

# Empathizing (Buddhism)

## Visiting a Buddhist Site

There are two types of locations you might consider visiting with the students. One is a temple serving a traditionally Buddhist ethnic group, such as Vietnamese Americans. A visit of this sort would give the students a view of Buddhism as a religion with priests, rites, incense, and so on. This may be a cross-cultural as well as an interreligious encounter. Other sites worth visiting might be meditation centers or dharma halls. These tend to have less of an affiliation with a particular Asian culture and tend to be patronized by people born in the United States who have chosen Buddhist practice as adults. The purpose of these centers is to teach meditation: they tend to deemphasize the religious aspects of Buddhism. Experienced meditation teachers lead a group of people through a meditation period and then allow them to pose questions.

## Guest Speakers

Buddhism has become widespread in the United States. In many communities, it will be possible to find a Buddhist who is willing to come and speak with your class about his or her religion. The students will be especially interested in how someone else's religion affects how they live their lives on a day-to-day basis. If you are fortunate enough to be able to do so, invite guests from both an Asian Buddhist community and the American Buddhist community.

## A Simple Meditation

It is not difficult to introduce the students to a simple meditation that will give them a sense of what it feels like. This can be done with respect for the students' own religious beliefs. Some of the students may have already tried meditation. You may prompt the class with the following:

*Sit comfortably in your seat, straight but not stiff. If you're comfortable doing so, close your eyes lightly. If you would rather, just let them focus softly downward about three feet in front of you. Now, focus on your breathing. Don't try to control or change it, just pay attention to it. If you wish, you can silently note "breathing in" on the inhalation and "breathing out" when you exhale. When your mind wanders, very gently bring it back to the rhythm of your breath.*

Five minutes of silence is probably long enough. The students can then share their experience. Common responses include "It felt good / I was bored," "the time went so quickly / so slowly," "my mind wandered all the time," "I got sleepy," or "I heard stuff I wouldn't have otherwise noticed."

