

# Still Learning

Bringing Buddhism to life for your school

## Teachers' Notes

### Artefacts and Symbolism

Buddhism is very rich in symbolism. Below is an explanation of some of the main symbols and artefacts you might come across.

#### Lotus

This is a very important symbol in Buddhism, representing the possibility of spiritual growth for all beings without exception.

Following the Buddha's enlightenment he had a vision of all beings as like lotuses growing out of a muddy pond towards the light. He saw that all beings are like lotuses—all have the capacity for spiritual growth. This inspired him to teach what he had discovered out of compassion for all beings.



#### Vajra / Dorje



This is a symbol from Tibetan Buddhism. A vajra is a diamond thunderbolt—unbreakable and unstoppable. Wisdom is also said to be unbreakable and unstoppable, and so the vajra represents wisdom—the destruction of ignorance.

#### Dharmachakra / Wheel of the Dharma

This is a symbol for the teachings of the Buddha, which we call the Dharma.

After the Buddha's Enlightenment he went to five of his old ascetic friends to teach them what he had learned. This was the first Dharma teaching he gave, when he first 'turned the wheel of the Dharma'.



#### Prayer Wheel



Used mainly in Tibetan Buddhism, a Prayer Wheel is used by spinning it. On the Wheel are written mantras, which are strings of sacred syllables reminding us of certain Buddhist figures.

Normally mantras are chanted using the voice, but spinning the Prayer Wheel is said to have a similar effect.

#### The Mandala

Mandala means something like 'sacred circle', and is used to represent the cosmos, different aspects of Enlightenment and paths to Enlightenment. In some schools of Buddhism The Mandala is used as an aid to meditation.



## On the Shrine

### The 3 Traditional Offerings

#### Flowers

Flowers are very beautiful, and help make our shrines a nice place where we would like to spend time.

They also have a deeper significance. Although they are very beautiful, they will soon wither away and die. They remind us that everything is impermanent, and that we need to make the most of every moment to practice the Buddha's teachings well, as our lives are very short.



#### Candles

The light that the candles produce represents the light of the Buddha's teaching, (the Dharma) and the transforming effect it has on the lives of those who practice it.

#### Incense

Incense is a very small thing, but it has a very big effect. It perfumes our room and makes the atmosphere lovely. It reminds us that even the smallest action we do has a big effect, and has the potential to make the world we live in a much nicer (or more unpleasant) place.



#### Offering Bowls

There are usually seven bowls like this on a shrine, often filled with water. These represent the seven traditional offerings that would be made to a visitor: water for washing hands, water for bathing the face, flowers, incense, drinking water, food and music.

#### Buddha Rupa

Rupa literally means 'body' or 'form'. Buddhists have statues of the Buddha on the shrine to remind them of the ideal of enlightenment to which they aspire. The Buddha was born a man and became enlightened by his own efforts—having his image on the shrine reminds us that if we make enough effort, we too can become enlightened.



## Meditation aids

### Mala

A mala is a string of beads, usually 108 in number. It is usually used to count the number of mantras that have been chanted (mantras are strings of sacred syllables that help us bring to mind certain Buddhist figures.)



### Singing Bowl

This is often rung in meditation to mark the progression of time and the different stages within the meditation. It can also be used to make a long continuous noise by running the stick around the outside rim—hence the name 'singing' bowl.

### Ghanta / Vajra Bell

This can be used in place of the Singing Bowl to mark the passage of time in meditation. It is essentially a bell, with a handle in the shape of one half of a Vajra.

You might sometimes see the Ghanta and the Vajra together. When seen together in this way they symbolise the way in which an enlightened person is both wise and compassionate: the Vajra symbolises wisdom, and the Ghanta compassion.

