

**UNIT 2: BELIEF SYSTEMS**  
LESSON 2

# Body Language in Buddhist Art

Discover the significance of body language in Buddhist art through movement, discussion, and storytelling



**Arts of China**  
TEACHING TOOLKIT

**Brooklyn Museum**

# Lesson Overview

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Identify Buddhism as a belief system
- Examine the significance of Buddhist imagery, including mudras (symbolic hand gestures) and how they relate to Buddhist teachings
- Analyze Buddhist statues to discover what they communicate about Buddhist beliefs and practices
- Look at body language to identify important ideas conveyed by the works of art

## VOCABULARY

<u>Buddhism</u>	A widespread Asian belief system and philosophy
<u>Buddha</u>	Referring to Siddhartha Gautama; Buddhism was founded on his teachings
<u>Compassion</u>	Sympathetic concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others
<u>Mudra</u>	A symbolic hand gesture used in Hindu and Buddhist ceremonies and statues
<u>Relief</u>	A sculpture in which three-dimensional elements are raised from a flat base

## INCLUDED RESOURCES

- [Google Slides deck](#)
- [The Story of Siddhartha Gautama \(audio\)](#)
- [Mudra reference sheet](#)

## REQUIRED MATERIALS FOR STUDENTS

- White paper
- Drawing pencils
- Photo app (like Photo Booth or camera on a smartphone)

## REQUIRED PREPARATION FOR TEACHER

Set up your Google Classroom (or other online learning platform) to include:

- Folder for students to upload body-language photos
- Space for students to submit final written reflections
- Space for students to share their drawings (optional)

# For the Teacher

# Background Information

In this lesson, students will become familiar with Buddhist history and imagery through the close observation of works of art combined with contextual information in the form of storytelling. Sculptures of the Buddha have specific features that express his enlightened state, which include:

**Ushnisha:** The bulge at the top of the Buddha’s head is called an *ushnisha*; it signifies his transcendent knowledge.

**Elongated earlobes:** The Buddha’s earlobes are elongated from wearing heavy gold earrings when he was a prince. After gaining enlightenment, he discarded such adornments as they represented attachment to the physical world.

**Hairstyle:** Indian princes traditionally wore their long hair piled up in elaborate hairstyles. When the Buddha began his spiritual quest, he cut his hair short as a sign of rejection of the physical world and of humility; in visual art, his hair is often depicted in tightly cropped curls.

**Clothing:** The Buddha wears the simple garments of a monk—an undergarment, a robe, and sometimes a shawl. In depictions of the Buddha from cold climates, he is sometimes shown more fully covered.

**Facial expression:** The Buddha’s serene expression and half-closed eyes signify meditation and inner peace. His lowered eyes also show awareness and compassion for the devotee. His lips often reveal the hint of a smile, another sign of compassion.

## OTHER SYMBOLIC IMAGERY

**Lotus flower:** As a sign of spiritual perfection, the lotus is a frequent motif in Buddhist art. Just as lotus flowers grow up through muddy waters and emerge pristine and radiant, Buddhists seek to rise above the “illusory world” to attain enlightenment.

**Halo:** A halo or circle of light, symbolizing divine radiance, often surrounds the head and/or body of the Buddha.

## Artwork Description

This sandstone statue is about 4 feet tall. The figure of the Buddha is carved in high relief, emerging from a flamelike shape, a mandorla, incised with intricate details carved in low relief. The Buddha stands upright with his bare feet firmly planted on a pedestal, his elbows bent, and the palms of his hands extended. The fingers of his right hand point up while those of his left hand point down. He appears to be wearing two robes: One is wrapped close to his body and tied at the waist with a long sash; the other is worn as an overgarment and has long flowing sleeves ending just above his ankles. The Buddha's hair is styled in a smooth dome on top of his head. He looks directly at the viewer with his eyes gently open and his lips slightly curved in a smile. His smoothly modeled features contrast with the highly detailed decoration surrounding him. Eight concentric circles radiate from the Buddha's head; the first two feature stylized lotus flowers. The flamelike mandorla behind him is covered in complex designs of plants and flowers as well as flickering flames that surround its border. Two winged figures face each other at the tip of the flame.



