

NEW LIGHT FROM AN OLD LAMP

A Strategic Analysis of Buddhism

(Documented researches) 5 lectures by Tan Beng Sin, Piyasilo

BUDDHISM IN INDIA

A brief strategic survey

(Piya Tan)

SYLLABUS

- (1) Buddhism and history; “strategic study”; historical periods of Buddhism.
- (2) Mahayana: origins and nature.
- (3) The Buddhist Canons.
- (4) Buddhism under the empires: Aśoka; the Guptas; Harsha.
- (5) Foreign influences in India: Buddhist art; religion.
- (6) Stupa worship & lay specialists.
- (6) Tantra in India.
- (7) Hindu reactions to Buddhism.
- (8) Decline of Buddhism in India.
- (9) Colonial period; modern period.

2. INTRODUCTION: BUDDHISM & HISTORY

The **phoenix** is a mythical bird that probably originated in India, but became better known in ancient Egyptian mythology. It is a bird of great beauty and sweet voice, of which only one exists at a time. It dies every 500 years, burning itself up, and from its ashes arises a new phoenix who lives for another 500 years, and so on. This is a beautiful imagery found in religion and literature, which I shall use as a central theme in my lectures on Buddhism in India and its global spread.

Strategic study of Buddhist history

In his book, *The Vision of Buddhism*, Roger Corless thinks that **history** (as understood in western academia) is “a western, post-Christian, academic discipline, is non-Buddhist, even anti-Buddhist” (NY: Paragon House, 1989: xx). However, he concedes that one could still write on a history of Buddhism, but that would be “**more history than Buddhism**”, and that in order to make sense of such a history, one should first have an understanding of Buddhism.

This series of lectures on the history of Buddhism is based on what I’ve called “a strategic study”. By **strategic study** I mean:

- (1) What are the strong points of Buddhism?
- (2) How were these strengths used by Buddhists, and how were these strengths exploited by others?
- (3) What are the weaknesses of Buddhism?
- (4) What do we learn from the patterns in Buddhist history?

As such, this is an interdisciplinary study of sorts: **history, sociology, ethics, missiology**. Above, all can sense can we make out of Buddhism specifically, and religion in general.

Linear conception of time

Scholarly works on Buddhism often assume the notion that for Buddhists **history simply does not matter**. This notion is generally based on the understanding that the Buddhist conception of time (like the

Indian one) is cyclic, not linear as in the case of the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam and their developments). For Buddhists, “history” definitely repeats itself over and again.

In a **linear conception of history**, events occur only once, and if history does repeat itself here, only the actions appear similar, but the actors are always new and unique. There is only one Moses, one Exodus, one Christ, one Crucifixion, one Mohammed, one Hejirah. And the unbeliever has only one chance to choose between an eternity of heaven if he believes or an eternity of hell if he does not. We almost do not such rhetoric in our better-informed societies today, but the linear conception of time still deeply influences us.

Cyclic conception of time

The Indian conception of time is **cyclic**, and Buddhism accepts such a conception of history. There are many Buddhas, many have come and gone, and more will come in the future. We have lived many lives before, and will continue to be reborn here or elsewhere in this vast cosmos (if we remain unenlightened). History repeats itself.

For Buddhists, at least the informed and practising Buddhists, this repetitiveness of history has a higher purpose. In simple terms, this higher purpose of history is for us to learn from our mistakes—the pronoun “our” here refers to a sort of common consciousness if you like, whether as different persons or in different situations. History can be cyclic, imprisoning one in its repetitive cycle, or it can be a spiral path of higher evolution leading one out of the cycle into spiritual liberation.

Buddhism in world history

When we talk of a “history” of Buddhism, we are referring to the human experience of *samsāra*, the ups and downs of religious fervour, spiritual growth and moral decay, repeating and interacting among themselves in endless colourful cycles. There are some clear patterns in all this, and we shall try to discover them for ourselves. Since history tends to repeat itself, we might thereby gain some wisdom in our positive responses to events that directly concern us as Buddhists today.

The Axial Age

The history of human civilization is characterized by recurrent waves of **fascination with power and wealth**, and then with the disillusion of these very same power and wealth when they seem not to fulfill the hopes associated with them. Around 600 B.C. (or the first 700-800 years BCE), a major series of such waves swept across all civilized Asia with major “breakthroughs”, in what the German Existentialist philosopher, Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) has called the “axis age” or “**axial age**”.

In **Greece**, we see the rise of pre-Socratic and classical philosophy; in **Persia**, the coming of Zoroastrianism; in **the Middle East**, the advent of classical Judaism through the prophets and the beginnings of rabbinical Judaism; in **China**, we have Daoism, Confucianism and the “hundred schools”; and in **India**, we see the birth of the Upanishads, Jainism, various heterodox sects—and Buddhism.

According to **Jaspers**, the axial age was a turning point in human history—in the 6th century BC, when Confucius, the Buddha, Zoroaster, Deutero-Isaiah, and Pythagoras were alive contemporaneously. If the axial age is extended backward in time to the original Isaiah’s generation and forward to Mohammed’s, it may perhaps be recognized as the age in which humans first sought to make direct contact with the ultimate spiritual reality behind phenomena instead of making such communication only indirectly through the non-human and social environments.

Serpents and dragons

Conze makes an interesting observation that for the last 2000 years Buddhism had mainly flourished in **rice-growing areas** and little elsewhere. Furthermore, he says, it is hard to explain why it had spread only into those countries which had previously **a cult of Serpents or Dragons**, and never made headway in those parts of the world which view the killing of dragons as a meritorious deed or blame serpents for mankind's ills. (1980: 12)

3. PRE-BUDDHIST INDIA

A central teaching of the Buddha is that of **non-self** (*anattā*), which offers the cure for individualism and eternalism. The Buddha addressed a society of individualistic city dwellers who generally believed in a creator god or an eternal soul, or who were utterly materialistic.

Furthermore, it was a society of **the Iron Age**, whose metal forged better weapons to wage more devastating wars by ambitious warrior kings who established large kingdoms, with big cities, widespread trade, a well-developed money economy and a rationally organized state. These cities replaced small tribal societies with large conurbia, with all the evils of alienation, specialization and social disorientation that all this entailed.

The Buddha's public ministry was mostly in the urban areas, which helps to account for the intellectual character of his teaching, the "urbanity" of his words and the rational quality of his ideas. As if reflecting the widespread republican spirit of his times, the Buddha often declared that he was merely a "guide" (Dh 276), not an authority (D 2:100, 154), and that all propositions, including his own should be tested (A 1:188 f).

Having the advantage of **a liberal spiritual education**, the Buddhists respond to the unknown and the unproven with benevolent skepticism and a spirit of inquiry. In this manner, they have been able to accommodate themselves to every kind of popular (and unpopular) belief, not only in India, but wherever they find themselves.

4. HISTORICAL PERIODS OF BUDDHISM

Edward Conze, in his short but excellent *History of Buddhism*, which first appeared in 1958, gives a useful framework where he divides Buddhist history into 4 periods of roughly 500 years each. This rather neat and systematic division does not always agree with the facts, but as Conze puts it,

[I]t is mentioned in many Buddhist writings dating from the beginning of the Christian era. These five periods of 500 years are enumerated as marking the continued degeneration of the doctrine... Whether or not observation bears out this diagnosis of continuous decay, it has a profound influence on the mentality of the Buddhists in later ages, and we will hear of it again and again. The story of Buddhism is indeed not only a splendid, but also a melancholy one.

(*A Short History of Buddhism*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1980: 14 f.)

Buddhism has lived for 2500 years and during that period has undergone profound and radical changes. If we follow the traditional 500-year system, as Conze has done, then we have 4 successive 500-year periods of Buddhist history (except for the last) neatly divided as:

The 1 st period: 500-0 BCE.	Early Buddhism	(Ascetic & Monastic Buddhism).
The 2 nd period: 0 CE-500.	Mahayana	(Popular Buddhism).
The 3 rd period: 500-1000	Tantra and Chan	(Magical & Contemplative Buddhism).
The 4 th period: 1000-2000.	Modern Buddhism	(Pragmatic Buddhism).

It is important to understand that this **500-year system** is at best an approximate guide for discussing Buddhist history. There are overlappings of sectarian developments and other events. Certain trends, like traditions rooted in early Buddhism (especially the Theravada), run throughout Buddhist history to the present day like a silent undercurrent in the sometime stormy sometime sunny Buddhist ocean. The headings (such as “Early Buddhism” etc.) here only refer to the predominating trend or trends.

In this lecture, I shall cover all these four periods as far as they cover the development of Buddhism in India. As for the spread of Buddhism outside India, I shall discuss in the second lecture (Spread of Buddhism).

5. RELIGIOUS FOCUS

Let us first have an overview of the 4 periods so that we would have a better grasp of certain recurrent developments in the 2500 years of Buddhist history as they are discussed here.

The 1st period of Buddhist history, or early Buddhism, remained almost totally Indian. This opening period concentrated on **psychological questions**, that is, concerning individuals gaining control of their own minds and the analysis of the method of self-control.

During the 2nd period (the Mahayana), Buddhism spread outside India, especially in south and southeast Asia and throughout Central Asia, and was in turn significantly influenced by non-Indian thought. This second period focussed on **ontological questions** (regarding being, that is, existence and reality), discussing the nature of true reality and the realization of the true nature of things essential for enlightenment.

The 3rd period (Tantra and Chan) was a creative period when Buddhism spread to north and east Asia. This period was one of adaptation and **indigenization**, whereby Buddhism harmonized with ambient society and the cosmos in the quest for spiritual liberation. Secular powers tapped the religiosity of Buddhism in the quest for legitimation and worldly power.

The 4th period (modern Buddhism), that is, the last 1000 years, we see at first the decline of Buddhism in India and elsewhere, its lowest ebb during the colonial period, followed by Buddhist revival in Asia and the **globalization** of Buddhism in our own day.

6. RELIGIOUS VIRTUOSI

In my later years as a Buddhist monk, my interest in sociology has helped me to have a deeper understanding of the dynamics of religion in society. I shall here employ the notion of “**religious virtuosi**”, an idea introduced by Max Weber and developed by other scholars like Guenther Roth. [See Roth & W. Schluchter, *Max Weber's Vision of History, Ethics and Methods*. Berkeley, CA, 1979.]

