

DUYÊN LINH

The Imprint of Buddhism Across Time

An Educational Resource Packet for Introductory College Courses

Written by Hoàng Ngọc An



3D-printed Medicine Buddha and Shakyamuni Buddha mold made for the Tibet Temple in Bình Dương, Việt Nam.

Photo by Ivan Baria (2026).

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ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

DUYÊN LINH: The Imprint of Buddhism Across Time

March 15, 2026 - May 31, 2026, Hải An Gallery, Hồ Chí Minh City, Việt Nam

Buddhism has been present in Vietnam for many centuries, arriving around the first century CE through trade and cultural exchange from India to the Phù Nam Kingdom. Tibetan Buddhism reached Vietnam much later, in the mid-twentieth century. Over the past two decades, it has become increasingly visible and popular, especially among young followers who encounter it through digital media.

This exhibition invites visitors to explore the evolving presence of Tibetan Buddhism in Vietnam. Through statues, scroll paintings, prayer flags, monk robes, conceptual and installation artwork, digital media, and pop-culture imagery, it shows how these traditions continue to take shape in contemporary life. Tracing ongoing dialogues with Tibetan traditions, the exhibition highlights how Buddhism is practiced in everyday settings through personal stories, lived experiences, and creative expressions of faith.

It is structured around five Buddhist ideas that emphasize impermanence, interdependence, compassion, and creativity. Creativity is understood as a form of skillful means (upāya), allowing Buddhist ideas to be translated through art, media, and everyday practice.

Navigating centers on a mandala, a map of the Buddhist cosmos, and guiding visitors along the shared paths of Tibetan and Vietnamese Buddhist traditions.

Attracting introduces Jambhala (the Bodhisattva of wealth), the Eight Auspicious Symbols, and new creative interpretations of wealth attraction.

Emitting rises as a cluster of colorful prayer flags, sending wishes to heaven and echoing the spread of Buddhist imagery and stories in Vietnam's online spaces.

Spinning turns to the prayer wheels, reflecting how languages, customs and spiritual expressions spin around a still, enlightened center.

Tying brings together a bamboo thicket and sacred threads woven through individual bamboo pieces, symbolizing the restoration of health to both human bodies and war-scarred landscapes, and honoring the enduring bond between Vietnamese and Tibetan Buddhism.

Exhibition co-curators: Hoàng Ngọc An and Stephen Christpher

ABOUT THE TEMPLETON FOUNDATION

Major support for this exhibition is provided by the John Templeton Foundation. The exhibition is a public-facing outcome of Project #63357, *New Religiosity and the Digital Study of Eudaimonia*.

This project created the world's largest open-access dataset on contemporary religious movements, exploring how emerging forms of religiosity contribute to human flourishing. It produced 400 entries for the *New Religiosity Poll*, now hosted by the Database of Religious History at the University of British Columbia.

Combining rich qualitative descriptions with extensive quantitative data, the project examined contemporary religious movements across five major traditions: Christian, Dharmic, Japanese, Islamic, and Esoteric. Designed to be reusable and interoperable, the dataset is supported by in-built data analysis tools that enable researchers to compare religious movements across cultures, regions, and time periods. Together, these resources provide evidence-based insights into how contemporary religious practices shape individual wellbeing and contribute to broader societal flourishing.

To learn more, visit: newreligiosity.org.

HOW TO USE THIS CURRICULUM GUIDE

Featuring a selection of artworks from the exhibition *DUYÊN LINH: The Imprint of Buddhism Across Time*, this guide is designed for introductory undergraduate courses in Anthropology, Religious Studies, Vietnamese Studies, Tibetan Studies and Museum Studies.

The content is designed to be used alongside the exhibition's 3D virtual walkthrough, which is available on the newreligiosity.org website. Within the virtual exhibition, students can freely explore the gallery, clicking on interactive hotspots to access photographs, object labels, interpretive texts, and eight ethnographic videos. This guide offers a flexible framework that instructors are welcome to adapt and build upon to suit their own course objectives and curriculum.

We designed this Curriculum Guide with three primary goals in mind.

First, we hope to extend the life of the exhibition beyond its physical installation. Originally visited by more than 15,000 people in the Hải An Gallery in Hồ Chí Minh City, the exhibition now continues in a fully interactive 3D virtual environment that can be incorporated into university teaching. The virtual tour recreates the original exhibition through its objects, photographs, labels, and interpretive texts, accompanied by an original lo-fi soundtrack that blends Tibetan and Vietnamese soundscapes. Designed to be intuitive and accessible, the platform allows instructors to integrate the exhibition into a wide range of classroom contexts.

Second, we aim to encourage critical engagement with the exhibition space itself. Rather than treating the exhibition as a static presentation of information, this guide invites students to investigate the relationships between objects, images, texts, and spatial design. By foregrounding the material and visual dimensions of the exhibition, the guide introduces key concepts in Tibetan Buddhism through the tactile and sensory qualities of the objects themselves, encouraging inquiry that is grounded in observation more than abstraction.

Finally, this guide highlights a lived religion approach to the study of Buddhism. Rather than focusing primarily on canonical texts, institutional doctrines, or lineage-based traditions, the lived religion perspective examines how Buddhism is experienced, practiced, and interpreted in everyday life. It emphasizes the diverse, contingent, and embodied ways that people engage with Buddhism in locally situated contexts. This approach brings questions of gender, politics, economics, tourism, material culture, and the supernatural into sharper focus, offering a richer understanding of Buddhism as a dynamic social and cultural practice.

The artworks highlighted in this Curriculum Guide represent only a small selection of those featured in the exhibition. For each artwork, we provide background information on its materials, symbolism, and the artist who created it. Each section also includes **key terms**, **suggested activities**, **discussion prompts**, and **academic resources** designed to deepen students' engagement with the exhibition and to extend learning beyond the virtual gallery.

In general, the Curriculum Guide is organized around three learning goals. First, it invites students to explore how ethnographic research can be translated into a visually driven museum exhibition, examining the curatorial choices that shape how knowledge is presented to the public. Second, it encourages students to investigate the relationship between material objects and interpretive meaning, considering how material objects communicate religious, historical, and cultural significance. Third, it foregrounds a lived religion approach by emphasizing how ordinary people experience, practice, and interpret Buddhism in their everyday lives. Rather than privileging texts or institutional doctrine, this approach highlights the diverse, embodied, and locally situated ways in which religious meaning is created and sustained.

