

EMBARGOED TILL 1 NOVEMBER 2007

MEDIA RELEASE

Trace The Spread Of Buddhism Through The Journeys Of Well-Travelled Monks On The Nalanda Trail

Latest exhibition at the Asian Civilisations Museum features important Buddhist art including Tang period paintings from the Dunhuang grottoes and the bone relics of Buddha

[31 October 2007, SINGAPORE] The spread of Buddhism from its birthplace in India to China and Southeast Asia is told through the amazing journeys of well-travelled Chinese monks in a new exhibition at the Asian Civilisations Museum. ***On The Nalanda Trail: Buddhism in India, China and Southeast Asia*** focuses on the pivotal role played by the ancient university of Nalanda in India, a key centre of Buddhist learning which attracted Buddhist pilgrims from far and wide more than 800 years ago. Key highlights of the exhibition are the bone relics of Buddha and a stunning display of Buddhist art, including rare paintings from Dunhuang that will be on view from 2 November 2007 to 23 March 2008. The exhibition will be launched on 1 November 2007, 7.00pm at the ACM by Guest-Of-Honour Mr George Yeo, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Singapore.

One of the most important exhibits on display are the bone relics of Buddha, excavated by the Archaeological Survey of India in 1898 from a stupa site in Piprahwa, in Bihar, India, near the birthplace of Buddha. On loan from the National Museum, New Delhi by special permission of the government of India, the relics are from the only archaeological find that can be linked directly to Buddha himself.

“Visitors can expect to see some of the finest Buddhist art, including many artefacts which are leaving India for the first time. These wonderful artefacts from India, China, Central Asia and Southeast Asia are tied together through the amazing

stories of Buddhist of monks and pilgrims on the Nalanda trail,” said Dr Kenson Kwok, Director of the Asian Civilisations Museum.

The exhibition opens with a section on the life of Buddha and features early depictions of Buddha in art. Buddhist art originated in India in 6th to 5th century BCE and later evolved through contact with other cultures as Buddhism spread to Asia and the world. Buddhist art begins with the phase where direct representation of Buddha as a human figure is avoided (aniconic). One example is the oldest artwork in the exhibition - a 3rd century BCE carved sandstone pillar depicting a devotee praying to Buddha who is represented by a throne, under the hoods of a naga called Muchalinda. This scene comes from one of the eight important events in Buddha’s life, which correspond to important sites of pilgrimage in India for Buddhists today.

The theme of pilgrimage continues with a focus on the momentous journeys made by monks such as Faxian, Xuanzang and Yijing. These great monks braved peril and uncertainty to travel from China through Central Asia via the Silk Road to India, in search of Buddha’s teachings. In the exhibition, this trail is illustrated through Buddhist art from these regions, which the monks pass on their way to Nalanda. This also offers the visitor a glimpse of the variety of styles that Buddhist art took on as it travelled through Asia.

By the 1st century CE, images of the Buddha in human form began to emerge. Earliest examples from this phase come from Gandhara (in today’s Pakistan) and Mathura (in northern India). These include masterpieces such as a large stone sculpture of the Bodhisattva Maitreya from 2nd – 3rd century CE Gandhara. Other star pieces include a sandstone Buddha from the Gupta period in the 5th – 6th century and an 8th century sculpture of the deity Lokanath from Nalanda in Bihar. Exquisite bronze figures include more star pieces from the Patna Museum in Bihar – a 10th century CE bronze of a standing Buddha in *abhaya* and *varada*, symbolic hand gestures representing peace and compassion.



“These are artworks of international repute that are recognised as national treasures in India. These bronze and stone sculptures are of extremely high quality, and this can be seen in the highly refined physical features of the bodies of these statues. It can be observed that Asian art in this period – around the 10th century – was in fact more advanced than western art of the same period,” noted Dr Gauri Krishnan, exhibition curator and Senior Curator, Asian Civilisations Museum.

She added, “To have so many examples of such high quality in one exhibition is exhilarating, and we feel very fortunate to be able to present such a show in Singapore. Securing these loans was by no means an easy feat, and we are thankful to our lenders who have lent us several top grade artefacts some of which are being shown for the first time.”