For our mutual convenience, I shall not be too pedantic here, but apply the term “religious virtuosi” as it helps us understand how Buddhist religious leaders function in our study of Buddhist history. Here, I shall use “**religious virtuoso**” to refer to a person who is perceived as having a vital grasp of Buddhist doctrine and spirit by sheer personality and social status.

Soteriologically (in terms of spiritual liberation), each of the four periods differ in the conception of the religious virtuoso. In the 1st period the religious ideal is the liberated saint or **Arhat**, in whom all cravings are extinguished and who will no more be reborn.

In the 2nd period, it is the ideal of the **Bodhisattva**, not the historical Buddha-to-be, but the hypostasis (or embodiment) of compassion, that is, a being (human or otherwise) who wishes to save other beings, even at the cost of postponing his own final enlightenment.

In the 3rd period, it is the **Siddha**, a holy man or religious adept who is totally in harmony with his environment that he is under no constraint whatsoever and as a free agent is able to manipulate the cosmic forces both inside and outside himself.

In the 4th period, it is the **Śreṣṭhī**, a secular professional or executive, a person of means, whose charisma and social success are regarded as blessings of past good karma—as such, worthy of emulation and respect as a teacher. [I will deal more with the Śreṣṭhī in my next lecture, on “The Spread of Buddhism”.]

Let me also add here that I shall not be discussing the life of the Buddha or his personal ministry as they are already well known and often dealt with elsewhere. Also given the time we have, I shall only select certain events and themes that I think are vital and useful for us in our own small way to positively influence the present course of Buddhism and the history of its future.

7. THE SANGHA AFTER THE BUDDHA’S DEATH

All the Buddhist traditions accept that soon after the Buddha’s Final Nirvana, a Buddhist Council was held. However, there are various versions of what actually took place in that council. As such, some scholars have doubted that there was ever such a Council. My analysis is that, after the Buddha’s passing, various groups of monks in different parts of India each had their own Council. In due course, such groups developed into various systematic schools of their own.

The First Council (543 BCE)

Chapter 11 of the Cullavagga of the Theravada Vinaya Piṭaka records an important incident in connection with the 1st Council or **the Council of Rājagṛha**, sponsored by king Ajātaśātru. Some elder monks invited the monk Purāṇa (of Dakkhina, giri, south of Rājagaha) to join in the Council that was in progress, but he turned down the invitation, saying:

Well-recited are the Dhamma and Vinaya by the elders, but I will remember the Buddha’s teaching from what I have heard directly in his presence, what I have directly received from him.
(V 2:290)

This event clearly shows that even though the 1st Council (as recorded in the Pali Canon) was held at Rājagṛha (in modern Bihar) and attended by 500 Arhats, there were other communities of monks who did not attend it.

Whether or not there was any assembly as large or as authoritative as this Council, remarks Noble Ross Reat, “is not as important historically as the point that soon after the death of the Buddha, if not already within his lifetime, a corpus of his teachings regarded as authentic began to take shape” (1994: 17; emphasis mine).

The Second Council (c. 350 BCE)

The Theravada Vinaya records the events of a 2nd Council or **the Council of Vaiśālī** in Chapter 12 of the Cullavagga (V 2:294 ff.). This event was said to have been sponsored by king Kālāśoka of Magadha (90-118 AB = 396-368 BCE). Most other sources also mention this event, especially since it resulted in a schism between the **Sthaviravāda** (Pali, *Theravāda*, “Teaching of the Elders”) and the **Mahāsaṅghika** (“the Great Sangha party”).

8. THE MAHĀSAṅGHIKA

The Mahāsaṅghika [28] was the more liberal of the two schools, winning more support from the laity, since they placed **less emphasis on the Vinaya and more stress on meditation**. In fact, this was the

early beginnings of a major new movement that would be called **Mahāyāna**, the Greater Vehicle, which as we shall see, would give rise to many philosophical schools and would increasingly accommodate the local cults through its catholic tendencies. [24]

Traditional accounts attribute the first schism after the Buddha to a dispute over monastic rules. Later texts however emphasize differences between the Mahāsaṅghikas and the Sthaviravādins regarding **the nature of the Buddha and of arhathood**. The Mahāsaṅghikas believed in a plurality of Buddhas who are supramundane (*lokottara*), omniscient and abide in eternal samadhi, and held that what passed for Gautama Buddha in his earthly existence was only an apparition. In holding such doctrines, the Mahāsaṅghika was a precursor of the Mahayana.

Bodhisattva ideal

Another important Mahāsaṅghika development was their **application of the term *bodhisattva* to an enlightened being**. Traditionally, the term *bodhisattva* applies to the Buddha-to-be in the process of cultivating and accumulating “perfections” (*pāramī*), such as generosity, moral conduct, and wisdom. While the Sthaviravāda ideal is the Arhat, the Mahāsaṅghika, and the Mahayana that followed, look up to the Bodhisattva, defined as **an enlightened being who postpones his final enlightenment** for the sake of giving succour to living beings and helping them on to enlightenment itself.

The notion of an enlightened being prolonging his lifespan was not new. Its basis is an enigmatic remark made by the Buddha before he passed away (recorded in the **Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta**):

Ānanda, whoever has developed the four paths of accomplishment (*iddhi,pāda*)* practised them frequently, established them...could undoubtedly live for a *kalpa* or the remainder of a *kalpa*. The Tathāgata has developed these four paths of power...established them. And he could, Ānanda, undoubtedly live for a *kalpa* or the remainder of a *kalpa*. (D 2:104)

[**iddhi,pāda*: the will to attain mental absorption, the effort to attain it, the mind to enjoy it, the investigation of that mental absorption, D 2:213, 3:78]

The same statement (regarding the *kalpa*) is made in the **Cakkavatti,sīhanāda Sutta** in relation to a monk, but including other blessings of spiritual beauty, spiritual happiness, spiritual wealth and spiritual power (through the cultivation of the setting up of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*) (D 3:77). The Theravada traditionally translate “**kalpa**” (*kappa*) as a normal human lifespan (as envisioned in the Buddha’s time), that is, a century. The Mahayanists however take “kalpa” in its literal dictionary sense to mean **a world-period**, that is, one cycle of the universe (from its arising to its collapse) (cf. D 1:17).

The Mahāsaṅghika school was first located in the area of Vaiśālī and spread also to south India, with centres at Amarāvātī and Nāgārjunakoṇḍa. Its texts were written in Prākṛit. It further divided into several subjects, of which the best known was the Lokottaravāda (so called because of its views on *lokottara*, or the supramundane).

9. EARLY BUDDHIST CANONS

The teachings the early Buddhist monks had learned, whether directly from the Buddha or from his immediate enlightened disciples, were handed down through **an oral tradition**. This was partly because all religious teachings of the time were orally transmitted, and partly because the languages used by the early Indian Buddhists themselves were lyrical and regulated by a well-developed **prosody** (system of versification). As such, the system is as accurate as a scribal (written) tradition, if not more so, like a living lineage of folk music and songs, whose tune and lyrics can be proof-checked from internal rules of sounds and spirit for accuracy by way of **communal chanting** (*saṅgīti*).

Understandably, human errors are likely to be found even in an oral tradition. The most viable solution to such uncertainties is the comparison of surviving scriptures of the various early schools of Buddhism. Whatever materials that agree amongst the disparate traditions could be reasonably taken to predate their separation.

10. ORIGINAL TEACHINGS

Unfortunately, the only totally complete extant Buddhist canon is that of the Pali canon of the Theravada. Fortunately, however, the surviving portions of the other early pre-Mahayana schools, sometimes called **Nikāya Buddhism**, exist in translation in the canons of the Chinese and the Tibetans.

Other than the Theravada canon, the only extensive literature of a Nikāya school to survive is the **Sarvāstivāda canon**, preserved almost in its entirety in Chinese translation. In general, Chinese translations of the Sarvāstivāda texts are in reasonably good agreement with their Theravada counterparts. From this sort of scriptural detective work, scholars can reasonably deduce an outline of the early Nikāya texts, going back to about 250 BCE, when the Sarvāstivāda broke away from the Sthaviravāda.

Vinaya

The canons of the early Buddhist schools all go by the same name of **Tripīṭaka**, “the three baskets”, that is, the Vinaya (monastic discipline), Sūtra (doctrines), and Abhidharma (higher doctrines). **The Vinaya** of the Theravadins is subdivided into three sections: the Sutta Vibhaṅga, the Khandhaka and the Parivāra.

The **Sutta Vibhaṅga** contains the Pātimokkha, the code of rules governing the lives of monastics. The **Khandhaka** contains procedural rules for the conduct of monastic affairs and contains valuable records of early Buddhist history. The **Parivāra** is a supplement to the Theravada canon, a book of summaries and classifications of rules.

The Vinayas of the Theravada, the Sarvāstivāda, and four other early schools are preserved in Chinese and Tibetan translations. They vary in arrangement and details, particularly in the Skandhaka (Pali, *Khandhaka*) (the procedural sections) and in their supplements. **The actual rules governing monastics, however, are remarkably consistent.**

11. SŪTRA

In terms of doctrine, the most important section of the Buddhist canon is the **Sūtra Pīṭaka**, the collection of teachings of the Buddha and his immediate foremost disciples. It should be noted that only the texts of the Theravada are in **Pāli**, while those of the other early schools are in what has been variously called “Buddhist Sanskrit” or “Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit”.

Most important of this collection are the first four groups of texts called *nikāya* in Theravada and *āgama* in the other early pre-Mahayana schools:

Dīgha Nikāya	Dīrgha Āgama	(Long Sayings)
Majjhima Nikāya	Madhyama Āgama	(Middle-length Sayings)
Samyutta Nikāya	Samyukta Āgama	(Connected Sayings)
Anguttara Nikāya	Ekōttara Āgama	(Numerical Sayings)
[Khuddaka Nikāya]	[Avadāna]	

The actual contents of the Long Sayings and Middle-Length Sayings of all the Nikāya schools agree closely with one another, even in translation. This agreement is particularly important in the case of the

Majjhima Nikāya and the Madhyama Āgama (of the Sarvāstivāda). As such, these texts (as we have mentioned) predate the first schism in about 250 BCE.

[See Anesaki, “Some Problems of the Textual History of Buddhist Scriptures” and “The Four Buddhist Āgamas in Chinese”, *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan*, vol. 35, nos. 2-3, 1908. see also Thich Minh Chau, *The Chinese Madhyama Āgama and the Pāli Majjhima Nikāya*, The Saigon Institute of Higher Buddhist Studies, n.d., probably 1964.]