SECTION 1

NAVIGATING

A mandala is a symbolic representation of the Buddhist cosmos. Its perfect geometry embodies universal harmony and serves as a spiritual guide for meditation and ritual practice. Mandalas appear in many settings in Vietnam, from the ceilings of temples to encased sand mandalas. Some mandalas are secret and personally modified for private meditation, while others take the form of thangkas displayed openly in public spaces such as restaurants and shops.

Visitors are invited to move clockwise around the mandala. Clockwise movement follows the flow of blessings and mantras, mirroring the turning of the Dharma Wheel and the ongoing transmission of the Buddha's teachings. The mandala is divided into four sections, reflecting the rich diversity of various Buddhist traditions and practices in Vietnam.

East: Tibetan Buddhism is represented by blue, the color of the Medicine Buddha, symbolizing healing, clarity, and spiritual balance.

South: Vietnamese Buddhism is represented by yellow, evoking muddy earthen stones and the muted tones traditionally reflected in Vietnamese monastic robes.

West: Vietnamese Vajrayana is represented by red, inspired by the stylized red roof tiles that ornament temples and signal vitality and protection.

North: Tibeto-Vietnamese Vajrayana Buddhism is symbolized by a green turtle shell, connecting life release practices with the adaptation of Tibetan monks to Vietnamese spiritual traditions.



Photo by Ivan Baria (2026), TWENTY-THREE DEITY NAIRAMTA MANDALA, c. 1375.
Reproduced with permission from The Cleveland Museum of Art, Creative Commons Zero (CC0).

Printed on 1m² wood box with side decals.

KEY TERMS

Emic and Etic: Emic refers to an insider perspective, describing a group using the concepts, categories, and meanings that members of that group use themselves. Etic refers to an outside analytical perspective, interpreting social data using theoretical concepts developed within social science disciplines.

Tibeto-Vietnamese Vajrayana: An etic umbrella term referring to the post-2010 popularization of Tibetan Buddhism in Vietnam across its many diverse expressions. These include lineage-based groups, private study groups, corporate religions, and business-licensed forms of religiosity and self-help consumerism. They also encompass state-led spiritual tourism projects, controversial financial schemes, innovative hybrid forms, self-proclaimed reincarnate masters, and digital religiosity on social media platforms. Together, these expressions occupy different positions along a spectrum of openness and state support on the one hand, and closedness and state avoidance on the other. All of these developments unfold within the broader political framework of late socialist Vietnam.

Vietnamese Vajrayana: Scholars and practitioners often distinguish between Tibetan Vajrayana and Vietnamese Vajrayana. Vietnamese Vajrayana is understood by practitioners as a locally indigenized tradition with roots extending back more than 2,000 years. Tibetan Vajrayana, by contrast, arrived in Vietnam in the mid-20th century and has grown rapidly in popularity over the past twenty years. Several scholars challenge the common view that Buddhism entered Vietnam through China, arguing instead that it arrived directly from India via maritime routes to the Phù Nam Kingdom around the first century CE. This historical uncertainty supports the idea that Vajrayana developed independently and was later adapted within Vietnam. As a result, some practices and iconographies often associated with the Himalayas, such as spinning prayer wheels, are understood by some as having been independently created in Vietnam. Early Indian Vajrayana influences may be visible at sites such as Luy Lâu and Hoa Lư. Although Vietnamese Vajrayana is often said to have peaked in the seventh century, several temples remain active today, mostly in northern Vietnam, where esoteric practices are taught to small groups of followers. One example is Luật Mật Viện Thắng Nghiêm, which features opulent displays combining Tibetan and Vietnamese Vajrayana traditions.

Trans-Himalayas: An etic term referring to the interconnected socio-cultural, religious, political, and economic worlds that extend across and beyond the Himalayan mountain range. Rather than being limited to the Himalayan mountains themselves, the Trans-Himalayas comprise a historically constituted network of peoples, institutions, pilgrimage routes, trade corridors, monastic lineages, and political formations that link the Tibetan Plateau with the Himalayas and adjoining regions, including Nepal, Bhutan, northern India, Pakistan, western China, and parts of Inner Asia. Anthropologically, the concept emphasizes circulation, connectivity, and the production of shared cultural worlds across political and ecological boundaries. In the Vietnamese context, the term Tibet is often deliberately avoided because of its political sensitivities. Instead, expressions such as Himalayan Buddhism or, as we used in the exhibition, Trans-Himalayan Buddhism, provide politically neutral ways of referring to Tibet or Tibetan Buddhism without invoking the geopolitical connotations.

Karma: An emic concept found in many South Asian and Buddhist traditions that refers to the moral causality of intentional actions and their consequences across time, including future lives. Anthropologically, karma is understood as a culturally embedded system for interpreting suffering, fortune, ethical conduct, and social relationships. Karma is more than religious doctrine; it serves as a moral framework through which individuals and communities explain life events, justify ethical obligations, negotiate uncertainty, and construct meaningful narratives about the relationship between action and consequence. As highlighted in the exhibition, karmic cause-and-effect are also represented visually in many Mahayana temples as a means of moral and religious socialization. These “karma boards” communicate ethical principles through vivid, sometimes grotesque imagery. For many Vietnamese people, repeated encounters with these images during temple visits from childhood onward embed karmic reasoning as a familiar way of understanding the relationship between actions and their consequences.

Religious syncretism: An etic analytical term referring to the combination, reinterpretation, and integration of beliefs, practices, rituals, symbols, and institutions drawn from different religious traditions. Anthropologically, religious syncretism is understood as an ongoing process through which individuals and communities creatively negotiate religious diversity, historical change, and local cultural contexts, rather than as the mere blending of otherwise separate or “pure” religions. Scholars sometimes differentiate between implicit and explicit processes of religious syncretism, the former being gradual and organic and the latter being the self-conscious project of mixing doctrines and institutions, often by elite actors. While syncretism has somewhat fallen out of fashion with religion scholars, it remains a useful analytic tool for understanding processes of cultural mixing.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY

1.1

CURATE YOUR OWN MINI EXHIBITION



Photo by Ivan Baria (2026).

The “Wrathful Deities” section groups together statues, thangkas, drawings, and ritual objects under a single interpretive theme.

