

## BUDDHISM

The religion known as Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama. He lived between 560 B.C. and 480 B.C. Siddhartha was a prince in Nepal, a country north of India in the Himalayan foothills. As a young man, he was surrounded by luxury and great wealth. His parents made sure he never saw anything that was sad or unpleasant.

One day, Siddhartha left the palace and journeyed to the outside world. For the first time, he saw old age, sickness, and death. These sights shocked him and changed the course of his life.

Siddhartha gave up his kingdom and left his wife and children to search for the reasons why men experience suffering and sadness. He wandered for six years through northern India without finding the answer. He practiced asceticism ("self-denial") to achieve an understanding of ultimate reality. He eventually abandoned asceticism and turned instead to intense meditation. While meditating under a bodhi tree, the answer came to him. When this happened, he became known as "Buddha," the "Enlightened One," or the one with spiritual knowledge. Buddha preached his first sermon in Deer Park in the holy city of Varanasi (Benares.) He dedicated the rest of his life to helping people overcome suffering.



*Figure 1: Gautama Siddhartha meditating under the bodhi tree.*

Buddha denied the reality of the material world. The physical surroundings of humans, he believed, were simply illusions. The pain, poverty and sorrow that afflict human beings are caused by their attachment to things of this world. Once people let go of their worldly cares, pain and sorrow can be forgotten. Then comes bodhi, or wisdom. Achieving wisdom is a key step to achieving nirvana, or ultimate reality-the end of the self and a reunion with the Great World Soul. This is similar to the concept of moksha in Hinduism.

Buddha preached the "Four Noble Truths." The first truth was that suffering is a part of life. Also, because of man's actions in this life, he may be reborn into more suffering in the next life. The second truth stated that the origin of man's suffering is his desire for things he cannot have, and his attachment to material objects. The third truth taught that man must overcome his desires in order to get rid of suffering and find peace. The fourth truth showed man how to overcome desire by following the "Noble Eightfold Path." The Eightfold Path consisted of eight practices focused on righteous action and following a path of moderation.

According to Buddha, man needed to go through several rebirths before he could overcome his desires and achieve "nirvana." In nirvana, man's soul would stop its cycle of rebirth and become one with the universe. While Siddhartha accepted the idea of reincarnation, he rejected the Hindu division of people into rigidly defined castes. He taught instead that ALL people (not just the higher castes) could reach nirvana because of their behavior in this life. This made Buddhism appealing to the downtrodden peoples at the lower end of the caste system.

Buddhism also differed from Hinduism in its simplicity. Siddhartha rejected the multitude of gods that had become identified with Hinduism. He forbade his followers to worship either his person (this has not necessarily been followed) or his image after his death. For that reason, some Buddhists see Buddhism as a philosophy rather than a religion.

Buddha encouraged his followers to become monks to spread his teachings. Because of the desire to spread Buddha's message to others, Buddhism is a universalizing religion. At first, Buddhism was slow to spread in India because it was opposed by powerful Brahman Hindu priests.

However, during the 200s B.C., the Indian ruler Asoka made Buddhism the official religion of the Mauryan Empire in India. His reign was instrumental to the diffusion of Buddhism. He sent missionaries to spread Buddhism to Central and East Asia via the Silk Road and to Southeast Asia via Sri Lanka.