The fifth Nikāya of the Theravada, the **Khuddaka Nikāya** or “Minor Collection”, is a miscellany, containing some very old texts, but others culled from the four Nikāyas or added later. The Chinese canon also contains a fifth section of miscellaneous texts, but it is not called an Āgama. Instead it is known as **Avadāna** (edifying stories) and as might be expected does not correspond well to material in the Pāli Khuddaka Nikāya.

12. DEVELOPMENT OF ABHIDHARMA

Both the Theravada and the Sarvāstivāda have their respective Abhidharma collection, but aside from a general similarity of ideas expressed, the actual content of the two collections is dissimilar. Both contain seven books, but the Theravadins ascribe their composition to the Buddha himself, whereas the Sarvāstivāda ascribe them to seven different disciples of the Buddha. In either case, it is clear that the Abhidharma represents a **scholastic development** within Buddhism quite some time after the Final Nirvana of the Buddha.

<u>Theravāda</u>	<u>Sarvāstivāda</u>
1. Dhamma.saṅgaṇī	1. Jñāna,prasthāna (T 1543-1544) by Katyāyanīputra
2. Vibhaṅga	2. Prakaraṇa,pāda (T 1541-1542) by Vasumitra
3. Puggala Paññatti	3. Vijñāna,kāya (T 1539) by Devaśarman/Devakṣema
4. Dhātu,kathā	4. Dharma,skandha (T 1537) by Śāriputra
5. Yamaka	5. Prajñāpti,śāstra (T 1538) by Maudgalyāyana
6. Paṭṭhāna	6. Dhātu,kāya (T 1540) by Pūrṇa
7. Kathā,vatthu	7. Saṅgīti,paryāya (T 1536) by Mahākauṣṭhila

The **Saṅgīti,paryāya** or more fully Abhidharma,saṅgīti,paryāya,pāda Śāstra is closely connected to the Dhammasaṅgaṇī. The original Sanskrit of the **Dharma,skandha** or Abhidharma,dharma,skandha,pāda Śāstra is lost, only fragments remain. This work is closely connected to the Vibhaṅga. The **Vijñāna,kāya** or Abhidharma,jñāna,kāya,pāda Śāstra is closely connected to the Dhātukathā.

It is important to note that the 1st Council recited only the “Dhamma and Vinaya” (V 2:285). There is no mention of “Abhidhamma” at all. In fact, the term (as used in reference to a collection of texts) is first mentioned in the Commentaries. As such, scholars generally think that the third Piṭaka probably was not composed until around 300 BCE, after the split between the Vibhajyavāda and the Sarvāstivāda, the former being the early Theravada.

13. ASOKA & BUDDHISM

Aśoka (r. c. 268-239 BCE) of the Maurya dynasty was the first monarch to rule over **a unified India**, and as such can be said to be the founder of India, since before him, India did not exist as a political entity.

He converted to Buddhism in 260 BCE after a traumatic experience of seeing the bloodshed he had caused in the Kalinga campaigns.

Within ten years of his conversion, in an effort to educate and unite his empire, Aśoka covered his realm with numerous **edicts** carved into stones, cave walls and free-standing granite pillars. These edicts are **the first examples of writing in India** after the demise of the Indus Valley civilization in about 1500 BCE.

For the remaining 80 years of the Maurya dynasty, Buddhism was the predominant religion though Aśoka also freely patronized other Indian religions. In effect, Buddhism was **the first state religion of India**, since India as such never existed before Aśoka.

Moggaliputta Tissa

Aśoka was said to have called the **3rd Buddhist Council**, the Council of Pāṭaliputra, to standardize the canon and to purify the Sangha which was rife with heresy and disunity. According to the Sri Lanka tradition, **Moggali,putta Tissa** was summoned by Aśoka to Pāṭaliputra, where Tissa defrocked heretics and purified the Sangha so that those remaining adhered to the **Vibhajjavāda** (the School of Analysis), that is, the Theravada.

The Sri Lanka sources also record that Moggaliputta Tissa composed the **Kathāvatthu** (Points of Controversy), a work of apologetics, to counter the various doctrinal points brought up by other schools against the Vibhajjavāda. This book is included in the Abhidhamma Piṭaka of the Theravada just before the Pali Canon was closed during the 3rd Council, presided over by him. This Council was held around the 18th year of Aśoka's reign.

The Council of Pāṭaliputra is mentioned only in the Sinhalese sources (Dīpv 7:343-43, 44-50; Mahv 5:267-82; VA 60 f.) and its Chinese recensions (T 1462 ch 2:684a-b). As such, not all scholars agree that the 3rd Council was held during Aśoka's reign. However, since Moggaliputta compiled the **Kathāvatthu** within the Theravada order, some sort of council must have been convened. However, this council could not have been held during Aśoka's reign, but approximately a century after Aśoka.

Schism

Hirakawa Akira argues that since the doctrines of the various schools of Nikāya Buddhism are examined and criticized in the Kathāvatthu, this text must have been written after these schools arose, probably during the last half of the 2nd century BCE. Thus, if the 3rd Council is to be considered as a historical event, it was a council only within the Theravada during the latter part of the 2nd century BCE. (*A History of Indian Buddhism*, 1990: 91).

In his effort to unify the Sangha, Aśoka erected edicts strongly warning monastics against creating schism in the Order. These edicts were found in **Kauśambī, Sāñcī and Sārnāth**, the strongholds of the western monks of the Gangetic plain [see map], who were historically connected with the reason for the convening of the 2nd Council in 100 AB. Anyway, it is said that these schisms eventually led to the rise of **the 18 schools of Nikāya Buddhism**:

I. Mahāsaṅghika:

1. Mūla, mahāsaṅghika, 2. Vyavahārika, 3. Lokottaravāda, 4. Bahuśrutiya, 5. Prajñaptivāda, 6. Caitika, 7. Pūrvaśaila, 8. Aparāśaila.

II. Sthavira:

1. Mūla, sthavira, 2. Sarvāstivāda, 3. Vātsīputrīya, 4. Dharmottarīya, 5. Bhadrāyanīya, 6. Saṃmatīya, 7. Mahīśāsaka, 8. Dharmaguptaka, 9. Suvarṣaka, 10. Uttarīya.

In his *History of Indian Buddhism* (1608: 270 f.), the Tibetan compiler, Tāranātha reproduces this list of 18 schools with 2 subdivisions which he attributes to the Sthaviras. He does not cite his source, but several early lists adopted the same subdivision. [See Kōgen Mizuno, *Essentials of Buddhism*, Tokyo: Kosei, 1996: 36-39 for diagrams with dates.]

14. SPREAD OF BUDDHISM OUTSIDE INDIA

[This topic will be covered in greater detail in “The Spread of Buddhism”.]

The Sri Lankan chronicles say that Aśoka sent various monks to spread Buddhism throughout India and abroad. Buddhism spread into southern India and lasted there longer than in the north. We hear of a Theravadin monk being invited from Kāñcī (Conjeeveram) in Tamilnadu to Sri Lanka as late as the 14th century, about a century after the Muslims gave the deathblow to Buddhism by destroying the monastic universities of north India.

By land, Buddhism spread first into eastern Iran and Central Asia, and then along the caravan route into China. Striking evidence showing that Buddhism early moved through the Northwest Passage out of India is found in the Aśokan inscriptions in Greek and Aramaic found at Kandahar (now in Afghanistan).

By sea, Buddhism spread from the east coast, in the middle of the first millennium CE, to continental southeast Asia and Indonesia. Some of the greatest Buddhist monuments, notably the Borobudur in Java and the temples of Angkor in Kampuchea are due to this seaborne expansion.

The Buddhist missionaries introduced important aspects of Indian culture—notably **writing** using the Indian script in one form or another—to parts of Central Asia and most of southeast Asia.

15. GREEK BUDDHISTS

Although the reign of Alexander the Great (336-323 BCE), one of the world’s greatest generals, was very short, it had a most significant impact on the history of Europe and Asia. He invaded India in 327 BCE spreading Greek culture there. He was repulsed by Candragupta (r. c. 321-297 BCE), the founder of the Mauryan empire.

During Aśoka’s reign, the monk **Majjhantika** was sent to northwestern India (a Greek area) as an emissary to establish a Buddhist order there. Inscriptions have been found to show that a number of Greeks had converted to Buddhism by the 1st century BCE. According to an inscription on a reliquary urn found in the Swat Valley, the urn contained a relic of Śākyamuni Buddha and had been installed there by a Greek governor (*meridarkh*) named **Theodoros**. He and his wife had also built a stupa.

Greek Buddhists were found even in Aśoka’s time. Among the Buddhist missionaries sent by Aśoka was a Greek monk named **Dhammarakkhita**, who went to Aparāntaka to spread Buddhism. It is possible that Buddhism was known in this area even in the Buddha’s time (M 3:268, S 4:61 f.).

Beginning around 180 BCE, when the Maurya empire began to weaken, a series of foreign peoples began invading northwestern India and occupying the land. The first of these were the Greeks, called **yavana** in Sanskrit and **yona** in Pali, both terms probably reflecting the Indianized forms of the place name “Ionia”.

Menander

After Alexander’s death, his generals continued to rule in western India. Of the Macedonian kings recorded in Indian history, **Menandros** (known in Pali as Milinda) is particularly important (Miln:H 1:

xxi-xxviii). Menandros invaded India and ruled an area extending from central India to Afghanistan from around 160 to 140 BCE. The capital of the empire was at Śākala.

Hisatsugu Ishiguro (*Iwai Commemorative Volume*, Tokyo, 1963: 34-42) presents the opinion that the Śākala or Sāgala of the Milinda,pañha is not Sialkot as is often supposed, but probably Bari Doab, and the description of the city was based upon Taxila.

Menander is thought to have held a series of debates with a Buddhist monk, **Nāgasena**, and to have converted to Buddhism. The contents of their discussions were compiled into the **Milinda,pañha** or Questions of King Milinda. The Pali text of this work includes some additions by later authors. However, the earliest parts can be determined by comparing the Pali text with the Chinese translation, the *Na-hsien pi-ch'iu ching* (T 1670a).