*Stele of a Standing Buddha*, 534–550 C.E. Sandstone, 55 × 25 × 8 in. (134.6 × 58.4 × 20.3 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Gift of the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation, NYC, in honor of Arnold Lehman, 2015.3. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

## About the Artwork

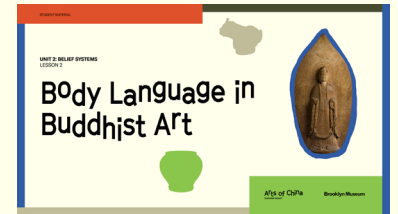
The Buddha is portrayed here with his right hand in the *abhaya mudra*, a symbolic gesture dispelling fear and offering divine protection, and his left hand in the *varada mudra*, representing giving to others in need. The serenity of the Buddha contrasts with the mandorla surrounding him, which shows an outer border of flickering flames symbolizing enlightenment. Flying *apsaras* (angels) carved in the tip of the flame lead the viewer into the heavens. The halo of lotus flowers surrounding the Buddha's head and framing his body symbolize rebirth and purity. The domed *ushnisha* on top of the Buddha's head signifies his enlightened state. He wears simple monastic robes symbolizing that he has renounced his princely status.

# Lesson

This lesson uses virtual resources, including a [Google Slides deck](#) with instructions, images, and other media that provide students with an introduction to Buddhist art through an understanding of symbolic body language:

The lesson is broken into three sequential activities:

- In **activity one**, students are introduced to the idea of *body language*, and practice conveying an emotion with their bodies and faces.
- In **activity two**, students are guided through an exploration of the *Stele of a Standing Buddha*. They will make observations about the sculpture through drawing and writing; learn about symbolic hand gestures in Buddhism called mudras; and listen to a story about the life of the Buddha.
- In **activity three**, students complete a virtual scavenger hunt. They will build on skills they have developed in activities one and two to independently explore a work of Buddhist art by looking at hand gestures and other body language.



# Lesson Extensions

## SOCIAL STUDIES CONNECTION—BODHISATTVAS

Examine Buddhism more closely by teaching students about bodhisattvas and their role in Buddhist practices. Show students an image of a bodhisattva, such as *Standing Bodhisattva*, and have them compare/contrast the artwork with the *Stele of a Standing Buddha*. Explain that bodhisattvas are enlightened beings who have postponed entering paradise, and are, therefore, often depicted with especially elaborate clothing, jewelry, and hairstyles. Then share more information about the path to enlightenment in Buddhism.

## ARTS CONNECTION—FIGURE DRAWING

Continue exploring the idea of body language in art through figure drawing. Introduce gesture drawing—quick (a minute or less) sketches that capture a pose—to your students, then have them take turns being a figure model for the class. Before they model, ask students to think of an emotion and try to embody it in their pose; afterward, ask the other students in the class to guess what emotion the model was trying to convey.



# Worksheets and Additional Materials

# Mudra Reference Sheet

In Buddhism, specific hand gestures, called *mudras* [moo-druhs], have specific symbolic meanings. Here are five common mudras that appear in Buddhist art.

## Abhaya Mudra

### PRONUNCIATION

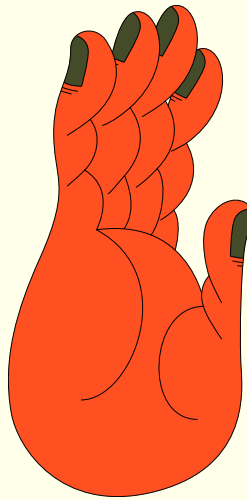
[Ah·bye·a]