Among these are rare sutras and paintings from the famous Dunhuang grottoes along the Silk Road, on loan from the National Museum New Delhi. These include silk paintings that have been specially lent for this exhibition, and some of which have not even been shown before. Dunhuang, located on the Silk Road between China and India, is where the world’s oldest printed book, the Diamond Sutra, was discovered by famed archaeologist Sir Aurel Stein. Other objects such as whimsical animal figures, eye shades for desert conditions and even a child’s shoe give insight into the way of life of travellers, traders and monks along the Silk Road.

From the Silk Road, pilgrims and students traversed India to reach the university at Nalanda. One of the world’s first great universities, the ancient university of Nalanda drew students from all over the world for over 700 years from the 5th century CE onwards. The university was mainly devoted to Buddhist studies, and had well-known masters and a lively intellectual climate. From Nalanda, these monks took scriptures back home and to Southeast Asia, furthering the spread of Buddhism in these regions.

Highlights from the Nalanda site include a large inscribed plaque recording a donation made by a ruler of the Shailendra dynasty in Sumatra, to a monastery in

Nalanda. The guilds of the monasteries at Nalanda were also famous for the Buddhist art they produced. Some of these sculptures, bearing the Nalanda stamp, travelled to Southeast Asia especially during the period of the Shailendras in the 6th to 7th centuries CE. Artefacts such as these highlight the historic ties between the two regions.

“This exhibition is one of our most ambitious to date, and is engaging and exciting on many levels. For visitors interested in religion, the exhibition offers them the chance to see a rare treasure – the bone relics of Buddha. Art history buffs can trace the evolution of Buddhist art through some of the best and most important Buddhist art available today. Finally, the spread of Buddhism reflects the historic ties that bind us in Asia to one other,” enthused Dr Kwok.

On The Nalanda Trail: Buddhism in India, China and Southeast Asia will be on show at the Asian Civilisations Museum from 2 November 2007 to 23 March 2008. Visitors to the exhibition stand a chance to win a trip for two to Nalanda, Rajgir and Bodhgaya courtesy of Indiatourism.

Please refer to the Annex for programmes in conjunction with this exhibition.

Annex Programmes in conjunction with *On The Nalanda Trail: Buddhism in India, China and Southeast Asia*

Admission Charges for *On The Nalanda Trail* (2 Nov 2007 to 23 March 2008)

Adult : \$10
Concession : \$5 (Full-time students and age 60 years and above)
Family Package : \$25 for maximum of 5 persons

- Free for children under 6 years old and below and NHB Season Pass Holders.
- Discounted admission on Fridays, 7pm – 9pm.
- Admission charges may vary during special exhibitions.



About the Asian Civilisations Museum

The Asian Civilisations Museum's mission is to explore and present the cultures and civilisations of Asia, so as to promote awareness and appreciation of the ancestral cultures of Singaporeans and their links to Southeast Asia and the World. The Asian Civilisations Museum first began its operations at Armenian Street in 1997, which closed at end-2005, and will re-open in 2008 as a brand new Peranakan attraction. ACM's flagship at the historic Empress Place Building opened on 2 March 2003.

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Opening Hours

Mondays : 1pm – 7pm
Tuesdays – Sundays : 9am – 7pm (to 9pm on Fridays)

ANNEX: Programmes for *On The Nalanda Trail: Buddhism in India, China and Southeast Asia* at the Asian Civilisations Museum

SCREEN SHOTS at ACM presents ...

Consuming Buddhism

15 – 17 November | Thursday – Saturday

One of the four major religions in the world, Buddhism has had a long history in Asia. This year's final installment of *Screen Shots* takes a look at the way Buddhism is practised and sometimes "consumed" in Asia. From a historical look at Buddhism in Asia, to the destruction and preservation of Buddhist relics, join us as we embark on our little "pilgrimage" into the world of Buddhism in Asia.

15 November | Thursday | 7.00 pm – 8.30 pm

Free. No registration is required.