Those parts found in both versions constitute the oldest elements of the work and offer a fascinating view of certain aspects of Indian Buddhism during the first and second centuries BCE. No elements of Mahayana is found in the work, which reflects Buddhist doctrine in the transitional period between the Āgamas and the development of Abhidharma literature. (Hirakawa Akira, 1990: 229)

Buddhism, being a rational and moral religion, easily appealed to foreign peoples. The Greeks readily responded to Buddhist teachings and worship at Buddhist stupas. In contrast, Brahmanism and Hinduism were based on the caste system and regarded foreigners as *mleccha* (impure barbarians). Moreover, Hinduism contains much folk religion. Not only the Greeks, but the foreign invaders of India who followed, including the Śakas, Parthians, and Kushans, often became supporters of Buddhism.

16. FOREIGN POWERS IN INDIA

Śaka (Scythian)

Around 180 CE, the **Śaka people**, a tribe of the Scythians, living near the Ili River in Central Asia were forced by the Uighurs to move west. The Śakas eventually destroyed the Macedonian state in Bactria and made it their base.

However, the Xiongnu later pushed the Uighurs further west, and the Uighurs in turn conquered Bactria. The Śaka, forced to move south, invaded India. Around 100 CE Maues became the first Śaka king. He conquered northern India and was on a campaign to conquer Mathura when he died. The Śaka rulers patronized Buddhism. They built stupas and monasteries, and gave land for the construction of cave temples.

Pahlava (Parthia)

Like the Śakas, the **Pahlavas** of Parthia, too, were of Scythian origin. Parthia was originally located southeast of the Caspian Sea (southwestern Asia bordering Europe). In the 3rd century BCE Arsakes rebelled against the king of Syria and established the Parthian kingdom. The Parthians (Pahlavas) overran the domains of the Greeks, and during the reign of king Azes invaded India. The next king, Gondophares, lived around the beginning of the Common Era and ruled northwestern India. By the end of the 1st century, the Parthians had replaced the Śakas as rulers of northwestern India. Shortly afterwards, the Kushan dynasty replaced the Parthians.

The Parthians were Buddhists. The Chinese called the Parthians *anxi* (*an-hsi*), a transliteration of Arsaces or Arsakes. A number of Parthian monks were instrumental in bringing Buddhism to China. For example, **An Shigao** (the character *an* was taken from the term *anxi* or Parthia and was used as an ethnicon indicating the monk's Parthian descent) was a prince who became a monk, studied Abhidharma and meditation. A few decades later, another Parthian, the layman **Anxuan** (An Hsüan), traveled to China.

17. THE KUSHANS

The Kushans (or Kuśāṇa), often thought to be an Indian dynasty, were originally refugees from the borders of far western China. In the 3rd century BCE, the Chinese had begun to build the Great Wall to keep out the marauding hordes known as the Xiongnu (Hsiung Nu). The Kushans, known as Dayuezhi (Ta yüeh chih) amongst the Chinese, found themselves outside the Great Wall and as such vulnerable to the random attacks of the Xiongnu.

As a result, the Kushans migrated south, encountering and conquering the Greek kingdoms to the northwest of India. Establishing themselves there, the Kushans in effect became a buffer zone between the Persian empire to the west and the relatively weak states of northern India to the east. Understandably, the Kushans pushed their way into India after subduing the weaker enemies.

Eventually, under the first great Kushan emperor **Kanishka** (r. c. 78-123), they dominated a broad area including present-day Afghanistan, Pakistan and northern India. Kanishka was also influential, if not dominant, among the Central Asian states on the Silk Road, the gateway to China and East Asia. The Kushans, who ruled northern India until about 225, thus maintained contacts with the Chinese, Persians, Greeks and Central Asians.

The Mahayana Buddhists remember Kanishka as the Mahayana equivalent of Aśoka. It is clear, however, that he not only patronized Mahayana, but also encouraged Nikāya Buddhism, particularly Sarvāstivāda (as evident from the inscription found at the great stupa of Kanishka).

As a **patron of Buddhism**, Kanishka is chiefly remembered for having convened **the 4th Council**, the Council of Kaśmīr, that traditionally marked the beginning of Mahayana Buddhism. During the Council, according to Chinese sources, authorized commentaries—**the Mahāvibhāṣā**—on the Buddhist canon were compiled and engraved on copper plates.

Kanishka, however, was a tolerant king, and his coins show that he honoured not only the Buddha but also the Zoroastrian, Greek and Brahmanic deities. During his reign, too, contacts with the Roman empire led to an increase in trade and the exchange of ideas. Perhaps the most remarkable example of the fusion of eastern and western influences in his reign was the **Gandharan school of art**, in which Græco-Roman classical lines are seen in images of the Buddha [19].

<Slide> Map & BODDO coin.

18. THE THREE SHRINES

While the Buddha lived, devotees would bring offerings and place them before his Fragrant Chamber (*gandha, kuṭi*) when he was away. The Introduction to the Kālīṅga, bodhi Jātaka (J 4:228) records that Ānanda questioned the Buddha regarding what, like the Fragrant Cell, could constitute a “basis worthy of worship” (*pūjāniyaṭṭhāna*) during his absence. In his reply, the Buddha spoke of **three kinds of shrines (cetiya)**:

- (1) **the bodily or analogous forms (*sarīrika cetiya*)**—here we might include relics, hair, and footprint;
- (2) **shrine by use or chrematomorphic forms (*paribhogika cetiya*)**, e.g. a robe, an almsbowl, a Dharma-seat and the Bodhi tree; and
- (3) **memorial forms: shrine by dedication or association (*uddesika cetiya*)**, e.g. the *dharma, cakra*, the trident (*triśula* or *nandī, pada*), the stupa, and the Buddha image.

The Buddha rejected the use of relics (*sarīrika cetiya*) in his own lifetime and dismissed the memorial forms (*uddesika cetiya*) as “groundless and fanciful”, in the sense of being arbitrary. He allowed only the use of **the Bodhi tree** to represent him while he lived. A similar prohibition is alluded to in chapter 48 of the

Sarvāstivāda Vinaya (see A.K. Coomaraswamy, *Elements of Buddhist Iconography*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1935:63 n4).

The three kinds of shrines are similarly mentioned in **the Commentary to the Nidhi,kaṇḍa Sutta** as follows:

- (1) the shrine by use (*paribhogika cetiya*), namely, the Bodhi tree;
- (2) the memorial shrine (*uddesika cetiya*), namely, the Buddha image (*Buddha paṭimā*); and
- (3) the relic shrine (*sa,dhātuka cetiya*), namely, the stupa with a relic chamber (*dhātu,gabbha thūpa*). (KhpA 222).

The Vinaya Subcommentary (*tīkā*), **Sārattha,dīpanī**, speaks of a slightly different set of Shrines: the shrine by use, the relic shrine, and the Dharma shrine (*dhamma cetiya*) (VT 1:264, Siamese ed). By the last-named is meant “that which is made into a book written with such doctrines as the Law of Interdependent Arising and so on, and then set aside [or installed in a shrine]” (*paṭicca,samuppada’ādi-likhita-pothakaṃ nidahitvā kataṃ pana dhamma,cetiyaṃ nāma*).

The Commentator probably drew his inspiration here from the Dhamma,cetiya Sutta (M 89) that speaks of the Dharma as a “shrine” (*cetiya*). But its Commentary explains the term as meaning “words of respect for the Dharma” where in showing respect to one of the Three Jewels, one does so to all three (MA 3:355). The Dharma shrine or *dharm,cetiya*, therefore, constitutes a fourth type of shrine.

Another reason for the Buddha’s rejection of the use of memorial shrines (*uddesika cetiya*)—including anthropomorphic images—to represent him is simply because when the Buddha finally passed away, he entered into “Nirvana without remainder”, thus abandoning his physical body. As such, before the Common Era, Buddhist art always represented the Buddha only **aniconically**, that is, in symbolic form (by way of a pair of footprints, a Dharma wheel, royal parasol, a Bodhi tree, etc.) carved in reliefs that adorned Buddhist stupas and architecture at places like Bharhut (2nd cent. BCE) and Sāñcī (1st cent. BCE) in central India.

19. THE FIRST BUDDHA IMAGES

The first images of the Buddha were **sculptures in human form** that appeared in **Gandhāra** (north-east Pakistan) and in **Mathurā** (northern India, on the Yamuna River, NW of Agra) during the last half of the 1st century CE. Understandably, these were areas ruled by foreign powers: the Greeks in Gandhāra and the Scythians (Śakas) in Mathurā.

In Gandhāra art, the Buddha was at first depicted in approximately human size, equal in size as the other figures in the **reliefs** though he was the central figure. Later, however, the Buddha figure was made larger than the surrounding ones. Finally, they appeared independently of the biographical contexts, and the first Buddha images as we commonly know them appeared.

Mathurā and Gandhāra were important centres of Buddhist art. Many Buddhist inscriptions dating from the reign of the Greeks, the Śakas, the Parthians (Pahlavas) and the Kushans have been found there, testifying to its importance in the history of Buddhism.

20. CAVE-TEMPLES

Chinese pilgrims like Faxian and Xuanzang visited a number of cave temples in India. In fact, some 1200 cave temples have been found in India, 75% of which are Buddhist, with the oldest dating from the 2nd or 1st century BCE. The excavation of cave temples peaked during the next few centuries.

Cave temples are a major distinguishing feature of Buddhism in the Deccan Plateau, especially in the Ghats, the mountain range along the west coast. The Deccan is an area of rocky but treeless mountains. Without enough wood for construction, the Buddhists there carved large caves turning them into monasteries and stupas.

<Slide> Ajañṭā

Since caves and rocks are long-lasting, these monuments provide significant information about monastic life in ancient India. The most famous cave-temples are found at Ajañṭā, Bhāja, Nāsik, Kārli and Ellora. Two types of caves are found at these sites: caves used for worship (*cetiya, ghara*) which contain a stupa, and caves used as quarters for monastics (*vihāra*).

One particular large cave *vihāra* at **Ellora** consists of three stories with a total of over a hundred cells for monks. The cell entrances and the stupas of such cave temples were often elaborately carved, while the *vihāras* were usually plain.

Ajañṭā is famous for its rock-hewn caves in the horseshor of cliffs forming north bank of the Wagora river. A total of 28 cave-temples were dug between 2nd century BCE and 7th century CE. Most of the caves are monastic residential quarters (*vihāra*) with **elaborate facades of paintings and sculptures** that are world-famous. Their preservation is due to the fact that by the time Buddhism disappeared in India they had been abandoned and forgotten, until they were re-discovered in 1817.