### GESTURE

Fingers straight up and palm facing outward

### MEANING

Represents getting rid of fear or offering protection



## Bhumisparsa Mudra

### PRONUNCIATION

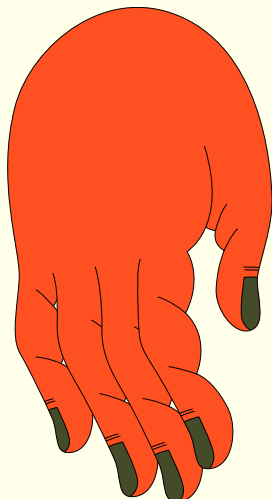
[Boo·me·spar·sa]

### GESTURE

Hand pointing down, fingers touching the ground, palm facing inward

### MEANING

Represents “touching the earth” for strength and focus



# Dharmachakra Mudra

## PRONUNCIATION

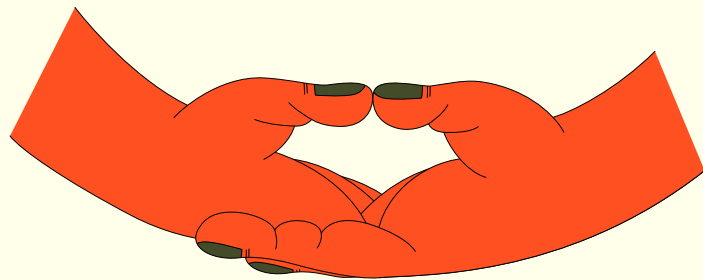
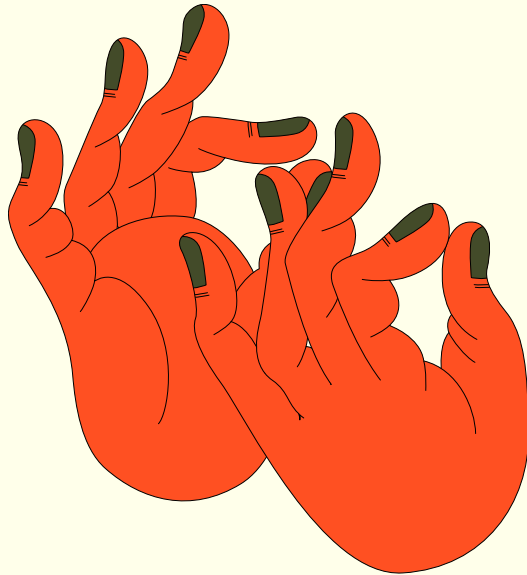
[Dar-muh-cha-cruh]

## GESTURE

Index finger touching thumb to make a circle; can be made with one hand or both

## MEANING

Represents teaching others about Buddhism



# Dhyana Mudra

## PRONUNCIATION

[Dee-ah-nuh]

## GESTURE

Both hands placed in the lap, right hand on top of the left hand, with palms facing upward

## MEANING

Represents meditation

# Varada Mudra

## PRONUNCIATION

[Vah-rah-da]

## GESTURE

Fingers pointing down and palm facing outward

## MEANING

Represents offering help to those in need



Text adapted from the Chung Tai World Museum.

Cover:  
*Stele of a Standing Buddha*, 554–550 C.E. Sandstone,  
53 × 25 × 8 in. (134.6 × 58.4 × 20.3 cm). Brooklyn  
Museum; Gift of the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation,  
NYC, in honor of Arnold Lehman, 2015.3. (Photo:  
Brooklyn Museum)

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Support for the Arts of China Teaching Toolkit was made possible by the Freeman Foundation.

This resource was written by Nicola Giardina, Curriculum Consultant, and Mellasenah Edwards, Teacher Resource Project Assistant, with assistance from Joan Cummins, Lisa and Bernard Selz Senior Curator, Asian Art, and the staff and students from P.S. 029 Bardwell, P.S. 321 William Penn, P.S. 015 Patrick F. Daly, and P.S. 032 Samuel Mills Sprole.

The Arts of China Teaching Toolkit initiative is coordinated by Michael Reback, Teacher Services Coordinator, with assistance from Keonna Hendrick, School Programs Manager, and Adjoa Jones de Almeida, Director of Education.