Choose 3-5 objects, artworks, photographs, videos, or installations from the Navigating section that you think belong together. Create your own mini exhibition by giving your group a title and writing an exhibition label that explains the connection between these objects.

Your label should:

- ◇ Have a title
- ◇ Be no more than 150 words
- ◇ Be written in accessible language Explain why these objects belong together

You may refer to the labels in the “Wrathful Deities” section as examples of how museum labels connect different objects through a shared idea.

ACTIVITY

1.2

WHY PAIR THESE OBJECTS?



Photo by Ivan Baria (2026).

Throughout this exhibition, many objects and practices are presented in pairs. For example:

- ◇ Vietnamese Mahayana and Tibetan Buddhist monastic robes
- ◇ Tsok and lộc as ritual food offerings
- ◇ Trans-Himalayan and Vietnamese artistic traditions

Museum curators often place objects side by side to encourage visitors to compare, contrast or discover relationships.

Come up with one additional pair from all the artworks displayed in the Navigating section and explain:

- ◇ Why do you place these two objects or practices together?
- ◇ What similarities and differences become visible through this comparison?
- ◇ How does this pairing change your understanding of either object?



Digital drawing by Chari Hamratanaphon (2025).

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1.1 Romanticizing Tibetan Buddhism

Throughout the exhibition, you encounter representations of Tibetan Buddhism created by both Western artists (such as Nicholas Roerich) and East Asian artists (such as Kuranishi), alongside contemporary Vietnamese interpretations.

How has Tibetan Buddhism been romanticized or imagined in popular culture? Consider examples from painting, film, literature, manga, anime, or social media. How do these representations shape public perceptions of Tibetan Buddhism? How do they compare with the lived religious practices presented in this exhibition?



Kuranishi's manga depictions of Tibetan monks. © Kuranishi.



Digital drawing by Chari Hamratanaphon (2025)

1.2 Religious Syncretism and Religious Legitimacy

This exhibition presents multiple Buddhist traditions in Vietnam, including Mahayana, Vajrayana, and local religious practices. These traditions sometimes coexist harmoniously, while at other times they negotiate questions of authenticity, authority, and legitimacy.

Using examples from the exhibition, discuss how different Buddhist traditions interact in contemporary Vietnam. When does religious syncretism enrich religious practice, and when does it raise questions about authenticity or legitimacy? Who has the authority to determine what counts as “real” or “bad” Buddhism?

1.3 Women and Religious Leadership

The exhibition introduces two female Buddhist leaders, Sư bà Diệu Huyền and Sư cô Diệu Quán, whose work illustrates different forms of religious authority and community leadership.

How do the stories of Sư bà Diệu Huyền and Sư cô Diệu Quán complicate common assumptions about gender and religious leadership? What do their experiences reveal about the opportunities and challenges facing women in contemporary Vietnamese Buddhism? How might their stories contribute to broader conversations in gender studies and the study of religion?



Sư bà Diệu Huyền and Sư cô Diệu Quán visiting the exhibition in 2026.

ACADEMIC RESOURCES

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Gould, Hannah, and Melyn McKay. “An introduction to bad Buddhism.” (2020).
<https://www.globalbuddhism.org/article/download/1284/1121>.

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SECTION 2

ATTRACTING



Screenshot taken from Tinna Tinh's Jambhala [chanting video](#).

As Tibetan Buddhism has spread in Vietnam, it has taken on many commercial forms, including spiritual tourism, vegetarian restaurants, religious shops, cremation services, spiritual healing technologies, house blessings, and creative arts. It has also blended with “law of attraction” beliefs, which hold that thoughts, intentions, and emotions shape life experiences. In simple terms, this view suggests that positive intentions attract positive outcomes, including prosperity and personal wealth. These ideas provide the cultural and spiritual context for the space you are about to enter.

Ashtamangala refers to the eight auspicious symbols in Buddhist and Hindu traditions associated with prosperity, wisdom, and protection. Entering the Ashtamangala Corridor, visitors step into a space oriented toward abundance and well-being. The corridor centers on Jambhala, a Dharma protector and Bodhisattva of wealth who has become increasingly popular in Vietnam. Jambhala is often associated with Thần Tài worship, as both are understood to attract wealth and good fortune.

Visitors are invited to reflect on images, objects, and rituals connected to Jambhala, presented across a range of artistic forms from popular culture to sacred practice. At the end of the corridor is a meditation room where visitors can chant a Jambhala mantra for attracting prosperity.

KEY TERMS

Corporate form of religion: Moving beyond the simple binary of “religion and business” by arguing that religion and economic activity are not separate spheres that merely coexist. Rather, religious institutions necessarily engage in economic practices to sustain themselves, and throughout history religious and corporate forms have developed through intertwined processes. Religion and economy are both co-constituted by shared elements such as power, ritual, and social organization, while also being co-made through their mutual formation. As McLaughlin et al. (2020) argue, subject formation, profit-seeking, and the creation of intentional communities are co-constitutive processes of both religion-making and corporation-making, and neither can be reduced to the other.

Spiritual/religious tourism: Spiritual tourism is a phenomenon undertaken by an “individual in the quest for personal meaning from and through travel” (Willson, McIntosh and Zahra 2013: 152). Despite this widely cited characterization, there is no consensus definition due to the difficulty of distinguishing between the fuzzy concepts of spirituality and religion. A further point of debate concerns perspective: should spiritual tourism be defined by the destinations visited and activities undertaken, or by the inner motivations and meanings that travelers attach to their journeys?

Religious commodification: Religious commodification is the process through which “religious ideas, persons, and practices” are transformed into objects and commodities that circulate within systems of exchange, consumption, and profit (Carrette 2017).

Ashtamangala: A set of eight auspicious symbols in Tibetan Buddhism that collectively represent the blessings of the Buddha, the virtues of the Dharma, and the auspicious conditions necessary for spiritual realization. As an integrated iconographic system, they express both worldly prosperity and the attainment of enlightenment. It is found all over the Trans-Himalayan region, on clothes, door hangers, restaurant menus, and even tote bags!

Law of Attraction: The belief that “like attracts like”. In other words, a person’s thoughts and mental states attract corresponding experiences, circumstances, and external conditions. This idea gained global virality in the early 2000s with the publication of Rhonda Byrne’s *The Secret*.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY

2.1

ONE DEITY, MANY IMAGES

The wealth deity Jambhala appears throughout the exhibition in many different forms, including traditional Tibetan statues, Vietnamese reinterpretations, contemporary paintings, and chibi-style illustrations by young artists.