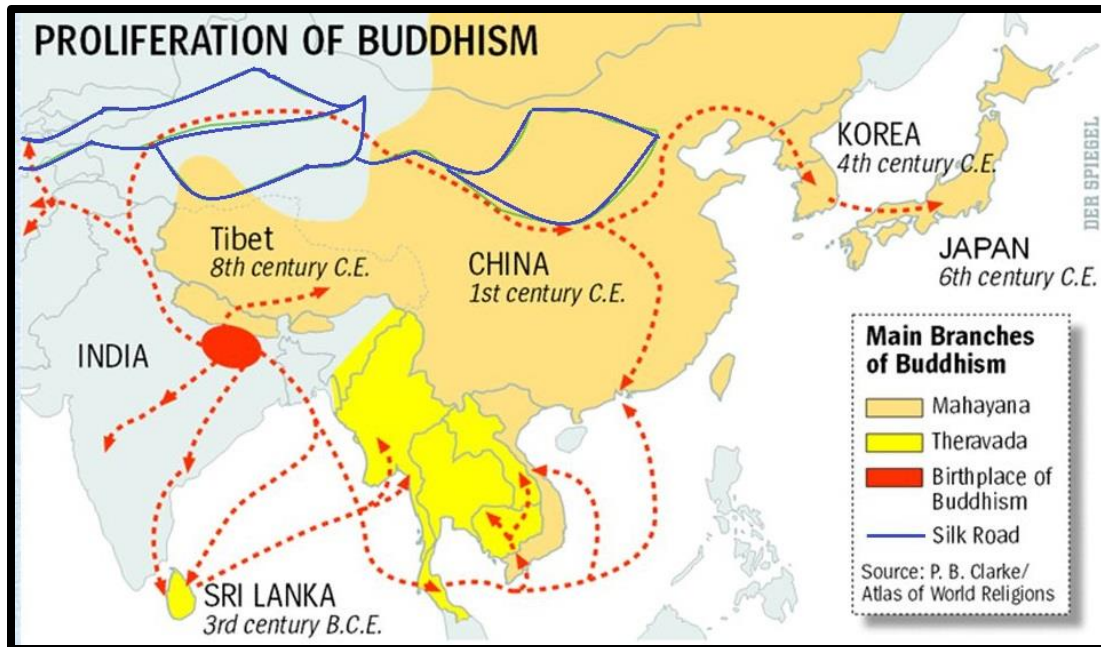


Figure 2: Diffusion of Buddhism

### Branches of Buddhism

Related to its different paths of diffusion, Buddhism also splintered into different branches. One branch is called Theravada Buddhism. As Buddha wanted, it stresses that Buddha was simply a teacher and not a god, and that the holiest of lives is that followed by Buddhist monks. It is widely practiced in Sri Lanka and most of Southeast Asia except Vietnam. Another sect, known as Mahayana Buddhism, was greatly influenced by Christian teachings. These Buddhists believe that Buddha was more than a teacher, that he was a god. They believe that nirvana is a paradise like the Christian heaven, and that bodhisattvas (Buddhist saints on their way to enlightenment) can help people reach nirvana. It is predominantly practiced in China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam (Vietnam is in Southeast Asia but has been greatly influenced by Chinese culture.) A third sect, sometimes considered part of the Mahayana school, is practiced in Tibet and Mongolia. Known by several different names, on the map above it is called Vajrayana. This is the branch of Buddhism associated with the Dalai Lama. After Ashoka's death, many Buddhist ideas were gradually absorbed into Hinduism, and Buddhism declined in importance in India. Today, Buddhism has less than a million followers in India, but it remains popular in China, Korea, Japan, and many countries of Southeast Asia.