There are also cave temples in Central Asia, such as those at **Bezeklik** in northern Turkestan.

21. STUPAS

The **stupa** is a memorial shrine that, as a rule, were constructed to enshrine the relics of the Buddha or his enlightened disciples. Stupas grew in popularity especially amongst the lay Buddhists after the Buddha's passing. A famous stupa is located in **Nāgārjunakoṇḍa** or Nāgārjunikoṇḍa, the capital of the Ikṣvāku state on a plateau, located on the south bank of the middle reaches of the Kistna River. Although the name of the place suggests a connection with the Mahayana thinker, Nāgārjuna (c. 150-250), the inscriptions found there do not mention his name. One of the inscriptions state that a certain stupa belonged to the Aparasāila school (a Mahāsaṅghika subsect).

Nāgārjuna is believed to have written his *Suḥr̥llekha* (Friendly Letter) to a Śātavāhana king, possibly Yajñaśrī (c. 173-202). He is said to have lived on a mountain in Nāgārjunakoṇḍa called **Śrīparvata**, the site of the Culadhammagiri monastery. An inscription from its shrine-hall records the gift of the hall by elder monks from "Tambapṇnaka" (Sri Lanka). Another inscription records the presence of a Sri Lankan monastery ("Sihala, vihāra") in the area and the gift of a water tank to the Pūrvasāila school (a Mahāsaṅghika subsect).

<Slide> Amaravati

One of the largest stupas built in India was the **Amarāvati stupa**, which was begun about 200 BC, but underwent several renovations and additions. It was about 160 ft (50 m) in diameter and 90-100 ft (30 m) high. The Amarāvati stupa contains many old inscriptions, one of which date from the reign of king Pulumāyi (2nd century) of the Śātavāhana dynasty, which states that the children of the merchant Puri commissioned a sculpture of the Dharma-wheel to present to the large stupa of the Buddha, which was the property of the "Cetiya" (Caitaka) school (a Mahāsaṅghika subsect).

The Amarāvati stupa was discovered mostly intact in 1797. However, in the following year, the local ruler had established his capital at Amarāvati. The great stupa was subsequently demolished and used as building materials for the new city. The carved marble panels and fence around the stupa were removed, and the ruins were eventually converted into a pond. Some of its marble carvings, however, were saved. Today they are in the collections of the British Museum in London and museums in Madras and Calcutta.

22. STUPA WORSHIP

Stupa worship played an important role in the rise of the Mahayana. Stupa and stupa worship are mentioned in many Mahayana sutras such as the Saddharma,puṇḍarīka Sūtra (T 262) and the Smaller Sukhāvatī,vyūha Sūtra (Amituo jing, T 366). Furthermore, the Mahayana concern with **saviour Buddhas** can be traced to stupa worship. (Hirakawa Akira, 1990:270-274.)

Nikāya Buddhism generally focusses on the Dharma, rather than the Buddha. Consequently, it emphasizes **monasticism** and rigid keeping of the Precepts. Mahayana, on the other hand, was originally concerned with lay Buddhists. Doctrines for **lay bodhisattvas** play a prominent role in the oldest Mahayana sutras. Only later did Mahayana increasingly develop into a religion in which monks assumed prominent positions.

Roots of stupa worship

Lay Buddhism emphasizes the role of the Buddha in salvation. Since lay followers are unable to strictly follow the Precepts or devote much time to meditation or put the Dharma into practice in a traditional manner, they turn to **the Buddha's compassion** for their salvation. This is evident in beliefs in the Buddhas Amitābha and Akṣobhya, showing the laity's need to rely on someone greater than themselves.

The hero of the **Vimala,kīrti Nirdeśa**, for example, is the layman Bodhisattva Vimala,kīrti himself. Moreover, lay or household language is clearly reflected, for example, in the Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra:

The three realms are completely insecure. They are like a burning house, full of suffering. Yet the three realms are all mine and the sentient beings within them are my children.

(Saddharma,puṇḍarīka Sūtra T 9:14c)

According to Hirakawa Akira, for such a state of affairs to develop, the lay Buddhists must have had their own teaching centres or organizations where one generation of lay teachers transmitted the teachings to the next, independent of the monastic system. The best place for such a development would be **the stupas**, since stupas were predominantly for lay Buddhists (1990: 270 f).

Stupa worship has its roots in **the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta**, where the Buddha, in response to Ānanda's question regarding the disposal of the Buddha's remains, replied that after his cremation, the remains should be interred in a stupa:

And whoever lays wreaths or puts sweet perfumes [sandalwood] and colours [ochre paste] there with a devout heart, will reap benefit and happiness for a long time.

(D 2:141 f)

After the Buddha's passing, **the Mallas of Kuśinagara** performed the last rites. His relics were then divided amongst eight contending kings, each of whom erected a stupa over their portion.

In the same Mahāparinibbāna Sutta passage, the Buddha mentions **“the four persons worthy of a stupa”**, namely, a Self-enlightened Buddha, a Pratyeka Buddha [fully enlightened one who does not establish a teaching], a Buddha's disciple and a wheel-turning monarch [righteous universal ruler]:

And why is each of these worthy of a stupa? Because, Ānanda, at the thought: “This is the stupa of the Tathāgata, of a Pratyeka Buddha, of a Tathāgata's disciple, of a wheel-turning monarch,” people's hearts are made peaceful, and then, at the breaking up of the body after death, they go to a good destiny and are reborn in a heavenly world. That is the reason, and those are the four who are worthy of a stupa.

(D 1:143)

Shrine halls and memorial mounds (*cetiya*) were erected at all such sacred places: the Buddha's birthplace at Lumbinī, the site of his enlightenment at Buddhagayā, the site of the first discourse at the Deer Park, Sārnāth, and the site of his passing away at Kuśinagara. Many such stupas were commissioned by emperor Aśoka himself. In due course, pilgrims visit these holy places, even today.

23. LAY RELIGIOUS SPECIALISTS

Thus from the very beginning, **stupas and their related sacred structures** were erected, maintained and protected by **the laity**, and the laity paid homage at them. (Even today, pagodas in Burma are administered by committees of exclusively lay devotees.) The religious **donations** recorded by the inscriptions came not only from individuals, but also from clans (*kula*), groups (*gana*) and associations (*sahaya*). In the case of the "associations", they could have been the Buddhist sects (like the Saphineyakas from Ujjayinī, and the Aparājitas and Apaguriyas from Junnar).

By the beginning of the Common Era, **stupas were built within the confines of the temples**, located centrally around which monastic quarters and other structures were built. This occurred understandably in response to the growing popularity of stupa worship. Stupa worship attracted lay followers, which in turn enlarged the scope of potential donations. (Liu 1988: 90 f, 95 ff., passim.)

We have evidence of this new development of constructing stupas within the temple compound. **The Pali Vinaya does not mention stupas** even though we know that stupas have graced temple compounds for centuries. Apparently, Theravada monks began making offerings at stupas only after the Vinaya Piṭaka had been compiled.

In contrast, the Sarvāstivādin and Mahāsaṅghika Vinayas (T 1435 and 1425) mention Buddha images, indicating that the compilation of these two Vinayas was probably later than the Pali Vinaya. The Sarvāstivādin and Mahāsaṅghika Vinayas state that a strict distinction must be maintained between properties belonging to the monastic order and those belonging to the stupa, transgressing of which entails stealing, that is, an offence of defeat (*pārājika*) (T 22:498a, 23:352b).

Neither lay nor monastic

Carvings on the stupa fences (*vedika*) and on its gates (*torāṇa*) illustrated incidents from the Buddha's last life and previous ones (from the Jātakas). Religious specialists who explained the Jātaka tales and life of the Buddha to the worshippers probably resided at the stupa, as did people who managed the lodgings for the pilgrims.

Since stupas had **property**, people must be present to manage it. Gold, silver, flowers, incense and food must have been offered at the stupa by the faithful. Although such alms were presented to the Buddha, they were undoubtedly accepted and used by those who cared for the stupa. These religious specialists were very different from ordinary lay devotees, but were probably not monastic members—they were **neither lay nor monastic**.

As these religious specialists repeatedly explained the illustrations of the Jātakas and the Buddha's life, they extolled the Buddha's religious practices in his past lives as the practice of the Bodhisattva and praised his greatness and deep compassion. Gradually they must have advanced doctrines to explain **the Buddha's power to save others**. In this way, they attracted more devotees to the stupas.

Visualization

Worship at the stupas probably led to meditations in which the Buddha was visualized. Even today, Tibetan pilgrims at Buddhagayā can be seen prostrating themselves hundreds, even thousands, of times in

from of stupas. As people repeatedly performed such practices while intently thinking of the Buddha, or reciting Buddhist passages, they might have attained some level of concentration (*samādhi*) in which the Buddha appeared in their minds.

Such practices are supported in the Pali Canon, for example, the Vimutti Sutta, where five methods of spiritual liberation are mentioned, here given in abridged form:

1. the Teacher or a monk teaches Dharma...
 2. the monk himself teaches Dharma in detail...
 3. **the monk recites Dharma in detail**...
 4. the monk examines the Dharma...
 5. the monk masters an object of meditation...
- ...and that monk experiences the meaning and the Dharma [attains jhanas & his mind is liberated].
(A 3:21)

Such practices would also correspond to the *pratyutpanna, samādhi* (concentration here and now) described in some Mahayana texts. Thus, Mahayana meditations in which the Buddha is visualized may have originated in the religious experiences of people worshipping the Buddha at stupas. Such religious experiences might have resulted in people coming to believe that they were Bodhisattvas. Some Mahayana texts mention “Bodhisattva groups” (*bodhisattva, gaṇa*), existing separately from the monastic order of Nikāya Buddhism.

[See Hirakawa Akira, *Shoki Daijō Bukkyō no kenkyū* (Studies in Early Mahayana Buddhism), Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1968: 797-811. Also “Stūpa Worship” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, 14:92-96.]

24. DEVOTIONAL BUDDHISM

Emperor Kanishka [17] of the Kushans was a patron of Mahayana Buddhism. He was often associated with **Aśvaghōṣa** (80?-150?), the first great Mahayana scholar. Aśvaghōṣa, however, was a shadowy figure who probably lived either slightly before or after Kanishka. Aśvaghōṣa was also credited with the writing of *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna*, a work which was probably written much later. He did, however, write the **Buddha, carita** (“Life of the Buddha”) that is universally regarded as one of the greatest poems in Sanskrit or any other language. This work is a product of a genre that was highly developed by his time, that is, inspirational biography of the divinized Buddha.