Choose three different depictions of Jambhala.

Compare them by considering the following questions:

- ◇ What iconographies (visual elements) are shared in all three depictions?
- ◇ Compare the different depictions by focusing on their style, materials, facial expressions, colors, scale, and setting. What differences do you notice between each version, and why do you think the artists chose to represent Jambhala in these different ways?
- ◇ Who do you think each depiction was intended for, and how might its purpose or audience have influenced its design?

Conclude by reflecting on this question:

Does changing the visual style of a religious figure change its religious meaning? Why or why not?



Photo by Tiên Zenda (2026).

ACTIVITY

2.1

DESIGN A NINTH AUSPICIOUS SYMBOL



Digital drawing by Chari Hamratanaphon (2025).

The Eight Auspicious Symbols were developed centuries ago to communicate Buddhist values.

Imagine you were asked to create a Ninth Auspicious Symbol for the twenty-first century.

- ◇ What value would it represent?
- ◇ What would it look like?
- ◇ Why is this value important today?

Include a sketch and a written description (300 words maximum).

DISCUSSION PROMPTS



Photo by LINARI (2025).

2.1 Religion, Economy and the Marketplacet

Throughout the *Attracting* section, the exhibition presents examples of Buddhist artists, temples, ritual specialists, and businesses producing and circulating religious objects, images, and experiences.

How does the exhibition challenge the boundary between religion and business? Using examples from the exhibition, discuss the different ways religious practice and economic activity intersect. Do commercial practices strengthen, transform, or undermine religious life? Support your argument with examples from the exhibition and, if relevant, examples from your own experience or other religious traditions.

2.2 Meditation, Modernity, and Sacred Space

The Tinna Tinh meditation room combines meditation with contemporary design, ambient lighting, and electronic dance music (EDM), departing from conventional expectations of Buddhist meditation spaces.



Photo by Lâm Khâu (2026).

How does the Tinna Tinh meditation room challenge conventional ideas about what meditation should look or sound like? Does changing the aesthetic environment change the religious practice itself? Discuss how this installation reflects broader processes of religious adaptation in contemporary society.

2.3 Cute and Commodified Sacrality

The exhibition includes contemporary reinterpretations of Buddhist deities, including chibi-style illustrations, collectible objects, and popular visual culture.

How do contemporary artistic styles, such as chibi aesthetics or collectible design, reshape the way people engage with sacred figures? Do these reinterpretations make Buddhism more accessible to new audiences, or do they risk commodifying and trivializing the divine? Use examples from the exhibition to support your argument.



Digital painting by Brain Huy (2024).

ACADEMIC RESOURCES

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SECTION 3

EMITTING



Photo by Ivan Baria (2026).

Prayer flags (*lungta*) are believed to release prayers into the wind, spreading blessings, compassion, and balance to all beings as they flutter in open spaces. They are often hung in high, windy places so prayers for peace and protection can travel far across the land. Lungta are installed on auspicious days and left to fade naturally as a reminder of impermanence. When they finally fall to the ground, they are respectfully burned.

Visitors are invited to step inside this sheltered area for contemplation and meditation. Lungta remind practitioners that positive intention, released into the world like wind, can uplift both oneself and the wider community. Today, social media carry images, stories, and digital content about Buddhism across vast networks. These streams of content function as “digital prayers”, circulating through cyberspace and linking Buddhist followers across Vietnam and extending as far as the Himalayas.

The thousands of *lungta* displayed in this gallery were gathered from the ground on a mountain beside Leh Palace in Ladakh, North India. With permission from a head monk, each fallen lungta was carefully retrieved, washed, dried, and re-bundled for exhibition purposes. After the exhibition, they were ritually burned in accordance with Buddhist practice.

KEY TERMS

Vajrahotties: Vajrahotties are emerging digital personas within Tibeto-Vietnamese Vajrayana, exemplified by the influencer Tinna Tình. She combines celebrity culture, spiritual practice, and social media influence. Including her, a wider network of “Vajrahotties” has emerged, spanning Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs), models, creatives, and entrepreneurs. They blend Tibetan Buddhist imagery with fashion, beauty, and luxury branding. Through livestreams and social media posts, they create a form of spiritual entertainment that appeals to young, urban elites seeking meaning within consumer culture. They show how Buddhist devotion, personal branding, and online commerce increasingly come together, shaping new ways of practicing and presenting faith online.

Mediatization: An approach to the study of religion that treats religion as fundamentally a question of mediation. Rather than viewing media as merely channels for transmitting religious beliefs, this perspective understands media as constitutive of religion itself. Rather than focusing primarily on belief, scholars examine how religion is materially produced and experienced through media, objects, bodies, rituals, and other practices of mediation. This is part of the “media turn in religion” approach as described by Matthew Engelke (2010).

Key Opinion Leader (KOL): This term is used more broadly in Vietnam than in many Western countries, especially in marketing and social media. Typically, Vietnamese marketers distinguish between two categories: KOLs have recognized expertise, authority, or credibility in a specific field, including experts or celebrities whose opinions carry weight; and KOCs (Key Opinion Consumer) are everyday consumers who build trust by reviewing products based on personal experience.

Lived religion: The ways people actually experience, practice, interpret, and integrate religion into their everyday lives, rather than focusing only on official doctrines, institutions and rituals. The concept emerged as an ethnographic response to approaches that treated religion primarily as a system of beliefs or formal institutions. Instead, anthropologists ask questions such as: How do people use religious ideas to make sense of daily experiences? And how do they adapt religious teachings to local circumstances? In this exhibition, the ethnographic data privileged the everyday experiences of ordinary followers and therefore we have adopted a lived religion approach.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY

3.1

DESIGN AN INTERACTIVE MUSEUM EXPERIENCE



Photo by Ivan Baria (2026).

The *Emitting* section invites visitors to think about how prayers, blessings, and religious ideas circulate through both physical and digital worlds.

Imagine you are part of the curatorial team. Design one new interactive experience that could be added to this section.