Documentary | The Abbot CEO of Shaolin

2003. 30 min. China. Dir: Chen Ke

The Abbot CEO of Shaolin is a story on how the ancient Shaolin Monastery, famous for its martial arts, is adapting to the challenges posed by the twenty-first century. Its current abbot is beginning to view and run the institution increasingly like a CEO. The film follows a day in the life of the abbot as he steers and guides this ancient tradition into modern times.

Lecture | Commodifying Religion

By Zhou Yan Fei, Buddhist Culture Manager, Buddha Tooth Relic Temple

Since its birth in ancient India, Buddhism has become one of the four major religions in the world. What began as an Asian religion is now practised by devotees from Europe to the Americas. How has this ancient religion found a foothold so far from its original home? Will it continue to weather the test of time? Explore these questions and more in this intriguing lecture.

16 November | Friday

Guided Gallery Tour | The Face of Buddha | 7.00 pm – 8.00 pm

By Dr Gauri Krishnan, Senior Curator, South Asia, Asian Civilisations Museum

\$12 per participant. Price includes entry to the galleries. Limited to 15 participants. Registration is required. Please assemble at the museum's front desk at least 10 minutes before 7.00pm.

Join Dr Krishnan, curator of our special exhibition *On the Nalanda Trail*, as she takes us through the museum's rich Buddhist collection. Discover the history of this ancient religion as you glean insights into the beautiful and mysterious artefacts that have fuelled the fascination and desire of collectors and devotees all over the world.

**Documentary | Dharma River: Journey of a Thousand Buddhas |
8.00 pm – 9.20 pm**

2003. 81 min. USA. Dir: John Bush

Free screening. Registration is not required.

Dharma River is a timeless journey through legendary rivers to the great Buddhist temples and mystical sites of Laos, Thailand and Burma. It offers a direct experience of lost civilisations, sacred spaces and ancient wisdom traditions. The Buddha image appears repeatedly in countless temples, caves and shrines but it is never exactly the same. The documentary explores the different cultural representations of this universal icon of inner peace and its contemporary relevance.

17 November | Saturday | 2.00 pm – 5.00 pm

\$8 per participant. Registration is required. Free seating. Light refreshments will be served.

Documentary | The Giant Buddhas

2005. 95 min. Switzerland. Dir: Christian Frei

In March 2001, two huge Buddha statues were blown up in the remote area of Bamiyan in Afghanistan. This dramatic event surrounding the ancient stone colossi — unique proof of a high culture that bloomed along the Silk Road until the 13th century — is the starting point for a cinematic essay on fanaticism and faith, terror and tolerance, ignorance and identity. Oscar-nominated director Christian Frei's thought-provoking film journeys along a perimeter that both divides and unites people and cultures.

Dialogue | The Price of Authenticity

With Dr John Miksic, Associate Professor, National University of Singapore; Heidi Tan, Senior Curator, Southeast Asia, Asian Civilisations Museum

From the destruction of the Giant Buddhas in Afghanistan, we move to the temple ruins in Asia to contemplate destruction of a slightly different nature. Tourism and the growing antique industry have placed a heavy strain on the historical sites and relics of many Asian countries. The looting of archaeological sites and smuggling of genuine art works is now as big a problem as the trade in drugs and weapons. Join our distinguished panel as they trace the destruction of some of these sites and the preservation and restoration efforts of the countries and interest groups.

About SCREEN SHOTS at ACM

From mysterious ancient cities to child brides, from religious relics to cannibalism, Asia holds a treasure trove of secrets waiting to be discovered. Each quarter, Screen Shots at ACM will uncover some of these secrets and explore issues and themes raised in our galleries through screenings of films and documentaries, special curatorial tours, lectures and panel discussions.

The China Affair: An ACM-NUS Chinese Lecture Series

Co-presented by the NUS Department of Chinese Studies and the Asian Civilisations Museum

3 November 2007, 5 January 2008/ Saturdays / 2.00 pm – 4.00 pm

Lectures are free and will be delivered in Mandarin unless otherwise specified. Light refreshments will be served.