Mahayana Buddhists were not the only ones who venerated the Buddha. By the time of Kanishka, several of the Nikāya schools had incorporated mythologized versions of the Buddha life into their Vinaya Piṭakas or in the “Miscellaneous” sections of their Tripiṭakas. The monk Saṅgarakṣa, a Sarvāstivādin, believed to be one of Kanishka’s teachers, wrote his own biography of the Buddha also called **Buddha, carita**, which survives in the Chinese. The **Mahāvastu**, the only complete text of the Mahā-saṅghika to survive in Sanskrit, is also a divinized account of the Buddha and his previous lives.

Bhagavad Gītā

As we have seen, Buddha images [19] were common enough by the time of Kanishka, by which time, too, popular deities of classical Hinduism were also becoming widespread, especially through the public performances of such inspirational works as the **Bhagavad Gītā**. Such works recount the exploits of gods, kings and heroes for public edification.

The first part of the Bhagavad Gītā, says A.L. Basham (*The Origins and Development of Classical Hinduism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989: 95 f), suggests that it was composed at a time when the ethics of the warrior, glorifying righteous warfare and stressing the martial virtues, were being questioned. This indicates that the Gītā as a whole is posterior to the rise of Buddhism and Jainism in the 5th century BCE. A verse from the Gītā, for example, is directed against Buddhism, as such postdating it:

[On the technical conventions used here, please refer to Piyasilo, *Guide to Buddhist Studies*, 1990 (unpublished MSS).]

“The world has no virtue,” they [the anxious persons] say:
“No basis, no Lord,
It has not come about through causation,
It is caused by desire only.”

(Bhagavad Gītā 16.8)

The Bhagavad Gītā is the first known work to encourage **religious devotion (*bhakti*)** towards a classical Hindu deity, namely, Krishna. The work, however, probably was not complete until about the time of Kanishka. From our current knowledge, scholars can only say that *bhakti* only gained widespread popularity amongst the religions of India between the reigns of Aśoka and of Kanishka.

Zoroastrianism

From what information we have right now, scholars cannot justify any conclusion that *bhakti* first developed in Hinduism or that Buddhist devotionism derived from Hindu devotionism. It is most likely that *bhakti* in Indian religion was a spontaneous development within India. If *bhakti* were a foreign import, it was most likely introduced from Zoroastrian Persia by way of Buddhism.

Zoroastrianism, which originated in the 6th century BCE, is a dualistic religion positing a saving deity of light, Ahura Mazda, who was opposed to an evil deity of matter, Angra Mainyu. According to Zoroastrianism, the responsibility of human beings is to transcend the material world and connect to the spiritual light of Ahura Mazda. According to Noble Ross Reat:

Because of its devotional content and Persia’s proximity to India, Zoroastrianism is often cited as a possible source of Indian *bhakti*. The several non-Indian cultures which influenced India after the reign of Aśoka—the Greeks, the Śakas, the Pahlavas, and the Kushans—were all in contact with Persia and all favored Buddhism among the religions of India. Therefore, if *bhakti* was imported from Persia, it probably entered India first in a Buddhist guise. During that period which *bhakti* appeared in India, Hinduism as we know it was only beginning to emerge from the orthodox Brahmanism that had been eclipsed by Buddhism since the time of Aśoka, a period of some three to four centuries.
(*Buddhism: A History*, 1994: 67)

25. PHILOSOPHICAL BUDDHISM

The other major development in Mahayana by the end of the Kushan period is the rise of philosophical Buddhism. Two of the foremost philosophers of Mahayana Buddhism, Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva, probably belonged to the Kushan period. **Nāgārjuna** (2nd-3rd century, S. India), probably the greatest of the Mahayana philosophers, founded the Madhyamaka school.

According to the Madhyamikas, all phenomena are embedded in the one absolute “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*), which in itself is without essence, “empty”. Thus the remarkable conclusion is drawn that the absolute emptiness (Nirvana) and the world of phenomena (*saṃsāra*) are identical. Since all concepts are conditioned, that is, denote only by virtue of their opposites, nothing can be said about this emptiness which lies in between the notion of being and nonbeing. Realization of this fact constitutes spiritual liberation.

In Nāgārjuna’s own time, there were already a fair number of Mahayana sutras presenting quite different versions of the Buddhist teachings. Nāgārjuna concentrated on the class of sutras known as the **Prajñā Pāramitā** or Perfection of Wisdom. His major work is the **Mūla, madhyamaka Kārikā**, the Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way.

Nālandā

Nāgārjuna is often regarded as the founder, or at least the first major figure, of the Mahayana **academic tradition**. He is traditionally associated with the great Buddhist **University of Nālandā**, whose imposing ruins still stand today, north of Rājgīr, in the state of Bihar. Later Tibetan sources say that he began his studies there.

It is unlikely that Nālandā was founded as early as Nāgārjuna's time (2nd century), but it was associated with Buddhist scholarship from very early times (6th-5th centuries BCE). Tradition has it that the followers of Śāriputra (the Buddha's right-hand monk) often gathered there for study. By the 5th century, reliable accounts by Chinese pilgrims record that **the library** at Nālandā was housed in three multi-story buildings and that the university had an enrollment of several thousand monk-students, representing all the schools of Buddhism and governed by strict admission procedures and academic standards.

If Nālandā were indeed founded by the Kushans [17], then it is **one of the world's oldest institutions of higher learning**. It is also one of history's longest running universities, since it existed right until its abrupt end in 1197. Nālandā was patronized by the Guptas and reached its maximum size under the Pāla kings (8th-2nd centuries CE).

Other great Buddhist universities

Besides Nālandā, many other Buddhist universities arose in India. In western India, **Valabhi** had become second only to Nālandā by the 5th century, frequented by the followers of the Saṃmitīya and Vijñānavāda schools. Under the Pāla patronage several other universities flourished in their empire, the greatest being Vikramaśilā, Uddāṇḍapura (Odantapurī, modern Bihār town), Somapurī, Jagaddala, Vajrāsana (at Buddhagayā) and Trikaṭuka. [See A.K. Warder, *Indian Buddhism*. 1970:ch 12.]

These great universities—notably Nālandā, Vikramaśilā and Uddāṇḍapura—were dominated by sectarian scholar-monks debating the relative merits of increasingly arcane academic opinions. The diaries of the Chinese pilgrims record that the various Buddhist institutions co-existed peacefully albeit in a constant state of scholarly debate.

The primary scholastic positions represented in these institutions were those of the several Nikāya schools (especially the Sarvāstivāda), and the Madhyamaka and the Vijñānavāda schools of Mahayana. One important school, the **Sautrāntika** (“those concerned only with the sutras”) broke away from the Sarvāstivāda, and rejected the Abhidharma and commentarial literature of all schools. [27]

[The term **Sautrāntika** comes from *sūtra*, “sūtra” + *anta*, “end” + *ika* (adjective form), so called because it gave pre-eminence to the *sūtra* portion of the canon.]

Another group, the **Pudgalavādin** (“those who affirm the person”), significantly numerous in number, came so close to affirming a soul that they were regarded as heretics by all the other schools of Buddhism. The general atmosphere was one of open study, debate and scholarship.

26. GUPTA PERIOD & AFTER

The Gupta dynasty (320-c. 500 CE) ruled a centralized state with an hierarchical social system firmly established in the spirit of Brahmanism which was facing a revival. It was during the Gupta periods that Chinese pilgrims like **Faxian** (340?-420?) visited India. His *Record of the Buddhist Kingdoms* is a valuable source on India at the beginning of the 5th century.

After the Gupta period, the Hun chieftains Toramāṇa (c. 500) and Mihirakula (c. 515) invaded northern India, mercilessly and randomly murdering thousands of people. Mihirakula, king of the Ephthalites

(White Huns), was said to have persecuted Buddhism. Despite these persecutions and the predominance of Hinduism in the Gupta period and persecutions, Mahayana Buddhism flourished. [27]

Harsha (c. 590-c. 647)

In the post-Gupta period, the influence of Buddhism was still evident in the Indian courts. The open-minded emperor **Harsha** (c.590-c.647) who ruled over a large portion of northern India (extending from Gujarat to Assam), was a Buddhist convert in a Hindu era. After his elder brother was assassinated by king Śaśāṅka of Gauda, Harsha was made regent at the age of 16, after an encouraging “communication” with a statue of Avalokiteśvara.

The Chinese pilgrim **Xuanzang** (c. 596-664), who recorded his travels in his *Record of the Western Regions*, visited India during Harsha’s time, and both of them became good friends. In 641, Harsha sent an envoy to the Chinese emperor and established the first diplomatic relations between India and China. Himself a poet, Harsha composed a few works, the best known of which is *Nāgānanda*, in which the Buddhist ideal of self-sacrifice is extolled.

27. CLASSICAL MAHAYANA

Despite the predominance of Hinduism in the Gupta period and the persecutions by the Toramāṇa and Mihirakula [26], Mahayana Buddhism flourished. In fact, the formulation of classical Mahayana philosophy which began under Nāgārjuna, reached its completion under **Asaṅga** (fl. 4th-5th centuries), **Vasubandhu** (fl. 4th century) and **Dignāga** (fl. late 5th century). The brothers Asaṅga and Vasubandhu are generally credited with the founding of the Vijñānavāda or Consciousness school.

Asaṅga (fl. 4th-5th centuries)

Asaṅga (fl. 4th-5th century, b. Puruṣapura, modern Peshāwar, Pakistan), was the influential Buddhist philosopher who established the **Yogācāra** (“Practice of Yoga”) school of idealism (“mind only”). Originally ordained as a Sarvāstivāda monk, he became dissatisfied with the Nikāya concepts of *śūnyatā* (“emptiness”) and *pudgala* (“person”), and turned to the Mahāyāna. He was also credited with winning over his brother, Vasubandhu, from Nikāya Buddhism to Mahayana.

Asaṅga’s teacher in the Yogācāra tradition was **Maitreya, nātha** (c. 275-350). This school (also called Vijñāna, vādā, or “Doctrine of Consciousness”) held that the external exists only as mental images that have no real permanence. A “store-house” of consciousness (*ālaya, vijñāna*) contains the trace impressions of the past and the potentialities of future actions.