Your proposal should identify:

- ◇ your target audience (children, university students, families, general visitors, etc.)
- ◇ the activity or installation
- ◇ the learning objectives
- ◇ how visitors would participate
- ◇ how the activity helps communicate one of the exhibition's key themes (for example: circulation, digital media, impermanence, community, or religious practice)

Explain why your design would enhance visitors' understanding of this section.

ACTIVITY

3.2

FINDING THE EXHIBITION METAPHOR



Photo by Ivan Baria (2026).

Each section of this exhibition is organized around a Buddhist object or concept that also serves as a metaphor for a broader social or cultural process.

For example:

- ◇ Navigating → Mandala → spatial orientation and spiritual travel
- ◇ Attracting → Eight Auspicious Symbols (ashtamangala) → physical and spiritual abundance
- ◇ Emitting → Prayer flags (lungta) → abstract circulation and digitality
- ◇ Spinning → Prayer wheels → repetition, movement, and religious syncretism
- ◇ Tying → Red strings → interpersonal relationships and healing wartorn places and afflicted people

Choose one religious object, symbol, or ritual from any religious tradition.

Explain how it could become the organizing metaphor for a new exhibition section.

In your response:

- ◇ identify the religious object or practice
- ◇ identify the contemporary idea or social phenomenon it represents
- ◇ explain why this metaphor helps visitors understand both religion and contemporary life

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

3.1 Lived Religion Through Personal Narratives

Watch the ethnographic video featuring the model and KOL Ken Bành. Throughout the exhibition, Buddhism is presented through the voices and experiences of practitioners, artists, monastics, and lay followers.

Identify two other individuals whose stories appear in the exhibition, either in ethnographic videos or photographs. Compare their experiences with Ken Bành's.

- ◇ How do they understand or practice Buddhism differently?
- ◇ What social, cultural, or personal factors shape their experiences?
- ◇ What do these similarities and differences reveal about the diversity of lived religion?

Use specific examples from the exhibition to support your discussion.



Photo by Lâm Khâu (2025).

3.2 How Does Religion Move?

The exhibition suggests that religions spread not only through scriptures and institutions, but also through objects, images, stories, artists, social media, and personal relationships.

Which of these forms of circulation do you think is most influential today? Has the way religions spread changed in the digital age, or have the technologies changed while the underlying processes remain the same? Use examples from the exhibition to support your argument.

3.3 Material Objects, Immaterial Ideas

Prayer flags are physical objects, yet their purpose is to transmit invisible blessings, prayers, and intentions.

Choose another object from the exhibition that functions in a similar way. How does the object mediate between the material and the spiritual? What role does it play in connecting practitioners with ideas, places, or communities?

ACADEMIC RESOURCES

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SECTION 4

SPINNING



Photo by Ivan Baria (2026).

Tibetan prayer wheels (mani) are ritual objects inscribed with sacred words (mantra) and filled with Buddhist texts (sutra), which are spun clockwise so that prayers and blessings unfurl outward to all sentient beings. Spinning the prayer wheel is a mindfulness practice on impermanence, a means of purifying negative karma, and a way to radiate compassion and peace to all beings.

Prayer wheels come in many sizes. The world's largest was inaugurated at Samten Hills Dalat in 2023. The world's smallest may be a tiny spinning cylinder inscribed with microscopically laser-engraved mantras inside a Sherpa OPS watch. A single watch can spin the equivalent of over 30 million mantras each year.

On display are five prayer wheels handmade in India, transported to Vietnam, and filled with hand drawn sutra paper. Visitors are invited to walk meditatively clockwise and to spin the prayer wheels in a clockwise direction. A hand drawn copy of the sutra paper contained inside each prayer wheel is displayed nearby.

The spinning of the prayer wheels also serves as a metaphor for the localization of Tibetan Buddhism in Vietnam. Each rotation represents the transmission of the dharma across cultures, as teachings blend with local knowledge, languages, and customs. These processes of localization have given rise to new and creative forms of spiritual expression and practice. Although the prayer wheels are turned by different hands, in different places, and under different circumstances, the compassionate and enlightened intention at their center remains the same.

KEY TERMS

Religious Indigenization: The process by which a religion becomes rooted in a local culture through conscious or unconscious adaptation. While its core beliefs may remain largely unchanged, the ways those beliefs are interpreted, expressed, and practiced come to reflect local cultural values, norms and social realities. This process may include translating sacred texts and rituals into local languages, incorporating indigenous forms of worship, music, dress, or artistic expression, developing local rather than relying on foreign leadership, and reinterpreting religious teachings in ways that resonate with local concerns and worldviews. Religious indigenization may involve syncretic blending with existing religious traditions, but it does not necessarily do so. It can also include elements of “heritagization”, whereby religious places, objects, practices, or traditions are reframed as part of a community’s or state’s tangible or intangible cultural heritage. Heritagization is often a sociopolitical process through which religious traditions are recognized, preserved, and integrated into a shared sense of cultural or national identity.

Đạo Mẫu: An indigenous Vietnamese religious tradition centered on the worship of Mother Goddesses who govern different cosmological realms. It is best known for the ritual of spirit mediumship, known as *lên đồng*, in which mediums become possessed by deities and perform music, dance, blessings, and gift-giving. Anthropologically, Đạo Mẫu can be understood in several ways. It is a system for negotiating reciprocal relationships between the physical and spiritual world. Worshippers make offerings, prayers, and ritual performances in exchange for protection and good fortune. It is an expression of Vietnamese cultural identity, a tradition which developed indigenously alongside imported traditions such as Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism. As such, it has received UNESCO recognition as Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2016. It is also a tradition that has prominent roles for goddesses and women mediums and ritual leaders. As our exhibition explored, it is also a space for queer acceptance and celebration based on the quality of a person’s soul.

Vía: A person’s soul or inner quality, is a critical concept in Mother Goddess [Đạo Mẫu] practice. Ông trời [heavenly father] is believed to have assigned men seven vía and women nine vía. A person’s number of vía determines their spiritual gender and how receptive they are to masculine and feminine spirits. Queer people are believed to be *vi nam vi nữ* [not male, not female] with eight vía. In contrast to popular perception that Mahayana teachings frame queerness as a manifestation of negative karmic pasts, Đạo Mẫu considers having eight vía as innately dexterous, a god-gifted quality that facilitates easier channeling of both male and female spirits. Having eight vía as one’s *căn quả* [spiritual root] is understood to challenge the negative associations of queerness and to invest alternative gender and sexual orientations with enhanced spiritual capabilities. In fact, some Đạo Mẫu communities intentionally seek out queer practitioners for this reason.

