings, the food in Chinese Buddhist temples is vegetarian.*

A temple is a place where all life is respected, so visitors should avoid even bringing meat onto the temple grounds. During mealtime, Buddhists commonly reflect on various virtues such as not taking more than is needed or generating feelings of gratitude toward all the people who contributed to growing, transporting, and cooking the food. In these ways, temples promote health and discourage wastefulness, two qualities needed on the path to enlightenment. During retreat periods or in special separate dining

halls, some meals are eaten in complete silence, while practitioners pay close attention to every single bite, calming the mind in the process.

### Handling Buddhist Scriptures

*The teachings of the Buddha are greatly respected; it is considered impolite to set Buddhist scriptures on the ground or alongside secular materials.*



Buddhist scriptures are called sutras. They record the Buddha's teachings. The Chinese, inventors of the printing press, preserved numerous volumes of the Buddha's teachings. Many important sutras, such as the *Diamond Sutra* and *Lotus Sutra*, have been translated into English and are available as books in stores or libraries at a temple. You may also find them inscribed on the walls of the temples' shrines and halls. A common practice at Chinese Buddhist temples is to transcribe the calligraphy of a sutra, providing an opportunity to read the words of the Buddha and develop calm concentration in the process.

## **Common Temple Layout**

### Entry Gate

*There is often a large entryway referred to as the "mountain gate," which marks the entry into the sacred ground of the temple.*

Many monasteries used to be built on mountains, and the term "mountain gate" is still a popular way of referring to Buddhist temples. The mountain gate also symbolizes a transition from the ordinary world to a sacred one.

## Entrance

*Guardian and protector figures are often depicted at the temple's entryways.*

Statues of bodhisattvas Qielan, Weituo, and the Four Heavenly Kings also commonly guard the temple's entrance or are presented as a pair on either side of an altar. Qielan is a historical general from medieval China who was respected for his sense of morality



and justice. He is frequently depicted with a red face and one hand stroking his long, black beard. Weituo, a warrior famous for protecting the Buddha's relics, is shown holding a large sword at his side. The Four Heavenly Kings each represent one of the cardinal directions and have committed themselves to protecting the Buddha's teachings. They are shown as a group, each holding a different item: a sword, a serpent, an umbrella, and a lute. There are opportunities to offer incense to these temple guardians.



*Near the entrance and throughout the temple, you may notice drawings, reliefs, or carvings of the eight-spoked Dharma wheel.*

When the Buddha first began teaching, it is said that he “set in motion, the wheel of Dharma.” Dharma is a teaching which leads to the end of

suffering. The eight spokes of the wheel symbolize the Noble Eightfold Path taught by the Buddha to put an end to all suffering. The Noble Eightfold Path involves developing morality, concentration, wisdom, and insight into the causes and end of suffering.

### Bodhisattva Halls

*The first building at a temple is likely an entrance hall dedicated to bodhisattvas.*



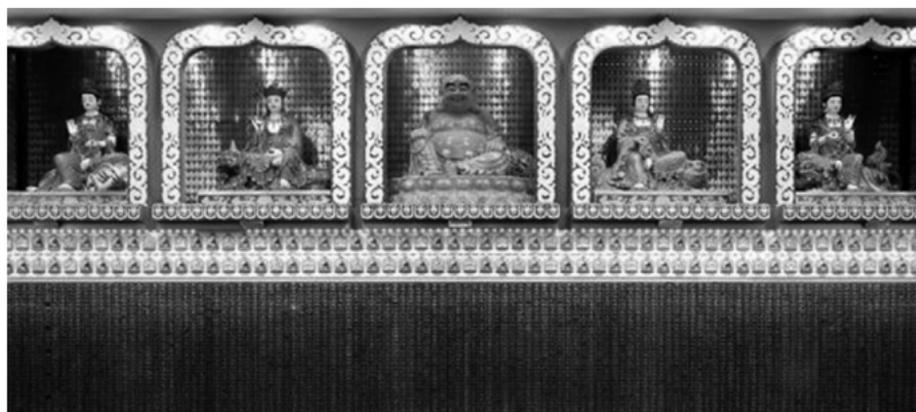
A bodhisattva is a being on the path to becoming a Buddha, and they are totally dedicated to the

compassionate service of all living beings. Most commonly, the Bodhisattva Hall depicts the laughing Buddha-to-be, Maitreya; although not a Buddha yet, he joyously greets visitors to the temple with the promise of his future liberation and harmony for all. The plump, smiling depiction of Maitreya is actually modeled off of a famous Chinese monk from the tenth century. In fact, all bodhisattvas were real people who devoted their lives to Buddhism.

Other bodhisattvas can be found in the hall with Maitreya, but they can also be given their own shrine area in the temple or located within the Main Shrine itself, providing a place where people may come and pay respects to individually. Altogether, there are five major bodhisattvas, including Maitreya. The other four bodhisattvas are Manjusri, Avalokitesvara, Ksitigarbha, and Samantabhadra. Each of these four bodhisattvas is associated with one of the four sacred mountains in China and represents a key virtue of the Buddhist path:

Manjusri is the bodhisattva of wisdom, which is to fully understand the causes of suffering and how to overcome them. He is depicted sitting atop a lion, and the lion's roar symbolizes the Buddhist teachings of wisdom.

Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva is the embodiment of compassion. Often depicted with a water vase in one hand, riding a dragon, or with a thousand arms



and eleven heads, these images symbolize the meaning of his name, “observing the sounds of the world.” He cares equally for all living beings, using whatever means is necessary.

Ksitigarbha is renowned for his great promise to guide and teach all living beings, even those in hell. This association with the underworld led to a connection with death, so Ksitigarbha is often seen near memorial halls. He is usually depicted as a monk with a long-ringed staff, which was carried by monks in ancient times to alert insects and small animals where they were walking to avoid accidentally harming them.

Samantabhadra Bodhisattva is most commonly associated with action, specifically putting the Buddha’s teachings into practice and using them to benefit all living beings. He is shown with an elephant at his side whose six tusks represent

the vows of generosity, morality, patience, concentration, practice, and wisdom. The elephant itself represents how one can control a wild mind with effort.

## Courtyard

*Temples may have a courtyard featuring a staggered rectangle design and images of the Buddha's disciples.*



Known as the “rice field” design, the Buddha instructed his disciples to stitch discarded cloth together in this pattern to make their robes. In the Chinese tradition, the outer robe worn during ceremonies is made with this pattern. This patterned courtyard symbolizes the relationship of mutual support between lay and monastic Buddhists. Laypeople provide material support to monastics who in turn provide the living teachings of the Buddha to the laity. Together, they

create the Buddhist community, walking together on the path to Buddhahood.

In or near the courtyard, there may also be various depictions of the Buddha's disciples. Arhat, which literally means "noble one," is the title given to practitioners who have attained awakening and put an end to all the causes of suffering: greed, hatred, and ignorance, but have not yet reached a Buddha's level of enlightenment.



There are a few standard groups of arhats a temple may depict. One set depicts five hundred arhats, symbolizing the Buddha's major enlightened disciples. Another set of ten or eighteen arhats displays

the Buddha's foremost students; these smaller sets may also be found in the Buddha Hall with their teacher, Sakyamuni Buddha. Arhats helped spread the Buddha's teachings.

## **Common Features of a Chinese Buddhist Temple**

### The Main Shrine

*Smaller temples may not have the aforementioned areas, but they will all have a Main Shrine.*

The Main Shrine, or Buddha Hall, is called the "Treasure Hall of the Great Hero," and all temples, regardless of their size, will have a Main Shrine because it is the area where monastics perform services and practitioners chant sutras or offer reverence to the Buddha. The different images inside the hall may vary: Some Main Shrine depict just Sakyamuni Buddha, whereas others also include the Medicine Buddha and Amitabha Buddha. The Main Shrine might also have a depiction of the eighteen arhats or other Buddhist figures. The environment of the Main Shrine is maintained to have a dignified and tranquil atmosphere so individuals entering the hall feel a sense of admiration and devotion.

*You may notice a swastika on the chest of a Buddha or as a decorative feature on temple structures.*



Over 2,000 years prior to its use by Nazi Germany, the swastika was a common symbol that represented goodness and compassion toward all beings. Swastika is a Sanskrit term which literally means, “that which is good.” The rotating quality of the symbol suggests goodness radiates out in all directions.



*The word Buddha means “Awakened One” and does not only refer to the historical figure.*

Any human being who is totally dedicated to serving others and completes the path to full awakening can become a Buddha; after all, Sakyamuni Buddha was a teacher, not a god. As Buddhism spread throughout India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central and East Asia, other Buddhas became part of the religion. Two of the most popular Buddhas are Amitabha and the Medicine Buddha. These Buddhas are often shown on either side of Sakyamuni in the Main Shrine, but a shrine may also be dedicated to one of them or other Buddhas depending on the focus of the temple.

*As the most sacred place in the temple, the Main Shrine is the center for temple activities.*

Most commonly, daily morning and weekly public chanting services are held in the Main Shrine, but meditation retreats, weddings, graduation ceremonies, lectures, and other events will also be held there. The predominate form of religious observance for Chinese Buddhist congregations is the singing and chanting of Buddhist sutras, which develops mental and emotional attitudes that correspond with the meaning of the sutra. The regular Sunday chanting service may last two hours, including a short concluding speech; for special holidays, such as the Buddha's birthday or Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva Day, chanting may be done eight to ten hours per day over a period of several days. Everyone is invited to join in the chanting of sutras while monastics lead the chant with the use of various instruments.

*Around the altar of the Main Shrine, there are several types of ceremonial instruments.*

These altars are mostly identical among Chinese Buddhist temples. Located on the Buddha's left hand side of the altar is a large, hollow wooden instrument in the shape of fish, and opposite to it on the right is a

large, bowl-shaped bell. In the far right hand corner, there is also a small drum with a bell attached. In larger services, a set of cymbals, and another small bell are used. Together, these instruments are used to coordinate the audience and provide the tempo for Buddhist ceremonies.