Asaṅga’s great contribution was his development of Maitreya nātha’s teaching, analysis of the *ālaya-vijñāna*, and setting forth of the stages (*bhūmi*) leading to Buddhahood. Amongst his important works is the ***Mahāyāna, saṃgraha*** (“Compendium of the Mahāyāna”). Because of great reverence for him, many of his works have been attributed to the future Buddha, Maitreya.

Vasubandhu (fl. 4th century)

Vasubandhu (fl. 4th century), Indian Buddhist philosopher and logician, refined classical Indian syllogistic logic by distinguishing procedure for reaching inferences in formal debate (five steps) from the method in personal thought (three steps). He also wrote several *śāstras* (“treatises”) holding that all seemingly external objects are only mental representations.

Vasubandhu’s greatest work was the ***Abhidharma, kośa*** (“Treasure of the Abhidharma”), which became the basic text for the study of Mahāyāna philosophy. It was based on the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma, but interpreted according to Vasubandhu’s Sautrāntika propensities. [25]

28. IN WHAT SENSE IS MAHAYANA “GREAT”?

Historically, there were two streams of early Mahayana development. The first stream was the continuation of **the Mahāsaṅghika school** [8], the faction which separated from the main body of Buddhism after the Council of Vaiśālī [7]. The Mahāsaṅghika continued to criticize the Sthaviras (orthodox elders) for their literal interpretation of the Buddhist texts, especially in connection with Arhathood.

The second stream of early Mahayana development involved the lay-centred cult of **stupa worship** [22] that in turn led to the rise of **lay religious specialists** [23]. As such, early Mahayana, vitalized by its power of assimilation and adaptation, had greater appeal for the lay masses.

The Mahayana was “great” (*mahā*) for another reason: **its doctrines became more comprehensive** than those of the traditional schools. Mahayana mainly developed in the northwest and south of India. The theory of **a southern origin of Mahayana** assumes that the Mahāsaṅghika monastic centres of Andhra developed such radical ideals regarding the nature of the Buddha and the Bodhisattva that they saw themselves as a movement completely distinct from the Nikāya schools.

In southern India, Mahayana thought responded to the popular **mother-goddess cults**, such as the female tutelary village deity (*grāma, devatā*), leading to the rise of celestial Bodhisattvas, which further contributed to the elevated spiritual roles of women in Mahayana. The mythology behind **Avalokiteśvara**, the most popular Bodhisattva of Mahayana, and worshipped throughout most of Asia, probably originated in south India.

Further west, there was **Greek influence**, from which the Mahayanists adopted new techniques of **iconography** of beautiful life-like images of the Buddha. Devotees could now *see* the Buddha, even after his Final Nirvana. The Mahayanists probably adapted the Gnostic notion of *Sophia* or Wisdom, which in due course flowered into the **Perfection of Wisdom philosophy**. In northwest India, there was lively contact with Zoroastrianism [24] and Manichaeism (a Persian religion founded by Mani, the “Apostle of Light”), to which it is likely that the Mahayanists responded by adopting its notion of light as embodying good by contextualizing and hypostasizing it into **the Buddha Amitābha**, the Buddha of Boundless Light.

The Catholic “skilful means”

What the Mahayana did during the early centuries of the Common Era by way of contextualizing local cults and indigenizing imported ideas is better appreciated if we look at what Roman Catholicism is attempting to do today since **second Vatican Council** or Vatican II (1962-65) to spiritually renew the church. Since it lost its political power after the Renaissance and with the rise of science and liberal education, the Roman church had to look for other ways to arrest its downgrade and to inspire a revival.

The key notion of Vatican II is **ecumenism**. On a simple level, it means the “unity” of all faiths. On a more theological level, the term as used by the contemporary Catholic church refers to an awakened conscience of the church towards its universal aspects and its renewed sense of mission and service. Through this philosophy the Catholic leaders hope to re-empower themselves through two broad methods: **reunion** with other churches (such as the Church of England) and **dialogue** with other religions, particularly the world religions.

The Catholic church is now more open to Buddhism and we often find the faithful of both religions in dialogue over a wide range of subjects. The Catholic practitioners are especially attracted to **Buddhist meditation** so much so that it is hard to meet a Catholic priest who has not practised it or who has not

heard of it. In the Fall 2001 issue of the US Buddhist magazine, *Tricycle*, **Huston Smith**, scholar of world religions puts the fruits of the new Catholic dialogue with Buddhism succinctly thus:

One of the important roles that Buddhism has played in the West is that the West took the esoteric or mystical aspects of Buddhism out of the monasteries and made them available to the laity. This helped revitalize interest in the mystical aspects of Christianity and Judaism. In some cases, it furthered the return of contemplative practices in those religions that had fallen into neglect. Mystics all speak the same language. They understand each other. Buddhism has brought new life to the Abrahamic religions, and this has been a wonderful contribution.

(*Tricycle*, Fall 2001: 31. My emphases.)

Even so, Buddhists cannot rest on their laurels: that would be like the hare sleeping in its race with the tortoise, except that in this case, the hare, upon waking up, would find great difficulty finding a mate in a tortoise world.

Writing

In his paper on “How the Mahayana Began”, Richard Gombrich proposes the hypothesis that the rise of the Mahayana is due to the use of **writing**, that is to say that

...the early Mahayana texts owe their survival to the fact that they were written down; any earlier texts which deviated from or criticized the canonical norms (by which I mean approximately the contents of the *Vinaya Khandhaka* and *Sutta Vibhaṅga* and the Four *Nikāya* of the Sutta Piaka) could not survive because they were not included among the texts which the Sangha preserved orally.

(*Journal of the Society for Pali and Buddhist Culture*, 1988. Emphasis mine.)

Scholars generally agree that the earliest surviving Mahayana texts date to **the 2nd or 1st century BCE**, which coincides with a time when writing of religious texts, especially Buddhist texts, became more widespread. Perhaps this development had to do with the availability of **better writing implements and materials**. Gombrich says that Patañjali’s *Mahā.bhāṣyā* is clearly a written text and is commonly dated to the 2nd century BCE on rather strong evidence (1988).

Gombrich agrees to the assertion that written works, too, may perish, and are likely to do so unless an institution guards them. A great majority of Mahayana and all later Buddhist works were lost in their original versions in Indian languages. Two interesting and important points must be raised here. Firstly, that **this loss of the original Mahayana texts** is further proof that the Mahayana *is* a written tradition. The oral tradition is not likely to lose its texts because they have been committed to memory, unless the reciter forgets or is exterminated.

My second point is a corollary to the first and based on the fact that many Mahayana works did survive long enough to be **translated into Chinese or Tibetan**. Such works could have been translations of an *oral* tradition, but this is difficult to prove. Nevertheless, my second point further supports the hypothesis that Mahayana is not only a written tradition, but also **a tradition of translations**.

[On the Scribal Tradition, see Piyasilo, *A Guide to Buddhist Studies*, 1990f: section IV The Sutra 2. (Unpublished MS).]

29. THE RISE OF TANTRA

The growing success of the Mahayana and the great Buddhist universities [25] led to a tendency to look inward, with students and scholars debating finer philosophical, logical or grammatical points. Although constructive religious thought was not dormant, as the Mahayana became more established and conventional, the natural need for religious revival found expression in other forms.

Hindu roots

Most likely, in their search for new forms of expression, the Mahayana scholars and thinkers were attracted to the visionary, revolutionary and charismatic leaders. This new expression were first found in *Buddhist Tantra*, and eventually as *Hindu Tantra*, since the former borrowed heavily from the latter.

Tantra philosophy is mostly **Madhyamaka** [25], i.e. mainstream Mahayana, but as a practical religion it has more in common with *Hindu Tantra* than with other forms of Buddhism. It can be said that Buddhist Tantra borrowed from Hindu Tantra in the sense that “Buddhist Tantra is so much more discontinuous with earlier Buddhism than Hindu Tantra is with earlier Hinduism” (Gombrich 1984: 86).

Radical departures

Buddhist Tantra, as such, makes two radical departures from mainstream Buddhism, that is, in its method and in its goal. The **Tantric method** comprises primarily complicated, even secret, **rituals**. Such rituals are believed to lead one towards salvation—and magical powers. Although mainstream Buddhism says that some kind of **psychic powers** do attend the higher levels of meditation, it does not place much significance on such powers as Tantra does. Both these new emphases of Tantra—ritual and magic—are foreign to earlier Buddhism.

The shift from the Mahayana to the Tantra seems to have gained momentum as Mahayana philosophy began to lose its creative energy. We know, for example, of Tantric practices in *Nālandā* in the 7th century. These practices were criticized by the *Nālandā* scholar **Dharmakīrti** but apparently were well received by its distinguished scholars in the following century.

As Tantra gained respectability, the first Pāla king **Gopāla** (mid-8th century) established a new university at **Uddanāpura** (Odantapurī, modern Bihār town), about 20 km northeast of *Nālandā*, rivaling it. The death of Harsha in 657 marked the decline of Mahayana in India, whereas the construction of the University of **Vikramaśilā** under **Dharmapāla** (r. c.770-810) about 800 marked the beginning of the Tantric period.

Tantric masters

The Tantric followers became **the new critics of the establishment**. Some asserted the superiority of **ritual and meditation** would lead one to a direct, spontaneous realization of Buddhahood in this life. As wandering saints called **siddha** (“possessed of *siddhi*, spiritual accomplishment”, i.e. magical powers), they assumed the demeanour of madmen, and abandoned the monastic rules. Others saw Tantra as the culmination of Mahayana and chose to **integrate it with earlier teachings**, following established monastic practices despite their contradictory outlooks.

A number of famous Tantric masters arose in this period. **Atīśa** (980/90-1055) was a patriarch of Magadha and teacher at Vikramaśilā. One of the most colourful monk-scholars of *Nālandā* was **Naropa** (1016-1100), who resigned as abbot of *Nālandā* (some sources say Vikramaśilā) in 1057 to seek his predestined Tantric master, and so becoming a major figure in this phase of Buddhist history. Both went to Tibet to propagate Buddhism there.

30. RISE OF HINDUISM

In 637, during Harsha’s reign, the Muslim armies conquered Ctesiphon, capital of the Persian empire. No one in India could have known of the impending disaster at the time. However, in an uncanny way, Buddhism began to shrink eastward of northern India. After Harsha’s death, the centre of Buddhism was in the northeast corner of India **under the patronage of the Pāla dynasty**, that ruled present-day Bihar and Bengal (c. 650-950).¹

By 711, Muslims had occupied territory in present-day Pakistan, but without any religious persecution that would characterize the blitz of northern India in the 13th century. Meanwhile, the internal conditions of Indian Buddhism led to its own decline, especially in the face of the rise of **populist Hinduism**.