Minoritization: The sociopolitical process through which a religious community comes to be defined, treated, and governed as a minority in ways that support the interests of a dominant religious, cultural, or political majority. This process operates both through discourse, by defining religious differences and drawing boundaries around what is considered legitimate, and through institutions, by using laws, regulations, and administrative systems to determine which forms of religious practice are officially recognized (Stausberg et al. 2023). Minoritization is therefore both a sociocultural process that shapes relationships between religious majorities and those who identify as, or are identified as, religious minorities, and a state process through which governments regulate, authorize, and limit religious life. In the context of the exhibition, some TVV groups are portrayed as religious minorities, while others are selectively integrated into Vietnamese society or heritized in ways that serve majority interests. This selective inclusion helps define the acceptable boundaries of Tibetan Buddhism while reinforcing the dominant position of Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhism.

Bodhisattva: In Buddhism, a bodhisattva is a being who is committed to attaining enlightenment not only for themselves but for the benefit of all sentient beings. Rather than entering final nirvana as soon as enlightenment is attained, a bodhisattva vows to remain engaged in the world, practicing compassion and wisdom while helping others progress on the path to liberation. In Mahayana Buddhism, the bodhisattva ideal is considered the highest expression of Buddhist practice, and many revered figures, such as Avalokiteśvara (Guanyin in Chinese, Quan Âm in Vietnamese), are understood to be bodhisattvas who continue to assist beings in countless forms. In Tibetan Buddhism, Avalokiteśvara is the bodhisattva of compassion, often depicted with 1,000 arms, each with an eye in its palm, symbolizing the ability to perceive suffering everywhere and to reach out and help all sentient beings.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY

4.1

FOLLOW AN OBJECT'S JOURNEY



Photo by Ivan Baria (2026).

Choose one object (such as a prayer wheel, statue, thangka, mantra, ritual implement or Buddhist image).

Create a timeline showing how it traveled across cultures. Where did it originate? How has it changed as it moved into Vietnam? What remains the same, and what has been adapted?

ACTIVITY

4.2

WHO GETS TO DEFINE "AUTHENTIC" BUDDHISM?



Photo by Ivan Baria (2026).

Find two objects or stories that illustrate different understandings of Buddhism.

Write a short response discussing:

Is Buddhism in Vietnam simply adopting Tibetan Buddhism, or is it creating something new? Use examples from the exhibition to support your argument.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

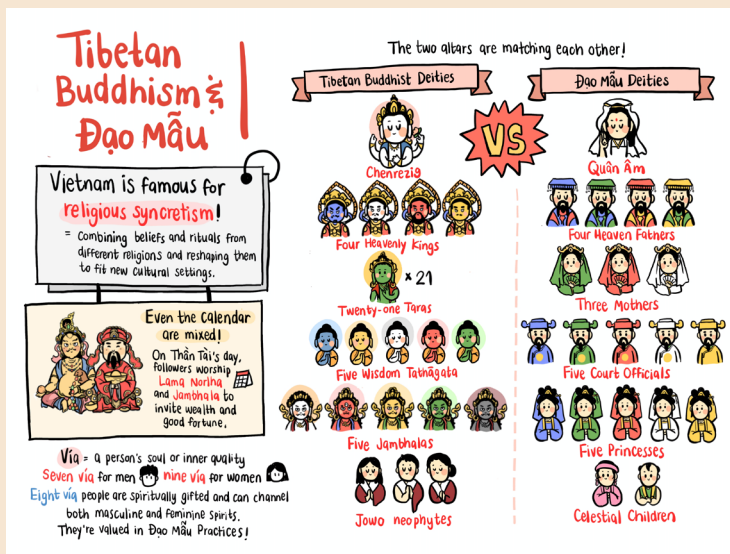
4.1 What Makes a Sacred Object Authentic?

Many Vietnamese temples import statues, thangkas, and ritual objects from Nepal, India, and Bhutan, while others commission Vietnamese artisans to create them locally. This exhibition also includes objects that have been digitally scanned, 3D printed, or artistically reinterpreted.

What makes a religious object “authentic”? Is authenticity determined by where it is made, who makes it, the materials used, ritual consecration, artistic skill, or religious intention? Use examples from the exhibition to support your discussion.



Photo by Nguyễn Thanh Hải (2016).



Digital drawing by Chari Hamrataphon (2025).

4.2 Religion, Gender and Syncretism

Read the label, watch the ethnographic video, and study the infographic on Tibetan Buddhism and Đạo Mẫu.

How does the integration of Đạo Mẫu reshape Tibetan Buddhism in Vietnam? Consider not only religious beliefs and practices, but also ideas about gender, identity, and community. Does this form of religious syncretism strengthen a global tradition by making it locally meaningful, or does it challenge conventional ideas of religious authenticity? Use examples from the exhibition to support your discussion.

4.3 Sacred Objects in Secular Spaces

Museums are generally understood as secular institutions, yet many of the objects in this exhibition continue to hold religious significance for practitioners. During the exhibition, some visitors have prayed, made offerings, or bowed before the objects on display.

How does displaying sacred objects in a museum change the way they are experienced? Do these objects become works of art, ethnographic artifacts, religious objects, or all three at once? Support your discussion with examples from the exhibition.



Photo by Hoàng Ngọc An (2025).

ACADEMIC RESOURCES

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SECTION 5

TYING



Photo by Lâm Khâu (2026).

In this installation, we have created an enclosed bamboo grove inspired by a similar site at Thiền viện Trúc Lâm Bình Phước. That grove has long been understood as a haunted landscape, marked by the presence of grievous soldiers who died during the war, when this area was an intense battleground. In response, both Vietnamese caretakers and Tibetan monks conduct healing rituals there, intended to liberate restless spirits and to restore wellbeing to the land itself. The video monitor inside the bamboo thicket documents how a temple caregiver and former soldier, Bồ Hà, cares for a haunted bamboo grove at Thiền viện Trúc Lâm Bình Phước. The grove is believed to be inhabited by the grievous spirits of fallen soldiers and was long avoided by the resident nuns.