*Although the Main Shrine may be used for meditation, large temples will likely have a Chan Hall specifically dedicated to meditation.*

Chan is the Chinese word for meditation as well as the name of one of the lineages or traditions of Buddhist thought, which has been passed down from Master to disciple since the time of the Buddha. The Master who brought the Chan tradition from India to China, Bodhidharma, is a common figure in temples, usually seen with a stern expression, long beard, big eyes, and a bald or hooded head. Tradition says he left a permanent shadow upon the wall of the cave he sat in a cave for nine years. From China, the Chan tradition spread to Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. In Japan, Chan is pronounced Zen, which has become a common word in the English language.



*Master Hsing Yun is the Founder of the Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Order and 48th Patriarch of the Linji Chan School.*

Over many centuries, variations in the Chan lineage developed around charismatic teachers. The predominant Chan lineage is Linji or Rinzai in Japanese, famous for its volumes of eloquent literature and emphasis upon the direct experience of the Buddha's teachings. As the founder of the order and patriarch of the lineage, a statue or painting of Master Hsing Yun will be found in all Fo Guang Shan temples. Hsi Lai is one of over two hundred temples Master Hsing Yun has founded since 1967. The goal of all these temples is to spread Humanistic

Buddhism, spread the Dharma with cultural activities, educate and nurture missionaries, benefit the community with charitable programs, and purify hearts through Buddhism. In addition to the temples, there is also a university which provides Buddhist education and a translation center which is dedicated to translating the Master's writing and other texts into a wide array of languages.

### Memorial Hall

*Many temples will have a Memorial Hall, a special area dedicated to the deceased.*

If built as a separate structure, Memorial Halls can be circular, square, or octagonal pagodas, a Chinese version of the Indian stupa. You may see tablets or rectangular yellow decorative paper displaying the names of loved ones who have passed away. In Chinese religion, revering one's ancestors is very important. Family members will continue to share the Buddha's teachings through chanting services so those who have passed can continue to develop along the path to awakening.

*Modern temples include numerous other facilities to promote the study, practice, and experience of the Buddhist religion.*

Often, libraries and bookstores on temple grounds provide Buddhist books, videos, and music to the public. To facilitate the study of Buddhism through lectures by scholars and eminent teachers, lecture halls, meeting rooms, auditoriums, and even museums may be present. Gift shops, tearooms and restaurants provide Buddhist cultural items, such as Buddhist statues, prayer beads, incense, and an opportunity to experience the highly developed world of Buddhist vegetarian cuisine. Although an ancient tradition, Buddhism has moved into the modern world to accommodate the various needs and interests of people today.

### **Ways to get further involved**

*Buddhist Studies and Meditation Classes* are offered regularly to help those new to Buddhism learn about the teachings and practices in addition to helping the more experienced develop further. Check websites and notice boards or ask a resident or volunteer about what classes might be offered.

*Arts and Education Activities* may be available, such as vegetarian cooking, flower arrangement, Chinese instruments, and calligraphy.

*Communal Practice* is the cornerstone of a temple. Other than regular chanting services and classes, which are often held daily, pilgrimages likely occur



several times throughout the year. Practitioners move slowly, alternating between three steps and one full prostration, usually while chanting. The simple and physical nature of these events can easily create a deep and introspective experience. Pilgrimages are often done on temple grounds, finish at the Main Shrine, and are a time for reflection and cleansing to start anew. A pilgrimage may be done in conjunction with a service in the Main Shrine, especially repentance services.

*Social Groups* such as boy and girl scouts or youth, men's, and women's study groups commonly exist at temples. These groups often come together to support special events, such as community service, conferences, and concerts.

*Retreats* are held to provide people an opportunity to go beyond the routines of daily life. During

retreats, participants can learn strategies to reduce stress and develop greater calm and peace of mind, which are foundations for the Buddhist path. Some common retreats are weekend “eight precept retreats” and weeklong “short-term monastic retreats,” which provide intensive periods to experience the benefits of ethical living or to get a taste of life as a monastic. Another important retreat is centered on Amitabha Buddha. The chanting of his name, Omītuōfo, is a fundamental Chinese Buddhist practice, great for beginners and experienced practitioners alike. Furthermore, some temples may even offer extended periods of intense on-site training over weeks or months.





*Holidays* are celebrated at temples for various Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and monastics, particular events in the Buddha's life, or traditional Chinese festivals. One of the largest celebrations centers around the Buddha's birthday, which can involve religious ceremonies but also many joyous festivities around the temple. Sangha Day is a festival of offerings to the monastic community. Special days to memorialize tragic event or vigils to pray for peace may also occur at temples. Although not a specifically Buddhist holiday, the Chinese New Year is still one of the largest festivals of the year for temples. Rather than January 1st, Chinese people traditionally celebrate the lunar new year, which occurs during late January or February. Buddhist services and many cultural events can be seen at the temple, such as lion dances, martial arts, and the wearing of traditional costumes.