



Religious Worlds of New York • *Curriculum Development Project*

Buddhism and the American Teen

Sharon Humphrey, Sharon High School, Sharon, MA

Project Focus:

Applying Buddhist Principles to the Everyday Lives of American Teenagers

Overview:

This lesson is designed to accompany a unit on Herman Hesse's novel *Siddhartha*, taught at a public high school in Massachusetts; however, it can be utilized in any unit of Buddhism. In short, it involves students, after learning about Buddhism through traditional scripture, literature, poetry, film, and live interaction with practicing Buddhists (the links/titles to these resources are included below), using the philosophies and worldview of Buddhists to confront and work through common struggles teenagers in America face.

The lesson is a two-part project: the first part takes place during the opening of the unit, before students read/view/listen about Buddhism, and the second part takes *after* students build a solid working knowledge of Buddhist "doctrine" and encounter various perspectives on what it means to be a Buddhist.

Objectives (students will be able to):

- Read, interpret, and analyze various texts (novel, film, scripture, non-fiction, personal essays, etc.) related to Buddhism
- Apply the principles and philosophies of Buddhist traditions to their own lives
- Compare Buddhist outlooks and approaches to dealing with the suffering in life to their own (mostly American) worldviews

Materials:

Below is a list of *suggested* texts broken down by type/purpose that can be used for varying purposes *throughout* the entire unit.

Non-Fiction Texts

- History, Legend, and Guiding Principles of Buddhism:
 - Textbook: Fisher, Mary Pat. *Living Religion (8th Edition)*. Prentice Hall. 2010.
 - Instructor-created PowerPoint Presentation
- Excerpts from Buddhist Scriptures, as found in Markham and Lohr's *A World Religious Leader (3rd Edition)*.
 - Suggested scriptures: "The Triple Refuge," "Setting the Rolling Wheel of Truth," and "An Analysis of the Path"
- Testimonials, as found in Markham and Lohr's *A World Religious Leader (3rd Edition)*.
 - Jane Compson's "Why Buddhism Makes Sense"
- Interpretations of Buddha's Teachings by Buddhist leaders
 - Pema Chödrön (American-born Buddhist leader and author):
<http://pemachodronfoundation.org/about/pema-chodron/>
 - Possible Selections: "How to Develop Unconditional Compassion," "Turn Your Thinking Upside Down," "The Answer to Anger and Aggression is Patience"

Video

- Documentary:
 - *The Buddha: The Story of Siddhartha* (2010), narrated by Richard Gere and directed by David Grubin
 - *The Story of India* (2007), a TV-mini series documentary featuring historian Michael Wood
- Drama: *Little Buddha* (1993), starring Keanu Reeves, Bridget Fonda, and Ruo Cheng Ying and directed by Bernardo Bertolucci
- Video Clips of Buddhists in practice:
 - Providence Zen Center (Local Temple) <http://www.providencezen.org/> (this is a video of a monk leading a service at a local temple)
 - Buddhist Nun, Pema Chödrön <http://pemachodronfoundation.org/videos-new/smile-at-fear-living-from-the-heart/>

Fiction Texts

- *Novel: Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha* (primary text for this particular unit)
- Poetry: The Buddhist Poetry Review.
 - <http://www.buddhistpoetryreview.com/home> ("Buddhist Poetry Review is a quarterly online journal dedicated to publishing fresh and insightful Buddhist poetry." Recommend: Sylvia Levinson and John Zurawski, who writes from prison.)

Buddhist Leaders/Temple Visits

- If possible, invite Buddhist monks or practitioners into the classroom to speak to students, or bring students to a temple to have face-to-face interaction with local Buddhists

Classroom Procedures

Part 1/Opening of Unit: Suffering in American Teenagers Lives

- At the start of the unit, students can brainstorm a list of "problems" or "issues" they themselves or their fellow students and friends face in their daily lives; alternatively, the instructor can give students a list of common challenging situations. [see example attached].
- Students work in groups of 3-4 to determine how they would approach/confront/work through the various issues if they themselves were in that situation or if a friend or family member were. Each group can be assigned one situation to be responsible for.
 - Example guiding questions: how would you try to resolve or cope with this issue? What or whom would you consult for guidance?
- Groups should record their responses and keep them in a safe place to be referred to later, at the end of the unit
- Groups present out to the whole class their ideas

Main components of the unit: Buddhist doctrine, scripture, teachings, interpretations, various lived experiences, fictional texts, *Siddhartha*, etc.

Part 2/Wrap-up of unit: Applying Buddhism to Modern Teenagers Lives

- After reading, watching, and listening to different perspectives to give students a deeper understanding of Buddhism, students, working in the same groups, will turn back to those same situations that they were presented with at the start of the unit. Using what they have learned over the course of the Buddhism unit, they attempt to view the situations through a Buddhist lens and apply the principles and teachings of Buddhism to the challenges of their lives.
 - Students should **quote and cite the sources** they are using to support their ideas.
- Groups share and discuss their ideas with the class.
- After the students use Buddhist teachings to resolve and work through their assigned challenges, they will compare and contrast their own approaches, recorded from the beginning of the unit, with what they determined is a Buddhist outlook in small group and whole class discussion
- *Extension:* If possible, it would be wonderful to have a Buddhist from the community come in to speak to the students and to share the way in which s/he would approach those challenging situations

Further Assessment: Writing Component

- As a follow-up to the activity and in-class discussion, students can write a reflection comparing or contrasting their own methods for coping with the stresses of life with what they've learned about Buddhism

***For information about the
Religious Worlds of New York summer institute for teachers,
and many more resources to enrich your teaching on
religious diversity, see:***

www.religiousworldsnyc.org

SHS – English II

Buddhism Unit - Handout 1

Name: _____

When Life gets Tough...

Directions (to students for part 1): Imagine you or a friend of yours is faced with one of the following situations. What would you do? To whom or what would you turn for help or guidance? How would you cope? How would you advise someone else?

Situation #1: Joey's mom, who is 45-years-old, has recently been diagnosed with cancer and has been given five years to live. Joey can't comprehend why this has happened to his mom and his family.

Situation #2: Lee and Sara just broke up. Sara said she needed some "time and space" to be alone and to figure out who she really is. A week later at a party, Sara is seen holding hands and kissing Lee's best friend Steve.

Situation #3: The soccer semi-final tournament is in two days, and Ellen, who is a senior and the starting forward on the team, breaks her ankle at practice.

Situation #4: Tommy's parents expect him to take all AP and honors classes, as well as participate in sports and school clubs. He is having a hard time keeping up with the workload, and feels very stressed.

Situation #5: Prom is coming up. Cory is looking forward to going with his girlfriend, but he's worried because prom costs a lot of money. The tradition at his school is for the guys to buy the girls the tickets. Additionally, his friends are taking a limo to prom and going to the beach for the weekend. He's been trying to pick up extra shifts at the restaurant, but he's still not making ends meet.

Directions (to students for part 2): You have read, watched, and discussed Buddhist traditions and philosophies. Using what you have learned over the course of the Buddhism unit, view the same situations that we discussed at the beginning of the unit through a Buddhist lens. Working with your groups, apply the principles and teachings of Buddhism to these challenges. Use direct quotes from any of the texts you've read to support your ideas and to show how you are using a Buddhist framework to approach these challenging situations.