The practice of tying red and orange strings around the wrist as a gesture of blessing and protection is widespread among Buddhist and Hindu communities in Tibet and South Asia. Anthropologically, these threads are portable ritual objects tied during moments of vulnerability to materialize protection, compassion, and ritual intention beyond the ceremony itself.

Volunteers from Sakya Vietnam have woven red and orange threads between the bamboo poles, creating a structure designed to be continuously transformed. Visitors are invited to add their own threads to this living network, forming a collective artwork of faith, connection, and renewal. The concept recalls the work of visual artist Chiharu Shiota, who explores memory and history through dense webs of thread. The installation encourages contemplation of the Dharma's healing and transformative power, and its enduring capacity to protect, reconcile, and liberate.

KEY TERMS

Spirit politics: Spirit politics refers to the ways religious actors engage with the governance of grievous ghosts, wartime dead, and other invisible beings as a means of negotiating political legitimacy, historical memory, and state power. In Vietnam, Tibetan monks sometimes perform rituals for those who died during the COVID-19 pandemic, unidentified wartime dead, and wandering spirits in and around temples. These practices extend beyond theological concerns about liberating all suffering beings. By situating Tibetan Buddhist ritual within state-sanctioned narratives of anti-colonial resistance and the ongoing spiritual reconciliation of wartime violence, Tibetan monks strategically align their activities with the moral and historical priorities of the Vietnamese state. This positioning creates an adaptive niche through which a minoritized religious tradition can expand its public presence and normalize its ritual authority. Some Tibetan monks working in Vietnam are also confronted with landscapes marked by unresolved wartime death, including mass graves and heritagized battlefields. These sites resonate with broader Vietnamese social imaginaries of ghosts and the unsettled dead (Kwon 2006), allowing Tibetan Buddhist rituals to intersect with existing concerns about the spiritual consequences of violence and historical displacement.

Reconciliation: The moral, political, and spiritual work of addressing the enduring legacies of the American War in Vietnam by repairing relations between the living and the dead, as well as between former enemies. In Vietnam, reconciliation is not limited to interpersonal forgiveness or legal justice. It is also tied to commemorating war martyrs, recovering and caring for the missing dead, and ritually pacifying unsettled spirits through practices such as *cầu siêu* (requiems). While the socialist state frames reconciliation through narratives of national unity, sacrifice, and patriotic remembrance, religious actors often broaden this framework to include the spiritual needs of all who died in the war, regardless of political affiliation. Ritual thus becomes a means of addressing the unresolved social, moral, and spiritual consequences of conflict. As a U.S. political project, reconciliation has also been advanced by veterans such as Senator John Kerry and former Senator John McCain, who was imprisoned in Hanoi during the war and later became a prominent advocate for restoring relations between the two countries.

Red address: Across Vietnam, sites are officially designated or colloquially recognized as *địa chỉ đỏ* (“red addresses”), referring to places associated with the revolutionary struggle, particularly those aligned with the Việt Minh and opposed to the American and South Vietnamese governments. Although Chùa Lâm Huệ is not part of the state’s formal heritage preservation or nationalist historical reclamation projects, it boasts official documentation of being a Communist-affiliated site in Hồ Chí Minh City. In this context, its framing as a red address provides the temple with greater logistical and administrative flexibility to invite and host Tibetan monks. This flexibility, however, is contingent and precarious, requiring continual negotiation with state authorities.

Requiem (cầu siêu): A Buddhist memorial ritual performed to transfer merit to the deceased, alleviate their suffering, and facilitate a favorable rebirth. In contemporary Vietnam, requiems have become important public ceremonies through which Buddhist practice reinforces state narratives of patriotism and historical memory. Organized by the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS), often in collaboration with the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF) and provincial authorities, requiems are regularly held at former battlefields and memorial sites on occasions such as War Invalids and Martyrs' Day (27 July) and major battle anniversaries. These ceremonies commemorate war martyrs while presenting Buddhism and the Vietnamese nation as united through a shared history of sacrifice and national liberation. For example, commemorative requiems marking the Battle of Điện Biên Phủ (1954) and national reunification (1975) have emphasized gratitude toward fallen soldiers and framed remembrance as both a religious duty and a patriotic act.

Medicine Buddha: A Buddha of healing in Tibetan Buddhism, embodying the eradication of physical illness, mental suffering, and the deeper afflictions of ignorance and karma. He is typically depicted with a deep blue body symbolizing the healing qualities of lapis lazuli, seated in meditation while holding a bowl of medicinal nectar in his left hand and a sprig of the myrobalan healing plant in his right. Devotional practices centered on the Medicine Buddha, including mantra recitation and ritual offerings, are believed to promote healing, purify negative karma, prolong life, and support both individual and collective well-being. In the exhibition, a Medicine Buddha thangka was nestled among bamboo and red strings, symbolizing his role as a source of healing and restoration for Vietnam's war-scarred landscapes and communities still affected by the enduring legacies of conflict.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY

5.1

SPIRIT POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM



Photo by Lâm Khâu (2025).

The exhibition presents rituals that address the spirits of soldiers who died during the war.

Research the concept of “wandering spirits” or “grievous ghosts” in Vietnam. Then compare the exhibition’s presentation with another case of postwar remembrance in Vietnam. How do religious rituals participate in the politics of memory and reconciliation?

ACTIVITY

5.2

DESIGNING A PARTICIPATORY RITUAL



Photo by Lâm Khâu (2026).

The Tying section invites visitors to tie a blessed string onto the bamboo installation, transforming the artwork throughout the exhibition.

Imagine you are designing a new participatory installation for this exhibition. Your proposal should include:

- ◇ a symbolic object or action that visitors would contribute
- ◇ the central theme (for example: healing, remembrance, protection, reconciliation, or community)
- ◇ how visitor participation changes the artwork over time
- ◇ what you hope visitors will learn or experience

Explain why your design is appropriate for a museum setting.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

5.1 Memory, Landscape, and Healing

The bamboo grove at Thiền viện Trúc Lâm Bình Phước is both a physical landscape and a place shaped by memory, war, and religious practice. Vietnamese caretakers and Tibetan monks perform rituals there to heal restless spirits and restore wellbeing to the land.

How do religious communities transform places associated with violence or loss? Can rituals contribute to healing, not only for individuals but also for communities and landscapes? Discuss using examples from the exhibition and, if relevant, other examples you know.



Photo by Ivan Baria (2026).