Śaṅkara (700?-750?)

The first and foremost figure in the Hindu response against Buddhism was **Śaṅkara** (700?-750?), the most famous exponent of the Advaita Vedānta school of philosophy, and the source of the main currents of modern Indian thought. Śaṅkara's thoughts were mainly based on the **Upanishads**, working on the proposition that there is no difference, no duality, between the essence of human consciousness and the essence of the universe, hence the name "Advaita" or "non-dualism" for his school.

Despite **Śaṅkara's vehement opposition to Buddhism**, his conception of ultimate reality corresponds so closely to that of Nāgārjuna, that Śaṅkara's Hindu rivals referred to him as a "surreptitious Buddhist" or **crypto-Buddhist**. Given his late date and the closeness of his ideas to Nāgārjuna's, it is almost certain that Śaṅkara was significantly influenced by Madhyamaka, which was fully formed and well known in India of Śaṅkara's time in the 8th century.

Hindu assimilation

No western or Buddhist scholars have ever seriously taken the sweeping statement by some Indian scholars that the Buddha was "born a Hindu, lived a Hindu, died a Hindu" for the primary reason of chronology. **"Hinduism" as an organized religion only arose in the Gupta age** [26]. Furthermore, the term "Hindu" is not Indian, but Persian, and was used by the ancient Chinese to denote India in general.

With the rise of **Mahayana** [24], however, Buddhism **came closer to Brahmanism**, especially in terms of folk beliefs and lay worship, and the use of images, chants and rituals. In the post-Gupta period, **Tantra** [29] virtually identified Buddhism with Hinduism by almost wholesale assimilation of Śaiva gods, goddesses, mantras, dhāraṇīs and mystical practices.

One of the most important doctrines of the **Bhagavad Gītā** [24] is that of the *avatāra* (lit. "descent"), that is, incarnation of Krishna in various forms through the ages of the world. Later Hindus developed this idea and applied it to the "ten incarnations" (*daśāvatārā*) of Vishnu, **the ninth of which was the Buddha**, who latter Hindus claimed was really a "demon" to lead astray other "demons" in our age of moral evil. The Buddha was depicted as an incarnation of Vishnu in the Mahābhārata, certain Purāṇas and Jayadeva's Gita.govinda. Such a teaching successfully prevented most Hindus from becoming Buddhists, since the Buddha is after all one of Vishnu's incarnation. So it would suffice to worship Vishnu (or Krishna). [S.R. Goyal, *A History of Indian Buddhism*. Meerut: Kusumanjali, 1987: 398.]

31. DISAPPEARANCE OF BUDDHISM FROM INDIA

Bhakti

Scholars like P.S. Jaini have remarked that one of the real reasons for the assimilation of Buddhism into Hinduism was **the failure of Buddhism to effectively respond to the rise of bhakti (devotionalism)** [24]. The popularity of devotional cults associated with Rāma and Krishna, for example, must have caused many defections from the lay ranks of Buddhism.

Jainism has many historical parallels with Buddhism (both arose around the same time and have similar teachings of non-violence). For the Jainas, however, **no synthesis of the human and the divine was ever possible**, and such Tantric practices as the identification of the self with the deity were simply out of question. Hence, **the Tīrthaṅkaras ("ford-makers" or saviour) remained the highest model and ideal of spiritual development**.

In the Mahayana conception of celestial bodhisattvas, **Mañjuśrī** and **Avalokiteśvara** often usurped the place of the historical Buddha himself, who ceased to be the ultimate spiritual goal. Interestingly, even though Buddhism virtually disappeared from India after the Muslim onslaught, **non-violent Jainism survived there to this day**.

Lack of royal patronage

The popularity of Buddhism in India, as elsewhere in Asia, has been mainly due to **royal patronage**. After the Gupta period, Buddhism in India received no significant support from any king, except from the Pāla monarchs [25]. On the contrary, some later kings, such as Puṣyamitra Śuṅga (r. 181-151) and Śaśaṅka of Gauḍa (c. 7th century), **actually persecuted Buddhism**, as did the Hun kings Toramāṇa (c. 500) and Mihirakula (c. 515) [26].

Some scholars postulate “**religious brain-drain**” of **Indian minds** to Tibet, China, Korea, Japan and southeast Asia as a contributory factor to the eventual decline of Buddhism in India. Radhakrishnan, for example, listed 24 eminent Indian scholars who left for China to propagate Buddhism from the 3rd century to 973 (*India and China*, p. 27). According to Joseph Edkins, at the beginning of the 6th century, there were over 3000 Indian Buddhists in China (*Chinese Buddhism*, p. 99).

Deathblow

By the time the Muslim armies devastated India, Buddhism as an entity was found primarily in its great monasteries (*mahā, vihāra*) and universities. Once these were destroyed and the students and scholars killed or driven away, Indian Buddhism lost the core of its identity. Hinduism, on the other hand, had no identifiable core at which to strike. Moreover, the Buddhist establishments were mostly in the urban areas which became easy targets for the enemies.

The destruction of Nālandā in 1197 and of Vikramaśilā in 1203 marked the effective end of Buddhism in India. For a time, Indian Buddhism persisted in the southern, eastern and northern extremities of India, beyond the reach of the Muslims. Small groups of Buddhists probably survived in the Gangetic plain for a while despite the widespread destruction, but were eventually too weak to resist being assimilated by Hinduism.

Pockets of India Buddhism may have survived to the present day in the northeast, in what is now Bangladesh and the several far eastern states of India (like Nagaland and Assam). Buddhism does appear to survive since ancient times in mountain states of the Himalayas—Ladakh in Jammu and Kashmir, Lahul Spiti and Kinnaur in Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Nepal and Bhutan.

[For details of the Muslim destruction of Buddhism, see, for example, A.K. Warder, 1970: 502-513. For a Muslim’s response to Buddhism here, see S.M. Yusuf, 1955:1-28.]

32. BUDDHISM IN THE COLONIAL INDIA

By the time of British colonialism, the Buddhist sites of Gangetic plain of India were in a bad state of neglect, compounded by the problem of the negligible population of Buddhists in that area. In 1885, **Sir Edwin Arnold** (who wrote the epic poem, *The Light of Asia*) wrote a series of articles in the *London Telegraph*, pointing out the sad state of the Buddhist sites in India. The British authorities restored the temple at Bodh Gayā, but the place was in the hands of Hindu Saivites, who were exploiting it as best as they could as a centre of pilgrimage.

A young Sinhalese Buddhist, David Hewavitarne (1864-1933; then about 21, and who later become **Anāgārika Dharmapāla**), hearing of this, visited the site. What he saw dismayed him so much that upon

[On the technical conventions used here, please refer to Piyasilo, *Guide to Buddhist Studies*, 1990 (unpublished MSS).]

his return to Sri Lanka in 1891, he formed what later became the **Mahā Bodhi Society**, a Buddhist organization in a predominantly Hindu country with its 14 states and 400 million people including a wide variety of religions.

The Maha Bodhi Society started at Bodh Gayā, and by 1900, it had 2 branches in India (Madras and Kusunagara) and one in Sri Lanka (at Anuradhapura). Despite the powerful advocacy given by Sir Edwin Arnold and Colonel Henry Olcott, the Society failed to retrieve Bodh Gayā from the Hindu landlord.

However, the publicity aroused the interest of educated Bengalis in Buddhism. In 1920, a Buddhist vihara was opened in Calcutta. In 1931, another vihara was built at Sarnath, near Benares, which previously was a grazing ground for pigs surrounded by jungle. In due course, the Sarnath vihara had a library, a free dispensary, a primary school and a training college.

33. BUDDHISM IN MODERN INDIA

Buddhism, in post-War India certainly rose in status. This was at two different levels. First, amongst intellectuals, a characteristic case of which was India's first Prime Minister, **Pandit Nehru**, born of a Kashmiri brahmin family. Although at his death he was cremated a Hindu, his life did not seem to have been Hindu at all, as is attested in his book, *The Discovery of India* (1956; 4th ed. London: Meridian Books, 1960).

In 1956, the Indian government published two special volumes, *2,500 Years of Buddhism* and *The Way of the Buddha* (a pictorial album on Buddhist art), in honour of the Buddha Jayanti or 2,500th anniversary of the Buddha's enlightenment. A large number of scholars contributed articles to *2,500 Years of Buddhism*, and the President of India, Dr. Radhakrishnan (who himself has translated and commented on Buddhist texts) himself wrote the foreword acknowledging India's debt to Buddhism.

The other level at which Buddhism saw revival was among the **Harijans**, former "untouchables" of India, which effectively began with the conversion of **Dr. A.B. Ambedkar** (1891-1956; PhD Columbia, 1916), who opposed Gandhi's policy of reforming the caste system rather than outlawing it. Ambedkar later became Minister of Law in the government of post-war, secular state of India, "the father of the Indian Constitution"—and the leader of the untouchables.

On 14 October, 1956, at Nagpur, he formally declared **his conversion to Buddhism**, together with a large number of the people he led. The conversions grew in number, and soon various Buddhist monks arrived to instruct the converts in their duties. By 1965, there were about 4 million ex-untouchable Buddhists, mostly in Maharashtra.

In 1959, when Tibet came under Chinese rule, **the Tibetan diaspora**—some 100,000 Tibetans—spilled into India where they were welcomed. The Tibetan immigration into India had a more pronounced effect than Ambedkar's Neo-Buddhist movement to re-establish Buddhism in India. The highly visible presence of exiled Tibetan Buddhists in India attracted international attention, aid and academics. As such, India became the primary haven for the tradition that has most faithfully preserved the Mahayana in its Indian origins.

Buddhism is generally better received in India today, and there are many new Buddhist viharas and educational institutions at such places as Nālandā (a new university), Sārnāth (near Benares) and Sāñcī (Caityagiri, an ancient centre of the Sthaviravāda). The spruced up Buddhist holy places of India and Nepal today draw countless pilgrims and tourists, contributing to the economic growth of both countries. With the efforts of native Indian Buddhists and migrant Tibetan Buddhists, India is playing a significant role in global Buddhism today.

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