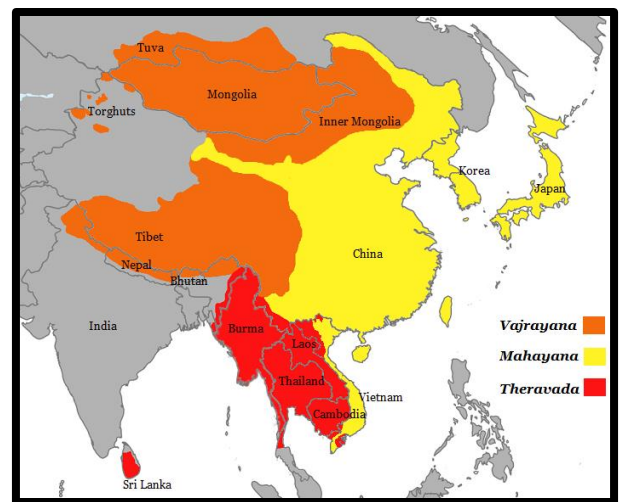


Figure 3: Geographic distribution of Buddhist branches

Because (to a certain degree) Buddhism is more of a philosophical approach to how to conduct your life, it is open to syncretism. Syncretism is the fusion or blending of different religious beliefs or practices. In China, Mahayana Buddhism became syncretic with the Chinese philosophies of Confucianism and Daoism. In Japan, Mahayana Buddhism became syncretic with Shintoism (the Japanese animistic and state religion that used to worship the emperor as a god). This evolved in Japan into Zen Buddhism and was the characteristic belief system of samurai warriors.

Today around 500 million people claim Buddhism as their religion. However, due to syncretism, those numbers may be less than accurate. An example is Japan. According to the CIA World Factbook, 70% of people follow Shinto and 67% follow Buddhism. Since this is mathematically impossible, one can assume that these statistics represent syncretism. This is also common for many Buddhists elsewhere in the world.



Figure 4: Overlapping religious affiliation indicate the effects of syncretism in Japan

### Buddhism and the Cultural Landscape

The Mauryan emperor, Ashoka, was also impactful in modifying the cultural landscape to reflect Buddhism. He had 84,000 stupas built. Stupas were repositories (storage places) of Buddhist relics. In addition, he had pillars erected across Northern India especially in places closely associated with Buddha’s life. These pillars are some of the earliest known stone sculptures in South Asia. They were often topped with carvings of lions and are inscribed with writings from Buddhist philosophy. Many of these pillars were later destroyed when more iconoclastic Muslims ruled India.



Figure 5: Stupas hold Buddhist relics. Ashoka had 84,000 built across India



Figure 6: Ashoka’s Pillars

Other symbols of Buddhism are items related to Buddha’s life or teachings. These include the bodhi tree under which Buddha reached enlightenment, the lotus flower which is said to have bloomed under the footsteps of the infant Buddha and the dharma wheel which is linked to the Buddhist believe in reincarnation and karma.

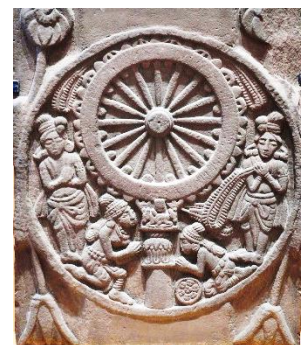
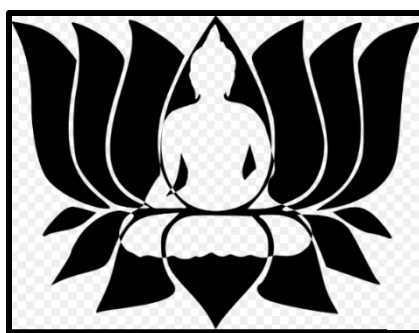


Figure 8: Symbols of Buddhism (from left to right)...the bodhi tree, the lotus flower and the Dharmachakra wheel



Figure 9: Pagodas are Buddhist shrines in East Asia

Buddhist temples in the Mahayana tradition of East Asia take the distinctive form of pagodas, sacred pyramid-shaped towers. They are frequently seen in China, Japan, and Korea. A pagoda has roofs curving upward in such a way that each story of the tower meets the next story above.

In addition, when many Westerners think of Buddha, they think of statues depicting a rotund and happy figure. Buddha (because he had practiced asceticism) was very thin. The “Laughing Buddha” statues are depictions of bodhisattvas. Bodhisattvas are Buddhist monks who are able to attain enlightenment but choose to defer that achievement in order to lead other people along the path toward enlightenment. Their large size and happy demeanor represent their contentment in life.



Figure 10: Buddha and Laughing Buddha are not the same