Kingship and Dharma — The Avalokitesvara, The Japanese Crown Prince Shotoku and Buddhist Political Tradition

Dr. Zhou Yan Fei, Buddhist Culture Manager, Buddhist Culture Department, Buddha Tooth Relic Temple

3 November 2007

In this lecture, the speaker will trace the establishment and implementation of Buddhist political ideology in Asia, focusing finally on a study of Japanese Crown Prince Shōtoku and his implementation of the Buddharaja tradition during his reign.

Defending Buddhism's Place in the Confucian Order

Dr. Douglas Skonicki, Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Chinese Studies, National University of Singapore

5 January 2008

This lecture will examine the arguments advanced by two politically active Northern Song monks, Zanning (919-1001) and Qisong (1007-1072), to both defend Buddhism from Confucian attacks and reconcile Buddhist practices with Confucian mores and government.

About The China Affair

Historical mysteries, court intrigue, ancient paintings with hidden meanings — be fascinated by the stories of China and its people. Starting November 2007, ACM together with the NUS Department of Chinese Studies will be co-presenting a series of Mandarin lectures inspired by the Chinese collections in the museum.

Family Fun Sunday! presents ...

Fantastic Voyages

13 January 2008 | Sundays | 1.00 pm – 4.00 pm

Activities are free unless otherwise specified.

Join us as we journey through time and space, to the world of famous the famous Buddhist monk, Xuan Zhang and his disciples, Wukong, Pigsy and Sandy. Rediscover the many tales from *The Journey to the West* as you embark on your own fantastic voyage!

Highlights

Check out these exciting activities the whole family can enjoy!

Asian Tales

3.30 pm – 4.00 pm

Come and join the Asian Storytelling Network as they entertain you with folktales from Asia. They will spin different tales every month.

Crafty Lil' Things

1.00 pm – 4.00 pm

Try your hand at a different craft activity every month. This January, make a mask of your favourite character from *Journey to the West*.

Handling Collection

3.00 pm – 3.20 pm

Touch and feel our extensive collection of objects from all over Asia, and learn new things through handling old ones. This January, come take a look at some very special puppets from the story *The Journey to The West*.

The Cart

1.00 pm – 4.00 pm

Look out for our special mobile cart full of exciting games, books, toys and all sorts of fun things to do! Be sure to look out for the books on our special exhibition, *On the Nalanda Trail: Buddhism in India, China and Southeast Asia*.

About Family Fun Sunday

The second Sunday of every month is ACM's Family Fun Sunday! This programme allows parents and children to explore the many aspects of our galleries together. Listen to lively storytelling in the main lobby, join a tour, create a piece of art – these are just a few of the entertaining activities the whole family can enjoy. So round up the kids and have a fun day out at the museum!

ADULTS ONLY presents ...

茶道: **The Way of Tea**

26 January, Friday, 7.30pm

Asian Civilisations Museum, Shaw Foundation Foyer

1 Empress Place, Singapore 179555

By Chado Urasenke Tankokai Singapore Association

\$15 each for adults, \$12 each for full time students. Price includes tea and Japanese sweets. Admission charges to the galleries apply.

Chado, the art of Japanese tea ceremony has a long and rich history. Once a privilege confined to the court aristocracy and Buddhist ceremonies, tea drinking became a practice that is integral to the Japanese way of life. Let the Urasenke Singapore chapter teach you more about this beautiful, contemplative art, as you start your weekend with a relaxing cup of tea.

About ADULTS ONLY

Unwind at the ACM every fourth Friday night of the month as we go beyond cultures and civilisations to bring you live performances featuring some of the hidden treasures from both local and abroad. Move to the rhythm; sway to the beat, revel in the act as we open your eyes to different Asian art forms such as music, dance, theatre and demonstrations. Mark your diary and spend an unforgettable evening with us.

CONFERENCE

Interactions and Practice – A Conference on Buddhism in Asia

19 – 20 January 2008 | Saturday - Sunday

In conjunction with the special exhibition *On the Nalanda Trail: Buddhism in India, China and Southeast Asia*, there will be a two day conference that focuses on the spread of Buddhism with special reference to the role of Nalanda as a centre of learning. More information on this conference will be available on our website in October.