

Approaching Tibetan Studies

Curricular Ideas and Support Materials

Tibetan Prayer Flag Lesson

Prayer flags are rooted in the religious and astrological traditions of Tibetan Buddhist culture. Buddhist prayers and mantras written on these flags invoke ideals of compassion, wisdom, peace, and good fortune. They can also be adorned with various Buddhist and astrological symbols. In Tibet, they are flown outdoors in high places around monasteries, holy sites, shrines, and roof-tops of homes. They are also found on mountain passes, where travelers hang them as offerings for safe passage. As a religious offering, practitioners will hang prayer flags at an auspicious location to gain merit for themselves, their family, to honor a holy person or patron deity, as well as for the benefit of all sentient beings. As the flags flutter in the wind, Tibetans believe that the sacred windhorse, often pictured in the center of prayer flags, carries off the prayers of good wishes to benefit others.

Traditionally, prayer flags are printed on square or rectangular swatches of cloth in a variety of sizes. After they are printed, they are hung with string, in sets of five colors, each corresponding to the natural elements (colors of prayer flags are listed in the order they are hung from left to right):

Blue
(sky,
air,
or wind)

White
(clouds)

Red
(people
or fire)

Green
(water)

Yellow
(earth)

Curricular Ideas

- ❑ Have students create their own prayer flags using the Tibetan Prayer Flag worksheet. Photocopy the worksheet into the five traditional colors.
- ❑ Use the purpose and structure of Tibetan prayer flags to create a cross-cultural experience where students express their own views and hopes for compassion, wisdom, and good wishes towards others.
- ❑ Use this exercise to have students reflect on their study of Tibet, or on their own concepts of compassion, peace and non-violence.
- ❑ In practicing the Buddhist ideal of patience, make sure students are given the time to reflect on the purpose of this exercise and carefully express what they choose to write.
- ❑ Have students make their own set of five prayer flags, in the five traditional colors, or have them contribute one flag to a larger set.
- ❑ Hang the flags in a public space or have students send them to others, such as family members, another school, public officials, etc.
- ❑ Any writings by The Fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet will illustrate the Tibetan Buddhist view of compassion, wisdom, peace and non-violence.
- ❑ Share with students some of the quotes from the Tibet Quotes handout.
- ❑ A good source for learning more about Tibetan Buddhist symbols, including the windhorse, is: *Buddhist Symbols in Tibetan Culture*, Dagyab Rinpoche, Wisdom, 1995.