Photo by Hoàng Ngọc An (2026).

5.2 Museums and Living Religion

The red strings in this installation were blessed by visiting Nepali monks before being displayed in the gallery. Visitors were then invited to interact with these ritual objects, tying thousands of red strings around the bamboo.

How does this installation challenge the boundary between a museum exhibition and a religious space? Should visitors treat these objects as artworks, museum artifacts, or sacred objects? Can they be all three at once? Support your discussion with examples from the exhibition.

5.3 Intention and Materiality

The same red thread can function as a bracelet, a ritual object, an artwork, or a personal keepsake.

What gives an ordinary object religious significance? Is it the object itself, the intention behind it, the ritual through which it is used, or the community that gives it meaning? Support your discussion with examples from the exhibition.



Photo by Lâm Khâu (2025).

ACADEMIC RESOURCES

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Kwon, Heonik. 2006. *After the massacre: commemoration and consolation in Ha My and My Lai*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

ARTISTS



Lâm KHÂU

With a background in Anthropology, Lâm Khâu approaches visual art through observing and listening to the quiet sounds of everyday life. The works presented in this exhibition emerge from an interdisciplinary artistic practice, bringing together the perspectives of anthropological research with the vision of a storyteller working through image and sound. All photographs and short video works presented in the exhibition were created by Lâm Khâu.

To realize this project, Lâm Khâu devoted time to fieldwork journeys, encounters, observation, and listening to the human world in all its tenderness. The artist acts as a bridge between the contemplations on the Dharma shared by the participants and the rhythms of everyday life.

These works are the result of a collective resonance. Lâm Khâu could not have completed this project without the joyful support of monastics, Buddhist followers, and the scholarly companionship of two senior anthropological researchers. This spirit of connection also became the essential material through which the artist could cultivate empathy and discover himself within the works.



Chari HAMRATANAPHON

Chari Hamratanaphon is a lecturer at Chulalongkorn University, Thailand. She holds a PhD in Anthropology from UC Riverside and works as an amateur illustrator. She is interested in Vietnamese beliefs and spiritual objects, and enjoys telling their stories through cute, cartoon-like drawings. While her visual style is simple, each color and icon is carefully chosen to preserve meaning. Working closely with curators, she hopes to invite viewers to feel connected to the fascinating stories hidden within these artworks.



LINARI (HỒ Hoàng Linh)

For me, art is not simply about creating beautiful forms. It is a way of observing and transforming the movements unfolding within. As an artist who approaches art as a practice of presence, my creative path has led me through Thangka painting, painting Buddhist statues, and facilitating mindful art workshops, where art gradually becomes a mirror reflecting the mind.

My creative process does not begin with the intention of inventing something new, but with returning to the body, emotions, and the breath. Color is applied in a state of stillness, where my hands become merely instruments of creation. Each brushstroke and every layer of paint is an invitation to slow down, allowing fear, desire, and the impulse to control to become visible before gently dissolving. For me, art is not a pursuit of perfection, but of sincerity.

Alongside my studio practice, I develop art workshops centered on Buddhist symbolism. Participants are invited to engage directly with color, imagery, and symbolic forms through hands-on experience. My hope is to share the spirit of mindful art, so that art is not only something to be seen, but something to be lived and experienced in everyday life



NGUYỄN Lan Anh

I am a painter devoted to the practice of Buddhist art, with the aspiration of approaching the creation of Buddhist paintings as a path of cultivation. In each work, I do not simply seek to depict the forms of the Deities, but also strive to preserve a sense of sacredness, mindfulness, and reverence in every brushstroke. For me, “Each painting is a universe entrusted with my aspirations, where the Deity accompanies my deepest intentions, and silent dreams gradually take shape.”

The creative process is a connection between the imagery of the Deities and the Dharma. It serves both as a form of inner cultivation and as a reminder to return to a wholesome mind and an unwavering faith in the Buddha’s teachings. Through my work, I hope to create a source of comfort and support, allowing viewers to experience blessings, strengthen their faith, and cultivate merit and virtue through contemplation.

If even a brief moment spent before a painting inspires someone to awaken kindness, gratitude, or inner stability, then I feel that the purpose of this artistic practice has been fully realized.



bằg giang

bằg giang (she/they) is an interdisciplinary artist, independent researcher, writer, poet, and Buddhist practitioner with many years of study and practice in Buddhist philosophy. giang’s artistic practice emerges at the intersection of art, philosophy, Buddhism, and the lived experience of being different. Their work engages with suffering, violence, and the ways marginalized individuals navigate and respond to social norms. giang is drawn to what is difficult to articulate, invisible burdens, and the language of psychological complexity, while advocating for respect for difference and diversity.

As a queer and neurodivergent person, giang’s journey of self-understanding has been deeply intertwined with Buddhist practice. From this connection emerged *Dreams*, a body of work that asks a simple yet profound question: “Could this worldly reality itself be a dream?” This question is not posed as an abstract metaphysical inquiry, but rather arises from the concrete experience of living, enduring, hoping, loving, and practicing the Dharma within contemporary secular life.

dreams is constructed from giang’s personal photographic archive and shaped through movement across multiple spaces: theoretical, religious, non-religious, and everyday lived experience. giang employs photography alongside direct experiences gained through the study and practice of Vajrayana teachings, using both as contemplative modes of storytelling. Here, photography functions not merely as a means of documenting reality, but as a site where memory, embodiment, and perception converge.

giang does not position their story as an extraordinary spiritual journey. Rather, it is the story of an ordinary Buddhist practitioner living within the world, simultaneously confronting the constraints of society and samsara while seeking spaces for reflection, learning, and gradual progress along the path toward awakening. The photographs and poems in *Dreams* serve both as personal reflections and as offerings of shared experience. Presented in the form of cards, they exist simultaneously as artworks and as a kind of divinatory encounter.

Through this interactive format, the work invites viewers into quiet conversations with themselves. giang’s artistic practice therefore does not seek to instruct or explain. Instead, it creates a space of stillness, one in which each individual may contemplate their own path, their suffering, and their capacity for awareness and awakening.



Photo by Lâm Khâu (2026) of Tibetan monks building the main altar installation at Hải An Gallery.

DUYÊN LINH

The Imprint of Buddhism Across Time

An Educational Resource Packet for Introductory College Courses

Written by Hoàng Ngọc An